

DOES ARMENIA DESIRE RECONCILIATION WITH TURKEY? - DIPLOMATIC OBSERVER - APRIL 2019

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Blog No: 24
04.04.2019

Diplomatic Observer (April 2019, Issue 134, p. 30-33)

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Every April provides us with a litmus test of whether Armenia is willing for reconciliation with Turkey.

Why April and what do we mean by this? The propaganda-laden discourse that aims to establish an acknowledgement of an Armenian genocide starts with a specific date: 24 April. Applying the adage that the more an audacious lie is repeated, the more effective the brain washing process becomes, the genocide narrative starts with the assertion that in Istanbul, on 24 April 1915, hundreds of Armenian intellectuals were arrested, sent to exile, and subsequently murdered.

Before thoroughly inquiring into this allegation so as to leave no doubt that it is unsubstantiated, it would be appropriate to start by looking into the vital challenges the Ottoman Empire was faced with in the early years of the First World War. The Ottoman state found itself, completely unprepared, as a warring party of the First World War in October 1914 as a result of two destroyers of the allied German navy, displaying the Ottoman banner, bombarding the Russian ports in the Black Sea. The Tsarist Russia, almost counting days for such an eventuality, started immediately with its land operations from Kars, a fortress town occupied by Russia following the 1877-78 war and built and buttressed into a major military forward post, with Erzurum as target within reach.

Stopping, even retracting the Russian armys advance became a military priority, hence under the personal command of the deputy Commander in Chief and Chief of General Staff, a counter military operation was initiated in December 1914. The Sarıkamış operation that was carried out under freezing, subzero winter conditions with insufficient preparations and supplies ended up in utter disaster, where the Ottoman Third Army, the main military bastion in eastern Anatolia, almost completely perished. Thus, the only hurdle before the Russian armys advance remained the harsh climate and the mountainous terrain.

The military evaluation of the situation concluded that a crucial factor behind the success of the Russian army was the contribution of the Armenian militia in the region. Armenian enlists of the Russian army, Armenian volunteers who had defected from the Ottoman side, and irregular Armenian gangs provided support at critical moments. Even more foreboding was the potential of the continuation and increase of such support on the advance route of the Russian army.

The Sarıkamış calamity incurred at the very beginning of the war was followed from the start of the year 1915 onwards with revolts, insurgencies, and atrocious killings of the Muslim population all over eastern Anatolia. In May 1915, the major provincial town of Van was overtaken by Armenian gangs, who then proceeded with killing and cleansing the unprotected Muslim majority of the town and delivering the keys of the town to Russian forces. Thus, the fall of Van into Russian hands in such a sinister manner brought the events to an irredeemable as well as irreversible point.

Two political organizations, the Hunchak party founded in 1887 and the Dashnak party founded in 1890 constituted the political basis of the insurgency in eastern Anatolia. The center where political instructions came from and where foreign support was coordinated was Istanbul and political opinion leaders living in Istanbul.

In view of what was happening on the eastern front, it is obvious that the Ottoman administration found itself facing a serious dilemma. On the one hand, there was the loyal Armenian entity who had been living in peace and harmony for centuries; a people who had never challenged Turks in the battlefield, sided with the Turks during the campaign of the Selchuks against Byzantium, and institutionalized friendly relations at the first Ottoman capital in Bursa through the community archbishop. An Armenian patriarchate was established in 1461 following the conquest of Istanbul and the Armenian patriarch in Istanbul became, for long years, the first among equals (the other ones were in Etchmiadzin, Sis/Adana, and Jerusalem) in the Armenian divine hierarchy. On the other hand, this same entity had been provoked and derailed to side and cooperate with enemy forces intent on the demise of the Ottoman state.

The Ottoman administrations immediate reaction was to detain some 235 persons in Istanbul, members of Armenian committees suspected to be political leaders of the insurgency. The available records and documents indicate that, of those detained, 155 were sent to Çankırı and 70 to Ayaş near Ankara for debriefing and interrogation. 7 of them, who were foreign citizens, were deported from the Empire. Those sent to Ayaş were

all members of Dashnak and Hunchak committees. Those sent to Çankırı were free to move within the city limits and lived in houses in groups of three to five. The only supervision they were subject to was to appear once daily at the police station and sign in for their presence. Furthermore, the state extended financial assistance and per diem to those who lacked means to afford their livelihood. Two weeks after their detention, on 8 May, a group of 8, among them a well-known musician, Vartapet Komitas, were pardoned to return to Istanbul. A little later, again some 35 of this group were also pardoned to return to Istanbul. Some 57 were sentenced to exile in different parts of the Empire. 25 of those in Çankırı were sentenced to prison and sent to the Ayaş prison** (All of Armenian political prisoners were released under the stipulations of the Mondros armistice, when the Ottomans lost the war).

As the Tsarist army continued with its advance and as revolts and atrocities perpetrated by Armenian gangs could not be prevented, the Ottoman government could come out with no other option then to evacuate the Armenian settlements on the war front as well as on the supply routes to the front. To this end, the law for Relocation and Resettlement enacted on 27 May 1915 envisaged to move all the Armenian population in the war operations zones outside these areas, to settlements in the south of the Empire such as the province of Damascus. Years later, an American military historian who researched in detail as to why this decision was made concluded that this decision was made strictly due to military necessity.*** The larger part of the Armenian population of the Ottoman state, however, was not subject to or affected with this law or measures.

It surely transpires from the above going that the relocation and resettlement decision of 1915, no doubt a human tragedy and which one would sincerely wish that it would have not come to this, was not an act of genocide and cannot even be labeled as massacre. Even propagandists of the genocide narrative have seen the need to extend the period of Armenian deaths up to the year 1923, since otherwise neither their claims nor numbers added up. In a curious, Dantean twist of history during this period, fortunes of war went through a number of ebbs and flows where victims of the day were the victors of the other day and vice versa again.

Up until the end of 1917, Armenian militia and gangs with nationalist aspirations, enjoying the blessing of the Tsarist army as they continued with their unhindered advance, fully convinced of establishing a vast, independent Armenian state, however conscious of the fact that at no part of it did they constitute a majority, resorted to full scale massacres so as to cleanse the aspired lands for the Armenians.

The Bolshevik takeover of Tsarist Russia in October 1917, Bolsheviks withdrawal from war, acceptance of the terms of the treaty of Brest-Litovsk in January 1918, retreat from all their territorial gains including those of 1877-78 war left the whole of eastern Anatolia to be recovered by the Ottoman army. Under the command of Kazım Karabekir, the Ottoman army carried out a successful military campaign, driving away the Armenian resistance. This was yet another episode in the counts of Armenian losses.

This period was also short lived. The Ottoman state, on the losers side of the First World War, ended up signing, on 30 October 1918, the surrender document of Mondros

armistice, leading to the occupation of its territory. This development gave the Armenian aspirations and ambitions a new impetus. The Armenian population that was resettled in todays Syria, when France occupied that territory, this time with the blessing of the French, moved back to south-eastern Anatolia under French occupation and went to excesses in acts of vengeance which in turn gave rise to Turkish resistance that earned Antep the title of Gazi (wounded veteran), and Maraş the title of Kahraman (heroic).

The Greek occupation of western Anatolia started in May 1919 with the landing of Greek troops in İzmir. Although the Armenian population of this vast region was not affected with the law of Relocation and Resettlement of 1915 and did not face any discrimination during the war, were nevertheless found cooperating with the Greek occupation forces and partners in the vicious crimes against the Turkish population.

Istanbul under British and French occupation became a center for Armenians in devising the partition of the state, in the meantime, fully employing the cruelty of the victor to the vanquished on the population of Istanbul.

What is noteworthy is the fact that as nationalist Armenians were on top, with victors on their side, their every whim surely to receive attention, during the peace treaty negotiations of Sévres near Paris, Armenian delegations never brought up the issue of Relocation and Resettlement, nor any grievances of massacres, as they were reconciled with the fact that what happened was within the bounds of warfare and that now it was the turn of the Turks to bear the brunt of war.

However, fortunes of war would change once again. With the start of the Turkish War of National Liberation on 19 May 1919, inauguration of the Grand National Assembly in Ankara on 23 April 1920, the Turkish army would once again, under the command of General Karabekir, establish its hold on eastern Anatolia within todays borders, France would agree to withdraw from Turkish territory with the Treaty of Ankara signed on 20 October 1921, large numbers of Armenian returnees that moved in with the French under the protection of the Mondros Armistice would feel the need also to withdraw with the French (the historical Armenian Catholicosate of Sis in Kozan/Adana was also among them. Despite the assurances of the National Assembly Government and Mustafa Kemal personally for the safety of the Catholicosate, they opted to leave on their own will, conscientious of their role during the occupation), İzmir would be liberated from Greek occupation on 9 September 1922, the Armenians would keep company to departing Greeks (As the Greek army was retreating from western Anatolia, there was a policy of scorced earth; burning down villages being left behind. This continued with their final point of departure, the city of İzmir itself. Contemporary Armenian historians often put the blame on the Turkish army for the burning of İzmir).

The Anatolian people, Turks and Armenians, suffered these historical tragedies together. The mutual killings (an accepted definition in Turkey) have caused reciprocal wounds and pains. That generation of Armenians who lived through those times, acknowledging the understanding that we brought ourselves the calamity that befell onto us, have buried their pain to their hearts and wrote them down in memoires but never resorted to revenge taking or political revanchism against Turks or Turkey. A different approach started

appearing with second, third, and later generations. Starting in 1960s, the seeds of a new political revanchism were sown. In the narrative dominant among Armenians, genocide has no historical or legal basis. It is a pure and total political discourse aiming at reviving historical ambitions, and from a positive angle, provides Turkey insight to differentiate friend from foe.

The Republic of Turkey, with the founding target of elevating its country and people to the contemporary level of civilization, had opened a clean chapter and turned its gaze to the future. This policy did not stem from covering up the past (if it should come to taking accounts with the past, Turks would have more to ask for than to give) but to direct the positive energy to the future to raise the welfare of its people (The new Republic was highly successful in this quest as has qualified to be within the ranks of G-20 economies, coming from impoverished conditions).

The month of April provides an opportunity and serves as an indicator for the Republic of Armenia as well as the Armenian people in the Diaspora whether a just, sensible and prudent road will be taken or whether they will be persisting in being prisoners of lost years and pipe dreams.

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** Yusuf Sarınay, What Happened on April 24, 1915? The Circular of April 24, 1915, and the Arrest of Armenian Committee Members in İstanbul, *International Journal of Turkish Studies*, Vol. 14, No: 1&2 (2008), p. 78-80.

*** Edward J. Erickson (ed.), *A Global History of Relocation in Counterinsurgency Warfare* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

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To cite this article: Alev KILIÇ. 2026. "DOES ARMENIA DESIRE RECONCILIATION WITH TURKEY? - DIPLOMATIC OBSERVER - APRIL 2019." Center For Eurasian Studies (AVİM), Blog No.2019 / 24. April 04. Accessed November 22, 2026. https://www.avim.org.tr/public/index.php/Blog/DOES-ARMENIA-DESIRE-RECONCILIATION-WITH-TURKEY-DIPLOMATIC-OBSERVER-APRIL-2019

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