

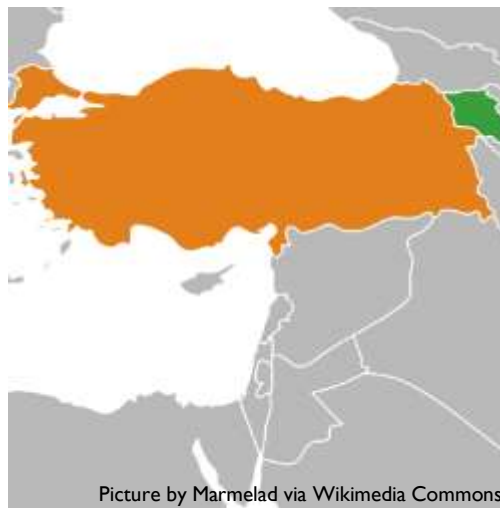


A question of 'genocide'

Jean-Marc Balhan SJ

Pope Francis' referral earlier this year to the Armenian 'genocide' provoked 'disappointment and sadness' in Turkey, where such an interpretation of the events of 1915 is refuted. Why is the use of that word by the pope and others such a source of distress in Turkey? Jean-Marc Balhan SJ unpacks the historical and contemporary context of the Turkish reaction.

Many were astonished at the reaction from the Turkish authorities when, on 12 April, Pope Francis referred to the tragedy that struck the Armenians at the end of the Ottoman Empire as 'the first genocide of the twentieth century'. He was not the first 'state' representative to use the 'G' word, and each time it happens Turkish authorities react in the same way, protesting loudly and recalling their ambassador for consultation. Why is this issue so sensitive to the Turkish people?



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Three years ago, at a reception in an Embassy in Ankara on the occasion of a national feast, a Turkish official to whom I had been introduced as a Catholic priest kindly asked me how I felt about being a Christian in Turkey. I answered that, on a personal level, as a *yabancı* ('foreigner'), I felt very welcome, enjoying traditional Turkish hospitality; but that the same was not true for all Turkish Christians, for example, the Armenians. Upon hearing this, he became more hostile: 'It is not because they are Christian, it is because they are Armenian. After *what they did to us*, they deserve what they got'.

What did they do 'to us', such that to accuse someone of having Armenian blood is to give great offence in Turkey (the common insult '*Ermeni dölü*' means, literally, 'seed of Armenian')?

There are approximately 60,000 Armenians in Turkey today, the majority of whom live in Istanbul. Life may be uncomfortable for those who live in more remote

parts of the country where some of them may sometime face a great deal of social pressure (as do other minorities in such places). It can be difficult or even impossible for them to work in official institutions (e.g. the police, the army) and some of them have changed their name to be able to do business.

However, in recent years the situation has been evolving positively, both at the legal level (for example, seized properties have been returned

to Armenian and other minority foundations) and at the social one (in the General Election of 7 June, three Armenians, together with members of other minorities, were elected to the parliament).

1. The Official Thesis

As far as the events which took place in 1915 are concerned, Turkish official institutions, starting with the Turkish Historical Society (*Türk Tarih Kurumu*), defend and promote at the national and international level the 'official thesis'. This thesis has been taught exclusively in Turkish schools until now, which is one of many reasons why Turks have found it difficult to read their history otherwise than in a defensive way.

It starts with the broad historical context, that is the drama of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and how the great powers of the time wanted to divide it. It highlights the real sufferings of the Turkish Muslims of the time: all those who died in the wars,

and the millions who were obliged to escape their homeland during the Balkan Wars and go to Anatolia to make their home there, which is still remembered as a traumatic event.

It then underlines Russian expansionism and says that Armenians, dispersed throughout Anatolia, had betrayed the Empire by allying themselves with the great powers of the time, and especially with Russia during the First World War (not only on the Eastern border, but everywhere). This betrayal, according to the thesis, is why the Young Turk triumvirate that was heading the Committee of Union and Progress, then at the top of the Ottoman state, gave orders to 'relocate' the Armenians in the South (in the desert, at Deir az-Zor, in what is now Eastern Syria).

This interpretation of events claims that if a few hundred thousand people died along the way (Armenians speak of up to 1.5 million), it was because of instability due to war conditions (famine, epidemics, banditry) from which *all* the Ottomans of the time suffered. The thesis denies that the central authorities gave informal orders to organise massacres in order to diminish the risks of a division of Anatolia in this age of nationalism, and to make space, socially and economically, for another part of the population. It denies that this 'relocation' had the 'intent to destroy that group in whole or in part', which is how the 1948 UN *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* would later define a 'genocide'.¹

The official thesis refers not only to the treason of Armenian groups and the crimes committed by some of them, but mixes it with the violence of Armenian nationalists who killed around 30 Turkish diplomats during the 1970s and 1980s in order to raise awareness for their cause, confirming in the eyes of most Turks the 'treachery' of the Armenians. Then the Nagorno-Karabakh war between neighbouring Armenia and Azerbaijan (considered as a brother Turkic country and by many as Turkey's nearest friend) in the early 1990s, leading to the annexing of that enclave by Armenia, and the violence which took place on that occasion, have been used as additional proof that Armenians are far from blameless. This war has also led to the closing of the border between Turkey and Armenia, lasting until now, as Azerbaijan is not only a Turkic brother and friend, but is also rich in gas...

2. A Changing Turkish Society

For decades, it has been impossible to challenge this narrative in Turkey. Ten years ago, you could still be taken to court for 'insult to the Turkish nation' if you used the 'S' word (genocide is *Soykırım* in Turkish) in public. But in the last decade, some changes have occurred. With the rise of the AKP combined with a growing acceptance of globalisation and the start of the EU process, civil society became freer and less dominated by Turkish nationalism, and it became possible to start discussing what happened in 1915 more freely. This has led to a slow recognition of the suffering of the Armenians, with liberal and left-leaning Turks even going so far as to talk about a 'genocide'.

In 2004, Fethiye Çetin, a well-known lawyer, wrote *My Grandmother* (in Turkish, *Anneannem*), telling the story of her relative who was thought by everyone in her family to be a Muslim, only for it to be revealed that in fact she was an Armenian who, as a child, had been stolen by a gendarme and adopted by him.² This led to other similar revelations, which slowly changed the way Turks, who have all been brought up with the official thesis and within a strongly Turkish nationalistic narrative, look at themselves. Nowadays, the 'hidden Armenians' are spoken about more and more openly.

In 2005 and after much opposition, an academic symposium dealing openly with the question (*Ottoman Armenians During the Decline of the Empire: Issues of Scientific Responsibility and Democracy*) was finally able to take place for the first time in Turkey, in Bilgi University. A similar meeting, although with a more explicit title (*The Armenian Genocide: Concepts and Comparative Perspectives*), took place in Boğaziçi University earlier this year. In the ten years in between, several books presenting the 1915 events as a 'genocide', have been published in Turkish, and liberal journalists and newspapers have started to discuss the issue freely. Even Hasan Cemal, the grandson of Cemal Pasha, one of the members of the triumvirate at the head of the Ottoman Empire who gave the fatal orders in 1915, wrote a book in 2012 called, *1915: Ermeni Soykırımı* ('1915: The Armenian Genocide').

After the assassination in 2007 of Hrant Dink, the editor of the prominent Armenian *Agos* newspaper, by a young nationalist, up to 100,000 people took to

the streets proclaiming, ‘We are all Hrant’ and even, ‘We are all Armenians’ (*Hepimiz Hrant’ız! Hepimiz Ermeni’yiz!*). The following year, Turkish journalists, academics and intellectuals caused outrage in some parts of Turkish society by launching an online petition which said: ‘My conscience does not accept the insensitivity showed to and the denial of the Great Catastrophe that the Ottoman Armenians were subjected to in 1915. I reject this injustice and for my share, I empathize with the feelings and pain of my Armenian brothers and sisters. I apologize to them’.³ Also in 2008, Abdullah Gül became the first Turkish president to visit Armenia. It was thought that this would start a process of reconciliation between the two countries, but that was not to be.

In 2014, the then Prime Minister Erdoğan offered his ‘condolences’ to the Armenians, describing what happened as a ‘shared pain’.⁴ Although his words could be (and have been) interpreted as a softened restatement of the official thesis, this was the first time that the suffering of the Armenians had been officially and publicly recognised. And in 2015, during the general election campaign, the leftist pro-Kurdish party HDP asked openly for the recognition of the ‘Armenian genocide’ (opposed by the three other parties), although one century ago, many exactions against the Armenians had been carried out by Kurds.

The ‘recognition of the genocide’ by foreign countries, often for their own domestic political reasons, has not necessarily helped Turkish society to come to terms with the question (although it also put some pressure on the state to soften its official discourse). It has often served to reinforce Turkey’s feeling of having no friends, of its existence being ‘threatened’, these sentiments resulting from the nationalist historical narrative to which all Turks have been exposed through their education and which has been kept alive and instrumentalised by successive governments.

3. A Sensitive and Painful Question

Turkey has changed a lot in this past decade, but for most Turks this question is still an unhealed wound. There are several aspects of Turkish life which continue to irritate this wound, causing pain and uncontrollable reactions: I mention two of them here.

3.1. Nationalism, fear of the other and feeling of insecurity

The first is a *nationalist view of history* to which Turks have been exposed during their formal education and which, for a long time, it has been impossible to question. The thesis about what happened in 1915 is part of this view, but it rests on a broader narrative which has been in place since the birth of the Turkish nation: this narrative was constructed to be a source of unity, identity and dignity for Turks after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. It did so by raising and keeping alive the fear of the other, whether inside or outside of the country. Indeed, in the decades since the traumatic birth of the new Republic, all ‘others’ have been regarded as potential enemies who could ‘divide us’. The identity of ‘Turkishness’ applies to Muslims of Anatolia; all others are excluded. Kurds have refused to be assimilated into this narrative and have been asking for some degree of autonomy. Several non-Muslim groups (Armenians, Greeks and Jews) were given an official minority status but were still considered as an almost foreign presence, until recently.

At the state level, this Turkish nationalism has slowly shifted in the last decade under the AKP and has been partly replaced by an Ottoman-Muslim nationalism, which looks for its founding narrative, identity and values in the glories of Islam and of the Ottoman Empire. Officially, it is somewhat more accommodating of minorities; however, it has created new friends and enemies, both inside and outside the country. A recent survey about public perceptions of Turkish Foreign Policy⁵ reveals that 39% of Turks think the country has no friends; 37% think Turkey’s nearest friend is Azerbaijan, followed by Northern Cyprus at 9%, then Bosnia and the US both at 6%. However, 35% think the US is the main threat, coming just after Israel with 42%, then Syria with 22% and Armenia with 20%! So this survey seems to confirm a Turkish saying: *‘Türk ün Türk ten başka dostu yok’*: ‘The Turk has no friend other than the Turk’. This feeling of insecurity makes a questioning of one’s founding narrative quite sensitive.

In Turkey, people do not trust the state – they like to say: *‘Deliye ve devlete güvenilmez’*: ‘Neither the fool nor the state can be trusted’. This is why in their everyday life, they cluster in groups of belonging (based on ethnicity, religion, ideology, culture, geography,

football teams, etc.), that often either despise or fear one another. This probably also contributes to the fact that the level of trust between people in Turkey is among the lowest of anywhere in the world⁶. All of this shows the level of existential insecurity present in the country, which makes one unlikely to shake one's founding narrative, and certainly unaccepting of having it shaken by 'another'.

3.2. Social conservatism and ethics of honour

The second factor that has made it difficult for the wound to be healed is the *cultural anthropology* of all levels of Turkish society (Armenians included), whether it is family, education, work, party politics, or any other. We could quickly summarise it as a *patriarchal social conservatism* characterised by a latent authoritarianism, by a sense of hierarchy (and, when there is none, by the law of the strongest), then by an *ethics of honour* which makes it difficult to recognise one's fault. It is important to note, however, that the current generation of young adults seem to be questioning this way of being more and more, as Turkish society becomes more democratic and open to the world.

In such a society, honour comes in two forms: individual and collective. As an *individual attribute*, 'honour is the value that a person owns in his own eyes, but it is also how this person is valued by those who constitute his society.'⁷ In Turkey, the ethics of honour can be a source of great generosity, as can be observed in the tradition of hospitality, or in the respectful behaviour towards more vulnerable members of society. However, this ethics of honour is also a source of many difficulties. One that can be observed in everyday domestic or foreign Turkish politics is the reluctance to negotiate, to yield certain things (considered to be a sign of weakness) in order to get others. Sensitivity to insult is another difficulty that can often be observed in everyday life, from car-driving to politics; and the courts often consider insult to be a form of provocation which then counts as a mitigating circumstance in case of crime.

Honour is also a *collective attribute*. In this sense, it is something in which all members of the group participate, 'so that the dishonouring conduct of an individual has consequences on the honour of all, and that, conversely, each member benefits from the honour of the group. Every social group has its honour, what-

ever its size, from the nuclear family, whose head is responsible for all members, to the nation, whose members' honour is linked to fidelity to the sovereign or to the nation.'⁸ This sense of honour as a collective attribute is present at all levels of Turkish society, whether in traditional families – such as with the problem of 'honour killings' – or in the question of insults to Atatürk, to 'the Turkish nation', or to 'religious values'.

As far as the Armenian question is concerned, it is interesting to read what the then Ministers Erdoğan and Davutoğlu declared a few years ago: 'We reject the claim of genocide, because our ancestors could not commit genocide', Erdoğan said in 2010, adding, 'We do not play with honour'. Davutoğlu confirmed this by stating: 'For us, it is a matter of national honour'⁹. A year earlier, Erdoğan had denied genocide in Darfur because, he said, 'A Muslim cannot commit genocide', inviting the UN to look at Gaza. The confession of fault is conceived as losing face, whether it is that of Turkey or that of Islam, rather than as a time of purification or a new start. When 'saving face' is more important than anything else, there is no room for weakness and frailty, nor for confession, and therefore not for forgiveness, change and conversion. One then remains a prisoner of the fault, which unfortunately often allows its repetition in other ways. Events of decades ago targeting different minorities are well known by all, but today still, it is politically incorrect to speak about the 'racism' present in Turkish society.¹⁰

The interpretation of the events that took place in 1915 as a 'genocide' by an outsider is considered as bad-mannered, an insult, even a mark of enmity, and the answer is either: 'Who do you think you are to dare to tell us such a thing: look at yourselves'; or 'You are partisan: look at the other side of the story, we too have suffered and they also acted badly'; or 'Look at the present: what is important is not the past but this or that contemporary drama, or to get on with each other now'. That is, in summary: 'Look everywhere except at the heart of the matter'. This is why that heart of the matter remains a blind spot in Turkish history: nationalism and a sense of insecurity on one side, and the ethics of honour on the other, prevent people from seeing, touching and healing this heart.

4. How to move forward: catharsis, new heroes, democratisation and EU project.

Although AKP, the party in power during the last decade, has wished to root the country in the long history of the Ottoman Empire, the current Republic of Turkey as we know it is a young country, which is not even 100 years old as it was born with the Lausanne Treaty in 1923. Its democratic history is even shorter: a one-party regime until the end of the forties, then a series of military *coups d'état* and a dirty war in the Kurdish South East. The 'AKP revolution' starting at the beginning of this century has diminished the influence of the military in politics and society, deemphasised the Turkish nationalist ideology, empowered an important part of Turkish society that had been despised and put aside in the past (conservatives from Central Anatolia), and started to open the 'Kurdish question'. The most recent elections have opened another new chapter still. Turkey now needs to find a carefully designed and negotiated political balance between the different layers of which it is composed and to root that balance in a new democratic constitution. But in order to be able to do that and to find true and lasting peace, it cannot sweep the dirt of history under the carpet of fear and shame. In parallel with deepening its democratisation process, it has to come to terms with its past, one dynamic helping the other and vice versa.

Coming to terms with what happened in 1915 would be good for the whole Turkish society. It would be the foundation of a true and sincere respect for all. It would be a *catharsis* empowering the citizens of this country to say: 'Never again' and would make everyone able to feel comfortable and truly at home in the country where they live, without having the feeling of being in some way 'out of place'. Different parts of the Turkish population have that feeling for different reasons: Turks feel insecure and threatened, that in a way they are where they are by force only, maybe without the real 'right' to be where they are, because of a collective guilt repressed by an imposed reading of history or by a sentiment of shame; and minorities feel that, in one way or another, they have been discriminated against and need to 'know their place'.

These sentiments have been and still are a source of violence. For Turkey to become a relaxed and peaceful place for everyone, in parallel with the deepening of the democratisation process, a general *catharsis* has to take place, taking into account what happened at the end of the Ottoman Empire and the other issues lying among the different stratas of which Turkey is made.

In the process, it will be realised that not all Turks have been involved negatively in these events. Indeed there were 'Righteous Turks', whether officials who refused to execute orders or ordinary people who saved lives and could be source of pride for the whole society and should be celebrated officially. It might be a way to transform the current notions of patriotism and heroism, which are mainly military, into a humanist patriotism and heroism, founded on resistance to evil, love of the other, reconciliation and peace and justice for all. It would be a change, as nowadays the main feasts, heroes and sources of glory are linked to military events, whether linked to the 'War of Liberation' that gave rise to the Republic or, more recently with the rise of AKP, linked to the Conquest of Istanbul in 1453, conceived of as a divinely sanctioned victory.

In order to help it come to terms with these events, Turkey can be 'encouraged' from outside, even if everyday Turkish domestic politics, sometimes creating and using local fears for short term political goals, hasn't always made that easy. European countries themselves, rather than also using the issue for their own domestic politics, playing with popular fears or misplaced feelings of self-righteousness by doing such things as penalising the denial of Armenian genocide, should do what is in their power to help Turks feel included in the EU project. It would help the democratisation process and also reinforce a sense of security and pride, a double dynamic that would help Turks come to terms with their past. And this will contribute to build a more peaceful Europe for all.

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¹ Article II says: ‘In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such : (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.’ For the whole convention, see:

<https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%2078/volume-78-I-1021-English.pdf>

² Fethiye Çetin, *My Grandmother: A Memoir*, English translation by Maureen Freely (London: Verso, 1st ed. 2008 ; 2nd ed. 2012).

³ Website of the campaign : <http://www.ozurdiliyoruz.com>

⁴ ‘We wish that the Armenians who lost their lives in the context of the early twentieth century rest in peace, and we convey our condolences to their grandchildren. Regardless of their ethnic or religious origins, we pay tribute, with compassion and respect, to all Ottoman citizens who lost their lives in the same period and under similar conditions.’ An English translation of the whole message is accessible on the website of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs : <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkish-prime-minister-mr-recep-tayyip-erdogan-published-a-message-on-the-events-of-1915.en.mfa>

⁵ *Türk Dış Politikası Kamuoyu Algıları Araştırması*, Kadir Has Üniversitesi, İstanbul, 27.05.2015 (<http://www.khas.edu.tr/news/1198>)

⁶ Morrone, A., N. Tontoranelli and G. Ranuzzi (2009), ‘How Good is Trust?: Measuring Trust and its Role for the Progress of Societies’, *OECD Statistics Working Papers*, 2009/03, OECD Publishing.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/220633873086>

⁷ Julian Pitt-Rivers, *Anthropologie de l'honneur. La mésaventure de Sichem* (Paris Le Sycomore, 1983), p. 18.

⁸ Julian Pitt-Rivers, *Op. Cit.*, p. 37.

⁹ Ahmet İnel, «Başbakan Recep Tayyip Erdoğan ‘Soykırım iddiasını reddediyoruz çünkü atalarımız soykırım yapmış olamazlar’ diye haykırıyor. Türk milletinin ortak atası yoksa İttihatçılar mı? », *Radikal*, 14 Mart 2010.

¹⁰ For example in 2011, the publication of the third issue of *Ankara Üniversitesi Afrika Çalışmaları Dergisi*, the academic journal published by the Centre for African Studies of Ankara University, was forbidden by the new director of that Centre because the issue in question spoke about racism in Turkey. Again, it touches the question of honour, as he said : ‘There is no racism in our country. If such expressions are spread, the entire world will quote them and will say that Turks are racist’. (‘Bizde’ ırkçılık yok, öyle ifadeler yayımlanursa, bütün dünya bunları alıntılıyıp Türklere ırkçı diyecek’). See CNN Türk at <http://www.cnnturk.com/2012/guncel/11/21/ankara-universitesinde.afrika.sansuru/685500.0/>