

## SUCKING UP TO THE TURKISH DENIERS

In a recent article in the *Embassy* magazine, the renowned British journalist Gwynne Dyer noted that words matter. Few would argue otherwise. Words matter no less than facts. Unfortunately, in the same article, Mr. Dyer did not even try to undertake a comprehensive overview of the literature and the factual data about the condition of the Armenians during World War I.

Mr Dyer argues in the article that “**motivation**” **behind the killings** is essential in terming mass killings a genocide (hence, according to him, the Holocaust should be distinguished from the others). He continues the argument that while there was a Nazi plan for a “final solution”, the **Armenian case was “less systematic and probably unplanned.”** There is an argument that as there were **Armenian uprisings in the Eastern regions near the front, the Turkish government ordered the mass deportations** of the civilian Armenian population, but the **Armenians living in the cities of western Turkey were not massacred or deported** in 1915. Finally, like many others who opposed the French Senate bill criminalizing the denial of genocides, including the Armenian genocide in Turkey, Mr. Dyer pins the proposed bill to the simplistic explanation that it’s high time in **elections in France and half a million Armenian votes are to be counted.**

I would not go into detailed polemics about all of these arguments as monographs abound on the topic. However, let me cite some facts which refute the veracity of these judgments.

In order to understand whether the Young Turkish government had **motivation or a plan behind the killings** one needs to go back to an earlier period – the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1878 the treaty of Berlin had urged the Turkish authorities to implement the necessary steps “to guarantee the security of the Armenians”, thus acknowledging that there existed a threat to their security. This did not prevent the Turkish authorities from organizing large-scale massacres of Armenians in 1894-96, when approximately 300,000 innocent Armenians throughout Ottoman Turkey were slaughtered. In just over a decade thereafter, massacres in Adana claimed the lives of 30,000 innocent Armenians. The Young Turks permitted or, as many believe, indirectly organized this mass killing which, the English historian E.F. Benson termed as “experimental”. All of this affirms the existence of an inclination on behalf of the Turkish state (before or during the Young Turkish regime) to solve the Armenian Question through massacres and physical extermination of the Armenians.

Speaking at the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) secret meeting on August 6, 1910 in Salonica, Talaat Bey, the Minister of Internal Affairs of the Ottoman Empire, laid out the ottomanizing goal of Turkey. He noted that “there can be no question of equality until we have succeeded in our task of ottomanizing the Empire - a long and laborious task. The British Ambassador to Turkey, Gerald Lowther commented that “to them ‘Ottoman’ evidently means ‘Turk’ and their present policy of ‘Ottomanization’ is one of pounding the non-Turkish elements in a Turkish mortar...” The French consul in Salonica went further in noting that the Union and Progress leaders were inclined to resort to violence in the event that “the peaceful efforts to achieve the unity of Turkey meet with failure.” (The idea of Turkification of Turkey and establishment of great Turan, preached by pan-Turanist ideologues like Zia Gokalp, is analogous to the Nazi ideas of *Lebensraum*)

Another document asserting the genocidal program of the Young Turks before the start of the massacres was the so-called “Ten Commandments”, introduced in December 1914, which is a record of resolutions adopted during the secret meeting of Ottoman Empire decision-making circles in Salonica, headed by Talaat Bey.

The first article calls for “closure of all Armenian societies and arrest of those who worked against the government at any time, and sending them to the provinces such as Baghdad or Mosul, and wipe them out on the road or at their destination.” The 3<sup>rd</sup> article noted: “inflame Moslem sentiment by appropriate and specific means in places like Van, Erzurum, Adana, where Armenians have already roused the hatred of the Moslems, incite organized massacres as the Russians did in Baku.” Article 5 is the embodiment of the whole program: “apply measures to exterminate all males under 50, including priests and teachers, detain girls and children to be Islamized.”

On a number of occasions and during many meetings held in 1915 Talaat himself maintained that the Armenian issue is a problem that “we have to put an end to and to get rid of.” War provided a unique opportunity to eliminate the Armenians and arrive at a solution to the Armenian Question once and for all (both the Armenian and Jewish genocides were committed during World Wars).

The Turkish Law on Deportation, adopted on May 27 1915, gave the army absolute power to massacre Armenians at will. Its 1<sup>st</sup> article authorized the army, troop and division commanders and their deputies to be harsh and unsparing with regard to any insubordination to government orders, and “to immediately and rigorously subdue, by force of arms, any assault or resistance.” Its 2<sup>nd</sup> article that went further, directs that “based on special military laws, commanders of armies and individual troops and divisions, in case of suspecting espionage or betrayal, may relocate residents of villages or townships, singly or massively, to other settlements.”

Obviously, no one could have envisaged deporting hundreds of thousands of Armenians without causing mass deaths. Moreover, except for the 1<sup>st</sup> article of the “Ten Commandments”, which is a death sentence rather than a destination plan, no resettlement plan exists. People were just forced into the blazing inhospitable desert. No possessions, no food, no water. Clearly most would die of starvation, weather conditions, or simply be killed on this death march.

In acquitting the then Turkish government of direct responsibility in its involvement and organization of the Armenian genocide, Gwynne Dyer writes that “Turkish troops could not be spared from fighting, so most of the job of “guarding” the columns of Armenian deportees...was left to Kurdish tribesmen”.

It is generally agreed that it was a state-sponsored genocide, initiated at the highest levels of government and implemented through several civilian state agencies. The interior and war ministries coordinated the genocide. Telegrams coordinating the Special Organizations’ movements and actions were sent through the Interior Ministry. The main executioners, specializing in massacring bound men and columns of women, children and the elderly, were the 20 to 30,000 men of the paramilitary forces organized by the Special Organization (similar to the Nazi SS).

On May 24, 1915 France, Great Britain and Russia made a joint declaration condemning the Turkish government for the massacres. The declarations began saying “for about a month the Kurdish and Turkish populations of Armenia have been massacring Armenians with the connivance and often the assistance of the Ottoman authorities....In view of those new crimes by Turkey against humanity and civilization, the Allied governments announce publicly to the Sublime-Porte that they will hold personally responsible, for these crimes, all members of the Ottoman government and those of their agents who are implicated in such massacres.” As the term “genocide” was non-existent then, “crime against humanity” was the utmost term for this context.

In 1919 some Turks acknowledged the extent of the crime. The new Ottoman government initiated war crimes trials and some of the organizers of the Armenian genocide were court-martialled. However, their execution was implemented by individual Armenians in various parts of the world. The then Minister of the interior wrote: “Four or five years ago a crime, unique in history, was committed in this land. A crime which makes the world shudder. The authors were not five or ten persons but hundreds of thousands....It is already a proven fact that this tragedy was planned by the decisions and orders of the Ittihad Central Committee.” The verdict and the indictment texts of the Turkish Ministry Tribunal in 1919 leave no doubt about the level of organization and the extent of the Armenian genocide.

It is true that, unlike the Jews during the Holocaust, Armenians resisted in some locations, but that was a response to decades of violence by the Ottoman government against the people. So claiming that there were **rebellions on the front** which led to the Turkish government’s decision to deport the Armenians is a gross mis-representation of the core issue. Before the start of the war the Turkish government asked the main Armenian political party (Dashnaktsutyun) leaders to help in the organization of insurrection among Armenians living in the Russian Caucasus. The CUP leaders promised that, in case of success they would grant Armenians an autonomous province under Turkish rule. The Armenians rejected the offer explaining that in the event of war Armenians on both sides of the frontier should remain loyal to their respective states. This was a reasonable response. Eventually, 150,000 Russian Armenians served in the Russian army, as opposed to the 200,000 Armenians conscripted in the Turkish forces, of whom a few deserted. By July 1915, 200,000 Armenian soldiers were killed. Most of these conscripts were exterminated in the army as part of the wider plan of extermination of Armenians.

To claim that deportations were organized at the front lines only is not true. Deportations of Armenians were organized throughout Turkey. Sivaz, Yozgat, Kayseri and many others deep in the countryside and not close to any of the borders of Turkey. On Bloody Sunday, the night of April 24, 1915, the Ottoman government rounded up and deported about 250 Armenian intellectuals and community leaders from Istanbul (including two members of the Ottoman parliament). Except for just a few of them, they were all killed in the deserts. So what is the basis of Mr. Dyer’s claim that “Armenian civilians living in the cities of western Turkey were not massacred or deported in 1915”?

The countering of the freedom of speech to criminalization of the denial of genocides is unsustainable. Freedom of speech itself is subject to some legal restrictions, including by some articles in the Genocide Convention. The same logic prohibits fascist and racial appeals, the

destructive power of which was supported by “scientific” arguments several decades ago. Moreover, freedom of speech can by no means justify the falsification of history and disrespect towards millions of Armenian victims and their descendants. Giving credence to the Turkish claim that “it’s **election time**”, and that there are half a million voters of Armenian descent in France” holds no water and is an extension of the over-simplification thread that runs in Mr Dyer’s article. First, all the major political parties stood by it. Second, there are about 600,000 Turks in France. So anyone counting on Armenian votes will be outbalanced by losing a larger number of Turkish votes. The argument of “election votes” therefore is absolutely baseless.

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