

Journal of Armenian Studies

Vol. IX, Nos.1-2, 2010

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Levels and Forms of Armenian-Turkish Dialogue: The Role of Scholarship

Gerard J. Libaridian

I would like to begin with some general observations. The first is that the Armenian/Turkish conflict, the theme of this symposium, functions on many levels and involves much more than feelings and memories.

It is, of course, evident in interpersonal relations: when an Armenian first meets a Turk, he/she is likely to ask, "Why did you kill us?" Within the Armenian diaspora the battle for genocide recognition has turned into a principle of community organization and legitimation of power.

Within the Republic of Armenia, Turkish/Armenian relations still dominate the debate over foreign and security policy directions, even if it is less obvious than in the early years of independence. I have previously defined this debate as the "battle for the soul of the Republic."

In Turkey too, the genocide issue has become one of the defining features between those who labor for the status quo in Turkey's military/nationalist dominated political system and their opponents who would like to see a thorough democratization of the system and, therefore, must come to terms with its past. The Armenian issue is one of the most important dimensions of what is known as the "Sevres Syndrome," the deeply-felt fear that the purpose of any remaking of the state system founded by Ataturk is to dismember it, and that genocide recognition, with its ostensible consequences, would be a harsh blow to that state and its security.

With the independence of Armenia, Armenian/Turkish relations now include state-to-state relations, which were absent since 1921. With the outcome of the Karabakh war favoring the

Armenian side while Turkey aligned itself with Azerbaijan, state-to-state relations between Armenia and Turkey have also become contingent upon Armenia's relation with Azerbaijan and the settlement of that conflict. Relations between Armenia and Turkey and, by extension diasporan attitudes toward Turkey, are of immense interest to Russia and Iran, two neighbors of Armenia and Turkey on which Armenia has depended since independence for a number of purposes, a dependence that is important for these two important states.

Armenian/Turkish antagonisms, on the state or diasporan level, have acquired significance for the European Union and many of its member countries, both for good and bad reasons. The well intentioned in Europe see Turkey's treatment of Armenia and Armenian issues as evidence of Turkey's rejection of European standards; others use existing antagonisms to justify their dislike of the prospect of seeing Turkey as a member of the European Union. Even the United States is known sometimes to use the "Armenian card" to get Turkey to move in its direction.

Although symbolized by the battles on the use or applicability of the word "genocide" to the Armenian case, it is obvious that this is a multi-layered and multi-dimensional conflict that is not easily addressed merely by a scholarly treatment of the subject.

Second, it is obvious that the dynamics of Armenian-Turkish relations have changed since Armenia's independence and the Karabakh war. Although there is no single person, institution, or organization that speaks for the extremely complex Armenian diaspora, we have come to agree that at least for most of its organized segment the recognition of the Genocide has become in the last thirty years or so its most important agenda item. Armenia's independence has added a new level of relations. While sensitive to diaspora attitudes, albeit to different degrees, each administration in Yerevan since independence has acted independently of the diaspora in disengaging state-to-state relations from the genocide recognition issue. Despite the absence of diplomatic relations between the two states, meetings and discussions between Armenian and Turkish statesmen in bilateral settings and international forums have become common.

Third, the regularization of contacts between the two states has encouraged non-state actors in Armenia and the diaspora to initiate joint Turkish/Armenian projects involving businessmen, journalists, scholars, artists, students, and youth. These projects have also been possible because of the rise of a civil society in Turkey and the willingness of many citizens in

Turkey and abroad to defy the state-supported interpretation of history.

Many of these projects were meant to be short lived, such as conferences; others, such as the Vienna Forum and Yerevan State University and Ankara University agreement, proved to be difficult to sustain. The most noted failure was the ill-conceived Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission (TARC). The Turkish-Armenian Business Council has continued its existence, but its field of action is limited in the absence of open borders between the two countries. As a general rule, efforts with the highest ambitions but without a sound strategy and intellectual grounding had the least chance of contributing to the dialogue now carried on so many levels.

Interestingly, the most sustainable project has proven to be the Workshop for Armenian/Turkish Scholarship, initiated at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, in 2000. Since 2001 the group, made up of Armenian, Turkish, and Western scholars, has met five times¹ in different locations for 2-4 day presentations and intensive discussions exploring the historical context within which the contested events took place as a way of unraveling the knot around the word "genocide." Professor Fatma Müge Göçek and I, for example, are developing a project in the context of the Workshop to jointly study the history of the city of Agn/Egin from earlier times to the present. The Workshop has been a laboratory to research, explore, and discuss the Genocide in its specifics and widest contexts. We will see if that interaction that has involved close to 200 scholars over seven years has enabled us to write the shared history of one single town.

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The questions we must now ask are to what extent scholarship—the existing one—constitutes part of the problem and in what way can it be part of the solution. The second question assumes that we want a solution. As I have indicated elsewhere, some on both sides prefer the problem to a solution. Despite decades of scholarship and political wrangling on the subject, we are still lacking a critical and comprehensive study of the inter-relationship between scholarship on the one hand, and political sensibilities and agendas, on the other. At the least, as I have indicated elsewhere, we have witnessed the development of two distinct narratives, two distinct and opposing histories, one for

¹ As of late 2010, there have been seven WATS workshops.

each "side," so to speak, with minor variations, both claiming to be based on research and sources.

In other words, scholarship has both reflected the conflict and contributed to it.

Let us ask the next question: What can one do with history, with the past? One can (a) ignore it; (b) negotiate it; (c) use and abuse it; and/or (d) explore and discuss it. To some extent or another, scholarship on the subject has been engaged in all four practices. Were it not so we would not find ourselves in a situation where the same events on the same lands peopled by the same actors are presented in such conflicting and contradictory ways.

If scholarship is to serve a purpose beyond itself, it must first distance itself from the mindsets that drive the political agendas. The first task of the historian, then, is to disentangle himself/herself from political considerations and to bare open the various layers that encumber the complex subject of Turkish/Armenian relations. Ideally, the purpose should be to contribute to the dialogue by aiming at finding a shared history and a shared language. This does not mean agreeing on every detail or assessment necessarily. After all, Armenian historians have disagreements among themselves just as Turkish historians are developing narratives that differ from that of the state or state-sponsored historians. But a shared history would at least provide for narratives that complement each other rather than present radically opposing facts and perspectives as history.

One step in this direction is to avoid projecting the fact of the Genocide back into centuries of Armenian/Turkish relations, giving an aura of inevitability to the Genocide. We must also recognize that while the Genocide ended the lives of about half of the Armenian population in the Ottoman Empire and ended the presence of the Armenian people on most of their historic homeland, the Armenian people continued to exist and Turkish/Armenian relations, in whatever form, continue and even evolve, and that genocide is not the only determining factor in what has followed.

The second step is for Armenians to recognize the role Armenian leaders have played in the making of that history. The leaders of the Church, political parties, and others spoke and acted on behalf of their people, making Armenians subjects of history and not merely its objects, destined to be destroyed.

Third, Armenian scholarship must be willing to place Turkish/Armenian relations in the context of the larger events within which they were situated, i.e., the interaction of the Great Powers with both the Ottoman state and the Armenian leader-

ship. We need to see three actors whose interaction determined the fate of Armenians, and not just "Turks" and "Armenians." This is critical for the exploration of the causation and timing of many of the significant developments leading to the Genocide.

Fourth, we will need to separate advocacy and propaganda from the writing of history. I am not referring to the advocacy of history and historical truth but from campaigns and claims which must inevitably simplify history, especially when campaigns involve the same Great Powers that had their share of responsibility in that history. We should be able to achieve a certain distance between us and our history, to be able to write self-critically and in a way that what we say is least affected by frameworks that may damage our credibility as scholars.

Fifth, we must insist that Armenian institutions and organizations that have archives make them available to all legitimate researchers. It is hypocritical to demand that Turkey open its archives while some Armenian archives remain out of reach for most scholars.

Sixth, we must train a contingent of new scholars who are equipped with the intellectual and linguistic tools to fill the huge gaps that still exist in our knowledge of the past. For good or bad, as a people, especially as a diaspora, we have internationalized, once more, an Armenian question and we should expect increased scrutiny of any and all claims on history or its consequences. Yet the number of scholars who are working on Turkish/Armenian relations or more specifically the Genocide is ridiculously low.

Just as was the case with the historically defined "Armenian Question," so with the genocide recognition battle: once an issue is internationalized, one does not know who will do what with it, one has less control over it. We will have to figure out where this issue is leading. It does not appear that the strongest and noisiest advocates for internationalization have a clear understanding of what the next battles will be and what resources they will require. That it will require more scholars is beyond any doubt.

Finally, we will have to multiply our efforts to work in conjunction with Turkish and other scholars on specific projects, even humble ones to begin with, even if we are not in full agreement, such as the one mentioned above.

Turkish historians, of course, have far bigger challenges and an increasing number of them are meeting that challenge. It is my hope that with hard work—intellectual and otherwise—we will be able to find more ways to interact and see if at least in

scholarship we can establish an arena of cooperation and dialogue for the benefit of all.