

PREFACE

The Armenian genocide in Ottoman Turkey, mainly during World War I, was a historical tragedy of vast significance. This book is an attempt not only to describe the facts and consequences of the genocide but also, and perhaps even principally, to present the Armenians to the foreign reader: their culture, customs, and society—matters the non-Armenian public is hardly acquainted with.

Indeed, present-day Armenian society, both that of the diaspora and that of the independent Armenian state, is marked—one might even say branded—by the memory of the genocide; nor is this surprising. Parallels exist with other ethnic groups that have been victims of massacres and genocides that, in the same way as the Armenians, suffer a collective trauma: Jews, Tutsis, the Roma (“Gypsies”), and others. The only way to deal with this trauma, apparently, is to face it and elaborate what has happened with as much realism and objectivity as possible. The fact that modern Turkey rejects responsibility for the genocide perpetrated by a former, very different, imperial Ottoman Turkish government—they continue to deny it, in the face of great masses of documentation—makes the task of elaborating the trauma considerably harder. Other nations do not necessarily deny a genocide committed by previous generations. Present-day Americans talk openly of the genocide of the American Indians. Not only do the Germans recognize the National Socialist regime’s accountability for the Shoah and the genocide of Gypsies and Poles, but the one carried out by imperial Germany against the Herreros in present-day Namibia at the beginning of the twentieth century is also openly discussed. Cambodia recognizes the mass slaughter carried out by the Pol Pot regime, and there are other examples.

The Armenian genocide, as Vahakn N. Dadrian constantly reminds us, was thoroughly tried by a Turkish military tribunal in 1919. But, since then, Turkish governments—which are actually based on the rejection of the Young Turks regime, which led the country not only to the genocide but also to a national catastrophe—have embarked on an official campaign in Orwellian fashion to brand the historical events enemy propaganda. One hopes that perhaps we are today on the threshold of a new era in which Turkish society no longer fears recognizing reality as such. For as long as this does not take place, there is no question of a modern, liberal Turkish society developing; to reject denial, then, is fundamental for Turkey itself.

This book, so to speak, has the obligation to talk about the genocide, but also tries to describe the past as well as the present, without fear of exercising self-criticism. Present-day Armenia, a tiny country, poor, and torn by internal strife, is described in detail and with great critical sympathy. The typical customs and traditions of the Armenians are presented here, perhaps for the first time in a Western language. One realizes that the Armenians are one of the most ancient nations in existence, who settled in large state-like communities in parts of present-day Anatolia and the southern Caucasus more than three thousand years ago. Christianity took hold there at the beginning of the fourth century, earlier than in many other parts of the ancient world. Thus the Armenians can legitimately claim to have been the first people to accept the new religion. Armenian script was invented at that time, and Armenian literature developed over the ages, in which Armenian civilization alternated between flourishing and decaying periods.

All this is reflected once more in the world of today, and the chapters of this book speak not only about the civilization of the past but also about the hope for a new advance. This is not something simple. The great majority of Armenians live in the diaspora: in the U.S.A., Europe, and elsewhere. Armenia is poor and underdeveloped, in part a consequence of long years of Soviet domination. In addition, a conflict has arisen between Armenia and the Azeris for control of the territory of Karabakh, and the two states, Armenia and Azerbaijan, are hostile to each other. The Azeris speak a language related to Turkish, which does not help at all to tackle the bilateral problems. But for the diaspora, Armenia would scarcely be able to rise out of its poverty; yet, even with the help of the diaspora, it is not finding it easy. More and more intellectuals seem to leave the country, and financial aid in itself is insufficient. In spite of all this, present-day Armenia constitutes the core of Armenian national consciousness, and the hopes of many Armenians are centered on that small mountainous country.

Still, this is not enough. This book depicts the diaspora and seduces the reader with the taste of Armenian dishes, memories of childhood places, and the ambitions for a future that will hopefully be better. The biographical sketches of intellectuals, artists, journalists, and others are most interesting, and produce a complicated kaleidoscope of a divided but lively people that is trying, once again, to rediscover its ethnic coherence. Armenian civilization does not consist solely of stories about a far-off past, but also of traditions and a national consciousness suggestive of a future that will transcend the present.

The solution is not to consign the genocide to the past, even though it took place more than ninety years ago and there are hardly any living witnesses of it left. To avenge it on present-day Turks, who are not to blame for what happened at that time, would be criminal, senseless, and counterproductive. But to arrive at an understanding with the Turkey of today can only be achieved after a recognition of the historical realities. In the meantime, life goes on, and one should neither forget history, nor allow oneself to be dominated by the trauma.

Development of a distinctive culture, promotion of their own language and script, and the willingness to coexist amicably with different peoples and cultures, very much including the Turkish people, seem to be what this book is trying to promote. The attempt being made here to make this clear to an international readership is extraordinarily important and, let us trust, also productive.

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