

Anatolia 1915:Turks Died, Too

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During World War 1, Anatolia, the Asiatic section of modern Turkey, was the scene of horrible acts of inhumanity between Armenians and Turks. For many decades, the history of the conflict between the Turks and the Armenians has primarily been written from the viewpoint of the Armenians. It is a viewpoint that emphasizes the deaths of Armenians but completely ignores the deaths of Turks.

The Armenian position has been effectively publicized. Every year in Congress, a group of representatives attempts to pass a bill that says the Turks were guilty of genocide. Newspapers feature articles on events in Turkey in 1915 as if they were today's news. Over the weekend, the Public Broadcasting System carried the historical visions of Armenian producers all across the country.

Unfortunately, effective publicity does not ensure accurate history. What has been presented as truth is, in fact, only one side of a complicated history that began more than 100 years before World War 1.

Lands occupied one by one

In the late 1700s, Russia embarked on the conquest of all the peoples around it. Those who stood in the way of expansion to the south were Turks and other Moslems. One by one, their lands were occupied by the Russians. In the Crimea and in the Caucasus region, the Moslems were forced to emigrate. Those who resisted, especially in the Caucasus, were slaughtered. The czar wished to have a loyal population in the new lands. Therefore, Russians and other Slavs were imported into lands newly emptied of their Moslem inhabitants.

It was not possible to populate all of the conquered lands with Slavs. The Russian population was hard pressed even in filling the more northerly lands. A different policy had to be adopted south of the Caucasus Mountains.

The Russians took the southern Caucasus region from two Moslem powers Persia and the Ottoman Empire. They had reason to fear that the Turks in the provinces that bordered the Ottoman Empire would rebel against their rule. To meet the threat, they adopted native Christians as their proxies. The Armenians, who were scattered throughout the Caucasus and in Anatolia and Persia, were to be used much as the Slavs had been used farther north, as a Christian group that would replace expelled Moslem Turks.

The Russians could promise many benefits to the Armenians. Those who sided with the Russians could hope for better economic conditions as part of a European empire. Like other Middle Eastern peoples, the primary identification of the Armenians was religious. They were convinced of the superiority and ultimate triumph of their Christian faith, and the opportunity to side with a great Christian power was seductive. Perhaps later there would be a chance for independence.

Armenian cooperation with the Russians began when Armenian armed units assisted the invading armies of Peter the Great and acted as spies against their Moslem rulers. Armenians were subsequently to become Russian soldiers and even generals who lead the Russian conquests.

The best example of the effects of Russian Armenian cooperation was seen in the province of Erivan (today the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic). Before the Russian invasion of Erivan, the majority of the population was Moslem. As the Russians defeated the Turks and Persians in 1827 29, 30 percent of the Moslems of Erivan either died or emigrated. They were replaced with greater numbers of Armenians

from Anatolia and Persia. Many more Armenians came to Erivan in the years to come, creating what today is Armenia.

Exchange continued for a century

The exchange of Armenian and Turkish populations continued for a century. With each war between the Russians and the Ottomans, more Moslems died, more fled, and more Armenians came. By 1922, more than 1 1/2 million Moslems had emigrated from the conquered lands.

In the late 19th century, Armenian revolutionary movements sprang up in the Ottoman Empire. They sought to create an independent Armenia in eastern Anatolia, in lands that were three quarters Moslem in population. The Russians gave their support whenever they felt they could use the revolutionaries.

After unsuccessful bloody uprisings in 1895 and 1909, the revolutionaries' chance came in 1914, when Russia went to war with the Ottoman Empire. Armenian rebellions broke out all over the empire, and Russian arms and even Russian uniforms appeared from hidden caches. Tens of thousands of Armenians formed themselves into guerrilla bands. The largest city of southeastern Anatolia, Van, was captured by the Armenian rebels in April 1915, and many Moslems in the city and surrounding villages were killed. The city was held until it could be turned over to the invading Russian army. Throughout eastern Anatolia, Armenian bands attacked villagers wherever they found them. In turn, Turks and especially Kurdish tribesmen attacked Armenian villages. It was the beginning of a bloody war.

For five years, Armenian peasants and the Russian army battled Turkish peasants and the Ottoman army. Most of the peasants undoubtedly wanted no part of the fighting but were forced by circumstances to take sides. Starvation and epidemic disease killed many times more people than bullets or knives did.

Because of the rebellion, the Ottoman government decided that it could not trust the Armenians. Orders went out to deport all Armenians from dangerous areas. The Ottomans, who were fighting a Russian invasion and vainly trying to defend Moslem villages from Armenian guerrillas, spared few soldiers to defend the columns of Armenian refugees moving to Syria. Many of the columns were attacked and many Armenians were robbed and killed by Kurdish tribes or corrupt officials. However, to put the suffering of Armenian refugees into perspective, twice as many Moslems as Armenians were forced from their homes because of attacks by Russian soldiers and Armenian guerrillas.

When the Russian Revolution destroyed the czar's power in Anatolia, a new Armenian Republic attempted to hold the territory that the Russians had conquered. They were defeated by the Turks, and as the Armenians retreated, they killed the Turks who fell into their hands. Cities such as Erzincan were left in ruins, with Turkish bodies filling the streets. Armenians who failed to escape with their retreating army were killed as well.

In Erivan and other parts of the Caucasus under the control of the Armenian Republic, Turkish villages were destroyed. and the inhabitants were forced to flee or die. Two thirds of the Moslems who had lived in the province of Erivan in 1914 were gone at war's end. A similar fate met Armenians in Turkish Azerbaijan.

In the end, almost 600,000 of the Anatolian Armenians had died. Almost 3 million Anatolian Moslems had died, more than one third of them in eastern Anatolia. Mortality in the Caucasus was similarly proportioned.

Why one-sided?

Why have we in the West formed such a one sided view of the Armenian question? It is a matter of sources and prejudice.

The events of World War I in Turkey were seen in the West only through the eyes of American missionaries and Armenian propagandists. American Protestant missionaries had worked extensively with Armenians and had been instrumental in creating Armenian nationalism. The missionaries reported the murders of Armenians by Turks. They did not report the murders of Turks by Armenians that were occurring at the same time. Their reports were collected by the US ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, Henry Morgenthau, who disseminated them. Morgenthau believed that the Turks were an inferior race and openly printed his view that Turks had "inferior blood." It is no wonder that his observations were colored by his prejudices. Yet it is his reports and the reports of others like him that have formed our histories.

If it seems odd that Americans of that time were so deeply prejudiced, we should reflect on the general attitude of our ancestors toward non Europeans and non-Christians. Asiatics and Africans were routinely described as inherently inferior to Europeans and Americans. Respect for and knowledge of non-Christian religions and peoples was virtually nonexistent.

Only in recent years have scholars begun to examine other evidence. There are Ottoman military records that tell of massacres of Turks and Kurds by Armenians, eyewitness accounts by Russian military men of Armenian atrocities against Turks, evidence of Americans who saw the destruction of the Ottoman East by Armenians. Most important, there is demographic evidence that tells us, for example, that 60 percent of the Moslems of the province of Van, where the Armenians began their rebellion, died in war. Such evidence belies claims of a one sided massacre. It does very accurately describe an awful war, one in which both sides were heroes and both sides were villains.

Those who bring forth such evidence are often vilified as unobjective and pro Turkish. But is it less than objective to state that both Turks and Armenians were killers and that both were victims? Can such be called a pro Turkish view?

Unfortunately, we have not yet reached a time when the Armenian-Turkish conflict is studied as we would study any other historical event.

A search is on

Today, a search is on for proof that the Ottoman government ordered genocide for the Armenians. What has appeared so far would be unacceptable in any other historical inquiry such as a few telegrams in poorly forged handwriting produced by an Armenian and entered in no telegraph records; reports from trials in which no objective evidence was produced and the accused were not allowed to defend themselves. Evidence that indicates the Ottomans intended no genocide is, like the deaths of the Turks, ignored. Yet the accusations will continue as long as nationalist sentiment guides the studies.

It would be better, I believe, to approach the Armenian-Turkish conflict as a study of the sufferings of the Armenians and the Turks. The nationalist feelings of today, whether Armenian or Turkish, have no place in the study. We should examine the fate of the millions who died in Russia's expansion efforts and consider the effects of revolutionary movements that pursued an ideal over the bodies of their own people and of others. We should study what occurs when a government is too weak to defend its people. The important questions are human questions, not national questions.

On April 24 of every year, Armenians gather to remember their dead. They grieve for lost family and the lost homes of their grandfathers, as is proper. It should be remembered that Turks, too, grieve for their dead.