

The Interconnection between Ethnicity, Ideology, and Genocide and their Reflection on the Armenian Genocide

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Abstract

The aim of this essay is to discuss the correlation of notions such as ethnicity and ideology and the usage of these notions in instigating genocides. The theoretical part of this essay will be supported by the detailed study of the 1915 events, when the Ottoman Empire initiated the targeted mass-killings of its ethnic Armenian (as well as Greek and Assyrian) minorities by systematically exterminating them from their historic homeland of what today is known as the Republic of Turkey. These atrocities are recognized as genocide by 21 countries, but not yet by Turkey itself. However, in this essay we will not concentrate on the latter aspect of non-recognition of the Genocide and the political motives behind this, but we will rather discuss the ideologies, as well as the perception of ethnic unity as a core concept in instigating these atrocities.

Keywords: Genocide, Armenians, Ottoman Empire, Ethnicity, Ideology

The Correlation of Ethnicity and Ideology in Inciting Genocides

Anthropologists define several levels of ethnicity, the highest level of which is the ethnic community, where the self-defined human population shares a myth of common ancestry, historical memories and elements of culture and a measure of solidarity. These types of

communities have a clear conception of who they are and have a common ethno-history, often articulated in chronicles and epics (Smith, 2006, p. 172). This type of definition is also applied for diaspora ethnic communities such as the Armenians, Greeks, Jews, who retained a symbolic link with their ancestral homelands (Smith, 2006, p. 172).

Different factors play a role in the formation of ethnic consciousness. These include the interplay of culture and politics, a sense of common ancestry, long warfare between states, religion, certain codes of communication among populations sharing common elements of culture, as well as collective beliefs and shared attachments to landscapes, all of which contribute in their turn to the creation and preservation of national identity (Smith, 2006, p. 172). These ethnic attachments and perceptions often influence political action, i.e. the political elites use the above-mentioned factors for reaffirmation of the territorial, cultural and other types of claims of the particular ethnic group or nation (Smith, 2006, p. 172). As Malesevic states, ethnicity and 'nationness' have much more to do with ideology than identity (2006, p. 157). Explaining the connection between ethnicity and ideology, he stresses that collective cultural difference is more than the synonym for ethnicity or 'nationness', since when formulating an identity, a choice of certain practices or artifacts is made from the nearly unlimited repertoire that cultures provide, which according to Malesevic, is politically motivated: in other words, ethnicity and 'nationness' are not merely culturally bound, but politically motivated forms of social action, which, in turn, shifts the perception of ethnicity and nationality based on identity into concepts substantiated by ideology (2006, p. 157).

Describing the power of ideology in mobilizing people, Malesevic quotes Cohen, who stated that ethnicity is essentially a political phenomenon and traditional customs are used only as mechanisms for political alignment (2006, p. 166). Malesevic goes on explaining that the use of cultural or religious symbols is aimed at mobilizing large sectors of the population on ethno-national basis, so that when confronted with other groups, they perceive them as culturally different and thus threatening. Elites manage to ideologically articulate cultural difference as a political difference, which in its turn gives political meaning and significance to culture by politicizing its content (2006, p. 166). <https://doi.org/10.5526/esj66>

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As a result, nationalism is formed, which, as described by Gellner, creates the concept that the ruler should belong to the same ethnic group as the ruled (Conversi, 2006, p. 320). The opposite situation is thus a road leading to ethnic cleansing, forced assimilation, mass deportation and genocide, because claiming that the inhabitants of a specific constituency must have the same ethnic roots of its leaders is to give green light to mass expulsion and redrawing of boundaries to suit the group's genealogy (Conversi, 2006, p. 321). Gellner also points at ethno-political purity as a factor of nationalism, which is the symbol of most nationalist attempts to erase ethnic distinctiveness by homogenizing entire populations (Conversi, 2006, p. 321).

History has shown that the process of assimilation is made easier particularly when nationalist mobilizations are accompanied by state militarism (Conversi, 2006, p. 321). As such, the earliest occurrence of this form of assimilation was the Armenian genocide at the beginning of the 20th century, when Westernizing nationalism emerged as an influential force among the Turkish elites (Conversi, 2006, p. 321). As Conversi states, "the 1914-16 mass extermination campaigns were unprecedented by any humanly acceptable and recognizable standard", which occurred as a result of rapidly modernizing state structures, which in their turn, by imitating Western models, were trying to prevent the collapse of the empire (2006, p. 321).

Malesevic points out as well that ethnic cleansings have been the result of not only the birth of modern nation-states, but also of the processes of democratization, liberalization and modernization; "it was the arrival of modernity – and its most enduring creation, the Enlightenment inspired nation-state – which generated an environment for the systematic mass extermination of human beings" (Malesevic, 2006, p. 204). In such circumstances, the prevailing assumption is that achieving a new properly functioning state is only possible through a single standardized cultural idiom. When this cultural homogeneity is achieved gradually and slowly, even if it involves systematic mass scale bloodshed (which in a course of time becomes a forgotten historical episode), we accept it as something normal and natural, while when this same principle is applied suddenly in front of our eyes, without any restraints, we are shocked and disgusted by its savagery (as was the case with the Rwandan Genocide) (Malesevic, 2006, pp. 205-6). Thus, Malesevic concludes that the reasons for ethnic cleansing and genocide are not so much in the

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authoritarian tradition or politics, or in the economic or technological backwardness, but in the idea of creating a modern nation-state, which eventually lays the foundation for all genocides (2006, p. 206).

In terms of analyzing the motives of systematic mass killing, Mann (2005) shows as well that the role of the state and the 'process of democratization' play a big role in justifying the crime by covering it with the pretence of modernity. He states that ethnic cleansing is most likely to happen where powerful representatives within two ethnic groups try to establish their rule over the same territory 'in the name of the people' (Mann, 2005, p. 33). However, the idea of modern and democratic rule in the people's name has often been misused and too often democracy has been read as ethnos, while the project of democratization has been treated as ethnic homogenization (Mann, 2005, p. 33). Thus, as Mann notices, mass scale ethnic cleansing has been viewed as the 'dark side of democracy', and in such circumstances, genocide has been taken as something more likely to happen under the conditions of imperfect democratization (2005, p. 33).

As such, Malesevic concludes that the 1915 genocide of Armenians was not executed by an authoritarian Ottoman Empire, but by a multiethnic Empire, where the ideological incentive was created by secular and Western oriented Young Turks. Moreover, the actions were carried out neither in the name of Allah, nor for the sake of imperial Ottoman glory, but rather in the name of modernizing the ruling system and reviving the nation/state-building process (Malesevic, 2006, p. 208). Therefore, genocide can be related to factors such as interstate rivalry, government expansion, modernization or nation/state creation, while patriotism and nationalism are factors providing ideological and emotional grounds for carrying out the crime.

For understanding what ideological mechanisms were used in case of the Armenian Genocide and how they actually worked, we would need to have a more profound study in this area for better illustration of how the blend of such notions like ethnicity and ideology was applied in the case of the Armenian Genocide.

Transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic of Turkey: the Nation Building Process and the Fate of Ethnic Armenians in 1920s

During the nation-building process in the late 19th century, the urgency of forming collective identity appeared in Turkey in response to Western attempts to partition the Ottoman Empire, therefore the following question emerged - what collective character should unite the society for avoiding the collapse (Akcam, 2004, pp. 124-5)? As a response to this question, two main political movements emerged in the middle of the 19th century, one of which was 'progressive/reformers' and the other, 'reactionary/traditionalists'. Despite the differences between these two movements, the sides were united on one point – the need for creating some shared, homogenous elements which separated the 'us' from the 'them' (Akcam, 2004, p. 125).

As a result, The Union and Progress movement (CUP), which became a driving force in the political power in the Ottoman Empire of 1908, emerged as a movement aimed at creating a centralized and modern state where the fundamental condition of strong state building was the shared identity based on universal equality (Akcam, 2004, p. 125). While it was obvious that there was need to gather different religious-national groups of the Empire under one roof for creating this 'union of peoples', it was unclear what the shared moral values and cultural identity between the Empire's different communities should be, which would allow them to unite (Akcam, 2004, p. 126).

Eventually, a very classical approach in solving the problem of creating a shared identity imposed upon the modern state was applied, i.e. the principle of universal citizenship, which considered everyone as equal, combined with a cultural identity that could be defined as Ottomanism and which would be formed around the values of the dominant Muslim Turkish society (Akcam, 2004, p. 128).

For this purpose, the unionists planned to implement the policy of assimilation or Turkification of the Ottoman Empire, which occurred in several ways. One such way was staying far from political and social pluralism as the CUP was convinced that only by transforming the country into an ethnically homogenous core state with an ethnically homogenous population was the only acceptable model for the Ottoman Empire (Ungor, 2011, p. 293). As a result, actions were

carried out such as undertaking detailed ethnographic research on almost all the non-Turkish Ottoman peoples in order to facilitate the plans of ethnic 'restructuring' (Ungor, 2011, p. 293).

An extensive campaign of Turkification was launched in the summer of 1913, when the place names were changed in many parts of the country and all traces of non-Turkish cultures were wiped out; the process went as far as the 1960s and ended up in the alteration of tens of thousands of topographic names (Ungor, 2011, p. 296).

Another way was the deportation of the entire Armenian population from Anatolia, which occurred based on the order of compulsory deportation of all Armenians to Der Zor (desert in Syria). Any Muslim protecting an Armenian was to be hanged in front of his house, his house was to be burnt down and if such a Muslim held an office, he should have been removed from it and brought in front of the martial court (Ungor, 2011, p. 297). By the autumn of 1915, the Ottoman bureaucracy had depopulated most of the Armenian settlements, isolated or eliminated the Armenian community leaders, and was managing the expropriation and allocation of the remaining Armenian property to Muslims (Ungor, 2011, p. 298).

Aside from deportation, massacres were also taking place. One such massacre that took place in 1915 in Diyarbakir and was carried out by the governor of the town Resid Bey who, according to his own words, 'removed' 120,000 Armenians from his province, the majority of whom were massacred or died from exhaustion (Ungor, 2011, p. 137). The governor, taking the Social Darwinist idea of the need to kill collectively in order to survive collectively, justified the murders as follows:

Either they us, or we them. In this situation, I thought to myself: (...) either Armenians will liquidate the Turks, or the Turks will liquidate them! ... Faced with the necessity of having to choose I did not hesitate for long. (...) But I did not accomplish this deed either to satisfy my personal pride or to enrich myself. I had seen that the fatherland was about to be lost, therefore, I proceeded eyes closed and without consideration, convinced that I was acting for the welfare of the nation (Ungor, 2011, p. 137).

Such actions, made by this and other governors, supported the realization of the plan of centralization, full sovereignty and Turkification of Anatolia at the expense of the region's religious

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and ethnic minorities. The First World War offered an opportunity to carry out these plans without attracting unnecessary attention.

However, not all governors were carrying out the order this eagerly. During the testimonies given before various sessions of the Unionists' trials in the courts-martial, former Ankara governor explained his removal thus: "I acted as if I did not understand the orders concerning the deportation of Armenians that I received from the interior minister in Istanbul. [...] [When] Atif Bey arrived... He orally relayed to me the order regarding the killing and annihilation of Armenians. I told him 'No, Atif Bey, I am the governor, I'm not a bandit. I cannot do it. I will get up from the [governor's] chair and you can come and do it.'" (Akcem, 2012, p. 195).

In addition to the provincial and district officials who lost their positions, other local officials lost their lives. Huseyin Nesimi, the senior administrator of Lice County, refused to carry out the order to massacre his Armenian residents. He first demanded to receive a written order to this effect. He was soon removed from his position, summoned to Diyarbekir, and murdered on the way. As his son recalls, the order to dismiss state officials came from Diyarbekir governor Dr. Resid Bey, and he names several other provincial and district heads who shared a similar fate. In order to carry out the annihilation of the Armenians, the younger Nesimi explains, "it was unavoidable that the administrative cadre that was likely to oppose [such a measure] would have to be removed. For this reason (...) it appeared necessary to eliminate the aforementioned persons" (Akcem, 2012, p. 196).

Armenians, however, were not the only ethnic group on the list. Kurds were also condemned to mass deportation. They were deported from East Anatolia to Western Anatolia and, according to the official correspondence, they were to undergo assimilation and rapid linguistic Turkification (Ungor, 2011, p. 298). The removal of Kurds from Eastern Turkey was accompanied by forced assimilation. In 1928, the Turkish nationalist Tekin Alp published a manifesto entitled 'Turkification', in which he argued that the rapid cultural homogenization of Turkey could only be accomplished by Turkifying the minorities by force: methods of forced integration included assuming Turkish names, speaking only Turkish, extinguishing non-Turkish collective identities, and socializing with Turks (Ungor, 2011, p. 303).

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As a result, in 1928, the Kemalist government initiated campaign titled “Citizen, Speak Turkish!”; in 1930, a secret order was issued regarding the fate of the deportees in that they were to be “made Turkish in languages, traditions and desires”; in 1934, the Surname Law homogenized all family names into a Turkish melting pot (Ungor, 2011, p. 303).

The significant component of Turkification was also making the use of Turkish language compulsory in all state organs and schools, as well as forcing the businesses owned or operated by non-Muslims using Turkish in all their corporate transactions. While the first step was aimed at cultural and linguistic homogenization, the second step aimed at establishing and enriching the ‘national economy’ through seizing the wealth of non-Muslims (Ungor, 2011, p. 296). Finally, removal of these events from people’s memory was also an important method of Turkification. For every region in Eastern Anatolia, local official historians produced volumes of history books, where the fact of the genocide was silenced and all ethnic minorities were named as Turks (Ungor, 2011, p. 304).

Through these steps, various ethnic and religious groups in the Ottoman Empire and then in the Turkish Republic were expelled and destroyed through the continuous processes of ethnic cleansing in the period of 1878 - 1945. The re-conceptualization of Turkish history in the first half of the twentieth century took place through deportation, expulsion and assimilation. First, there was the Armenian Genocide, then the expulsion of the Greeks, and finally the dissolution of the Kurds, which all led to homogenization of the society during the Young Turks’ (CUP) era. It was these Young Turks that were united around CUP’s ideological projects who shaped the policies of state/nation formation and the political and ethnic map of Turkey (Ungor, 2011, pp. 304-5).

Ideological Grounds

The fall of the Ottoman Empire gave birth to several ideologies aimed at preventing its total collapse: these were Ottomanism, Islamism, Westernism and Turkism. Despite the differences between them, the core of all of these ideologies was the expectation of continuing Turkish domination over other nations in the region (Akcem, 2004, p. 134). The uniting point among these different streams was not only the religious dominance of Muslims over non-Muslims, but also of

the Turkish race over all other races. As such, different representatives of these streams agreed that in regards to their military, civilizing and political roles, the Turkish race was superior and more ancient than all the other races, which in turn privileged them over other races (Akcam, 2004, p. 135).

What the CUP later on did was simply borrow this ideology, claiming that in multinational constructs such as the Ottoman Empire, the domination of one nation/ethnos should be seen as normal. However, the CUP did not entirely reject other ideologies such as Islamism or Ottomanism, but instead applied them whenever occasion demanded (Akcam, 2004, p. 137). In the series of articles “Turkification, Islamification, Modernization” published in 1913, Ziya Gokalp, an influential figure in the formation of Turkish nationalism, argued that these ideologies should be understood as essentially saying the same thing, thus forming the necessary theoretical foundation for the CUP’s pragmatism: “There has never been a contradiction between Turkism and Islam, because one possesses the character of nationalism, the other, of international unity (...) Turkism is simultaneously Islamism” (Akcam, 2004, p. 137).

When it was obvious that the idea of unity of different religious and ethnic groups was not possible, the attempts of establishing a new state on the foundation of Islam and Turkishness came to substitute previous ideology. For Gokalp, it was clear that a state that was not based on a shared consciousness could not survive, which eventually led to the creation of ideal nationhood and it was announced that nationalism had to be employed among Muslims (Akcam, 2004, p. 138). For achieving political unity, Gokalp suggested to follow a German model of ‘cultural unity, economic unity and political unity’, where economic unity could be achieved through common national consciousness. This, in turn, drew the focus on the ethnic dimension of the economy, because the national economy could be realized through ethnic uniformity: Accordingly, the idea was that there must be a division of labor based on one ethnic group, which has shared moral values (Akcam, 2004, p. 139).

As a result, the portrayal of non-Muslims as responsible for the disasters that had befallen the Empire started. The idea that the survival of Turkey was greatly depending on the decrease of the amount of ‘foreigners’ dominated in the society and oppression against non-Muslims became

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an everyday occurrence (Akcem, 2004, p. 140). Muslim- Turkish elements began to employ political force to remove non-Muslims from their economic position and to replace them, and through economic nationalization, non- Muslim subjects and foreigners were eliminated from the market. By implicating large numbers of people via illegal methods of acquisition, the Young Turk government bought the silence and cooperation of the populace as many enriched themselves by misappropriating the forcibly abandoned properties and businesses of the Armenians (Adalian, 2009, p. 66). These measures allowed CUP to clear the markets from non- Muslims and also created lots of income flow for the party's own functionality (Akcem, 2004, p. 143). This step, among others aimed at exterminating non-Muslims in the region, eventually led to the creation of the identity the CUP had long strived for, which in turn gave firm grounds for the creation of the Republic of Turkey.

Conclusion

The Armenian Genocide, even though carried out during the First World War, was planned long before 1915. The ideology of transforming the multicultural, multiethnic and multi-religious communities in the region into a more homogenous society was planned the moment it was obvious that the Ottoman Empire needed to undergo structural changes for surviving the pressures from outside and within. The transformation of the country into a modernized and westernized state, which was the only way of survival according to the Young Turks, was viewed by them as possible only through the creation of a homogenous society and in turn, ethnic unity. As a result, ethnic cleansings in the region once again proved that the reasons for crimes against humanity and genocide do not result primarily from authoritarian traditions, politics or economic or technological backwardness, but from the idea of creating a modern nation- state, where ruling powers would have the unanimous support of a given population with shared cultural values, ethnic backgrounds and religious inclinations. As such, the creation of the Republic of Turkey is a clear example of how ethnicity and ideology, when intertwined and used as a tool for obtaining power, can and do lead to genocides.

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