

Can Germany Mediate Armenian-Turkish Reconciliation?

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In 2005, the German Bundestag passed a resolution calling on the German government to facilitate a process of Armenian-Turkish understanding and reconciliation. Now, six years later, scholars and civil society activists are asking: what has been achieved since then? This was the subject of a one-day seminar on “The Armenian Genocide and German Public Opinion” on September 22, organized by the Heinrich Böll Foundation at its Berlin headquarters. That resolution, presented by all parliamentary factions and voted up, called on Berlin to contribute to such a process by encouraging an honest examination of the historical record. This included demands for the release of historical documents both from the Ottoman archives and copies of documents given by the German foreign ministry to Turkey, and the establishment of a historians’ commission with international experts. The aim of such efforts was to encourage the Turkish authorities to deal with the 1915 genocide and move towards reconciliation and normalization of relations with the Republic of Armenia. Guaranteeing the freedom of opinion in Turkey, especially regarding the Armenian question, was stressed. Although the motion did not call on the German government to recognize the genocide in those terms, in the statement of grounds for the initiative, it referenced the fact that “numerous independent historians, parliaments, and international organizations term the expulsion and extermination of the Armenians as genocide.”

International historians presented updates on the status of genocide research: Prof. Raymond Kevorkian of Paris, who has written widely on Armenian history including an authoritative account of the 1915 events, gave an overview of the history of genocide studies, Swiss researcher Hans-Lukas Kieser and German researcher Wolfgang Gust discussed the German role on the basis of official documents, and considerable discussion revolved around whether the Germans, allied to the Young Turks in World War I, were co-responsible or complicit, what they knew when, and what they did or failed to do to stop it. Gust, who has been publishing the German Foreign Ministry archive material on the issue, said Berlin knew in real time what occurred and had the power to intervene but did not. The war provided the context for the genocide, as Kieser stressed, and it was the Young Turks who sought the alliance with Germany, after which the Germans pushed for their engagement in the conflict. One important point made by Gust was that, contrary to official Turkish propaganda that the Armenians constituted a military threat to the Ottomans, there is no trace of any such view in the German archives.

Following discussion of the historical developments, the seminar turned to reports by civil society activists involved in trying to engage members of the Armenian, Turkish, Kurdish, and German communities in a dialogue process about their common tragic past. Sophia Georgallidis of a Greek community association, summarized the proceedings of a workshop held in Cologne last October, where various projects were presented, from the Hrant Dink

Forum in Cologne (and now Berlin), to Ali Ertam's Association of Genocide Opponents in Frankfurt, to this author's "Project 2015," to the well-known study excursions to Berlin organized by Turkish-born German author Dogan Akhanli and others of Recherche International in Cologne.

Akhanli himself described his group's extensive tours of Berlin, where participants visit historical sites linked to these events, hear lectures, and engage in discussion with experts. Sites include the place where Young Turk leader Talaat Pasha was assassinated, as well as monuments commemorating victims of the Holocaust and Stalinist terror.

Toros Sarian, an Armenian journalist and editor from Hamburg who publishes the online magazine ArmenienInfo.net, reported on his local grass roots organizing: in response to a leaflet campaign following Hrant Dink's murder in 2007, a thousand people demonstrated three days after the assassination. This led to a Round Table event in Hamburg the following April and, in 2010, to a series of commemorative events around the April 24 anniversary of the mass arrests in Constantinople, culminating in an ecumenical gathering of 800 people – Turks, Kurds, Germans, and Armenians, among others.

If such grass-roots initiatives have contributed significantly to educating citizens about the past, especially the Armenian genocide, there remains much to be done, especially on the level of formal education. Here, the issue of history text-books becomes critical. As noted in the seminar, in Germany the state governments are responsible for curricula, and, if progress is to be made, these institutions must take up the challenge. Thus far, Brandenburg is the only state which has succeeded in presenting the Armenian genocide to pupils in history classes – and did so prior to 2005. Opposition to such teaching by informal Turkish lobbyists has thus far prevented other states from addressing this subject, among other controversial issues.

Two other projects presented at the seminar illustrated the power of dialogue in seeking understanding among members of former adversary populations.

„ I am not the Murderer, not I“

One exciting project is a special attraction for student audiences, and could fill an important gap in curricula regarding the genocide of 1915. This is not a classroom lesson but a theatrical reading presented by actors and actresses, to musical accompaniment. The piece, entitled "I am not the Murderer, not I," is the brainchild of Heinz Böke, from the German Bundestag. How he came to develop the idea is instructive. As he related to the conference participants, "until four years ago I knew nothing about the Armenian genocide, simply nothing." He responded to his upsetting discovery by looking into the history, which included a visit to Armenia. In the course of his extensive research in Germany, he came across the court records of the trial held on June 2-3, 1921 of the young Armenian, Soromon Tehlerjan (also Soghoman Tehlirian), who gunned down Young Turk leader Talaat Pasha on a Berlin street in broad daylight on March 15, 1921. Böke saw the educational potential in the historical event, as documented in the court records, and, in collaboration with others, put together a play, "The Talaat Pasha Trial – A Theatre Project for Intercultural Studies," which debuted in 2010 and has been performed in several German cities since then.

Talaat, as Böke recalled, had escaped to Berlin with German help after the end of the war. The young Tehlerjan had been deployed by the Armenian commandoes known as "Operation Nemesis," to hunt down and assassinate Young Turk criminals wherever they

could be located. The trial examined not only the crime but also the assailant's motivations: why did he kill Talaat? What had Talaat done? The assassin later explained his action with the words, "I killed a man, but I am not a murderer." Talaat, he meant, was the mass murderer. The court ruled that Tehlerjan was of unsound mind and could not be considered guilty, and acquitted him.

The performances of the theatrical piece open with a 10-minute introduction by Böke on the historical background. After an Armenian song, the work unfolds in a series of 16 scenes documenting the trial. The actors come from different ethnic/cultural backgrounds, Turkish, Armenian, German, Austrian, etc., and at the end of the performance, a discussion takes place with the public. When presented to student audiences, the actors may interrupt the action just prior to the jury's decision, to allow students to say what they think the verdict should be.

This is not theatre in the conventional sense of the term, certainly not theatre as entertainment, but rather theatre as an educational medium to challenge the minds and open the hearts of viewers to consider historical events they may never have heard of. The historical context of the piece – Ottoman Turkey and the 1915 genocide — poses the question of whether or not peoples of different ethnic/cultural/religious backgrounds can coexist or not. Students watching the play are thrust into the historical context and must think through the choices that historical personalities at the time faced.

In the discussions held at the end of the play, three main themes are dealt with: the problem of violence as a political tool, a theme only too relevant for students who read of terrorism every day; the enhanced readiness for violence among some layers of youth in Germany today, for example, in right-wing extremist milieus; and the question of guilt. Those involved in the project have taken care to stress that it is not a question of attributing guilt to Turks or Turkish immigrants in Germany, but to document that the 1915 genocide was the work of the Young Turk regime in power at the time.

The theatre project has met with resounding success wherever it has been presented, and its organizers plan to expand performances for schools as well as for the general public.

"Speaking to One Another"

The other institutional initiative, presented by Matthias Klingenberg of the Institute for International Cooperation of the German Adult Education Association (dvv), was the research project, "Adult Education and Oral History Contributing to Armenian-Turkish Reconciliation." This project, financed by the German Foreign Ministry, brought together ten university students from Turkey and ten from Armenia who received training in October 2009 in conducting oral history interviews from qualified social scientists. From October 2009 to February 2010, two teams including the students conducted oral history research into the events of 1915. The basic idea was to facilitate a dialogue among members of the Armenian, Turkish, and Kurdish communities about their common past. Since, for obvious reasons, there were no direct survivors involved, the participants were second and third generation survivors, whose knowledge of the 1915-related events had been passed down to them by parents and grandparents. The persons interviewed came from the Armenian diaspora, many in Turkey, and also from the Republic of Armenia.

Well over a hundred interviews were conducted, and a selection (13 in Turkey and 35 in

Armenia) was then published in Turkish, Armenian, and English, in a volume entitled, "Speaking to One Another."⁽¹⁾ There are two levels on which the activities and achievements of the research groups should be evaluated: first, there is the wealth of specific information about the genocide – the executions, the deportations, the abduction of women, the expropriation and/or destruction of land and buildings, emphatically including places of worship, and so forth – which comes to light and, again, in its excruciating specificity of gruesome detail, documents that what occurred in 1915 was indeed genocide.

The other level is that of the trans-generational dialogue which unfolds through the exchange between the interviewers and interviewees. The fact that the book has been issued in several languages should ensure that the dialogue will continue among these communities.

The first part of the book contains testimonies from Armenians, Kurds, and Turks living in modern-day Turkey. And yet to identify them in such ethnic terms is deceptive; for, as their family histories reveal, the overriding question for them is precisely what their ethnic/religious identity is. There are those Turks who discover that their grandmothers were Armenian, others, presumably Turks, who discover Armenian, Kurdish, and Arab ancestors. This quest for identity is not only a human drama as depicted in the interviews; it plays a powerful part in the process now unfolding in Turkey whereby the citizenry is asking fundamental questions about the past, particularly related to 1915. Although official Turkish policy has obscured the historical record and criminalized anyone daring to call it genocide, the assassination of Hrant Dink in 2007 "was a significant milestone which transformed relations within the Armenian community, as well as between the community and Turkish society" (p. 19). Armenians became more willing to talk about 1915 and Turks sought to learn about the history of Armenians in their midst.

One Turk who had attended primary school in the 1960s in Akshehir in central Anatolia, told his interviewers how he had pestered his grandfather back then with the question, "Grandpa, who were the *gavurs*?" (the unbelievers, the Armenian Christians). As an adult, he learned about the Armenians who had once lived there and that it was they who had worshipped in a church whose ruins remained; and, he learned that after the Armenians were „gone,“ the local economy suffered from the absence of their skills. Or, there is the story of Mete, a 24-year-old, who began in 2009 to make video recordings of conversations with family members in an attempt to answer the question: "Who am I?" When, in high school, he first heard about the genocide, he couldn't believe it, thinking only the Nazis had committed such crimes.

For Adil, who was born in 1983 in Diyarbakir, the question was: why did he have blond hair and green eyes? He was to learn that he had inherited these somatic features from his grandfather's mother, Sosi, an Armenian who, as a thirteen-year-old survivor, had been "sold" and married off. For Adil, exploring the story of his Armenian ancestor provided a means of overcoming the sense of guilt felt by many Turks and Kurds about 1915, in that they can identify with the victim.

The 77- year-old Ruhi reported that when he discovered his mother was Armenian, it robbed him of his identity. Like so many other young girl survivors, she had been "taken away" in 1915 at the age of 8, and married to a Turk. For other Armenians social pressures in Turkey were so great that they did not teach their children the Armenian language, and changed their surnames. Then there was Ayhan, whose great-grandfather survived among Kurdish tribes, and took a Muslim name. When Ayhan moved to Istanbul, he learned Turkish, and

Armenian at a summer camp. Identity was a complex affair. As he put it, "We are Kurds at home, we speak Kurdish. Second, we are Turks at school, we speak Turkish. Third, we are Armenians at the camp, we speak Armenian" (p. 57).

Dikran, who could not trace his family history back beyond his grandfather, knew however that Armenians had inhabited the region over thousands of years. It irritated him that Turks would ask him, "Where do you come from?"

The second part of the book contains interviews with citizens of the Republic of Armenia. Many were descendants of survivors who had fled to Russia, or orphans who reached the Soviet Union after transit through Arab countries. In the atmosphere of friendly relations between the USSR and Turkey, public discussion of the genocide was nil. But in the 1930s, as those orphan survivors reached adulthood, they began to talk, at least to one another. What the researchers found was that, although the overwhelming majority of the Armenians had never had any contact with Turks over the past 90 years, they all had "memories of memories" which had been passed down through their families. In the 1960s public consciousness of the genocide matured, with public rallies and campaigns to build commemorative monuments, as well as ceremonies to remember the resistance at Musa Dagh and April 24.

The stories told by Armenians in the new Republic are full of gruesome details of the genocide: men herded off to be shot then decapitated, groups forced into churches and incinerated, corpses thrown into rivers until pollution forced the authorities to order the dead be burned; the stench of burning corpses which then led to more deportations, to drive the unwanted population into the Syrian desert. In a recurring motif, there are stories of "beautiful young Armenian girls," who are "taken away" and forced to marry Turks or Kurds. Many mothers preferred to have their daughters die than to suffer such a fate. One Armenian woman, forcibly married to a Turkish man, strangled all the children she bore over seven years, because "she did not want to have children from a Turk..." (p. 109).

The "memories of memories" recorded by the interviewees in Armenia communicate the excruciating pain suffered by the victims. Most of the sources are women; "since men were killed in excess," the authors explain, "there are fewer men among the survivors." The women tended to be more willing to talk, although many men wrote down their experiences as a private matter. Their experiences were traumatic, like that of the deported woman who had to leave one of her four children behind and was mentally tortured to her dying day by the memory (p. 84).

The enormity of the suffering, no matter how difficult for a reader to face emotionally, is crucial to provide insight into the attitude of many Armenians today towards the Turks and Turkey. When the researchers asked their Armenian interlocutors to express the emotions that they related to the word "Turk," the answers included the following: "hatred," "hatred, revenge," "they are cruel, cruel," "enmity," and so forth. When the same people were asked whether or not they had even encountered a Turk, most said no.

It comes as no surprise that the interviewees should express pessimism about the prospect of overcoming the trauma. Some said they thought that if Turkey does not acknowledge the genocide, then in the future Turks might repeat the genocide. Asked to explain why it occurred in the first place, most thought that the Turks wanted to expropriate the Armenians, take their gold, their land, their possessions. Another poignant response was: "I don't know," i.e. they could see no rational explanation for such atrocious horror (p.133).

Yet, — and this is the most important feature of the oral history project – there is a readiness to overcome the hostility, to forgive and to forget. Aram, a doctor from Istanbul, stressed the shared culture of Turks and Armenians: “I don’t think I am culturally different. Because you belong to the same land. You belong here.... Even if you killed each other, even if you don’t look at one another’s face, the same thing makes you happy.” Many Turks expressed a sense of nostalgia about the time before 1915 when the two peoples lived peacefully side by side, and guilt about the genocide. Speaking of how pain can be forgotten, Aram went on: “It can be forgotten through forgiving. Discussing is something, questioning is another thing, but eventually you have to love. And they have to love you in return” (p. 30). The precondition for such forgiveness is acknowledgement of having done wrong. The researchers write: “[F]orgiveness starts from demeanor of the one who acted wrongly. The one who acted wrongly would be prepared to avoid repeating the wrong action again; to avoid repeating the wrong action he should understand, should acknowledge that he did wrong. Then, forgiveness would make sense. Forgiveness makes no sense without repentance. To forgive who? To forgive what?” (p. 134).

The Turkish Dilemma

The need for Turkey to recognize the genocide was a key point made in a public round table discussion concluding the day’s proceedings. Keynote speaker Cem Özdemir, Chariman of the Green Party in Germany, whose family comes from Turkey, stressed his view that, although he understands the desires of the Armenian diaspora for recognition on the part of many parliaments, he considers the only “solution” to lie in action by the Turkish parliament. “Healing the wounds lies in Turkey,” he said. Özdemir, who has himself been accused of “treachery” for endorsing recognition of the genocide, recalled the fact that Hrant Dink had come under attack by some in the Armenian diaspora for his message of reconciliation. To understand why it is so difficult for Turkey to face up to its past, Özdemir pointed to the Ottoman losses in the Balkan wars, and to the continuity between the empire and the Turkish Republic, especially regarding the current of the Young Turks. Dogan Akhanli reported from his own experience that Germany has become a place where one can talk with Armenians and nationalistic Turks about 1915, but added that the central task is to develop discussion in Turkish civil society, working up from the grass roots level.

Notes

1. *Speaking to One Another: Personal Memories of the Past in Armenia and Turkey, Wish they hadn’t left*, Leyla Nayzi, *Whom to forgive? What to forgive?* Hranush Kharatyan-Araqelyan, “Adult Education and Oral History Contributing to Armenian-Turkish Reconciliation,” published by Istitut für Internaitonale Zusammenarbeit Des Deutschen Volkshochschul-Verbandes (dvv international), Istanbul, 2010.

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