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Considerations upon the Armenian Genocide (1915-1917)

The twentieth century has been termed by many as the most violent century in the history of mankind. This allegation, despite its rather generous character, is in many ways correct as during the course of that century mankind found itself fighting two devastating world wars and a number of violent and bloody small wars. One recurrent feature of the conflicts of the twentieth century is the increased degree of violence used against civilian population, which was subjected to aerial bombings, starvation, rapes, deportation and/or extermination in the form of genocide and ethnic cleansing.

One of the first examples of genocide took place during World War 1, inside the borders of the Ottoman Empire and involved the extermination of almost the entire Armenian population living inside the borders of that empire. The aim of this paper is to analyze the Armenian genocide from the perspective of the total/classic war dichotomy and to establish if there was any sort of rationale behind the decision of the Ottoman government to exterminate a nation whose history and unique culture can be traced to ancient times. My thesis is that there was no practical reason for the Ottoman government to exterminate the better part of a population that proved itself loyal to the state, and that the entire genocide was a result of strategic paranoia and ethnic nationalism.

The paper will consider the context of the genocide, the actual sequence of events and will draw some conclusions regarding the rationality behind the use of violence against civilian population or civilian targets during wartime. A series of documents which describe the genocide from Ottoman perspective as well as allied perspective will be used in this research.

However first of all some terms must be defined. Genocide is defined in strictly legal terms by the UN General Assembly Resolution 260 (III) adopted on December 9, 1948: "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: killing members of the group, causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group, deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part, imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group and forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”¹ Total war shall be defined as “a type of armed conflict where strategies, tactics and technologies are deliberately employed on a large scale in order to damage irreversibly one or more of the constituting elements of the opponent’s power”². Conversely classic or limited war is a “type of warfare in which the victor does not employ strategies, tactics and technologies that harm irreversibly the constituting elements of the opponent’s power”³. In terms of outcomes the result of total war is the annihilation of one of the opponents while the outcome of a classic (limited) war is far less disastrous for the defeated party, as its counterpart seeks only to put him out of action for a short time and/or a limited purpose.

Genocide will therefore be considered in this paper as a total strategy aimed deliberately at exterminating the whole or the better part of the opponent’s population.

The context of the Armenian genocide

The Armenian genocide needs to be considered in a larger perspective in order to understand fully the causes and the events that have led to the first of the twentieth century genocides. This context is given by three important elements: the Eastern Question, Turkish nationalism and the advent of World War 1, with Turkey joining in on the side of the Central Powers.

The Eastern Question dates back to the early eighteenth century and it is linked with the gradual decline in terms of power of the Ottoman Empire. Russia and the Habsburg Empire defeat and attach to their empires territories belonging to the Ottoman Empire, which is forced to retreat and seek help from other European Great Powers: France and Great Britain.

By the beginning of the twentieth century the Ottoman Empire is but a shadow of the empire that threatened Europe up to the end of the seventeenth century. It has become subject for derision in European chancelleries, being called “the sick man of Europe” and every Great Power wants to control it due to its strategic importance. Some like Russia seek to dismantle the empire in order to project power over in the Mediterranean and the Middle

¹ “Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide” UN General Assembly Resolution 260 (III) adopted on December 9, 1948 www.hrweb.org/legal/genocide.html website accessed April 15, 2005.

² Diaconu, Florin, “*Razboi clasic si razboi total in secolul al XX-lea*” PHD Thesis in Political Science, Department of Political Science, University of Bucharest, coordinator: Professor Daniel Barbu, PHD, p.85.

³ Ibidem, p. 85.

East; some like Great Britain want to preserve the Ottoman Empire intact, in order to keep others from threatening its position in India and to see that the empire pays its debts. The Empire is gradually torn apart by even smaller contenders, such as Greece, Bulgaria or Serbia, which have national agendas to fulfill and also as retribution for the centuries endured under the domination of the Sublime Porte.

Christian minorities living inside the borders of the beleaguered empire become pretexts for intervention, as the Great Powers use them as tools for advancing their own interests⁴. Following a number of wars in the nineteenth century, the empire loses large chunks of its territory in the Balkans due to the interventions of Russia and Austria Hungary in what the Ottomans consider matters of internal politics: a number of rebellions among the Christian minorities caused by Turkish excessive rule, but also by the advent of ethnic nationalism. The consequences for the empire are dire, as by 1914 it holds a very small territory in South-Eastern Europe, a region which it had previously controlled entirely.

The decline of the Ottoman Empire has led to some attempts to preserve and reform the empire, starting in the 1830's with the Tanzimat reforms which continued in the 1870's with the promulgation of a constitution for the empire. Furthermore the attempts to modernize the empire lead to the development of radical national movements, made up of Western educated Turks who wanted to put an end to the decline of the empire. In 1908 the Young Turks party manages to take power and embark on a modernization drive fashioned on the European model. In their proclamation to the Ottoman Empire, the Young Turks sketched a plan to transform the country into a constitutional monarchy, based on equal citizenship provided by the Ottoman identity and envisioned a country similar to the already established European nations⁵.

The Young Turks not only came up with what seemed to be a comprehensive modernization plan for the ailing empire, but a number of extreme ideologies were developed under their leadership such as pan-Turanism, pan-Turkism and pan-Islamism. Pan-Turanism professed that Turkey must create a Euro-Asiatic super-state, encompassing all Turanic peoples from the Mediterranean to the Urals, and Hungary and Finland to Mongolia. Pan-Turkism was more limited in its scope and called for smaller state made up of Turkish speaking peoples from both east and west, while pan-Islamism held that Turkey's duty was to revive and rule over the Islamic Khalifat as well as Turanic and Turkish speaking spaces.⁶ All these ideologies affirmed the superiority of the Turkish element within the

⁴ Ternon, Yves, "*Statul criminal. Genocidurile secolului XX*", Iasi: Institutul European, 2002, pp. 170-171.

⁵ Proclamation for the Ottoman Empire, www.firstworldwar.com/source/youngturkproclamation.htm, website accessed April 15, 2005.

⁶ Selian, Segiu "*Istoria unui genocid ignorat*" Bucuresti: Ed. Silex, 1994, pp.60-61.

empire over the other populations living within its borders. Moreover groups with an identity at least as old and as strong as that of the Turks such as the Armenians, automatically became rivals in the eyes of those who professed such ideologies and therefore became targets of nationalistic and racist hatred from the dominant group.

Finally the outbreak of World War 1 in 1914 provided the opportunity to carry out and justify the genocide. At the beginning of the conflict the Ottoman Empire proclaimed its neutrality, but the government although divided in terms of preferences between the Central Powers and the Entente, was dominated by the Young Turks which were pro-German and consequently in 1914, after intense pressures from the Central Powers, the Ottoman Empire entered the war on their side⁷. The Young Turks, most of them educated in Germany, chose the Central Powers because of their fear of Russia, whom they considered the greatest threat to the existence of the Ottoman Empire and moreover because they believed that the traditional protectors of the empire, Great Britain and France, could not win the war. The war will provide the Young Turks with the opportunity to get rid of the Armenians as well as to hide and justify the entire genocide.

The Armenian community inside the borders of the Ottoman Empire

The Armenians represented a distinct community among the peoples of Asia Minor in general and particularly among the many ethnic groups living inside the borders of the Ottoman Empire. Their history can be traced for more than two thousand years; the Armenian Church was independent from other Christian churches and claimed to be the first people as a whole to convert to Christianity. Generally speaking the Armenians are best known as an entrepreneurial people, many of them being successful merchants and contributing to the wealth of the Ottoman Empire. Furthermore they were agents of modernity, in the nineteenth century contributing culturally and economically to the modernization of the empire.

However most of them were concentrated in central and eastern Anatolia, a strategically important region, which linked the Middle East with the Caucasus and Central Asia as well as an important trade route, intensely used in ancient and medieval times as part of the Silk Road⁸. The Armenians lived in scattered villages along the high plateaus and mountains of central and eastern Anatolia. The vast majority of the Armenian population was rural, living off the land and engaging in trading. The Armenian elite was living in urban

⁷ Taylor, A.J.P., *"The Struggle for Mastery in Europe 1848-1918"*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971 pp.533-535.

⁸ Chaliand, Gerard and Ternon, Yves *"Le genocide des Armeniens 1915-1917"* Brussels: Editions Complexe, 1984, pp.15-16.

centers, especially in Istanbul, the capital of the empire, were it participated in economic, social and political life of the empire.

Until the nineteenth century the Armenian populations as well as other ethnic and religious groups making up the Ottoman Empire were considered second class citizens, by the ruling Muslim Turkish group. The reason for this discrimination lay with the peculiar character of traditional Muslim society, which defines citizenship in terms of religion. Full citizenship within the *umma* (community) is granted only to Muslims, according to the Sharia law. The Ottoman Empire granted official recognition to other religions in the form of the *millet* and in some cases such as those of the Christian and Jewish communities, the millet provided the members of the community with some degree of autonomy⁹. The semi autonomous status of the *millet* however did not mean complete equality among the populations of empire as the Muslim *millet* was clearly the dominant one. This form of discrimination did not however lead to any systematic persecutions of Christians or any other religious group, living in the Ottoman Empire¹⁰. Nevertheless it helped form the mindset of those who perpetrated the Armenian genocide, in the sense that they already saw in them "the other", who is different and not part of the community.

In the nineteenth century as part of the efforts to modernize and revive the ailing Ottoman Empire, legislation was passed to ensure full equality in terms of citizenship for all the peoples living in the empire. However most of this legislation remained on paper, as the Ottoman authorities continued to abuse and discriminate other religious groups as well as Muslims. Armenians suffered from the abuses of the Ottoman authorities during the nineteenth century, that culminated in the massacres of 1895 in which 200 000 to 300 000 Armenians lost their lives.¹¹

Despite abuses, discrimination and even massacres the Armenian population proved to be remarkably loyal to the Ottoman Empire. There were indeed radical nationalist organizations, which employed violence in order to draw attention on the suffering of the Armenians and advance their cause, but overall despite increasing hardships choose to participate peacefully in the political life of the empire at the beginning of the twentieth century. The Young Turks used the attacks of radical Armenian groups as one of the justifications of the genocide, depicting the entire Armenian population as being a threat to the security of their country.

⁹ Davidson, Roderic H. "Turkish Attitudes Concerning Christian-Muslim Equality in the Nineteenth Century" in *Armenian Historical Review*, vol. 59, No.4, (July 1954), p. 844.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 845.

¹¹ Adalian, Rouben Paul, "The Armenian Genocide: Context and Legacy", The Official Journal of the National Council for the Social Studies, (February 1991), www.armenian-genocide.org/Education.56/current_category.117/resourceguide_detail.html, website accessed April 15, 2005.

The Armenian genocide of 1915-1917

The start of World War 1 and the subsequent entry of the Ottoman Empire in the conflict on the side of the Central Powers offered the opportunity and justification for the killing of the Armenians in living in Turkey. In the eyes of the Young Turks, the Armenian community with its age old institutions, autonomy, wealth and strong cultural identity posed a threat to their ideal of creating a homogenously ethnic state¹². Furthermore the concentration of the greater part of the Armenian population in eastern Anatolia, near the border with the Russian Empire, which was considered by all Turks as the greatest threat to the existence of the empire, fuelled the hatred and fears of the Young Turks regarding the Armenians.¹³ The worst case scenario, for the Young Turks, involved the loss of Anatolia, which was for them the cradle of Turkish civilization and would have compromised forever the idea of a Turanic empire.

The state of mind of the Young Turks concerning the fate of the Armenians is best described by one of the leading members of the party, a certain Dr. Nazâm, who in a speech at a party gathering at the beginning of 1915 made the following remarks:

"We must liquidate and uproot the Armenians, in our lands no Armenian must remain and the name Armenian must be forgotten. At present we are at war and no other favorable opportunity would offer to us: the interventions of the Great Powers and protests of the press will not attract attention and even if they would be faced with a *fait accompli*. This time it will be extermination."¹⁴

In a letter to the German chancellor, Bethmann-Holweg, the German ambassador to the Sublime Porte mentioned in a conversation with Talaat bey, minister of the interior, a German doctor in the service of the embassy was told that the "Porte, would like to take advantage of the war in order to radically solve the issue of the enemies within the empire without the hindrance of foreign diplomatic interference"¹⁵.

It is clear, in light of this evidence, that the Young Turks were bent on exterminating the Armenians living inside the borders of the empire and would let nobody to stop them from carrying out their genocidal plan. The genocide was most likely planned sometime in the

¹² Selian, Segiu "Istoria unui genocid ignorat" Bucuresti: Ed. Silex, 1994, p.60.

¹³ James J. Reid. "Total War, the Annihilation Ethic, and the Armenian Genocide, 1870-1918", www.comw.org/pda/fulltext/92reid.html website accessed April 15 2005.

¹⁴ Selian, Segiu "Istoria unui genocid ignorat", p.31.

¹⁵ Chaliand, Gerard and Ternon, Yves "Le genocide des Armeniens 1915-1917" Brussels: Editions Complexe, 1984, p.69. The enemies within were the Armenians. The letter is dated June 15, 1915.

winter of 1914-1915 by the central committee of the Young Turks party "Unity and Progress" (*Ittihad ve Terrak*). It is likely that the decision was taken so early into the war because of the failure of the Ottoman offensive in Azerbaijan against Russia and due to the presence of Armenian units in the Russian army used as scouts.¹⁶ Clearly the Young Turks feared the annexation of Anatolia or an Armenian rebellion.

In order to carry out the genocide the Young Turks used the Special Organization, a special unit of the party created in 1911 and charged with carrying out intelligence gathering operations outside the country for the ministry of war. During the preparation of the genocide a part of this unit was transferred to the ministry of the interior and was employed to train and form liberated convicts in paramilitary units, which will actually carry out the genocide.¹⁷

Using the rebellion of the Armenian population in the city of Van as a pretext, the genocide begins on April 24, 1915 with the arrest and rounding up of the Armenian elite living in Istanbul. Previously between January and April 1915 the Armenian soldiers serving in the Ottoman army are disarmed, distributed in auxiliary battalions and quietly eliminated. Starting with May and continuing until July 1915 the Armenian population from seven eastern provinces of the empire: Erzerum, Bitlis, Van, Diarbekir, Trebizond, Sivas and Kharput, is deported to Aleppo. However few of the Armenians rounded up by the Turks, will reach Aleppo alive, as all able bodied men are separated from the rest of the population and killed, while the women, children and the old are attacked along the way by the paramilitaries or Kurdish tribesmen. This does not happen by chance, the standing orders of those involved in the genocide are that very few Armenians are to reach Aleppo alive. By August 1915 the first phase of the genocide is over and Armenians from the rest of the empire are now the target. This phase begins on August 1915 and lasts until July 1916. The Armenians are deported to the Dardanelles where they are interned in concentration camps. Those that managed to reach Aleppo alive are deported in Syrian concentration camps, where the awful living conditions take their toll. What is left of them is deported again, this time in the middle of the desert, their final destination being Deir es – Zor in the desert of Mesopotamia. Many of the Armenians, the vast majority being women and children, die on route of starvation and thirst. At Deir es – Zor the surviving Armenians are forced into the caves and are burnt to death by Turkish soldiers¹⁸.

The genocide did not involve just the taken of lives but also the destruction of identities by forced conversions to Islam, Armenian young women were forced to marry Turkish men and according to the orders of the minister of interior, Talaat, the orphans who

¹⁶ Ternon, Yves, " *Statul criminal. Genocidurile secolului XX*", p.172.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p.172

¹⁸ Ibidem pp.170-172.

could not "remember the terrors to which their parents have been subjected"¹⁹ were to be sent to Turkish orphanages and raised as Turks. Furthermore the Armenian places of worship were destroyed in order to leave as little evidence as possible of the existence of the Armenians.

The genocide did not go unnoticed by both Allies and Central Powers, however there was little to be done to stop the genocide. The Germans although disapproved the entire undertaking, considered Turkey a too valuable ally to lose, while the Entente powers threatened with prosecutions after the end of hostilities.

In the aftermath of the genocide it was estimated that over 1,500 000²⁰ million Armenians have been killed by the Young Turks. Viscount James Bryce who was tasked by the British government to investigate the Armenian genocide recorded the following in his report:

"It would seem that three-fourths or four-fifths of the whole nation has been wiped out, and there is no case in history, certainly not since the time of Tamerlane, in which any crime so hideous and upon so large a scale has been recorded."²¹

Nevertheless the Turks did not stop here with their atrocities against the Armenian population. When they invaded in 1918 Azerbaijan further massacres were committed against the Armenian population living in Russia. And even after the end of the Young Turks rule in Turkey, atrocities against what was left of the Armenian community continued well after the war, under the regime of Mustafa Kemal, by 1923 there were no more Armenians living in Asia Minor and West Armenia.²² Furthermore the Young Turks and later Turkish authorities took every measure possible to hide the genocide, which is not recognized by Turkey even today.

The Armenian genocide – an overview

All in all there was no rationale for the Young Turks to destroy the Armenian population during World War 1. The Armenian themselves, despite repeated and deliberate abuses committed against them prior to 1915 and despite the vicinity of Russia, where fellow Armenians were living in far better conditions, remained loyal citizens of the Ottoman

¹⁹ www.firstworldwar.com/source/armenia_talaatorders.htm, website accessed April 15, 2005.

²⁰ Ternon, Yves, " *Statul criminal. Genocidurile secolului XX*", p.174.

²¹ www.firstworldwar.com/source/brycereport_armenia.htm, website accessed April 15, 2005.

²² www.armenian-genocide.org/genocidedefaq.html, website accessed April 15, 2005.

Empire, contributing to its prosperity and modernization. They used violence only when it became evident that, if they want to survive they had to fight.²³

However the Young Turks saw in the Armenians living in the empire a threat to its security, because of the prior experience with regard to the use of Christian minorities to grab portions of the ailing empire. Nevertheless this is not enough to explain the cruelty and the scale on which the genocide was perpetrated. The most likely explanation is that the Young Turks considered the Armenians as a threat to their dream of creating a homogenous Turkish state.

Can the Armenian genocide be considered a case of total war? Yes, definitely, because the purpose of the Young Turks was to exterminate the Armenian population and for that end they used almost unlimited forms of violence. Moreover the Turks used what was then the latest technology in terms of communication and transportation to carry out and organize the genocide: the telegraph and the rail way. The genocide was so effective, that it is still surrounded by controversy and for most of the twentieth century it was forgotten.

If indeed the Armenian community posed a threat to the Ottoman Empire, it would have sufficed to deport some of the population from the border areas, so that the Russians if they would have mounted an offensive, could not use them against the Turks. Furthermore the radical elements could have been silenced in order to prevent a possible rebellion. These measures should have been enough to guarantee the security of the border areas of the empire, in case of a threat. However the threat existed only in the minds of those in charge of the Ottoman government and the subsequent actions cannot find other explanation than that of a prevailing strategic paranoia coupled with ethnic hatred. The entire genocide was brought about by the will of the Young Turks to create a homogenous Turkey, who could not be threatened anymore with partition by the Great Powers.

²³ www.firstworldwar.com/source/brycereport_armenia.htm, website accessed April 15, 2005.

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