

ON SOME PROBLEMS OF THE ARMENIAN NATIONAL MINORITY IN TURKEY

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Ottoman Empire was known as a multi-national, multi-ethnic and multi-confessional state, but due to different circumstances (the Armenian Genocide, ethnic cleansings, exchange of population, etc.) the Republic of Turkey inherited a country mostly populated by Muslims and with incomparably smaller number of people of other religions. According to the Lausanne Treaty three communities of other religions – Armenians, Greeks and Jews – were recognized as national and religious minorities. Attention should be paid to the fact that all other ethno-religious groups in Turkey did not get separate rights and status, and in fact they were presented as a part of the Turkish nation, whereas some more specialized professional circles consider them ethnographic groups of Turks of other ethnicity.

According to various sources, the number of the Armenians in the initial formation years of the Turkish Republic was 250-300 thousand [1, p.75], and they retained some rights stipulated by the clauses of the Lausanne Treaty. However, scrutinizing the policies of the republican Turkey allows to state that the national minorities, including Armenians, were generally subject to a policy of persecutions and discrimination of a varying severity in different years.

Let us try looking into some manifestations of that policy, the result of which is that according to the official statistics the Armenian Christian community in Turkey today barely totals to 50-60 thousand [2]. Among the main manifestations of that policy the following three are notable:

- the conscription of “the twenty classes” (1941-1942)
- the property tax (1942-1944)
- the events of September 6-7, 1955

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The conscription of “the twenty classes”. One of the poorly studied issues in the discriminatory policy toward national minorities carried out in the republican Turkey is the so-called conscription of “the twenty classes”. This conscription mainly involved adult male Armenians, Greeks and Jews (according to different sources, aged 18-48 [3, p. 504], 26-45 [4, p.40], 18-60 [5, p.162]), most of whom were hastily drafted during the World War II (in 1941). Remarkably, even those who had already served in the army and were then in reserve were conscripted [6, p. 4]. The draft was implemented in strict secrecy and any leakage of information was prevented as much as possible [6, p.9]. The main peculiarity of this conscription was that it applied exclusively to non-Muslim citizens [6, p.9]. The researcher Rifat Bali found out from the eyewitness interviews he conducted that during the draft no exemptions were made for any special circumstances: even the handicapped, blind and otherwise physically disabled persons were conscripted. Sarkis Cherkezian, an Armenian draftee, later told that together with him people with mental disorders had been conscripted; their only “fault” was that they were a national minority [7, p.121]. However, these conscripts could not be qualified as true soldiers, because they were given no weapons and quite often they did not even wear military uniforms. These non-Muslims were gathered in labor battalions where no Muslims were enlisted, even more deepening the suspicions and widespread fear that they were pulled together to be annihilated when a suitable moment comes. Interestingly, the Turkish state had differentiated approaches to the three non-Muslim national minorities. For instance, Greeks and Jews served in the Army’s auxiliary battalions or in airfields construction, whereas Armenians mostly performed public service duties [4, p.40], which was determined by the distrust to them. With regards to the causes and ends of the “the twenty classes” conscription it is worth mentioning that the few information sources available suggest, and eyewitness accounts confirm the version that, by and large, it was a premeditated ethnic cleansing with all its derivatives. The prevailing and widespread point of view on the matter was that wishing to partake in the World War II, Turkey gathered in advance all unreliable non-Muslim men regarded a “fifth column”. It has to be also noted that due to the poor conditions during the service there were deaths and diseases among the conscripts. Anyhow, this roughly yearlong “service” left a deep scar on the national minorities, among which the atmosphere of fear and distrust aggravated even more, making many of them seriously think about emigration from Turkey.

The Property Tax. In November 1942, shortly after the conscription of “the twenty classes”, the Turkish government, headed by the Prime Minister Şükrü Saraçoğlu submitted the so-called “Property Tax Law” to the Grand National Assembly for approval, which unanimously passed it on November 11, 1942 [8, p.72]. How-

ever, before adopting the law, the Turkish Ministry of Finance demanded all the data about the wealth of the national minorities from the financial departments of the provinces, banks and security services [8, p. 67-68]. It can be seen with a naked eye that the law was specifically directed against the national and religious minorities. For instance, the “Property Tax Law” divided the taxpayers in 4 groups, in accordance with their religious affiliations:

1. Muslims
2. Non-Muslims
3. The converted (“dönme”)
4. Foreign nationals

In fact, this violated the constitutional provision on equal rights for all citizens of Turkey, including non-Muslims. What draws an attention is that even in the mid-20th century Turkey people were taxed based on their ethnic and religious background, rather than commensurate with their property. Special commissions were created who set tax rates at will, and most importantly, taxpayers had no right to legally challenge these rates. The tax amount often exceeded the property value, and if a taxpayer was not able to pay the tax within the set time limit (30 days), then the property was auctioned off. In case even that sum did not cover the tax, then the taxpayer was exiled to perform a penal servitude to work and pay the owed tax. The main place of exile was Aşkale province, known for its cold climate. The Prime Minister Saracoğlu’s formal excuses for adopting the “Property Tax Law” were strengthening Turkish lira, decreasing the money supply, fighting the black market, inflation and speculators [8, p.58]. However, in about two months after passing the law, the “Cumhuriyet” newspaper (January 21, 1943) published some of his more sincere thoughts that uncovered the real goals of this taxation. “This law will be enforced strictly on those, who taking advantage of the hospitality of this country grew rich, but despite this they avoid performing their duties in this hard time” [8, p.11]. The “Property Tax Law” had multi-layer effects: first of all, the economy was mostly Turkified, because the bankrupt non-Muslim businessmen were substituted by the nouveau riches who bought off their assets at low prices; almost all of them were Muslim and the Turkish Armenian bourgeoisie was almost totally eliminated. Rıdvan Akar, a Turkish researcher, considers it an “economic genocide” of national minorities [8, p.15].

The events of September 6-7, 1955. In Istanbul and Izmir the state arranged assaults on houses, shops, churches of the national minorities (mostly Greeks and Armenians), accompanied by pogroms, pillage and rape. During those events 10-12

people were killed, 400 women were raped [9], 73 churches, 1 synagogue, 8 Greek sacred sites, 2 monasteries, 2 cemeteries, 21 factories, 26 schools, 5 sports clubs, 1004 houses, 4348 shops/workshops, 27 pharmacies and laboratories, 110 cafeterias, cafes and hotels were plundered and destroyed [10, p. 197]. These events were the last straw that broke the camel's back for the national minorities and many of them finally decided to leave Turkey for good.

The above mentioned were the main, but not all the methods used in the policy of discrimination against the national minorities, as such manifestations could have also been observed in other areas and in everyday life. All of this played a key role in formation of the current situation in the country. Consequently, many Armenians migrated from Turkey and today we have what we have. Suffice it to mention that apart from Istanbul, a rather small number of Christian Armenians is left in Turkey, who can hardly be regarded as a community, and in the press one may find articles titled like "The Last Armenian of Diyarbakir" [11] or "The Last Armenian of Arabkir". According to the official data, besides Istanbul, there are Armenians in Malatya, Sebastia, Ankara, Antakya and Elâzığ [1, p.169].

A few pages are not nearly enough to present the Armenian cultural heritage, but there are a couple of points we would like to mention. Being one of the native peoples of these lands, Armenians have created many cultural monuments over the course of the centuries. Most of these monuments in Turkish Republic (especially in its eastern parts) are in shabby condition. The term "cultural genocide" frequently used today applies well to the Armenian cultural heritage on the territory of Turkey. The official state has had an ill-disposed attitude towards these monuments: this is evidenced by the policy implemented with regard to them, which we will try to present here below:

- Left without care, Armenian historical monuments dilapidated over time.
- The ownership of Armenian churches was transferred to the local Muslim population who use them as they wish.
- Citing the interests of the state as an excuse, historical monuments are destroyed, e.g. they are used as shooting targets during war games.
- Armenian churches are turned into mosques.

The latest example was Surb Arakelots (Saint Apostles) Church in Kars: this 10th century church was restored and reopened as a mosque in 2008. Built during the reign of the Armenian king Abas Bagratuni the church was closed in 1920 and after that never served its intended purpose. Since then it was used as a warehouse, museum and a mosque. When the restoration works began there was a hope that it would be reopened at least as a museum, but actually it became Kümbet Cami

mosque. It has to be mentioned that Turkey does not lack mosques; they are built everywhere and the idea of turning Surb Arakelots Church into a mosque was not quite explicable. Also, the local faithful Muslims do not visit the church made a mosque too often, and this is an evidence of people's peculiar memory. On the other hand, it is worth noting that had Surb Arakelots Church not been turned into a mosque, it could have suffered the dire destiny of many other Armenian cultural monuments.

With regards to the Armenian monuments and particularly churches, it should be mentioned that in the eastern part of Turkey it is difficult to find a single functioning Armenian church and even Surb Khach (Saint Cross) Church on Akhtamar island which caused so much clamor, still does not have a cross on it and, in fact, does not function as a church. Naturally, we should understand that such phenomenon is closely related to the insufficient tolerance among the local population and certain strata of the Turkish society in general.

The issue of education and schools is currently one of the vital matters for the Armenian community in Turkey. This issue is a part of the educational problems of the national minorities in Turkey, and in this respect rather interesting facts were published in the EC report "Combating Discrimination and Promoting Minority Rights in Turkey". For example, according to this report, a decrease in the number of national minority schools and students is obvious, and this is mostly connected with the policy carried out by the state in which assimilation elements dominate. The part of the report concerning the educational system is titled rather interestingly – "Forgotten or Assimilated? Minorities in the Education System of Turkey"¹. According to the data presented in the report, in 1930-31 there were 117 schools of the national minorities in Turkey and in 1995-96 their number shrunk to 34 [12, p.14]. The situation with the Armenian schools is deplorable, too. For instance, according to the statistics, in 1972-73 there were 32 Armenian schools with 7360 students in Istanbul, while in 1999-2000, 18 schools remained with 3786 students [13, p. 24] and in 2008 the number of the Armenian students decreased to 3072². As seen, in the period of 30 years Armenian community lost almost half of its schools and students. As Garo Paylan, an Armenian pedagogue from Istanbul stated: "Every year we lose around 150–200 students; if it continues this way, we will close down 6–7 schools in the next years."³

¹ Unutmak mı Asimilasyon mu? Türkiye'nin Eğitim Sisteminde Azınlıklar

<http://www.hyetert.com/yazi3.asp?s=1&Id=409&DilId=1>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

It has been noted that recently the Turkish authorities and part of the society have started to pay more attention to the issue of the national minorities, because Turk migrant workers who came to Europe in 1960s, formed their communities and became a national minority there, and thus began tasting “the sweet and bitter fruits” falling on the lot of the national minorities. Today Turks themselves face the issue of the national minorities but in another geographic locale – in Europe – where a multi-million strong Turkish community exists. It should be mentioned that Turkish authorities have always kept the issue of the Turks in Europe in the spotlight and always supported them in preserving their national and religious self-consciousness to struggle against assimilation. Prime Minister Erdoğan addressed this issue during his visit to Germany in 2008; he urged the Turks in Europe to integrate in the society they live in, but at the same time, to avoid assimilation. Moreover, he expressed an idea that assimilation is a crime against humanity. “You cannot demand from any human being, any society to reject their language, religion, culture and customs. And if you do that, you would commit a sin against humanity” [14], - said Erdoğan. Turkish media often voice and harshly criticize problems related to the Turkish communities in different countries. A recent instance of such criticism was about the policies concerning the Turks in Bulgaria [15]. However, to be truthful one can say that the same and even harsher methods were and are used in Turkey towards the national minorities, leading to their partial or full assimilation. After all, the policy of assimilation was one of the cornerstone policy elements of both the Ottoman Empire and the leaders of the Turkish republic. Today the statements of some high-ranking Turkish officials still cause concern. Among those the statement of Vecdi Gönül, Minister of Defense of Turkey, made in November 2008 in Brussels, is noteworthy: “If Greeks had continued to live in the Aegean, and Armenians in various parts of the country, could Turkey have become the nation-state it is?” [16]. This statement triggered a wide response: the representatives of the intelligentsia and Armenians of Istanbul appealed to the Prime Minister with an open letter, articles criticizing that statement were published. It is true that the Minister tried to comment upon his statement, but the negative impression remained.

To summarize, the Armenian national minority in Turkey currently faces serious problems: part of the Armenian cultural heritage has been destroyed and another part is in an extremely deplorable condition. In addition to that, certain circles in Turkey perceive national minorities as aliens and enemies.

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