

Less than Nations

Less than Nations:
Central-Eastern European Minorities after WWI,
Volume 2

By

Giuseppe Motta

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P U B L I S H I N G

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SECTION IV:
CASE STUDIES

CHAPTER ONE

THE MASSACRES OF THE ARMENIANS AND THEIR IMPACT OVER XX CENTURY HISTORY

The Armenian Emergency

History delivers us a terrible series of massacres that were perpetrated against those who were considered a minority. During ancient times it was the turn of the Christians and the Jews. Modern Europe experienced wars of religion against Protestants as well as the expulsion of Jews and Mohammedans from the Southern regions that were conquered by Christians (as occurred first in Sicily and, at the end of the XV century, in Spain). These and other facts –many unmentioned happenings deserve the same respect, the wars of religion, the crusades against Cathars, Waldensians...- constituted the tragic basis on which contemporary Europe had been shaped. But these changes did not imply an automatic abandon of violence against minorities; on the contrary, they took to the most radical and bloodiest episodes which have been defined as genocide. Genocides differ from the old persecutions but are the expression of the same hatred towards the minorities and of the same absolute aspiration towards something sacred which can admit the sacrifice of the few for the good of the many.

Even if the definition of that tragedy is still a controversial question, for many the event that marked this new wave of XX century violence was undoubtedly the massacre of the Armenians.

The Armenians had inhabited the region of the Middle East and the Caucasus since the antiquity and had given life to an extraordinary civilization with their own culture, religion, literature and language, establishing trading communities in Europe and all over the world.¹ Unfortunately, they were also the first to suffer from the terrible consequences of World War I, when they experienced a massive ethnic cleansing that many rightly or wrongly considered a real genocide. But to better understand the violence of the war –which will not be fully analysed

in these pages— it is necessary to take some steps back, at least at the time of the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca (1774), when the once-mighty Ottoman Empire had to capitulate against Russia and to promise “permanent protection of the Christian religion and its churches.” (clause 7).

International stipulations were accepted by the Sultan as a condition of peace but generated in the Turks a sense of humiliation which was later fostered by the Treaty of Berlin (1878) and by the gradual agony of the Porte, which was handled by international diplomacy.² This frustration against the Powers was dangerously combined with the rising Turkish nationalism which saw foreign intervention as a further element to increase the national pride against the arrogance of the West. The empire was losing its power piece by piece: at first Greece gained independence between 1821 and 1829, then Romania, Serbia and Montenegro, were all recognized as independent states by the Treaty of Berlin.

This phase coincided with the end of the *Tanzimat* (1839-1876), which had launched a process of centralization, generating many problems in the wide periphery of the empire and among the minorities who enjoyed certain autonomy thanks to the *millet* system. Between 1840 and 1860 the eastern regions staged a chaotic administrative anarchy which was caused also by the refusal to apply the decisions coming from Istanbul. It was just in this context that the Armenians experienced their neighbours' violence, which attracted the attention of international diplomacy. In 1878, Berlin hosted a congress which proved to be fundamental for the settlement of the Eastern Question. The meeting was summoned after the start of a Russian-Turkish war, which had begun as a consequence of the crude Ottoman repression of the Balkan revolts. The echo of these clashes toured the world and found an important place in the political debates, with William Gladstone's pamphlet *The Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East* (1876), and in the pages of all the most important newspapers, for example in the “New York Times”, which on the 7th of August 1876 denounced the massacre of 46,000 Bulgarians.³ The Treaty of Berlin and its clauses about Ottoman minorities were the result not only of the war but also of this wave of strong criticism against the Sultan regime and its Asiatic and bloody oppression. This sense of western superiority exacerbated the wounded pride of the Turks, which was strongly damaged by the clauses of the treaty to control and improve the treatment of Ottoman authorities towards the minorities -European countries, anyway, had to accept the same provisions-. After Berlin, the Sultan had to make a “spontaneous” declaration for the religious freedom of his people, and to accept foreign control on the application of these provisions and of the special clauses for the Armenians, who had to be protected against the Circassians and Kurds

(art.61): other similar measures were later imposed by Great Britain with the Convention of Cyprus in 1879.

The foreign complaints tensed the relationships between Muslims and Christians, especially the biggest minority still under the full sovereignty of the Sultan, the Armenians, who were perceived as an inner column of foreign imperialism, and were subjected to the social prejudice of the less economically developed people. As a matter of fact, the Armenians could count on deep trading and economic relationships with the European countries, they were among the most enterprising and active ones and were able to form a “ruling class of bankers, financiers and merchants”.⁴ The economic gap was particularly disturbing for those new Muslim residents who had settled in the eastern regions of the Ottoman Empire after escaping from European Balkans, where they had left their goods and properties.

The difference had also an ethnic nature, as the Armenians did not belong to the great *Turan*, the homeland of the Turks and the centre of the national thought that inspired the lay Young Turks but also the religious Muslim League. Turkish nationalism was growing and the attitude of international diplomacy was a tool to strengthen inner cohesion against western prejudices. The decline of the Ottoman Empire was clearly manifest and it was interpreted like the result of the interference that the European Powers had through their accomplices, their fifth column: the Christian minorities who served as an excuse to influence the life of the Ottoman Empire. As a matter of fact, since the beginning of the XIX century, western Powers had managed the Eastern Question in order to follow their interests and, although this policy often coincided with the survival of the Porte, it was perceived by the Turks as a clear symptom of hostility.⁵

This attitude played a central role for the definition of that vague idea that young generations of Turks were developing for the creation of an Ottoman identity, which could be lay or religious, but in both cases was based on a strong opposition towards foreign intervention. The menaces to the empire's survival were inevitably connected with the European states, with Russia and the other Powers who were accomplices of Russian aggressions and guilty of having imposed unacceptable measures for the treatment of Ottoman Christians and Armenians.

The identification of Armenians with the decline of the empire was underlined by their activity at the eastern frontier of the state, where revolutionary organizations animated a constant rebellion against Ottoman authorities. These movements combined socialist suggestions with populism and nationalism and, in the case of Armenians, with a fierce

resistance against the Ottoman dominion. In Eastern Anatolia there were the Defenders of the homeland and Patriotic Society, while the most active were the revolutionary Hnçhak, and the Dashnaksutyun, which were created, respectively, at Geneva in 1887 and at Tbilisi in 1890. These organizations increased their propaganda and their actions in the last decade of the century, causing troubles both in Russia and in the Ottoman Empire. In the Ottoman territory, the “pacification” of the eastern regions was pursued with a system of double taxation for the Armenians, who were asked to pay tributes to the authorities and to the Kurdish military unities, the notorious *Hamidiye* regiments. The treatment of *divide et impera* resulted very hard for the Armenians, who were pushed towards a strong opposition against their rulers. In this sense, the political guidance of revolutionaries was later invoked to justify the violence of the reprisals, as the rebels often acted with the perfect consciousness or maybe with the specific intention to provoke a hard and bloody response in order to ask for international protection.⁶

In the summer of 1894 the residents of Sassun refused to pay the tribute to the Kurds, who asked for the intervention of the regular army. The latter, after having promised an amnesty, did not hesitate to massacre the Armenians and their villages, as reported by the “New York Times”. On the 6th of December 1894, the newspaper compared the Armenian massacres with the “Shocking Bulgarian Atrocities of 1876” and mentioned the emigration of the Armenians among the consequences of the broken promises of the Treaty of Berlin:

“The emigrants have come from the better elements of the Armenian population, the young, vigorous, and progressive, which have preferred to expatriate themselves rather than to submit to the unequal conditions under which they would be compelled to live if they remained in their own country”.⁷

The Greek uprising in Crete in 1896 did not help to soften the situation but, on the contrary, exacerbated Muslim fanaticism and the hatred against the Christians, who were clearly perceived as the enemy of the state.

Besides the numerous acts of violence, the Armenians had to deal with the difficult material conditions and with the hostility of the Kurds. The Armenian revolutionary activity did not stop and in 1896 prepared a big *coup*, maybe in order to accelerate the reforms or the intervention of foreign powers. On the 26th of August, a group of revolutionaries with guns and dynamite entered the imperial Ottoman bank in Istanbul menacing to make it explode and advancing precise political requests such as the amnesty, and the appointment of a European high commissioner.

This plan –which has been debated among historians: was it a provocation? Was it acknowledged by the Ottoman authorities?- in the same afternoon gave birth to violent attacks against the Armenian communities of the capital. These attacks seemed not very spontaneous but well organized already in the previous days, and continued in other parts of the empire.

A climate of *guerrilla* characterized the regions where the Armenians inhabited and were exposed to the revolutionaries' violence against the Kurdish and Turkish military garrisons and to the reprisals of the latter, with tragic consequences for the civil population.

Several reports appeared in the pages of the “New York Times” through the years; in 1900, when Turks and Kurds massacred Armenians (August 10, 1900), and especially in 1904 when hundreds of Armenians were slain by the Turks, who destroyed villages as a reprisal after the rebels' attacks.⁸

The information arriving from Armenia was terrifying: attacks of the Kurds, death caused by slain and starvation, assassinations and destructions of villages were the effects of a climate of hatred and violence which characterized Armenian territories in the first years of the XX century.⁹

Turkish nationalism debuted just in this climate of imminent decline, humiliations and defeats. The perception of the hostility which surrounded the Porte and the echoes of the violence that was perpetrated against its minorities made the image of the Turks coincide with that of barbarian Asiatic oppressors. As we have previously mentioned, this feature could not be ignored to explain the growth of Turkish nationalism, which developed as a response to the constant decline of the empire.

For the young and more advanced generations, Europe was the problem but also the answer and in that moment Europe was expressing the idea of nation as a vector of modernity and progress. It was natural, thus, that the elites of the army generated a sort of nationalism shaping it around the European model. This nationalism combined Turanism with democratic reforms: the empire had to change if it wanted to survive the times. The changes, naturally, should include a Constitution, a lay reform of the state and the adoption of western models to compete with western enemies.

This process brought a general development of Turkish culture through the appearance of newspapers and reviews, the promotion of Turkish history and the evaluation of Ottoman values. In this first phase, the results of this evolution combined the laicity of western models with the religious values of tradition, the lay nationalism with Muslim Ottomanism, as showed by the works of the first “theologians” (Yusuf Akçura, Ziya Paşa,

Ibrahim Şinasi, Namik Kemal, Ahmed Vefik, Mustafa Celâleddin, and Süleyman Paşa). Islamic unity was one of the focal points of this process, which inevitably took to a strong aversion against minorities, especially those Christians who had important connections with Europe and the states which were jeopardizing the Turkish Empire.

Religion was not a political factor but just a deep substratum of national culture, a means of identifying a national consciousness among the Turks. If Islam was important to create a common homeland and the basis for the development of a national identity and thought, this construction was translated into political terms in a lay version by the most prominent political expression of this national growth, which was politically driven by a lay perspective. The Young Turks originated at the end of the XIX century from the progressive university groups, who expressed their political dissent through the request of establishing a constitutional monarchy. The Young Turks became a truly organized movement with the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) recruiting members from the army, especially the divisions who were quartered in the Balkans.

This group of officers included Mehmet Talat, Enver Bey, Cemal Bey and also the future “Father of the Turks”, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and was the principal expression of the reformist groups. The latter were questioning the old structure of the empire and sought an alignment with western states through measures of national and democratic development. In many ways, these groups could be considered the Turkish version of European influences as they combined the lay and democratic reform of the state with a national ideology, invoking the rebirth of the Ottoman and Turkish nation. European nationalism had an important influence on the Young Turks, who were mainly soldiers or officers who had been greatly impressed by the western political ideas of nationalism and constitutionalism. Being part of the army, they probably were influenced by the German instructors who were sent to reform the Ottoman military forces thanks to the agreement with William II's Reich. After the German delegation of 1841, a second and more important one, under the direction of General Von Der Goltz, worked at the end of the century, accompanying an analogue process of financial and economic penetration.¹⁰

The Young Turks were part of a wider opposition that joined Prince Sabaheddin's Liberal Union, which was more sympathetic towards minorities and decentralization, the Muslim League, which was clearly inspired by the Koran and Islamic values, and during certain periods also the Armenian political organizations: all these movements aimed to reform the empire.

The convergence with the Armenian political forces was clearly conditioned by the need of strengthening the coalition; as a consequence, these efforts were not the result of a common ideology, but only of the convenience of the times and they were put into practice only after the first wave of massacres against the Armenians in the eastern regions. Violence decreased after the first years of the new century, even if the Ottoman Empire was destined not to live so long. In the meanwhile the agitations converted into a real revolution in 1908, when the Young Turks revolted and succeeded in creating a constitutional regime and, at least, in replacing Abdul-Hamid with Mehmet V. As a matter of fact, in April 1909 a counter-coup gave the control of the country back to the Sultan. Even if this counter-attack initially targeted the nascent Young Turk Government, it also practiced violence against the Armenians who were accused of having supported the Constitution, as happened in the province of Adana.

The events of 1908 unintentionally contributed to the further decline of the imperial power, which had to assist to the definitive loss of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Crete and Bulgaria. The reform of the empire accelerated this process of erosion, which continued with the Libyan war against Italy (1911) and the Balkan Wars of 1912-13 which almost withdrew the Turks from the Balkans.¹¹ Another consequence of this situation was the deepening of a national doctrine, which was no more addressed towards Ottomanism but concentrated on Turkism, and was built in a line of continuity with the thoughts of Abdul Hamid and the "German gospel" he introduced at the end of the XIX century.¹²

In this context, the Armenians represented the only substantial minority who had to face this increase of national Turkish feelings. Christian minorities were seen with suspicion and diffidence and were opposed for many reasons. A certain feeling of superiority was spreading among the Turks, who had conquered their Christian minorities in the past and could not stand the fact that the latter were trying to get revenge through the assistance of western Powers, and the international protection which was considered as an evidence of their treasonous attitude. The expulsion of Balkan Muslims from the territories in Europe and their settlement in the eastern regions made the collapse of the empire even more concrete and actual, and exacerbated the relationships among the different ethnic groups.¹³ All these features contributed to a fast worsening in the conditions of the minorities, who were gradually converted into the symbol of Ottoman decline, both by government and by opposition, especially by the Young Turks with their strong nationalism. This movement had further reasons of considering the Armenians like smoke in the eyes, as it was mainly composed by the officers who directly

witnessed the loss of the Balkans and the violence which accompanied the migrations of Balkan Muslims and their return to Asia.

The events after the 1908 revolution, contributed to maintain the strange alliance between the Armenian political representatives and the Turkish reformists, who opposed the “counter-reform”. In 1909, a decree (August 16) forbade political national associations and those aiming to change the form of government or to spread political divisions among the different Ottoman forces.

However, the most prominent political movement, the Committee for Union and Progress, increased its sympathizers and strengthened the idea of a national state. In 1910, Ziya Gökalp, the ideological father of the Turanism entered the party's central committee. The controversial figure of Ziya Gökalp and his recall of a visionary Turan became fundamental to answer to what Turkism was (*Türkçülük nedir?*): and to “to exalt the Turkish nation”.¹⁴ His Turkism was focused on religion and language and became the official party policy in 1913, when the Young Turks came back to power and instituted a committee of national defence and one for the national independence with the target of developing the national character of the economic sphere.

The conditions degenerated in 1914, when Enver became general and the Special Organization (*Teşkilat-i Mahsusa*) started to enhance the principles of ethnic consolidation aiming to resolve the Greek and Armenian questions.¹⁵ The existence and activity of this organization became a matter of discussions among historians, in order to define the real intentions of the *İttihad*, which created this body and kept regular relationships with it. The organization soon became the worst nightmare of the Armenian communities who had fallen victims to violence even before the beginning of the war. Once again the international intervention tried to put an end to this umpteenth wave of massacres and in February 1914 an agreement was signed to improve the conditions of Armenians: according to this act, two inspectors, Westenenk and Hoff, were to be sent to the region.

This project was prepared by Andrej Mandelstam, a Russian diplomat, and by the representatives of the Armenian national assembly. The reform package was signed into law in February 1914 and lasted in force until it was abolished on the 16th of December 1914. In the same year, another agreement was signed with Greece, providing the basis for a voluntary exchange of populations between the Greeks coming from Thrace, Dardanelles and hinterland, and the *vilayet* of Aidin and the Muslims of Macedonia and Thrace (art.1). These acts were not ratified and put into practice, but remained as an important forerunner for the postwar

decisions, together with the analogous protocol that was annexed to the 1913 treaty between Bulgaria and Turkey.¹⁶

The war, on the contrary, had the important effect of exacerbating once more the feelings towards Greeks and Armenians, who were identified as the principal symbol of western Christian hostility towards Muslim Turkey.

These feelings were further inflamed by the recruitment of many Armenians inside the Russian army, which fought against Turkish troops in the eastern regions of the empire. Russia won many battles, for example at Kara Killisse and Sarikamış, and caused big troubles to the Ottomans. The Armenian congress at Erzurum (8th congress of Dashnaksutyun) decided not to help the Ottoman government, which asked its Armenian citizens to facilitate the conquest of Transcaucasia by inciting a rebellion (together with their brethren living in Russian territories) against the Tsarist army. On the contrary, the Russian army was often welcomed by the Armenian population, who saw in the Tsarist troops the liberation from the old Asiatic and oppressive dominion of the Sultan. Moreover, the existing revolutionary organizations had stable connections with Russian territories and this link cost the Armenians further sufferings and tragedies.

In the summer of 1914, Armenian volunteer units were established under the Russian armed forces. As the Russian Armenian conscripts had already been sent to the European front, this force was uniquely established by non-Russian Armenians who were not obliged to serve Russia. Returning to Constantinople after the disastrous Caucasus campaign, Enver publicly blamed his defeat on the Armenians in the region, who actively sided with the Russians.

On February 25, 1915, the Minister of War Enver Pasha sent an order to all military units in order to demobilize and assign to the unarmed labour battalion (*amele taburlari*) the Armenians in the Ottoman forces. Military defeats were attributed to the Armenian betrayal and, as a consequence, the Ottoman authorities thought to solve definitively the problem, disarming the Armenians, throwing them out of their public positions and punishing their political leaders.

On April 24, 1915, during the Red Sunday, the Armenian leaders in Istanbul were arrested and moved to two holding centres near Ankara by the Minister of Interior Mehmed Talat Bey. These Armenians were later deported together with all their communities, who were directly concerned by the Tehcir Law on May 29, 1915.

In May 1915, Mehmed Talat requested that the cabinet and Grand Vizier Halim Pasha should legalize a measure for the relocation and settlement of Armenians to other places, owing to what Talat Pasha called

"the Armenian riots and massacres." Even if Talat Pasha was referring specifically to the events in Zeytun and Van, he aimed to extend implementation of this measure to the regions in which alleged "riots and massacres" could affect the security of the war zone of the Caucasus campaign. As a consequence, the scope of this forced migration was widened in order to include the Armenians in the other provinces.

The temporary law of deportation (Tehcir Law) gave the Ottoman government the authorization to deport anyone it "sensed" as a threat to national security. This temporary civil provision was planned, implemented and enforced by an office which was created to coordinate the activities under the name of migrant general directorate (Göçmen Genel Müdürlüğü). The law was naturally accompanied by many other supplementary provisions, for example the one of 1915 relating to abandoned properties.

In 1915, with the temporary law of deportation the Armenians were moved away from their residence in the eastern regions of the Ottoman Empire, where they could sympathize with the Russian enemy. But the deportation meant not only the abandon of their homeland but also the start of the saddest tragedy in Armenian history, the Big Crime (*Mec Yeğem*). These massacres were implemented directly in the Armenian villages during the first expulsions and gave birth to a tragedy which has been considered as a real genocide. Then they continued along the path towards the sorting centre of Aleppo or the new places of residence. During this "death marches", the assassinations that were perpetrated by the soldiers or by the Kurdish bandits were accompanied by the lack of any help (food, medicine, hosting), which contributed to cause many further deaths.

The Question of Genocide

Forgetting the debate which animated the XX century creating two opposite factions, contrary to or in favour of the adoption of the term genocide, it is indisputable that these events should be included among the most dramatic moments of contemporary history. The tragedy of these massacres was to be found not only in the death itself, but also in the fact that the facts were not particularly hidden or kept secret but were known by the whole public opinion.

The knowledge of those terrible facts was spread by many works that appeared in the following years: *The memoir of Naim Bey: Turkish Official Documents Relating to the Deportations and Massacres of Armenians* (London 1920); Lepsius' *Deutschland und Armenien 1914-1918: Sammlung diplomatischer Aktenstücke* (Potsdam 1919) and the

various memories of German officers (Colmar von der Goltz, Armin Wegner, Theodor Wiegand, Otto Liman von Sanders). Among them, it is necessary to quote the outstanding book of a particular witness, the American ambassador Morgenthau, who in 1918 testified in front of the world his experience in Turkey during the war.

Morgenthau's report mentioned the conditions of the capital city of the empire, where the authorities arrested about two hundred educational and social Armenian leaders, and men who were prominent in industry and in finance, sending them to the interior. These "self-defense" measures were especially centered in the vilayet of Van, an important strategic region for the conflict with Russia, where the Armenians had already rebelled and experienced the hard punishment of the Turkish authorities.

During the conflict, the activities of Van's Armenian population became a matter of daily suspicion and the justification for a whole of different actions which included disarm, and the requisitions of their cattle, all their wheat, and all their goods of every kind, in exchange for worthless pieces of paper.¹⁷

In the chapter about the murder of a nation, the ambassador reported an episode contained in the records of the American State Department. According to the report of an American consul, in July, 2,000 Armenian "*amélés*", former soldiers who were reduced to workmen, were sent from Harpoot to build roads. In spite of the governor's assurance, "practically every man of these 2,000 was massacred, and his body thrown into a cave". Only few escaped and could relate their story, which was similar to the destiny that was reserved to another 2,000 soldiers who were sent to Diarbekir. These "poor creatures were systematically starved" and attacked by the Kurdish tribes willing to gain that merit in Allah's eyes that came from killing a Christian. These happenings were not isolated but were repeated in many parts of the country as showed by many diplomatic documents that were collected by the Armenian National Institute.

These documents, for example the telegram sent by the Department of State to the American embassy in Constantinople (May 29, 1915), denounced the connivance and often assistance of Ottoman authorities, and asked to intervene to halt "new crimes of Turkey against humanity and civilization".¹⁸

The Allied Powers openly declared that they held personally responsible for these crimes all members of the Ottoman government and the agents who were implicated in such massacres. In 1915 the United States even set up the American Committee for Relief in the Near East, a relief organization which was called to alleviate the suffering of the Armenian people.

A telegram by Lansing, from the Department of State to the embassy in Constantinople, on the 15th of July 1915, pressed the Turkish Minister of Interior and Minister of War to stop Armenian persecution, while a telegram (July 16, 1915) from the American ambassador, defined the massacres as “a campaign of race extermination”. The emergence was so urgent that the Congress of the United States passed a resolution to start a campaign of fund-raising in order to encounter the needs of the Armenian refugees to relieve “the misery, wretchedness, and hardships” (64th Congress, 1st Session, senate resolution no. 12, February 9, 1916).¹⁹

Plenty of documents (from Armenian church, missionaries, foreign embassies) deplored the terrible treatment of the Armenians, who were killed in many ways. Many reports talked about the sinking of boats in the Black Sea, others about the use of poison and drug overdoses, or about Typhoid inoculations. A whole of different measures were synchronically put into practice by different agents, sometimes by the army sometimes by bandits or other groups, with the indolent connivance of the authorities and the active coordination of the notorious Special Organization. The intentional character of these acts was not always evident but it was clear that the Ottoman government had, at least, an objective responsibility upon its territory and citizens, especially after it was asked to stop the massacres.²⁰ It was quite indisputable, for example, that without adequate supplies, the migrations that were inflicted to the Armenians through deserts and critical zones could easily convert into a sort of death marches. As a matter of fact, the criminality of those acts was recognized by the trials which followed the end of the war.

In 1919, Sultan Mehmed VI instructed domestic courts-martial to judge the members of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) and used the Armenian issue as a tool to punish the leaders of CUP.

After the signature of the armistice of Mudros (October 30, 1918), many courts were formed to punish various *Ittihad ve Terrake* members who were accused of performing an attack against the Constitution, of the massacres against Greeks and Armenians, and of economic speculations during the war. The principal proceeding was held in Istanbul and was concluded with the verdict (*Kararname*) of the Turkish military tribunal, on the 5th of July 1919. The military court found that the CUP had the intention to eliminate the Armenians physically, via its special organisation, and sentenced to death *in absentia* the three Pashas, Talat, Enver, Cemal, who were the members of the triumvirate that had ruled the empire at the end of the conflict. The decision was rendered unanimously *in absentia* the three Pashas, Talat, Enver, Cemal, who were the members of the triumvirate that had ruled the empire during the conflict, and Dr.

Nazım; other prominent unionists, (Cavid, Mustafa Şeref, Musa Kazım, Vosgan and Suleyman-el Boustani) were sentenced to fifteen years at hard labour.

Moreover, various Ottoman politicians, generals, and intellectuals were transferred to Malta, where they were held for some years while searches were made into the archives in Constantinople, London, Paris and Washington to investigate their actions. The Commission on Responsibilities and Sanctions –which was established in January 1919 and chaired by US Secretary of State Lansing- worked to add some articles to the Treaty of Sèvres (August 1920) and organized a trial to determine those responsible for the “barbarous and illegitimate methods of warfare”. Article 230 of the Treaty of Sèvres required the Ottoman Empire to “hand over to the Allied Powers the persons whose surrender may be required by the latter as being responsible for the massacres committed during the continuance of the state of war on territory which formed part of the Ottoman Empire on August 1, 1914.”

The Treaty of Sèvres contained many articles concerning the protection of minorities, which had to be recognized as fundamental laws (art. 140). A full and complete protection of life and liberty and religious freedom was assured to all the inhabitants of Turkey without distinction of birth, nationality, language, race or religion (art.141) while conversions to Islam since November 1, 1914 were regarded as illegal (art.142).

“In order to repair so far as possible the wrongs inflicted on individuals in the course of the massacres perpetrated in Turkey during the war, the Turkish Government undertakes to afford all the assistance in its power or in that of the Turkish authorities in the search for and deliverance of all persons, of whatever race or religion, who have disappeared, been carried off, interned or placed in captivity since November 1, 1914.

The Turkish Government undertakes to facilitate the operations of mixed commissions appointed by the Council of the League of Nations to receive the complaints of the victims themselves, their families or their relations, to make the necessary enquiries, and to order the liberation of the persons in question.

The Turkish Government undertakes to ensure the execution of the decisions of these commissions, and to assure the security and the liberty of the persons thus restored to the full enjoyment of their rights” (art. 142, p. 2, 3, 4)”.

The first steps for a future reciprocal and voluntary emigration of persons belonging to racial minorities were arranged (art.143) while the Turkish Government undertook to facilitate the return to their homes and re-establishment in their businesses of the Turkish subjects of non-Turkish

race who had been forcibly driven out from their home and to restore any immovable or movable property of the said Turkish subjects or of the communities they belonged to (art.144).

The Turkish Government agreed that special arbitral commissions might be appointed by the Council of the League of Nations to hear all these claims and to establish many kind of reparations, indemnification, cancellations, even giving to the respective community the properties belonging to members of a community who had died or disappeared since January 1, 1914, without leaving heirs.

Special generous provisions were stipulated in favour of all the minorities (art.145-150): equality before the law, the right to establish, manage and control any charitable, religious and social institutions, schools for primary, secondary and higher instruction and other educational establishments, an equitable share in the enjoyment and application of the sums which may be provided out of public funds under the state, municipal or other budgets for educational or charitable purposes, the right not be compelled to perform any act which constituted a violation of their faith or religious observances, the ecclesiastical and scholastic autonomy of all racial minorities in Turkey, confirming all the prerogatives and immunities of ecclesiastical, scholastic or judicial nature that the Sultan granted to non-Moslem races in virtue of special orders or imperial decrees (firmans, hattis, berats, etc.).

The Armenian question was analysed in a special section of the treaty, which recognized the independence of Armenia (art.88) leaving to the arbitration of the President of the United States of America the question of the frontier between Turkey and Armenia in the vilayets of Erzurum, Trebizond, Van and Bitlis, (art.89).

Anyway, the Treaty of Sèvres never entered into force as a consequence of the Greco-Turkish War that broke out after the occupation of Smyrne in May 1919. The arrival of Greek troops meant the first clashes against the Turks and the start of a military occupation which was to be territorially increased in the following months. When the Treaty of Sèvres was signed, Greece obtained Thrace and all rights over Imbros and Tenedos, while Turkey retained the small territories of Constantinople, the islands of Marmara, and "a tiny strip of European territory." The Straits of Bosphorus were placed under an international commission, while Turkey was forced to transfer to Greece "the exercise of her rights of sovereignty" over Smyrna in addition to "a considerable Hinterland".

The treaty caused a great resentment inside Turkey and was never ratified by the Ottoman government and by the nationalist army, which animated the resistance against the Greek advance. It was the birth of a

real war which took Turkey to withdraw Greek troops from Asia and to gain a new independence as a lay and democratic National State, under the great figure who emerged from these clashes as the father of all the Turks, Mustafa Kemal.

Unfortunately, the war cost the Christian minorities further troubles and violence, for example in the district of Marrash, where the foreign consuls stated that further massacres and expulsions were enacted in 1920 and 1922 as a consequence of the “new revolutionary policy” according to which no Christians were to be allowed to stay in Turkey.²¹

During 1921 and 1922, the Secretary-General of the League received many alarming protests with regard to the situation of minorities in Asia minor and Thrace. A telegram from the Greek colony of Dresden announced that the innocent population was cruelly persecuted, while some had been executed in a merciless manner by Kemalist barbarism; the Committee of the Greek National Defence at Constantinople reported about the hanging of Greeks “en masse” at Samsoun, Kerassud, Baffra, Amassia, Ordou and practically at every town and village of the Pontus and the interior of Anatolia; Nicolas, the patriarch of Constantinople, and the Greek delegate at the meetings of the minority commission within the International union of associations for the League of Nations, Seferiades, talked about persecutions, deaths, sacking, exactions which were still applied three years after the armistice.²²

On the other side, similar notes were sent by the Ottoman delegation and by the Committee of Thrace concerning the situation of Muslims in Greece. At Crete the mufti Chameouddin accused the Greek authorities to sack mosques and transform them into churches or army warehouses; cemeteries became property of Greek government, while armed bands maltreated and killed the Muslims and dishonoured their women. The Ottoman delegation denounced the constant flow of Muslims escaping from Greece and the Greek intention to change the ethnographic frame of the region, while the Committee of Thrace informed the Secretariat about the violence of Greek occupation, which stroke the Muslims with evacuations – in order to free the villages where the Greek refugees had to be settled-, and every kind of atrocities, for example the destruction of all the villages in the district of Kirk-Kilissé.²³

The situation was critical and the ethnic conflicts were more than alarming, especially after the outbreak of Greco-Turkish War and the rise of Mustafa Kemal: these conditions prevented the inter-allied tribunal from solidifying, and the initial British efforts to accelerate the prosecutions were abandoned. The detainees were eventually returned to Turkey in exchange for British citizens who were held by Kemalist

Turkey. The Greco-Turkish War finally ended in 1923 and was concluded by the Treaty of Lausanne and by the special convention providing a forced exchange of population between Greece and Turkey. The Treaty of Lausanne finally meant the end of all the attempts aiming to give the Armenians a “national home” in Turkey.

After that in 1920 the Powers recognized the Armenian Government *de facto*, Turkey, however, repudiated the Treaty of Sèvres and invaded Armenia, which appealed urgently for help. Meanwhile a Bolshevik revolution broke out and brought to the establishment of the Soviet republic of Yerevan (Armenia) under Russian control.

The Armenian question was discussed at various meetings between Turkey and the Powers, which at London (February-March, 1921) had declared that they did not forget their moral obligation to constitute one united, independent and stable Armenia. Chaos reigned and nullified all these efforts. News of the prospected evacuation of the Allied troops produced panic among the Armenians, who after a vain appeal to the Powers preferred to leave their homes *en masse*. Some accompanied the retreating French troops on foot; others embarked on shipboards; others, maybe 100,000, accompanied the wretched Greek refugees in Greece, and at the two Conferences of Lausanne (1922 and 1923) the idea of giving the Armenians a “national home” in Turkey was finally abandoned.²⁴

The Convention of Lausanne decided to solve the question through a forced exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey and, concerning the Armenians, to insert their legal protection in the section of the treaty which was dedicated to minorities. The Treaty of Lausanne also meant the start of a new path for Turkey, who could begin her existence as a National State without the Christian minorities who characterized Ottoman multiculturalism, and put an end to the phase of the international trials concerning the Armenian question. The punishment of the old governors who had been found guilty of the massacres against the Armenians, thus, was left to the private justice of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, which in autumn 1919, decided to pursue an assassination campaign, the operation Nemesis, against those who were considered responsible. A special mission (*Haduk Gordz*) started and between 1920 and 1922 caused the death of many Turkish personalities such as Fatahi Khan Khoyski, Behbud Khan Javanshir, Said Halim Pasha, Behaeddin Shakir Bey, Jemal Azmi, Ahmed Djemal, Enver Pasha, and even of some Armenians who were punished as traitors. The most important target of this operation was Mehmed Talat Pasha, “the Turkish Hitler”, who was assassinated by Soghomon Tehlirian on the 15th of March 1921 as he was coming out of his house in Charlottenburg, Berlin.

Tehlirian was then found innocent by a German tribunal for temporary insanity due to the traumatic experience he had gone through during the war.²⁵

The trial of Soghomon Tehlirian, Talat's assassin, had an important influence on Raphael Lemkin, a lawyer of Polish-Jewish descent who campaigned in the League of Nations against "barbarity" and "vandalism". Many years later, Lemkin became one of the founding-fathers of the term "genocide", which was adapted to the cases of Jewish persecutions and Armenian massacres. In 1933 Lemkin submitted a proposal to the International Conference for Unification of Criminal Law in Madrid, for which he prepared an essay on the crime of barbarity as a crime under the law of nations (*delictum iuris gentium*). The concept of the crime, which later evolved into the idea of genocide, was based on the Armenian massacres and prompted by the experience of Assyrians who were killed in Iraq during the 1933 Simele massacre.²⁶

At Madrid Lemkin envisaged the creation of two distinct crimes: the crime of barbarity, consisting in the extermination of ethnic groups; the crime of vandalism, that is to say the destruction of cultural and artistic products of the same groups. Lemkin contrived the concept of genocide, deriving from the Greek words *ghénos* and *èthnos*, only some years later, in his essay *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* (1944), and referred it to the Nazis extermination of the Jews. The idea, anyway, had been growing inside his mind since many years before and its development had a strict connection with what happened during World War I. This link was proved by the memorandum that Lemkin issued in 1946, which mentioned "an attack against the life, liberty, or property", acknowledging that genocide was a composite crime: it was composed of different actions (including working to death in special camps, deliberate separations of families for depopulation purposes) which were subordinated to the criminal intent to destroy or to cripple a human group permanently.²⁷ But in the Armenian case, the use of the term genocide was never fully accepted unanimously: *in primis* the Turkish government, but also many foreign historians saw no evidence of an intentionally planned ethnic cleansing.

This complex and articulated question became a matter of angry disputes and of political interest, as it was connected to Turkish adhesion to the European Union, and gave birth to a very interesting whole of books and works concerning the massacres of the First World War. Apart from the moral implications of this discussion, a special attention should be given to the legal features connected with the use of the term genocide. The texts of Ignaz Seidl-Hohenveldern, Mark Levene and Raphael Lemkin's *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, contributed to clear up the

historical idea of genocide, which was legally defined by the resolution no. 96 (1) of the United Nations' General Assembly (November 11, 1946) which defined genocide as "a denial of the right of existence of entire human groups, as homicide is the denial of the right to live of individual beings".²⁸

The Convention for the prevention and repression of genocide was approved by the General Assembly of the United Nations on the 9th of December 1948, and tried to give a legal expression of the genocide crime, which had to be considered as a question of international humanitarian relevance. One of the most important factors which lay behind the definition of genocide is the intention of directing such an action against a group or a member of a precise group. Generally, it is on the character of intentionality that the discussions focused when having to deal with cases of genocide or other events that could be categorized as ethnocide or democide.

According to Lemkin's theorization, the terms "Germanization," "Magyarization", "Italianization", were used to connote the imposition by one stronger nation (Germany, Hungary, Italy) of its national pattern upon a different national group. These terms were inadequate because they treated mainly the cultural, economic, and social aspects of genocide, leaving out the biological aspect, the physical decline and even the destruction of one population. Such terms were too restricted to apply to a process in which the population was attacked in a physical sense and supplanted by populations of the oppressor nations.²⁹

Destructive intentionality should be accompanied to a clear identification of the subject to destroy and to an "organizational" dimension which were quite simple to find in the case of the Holocaust. The same features were not so easily identified in other cases, such as the Armenian one or the great famine of 1932-1933 in Ukraine, which was regarded by Ukrainian historians as a real genocide that was committed by communist regime against the Ukrainian people. Also the application of the term genocide to the massacres of the Armenians had been very difficult and gave birth to many discussions. The question is conditioned by a historical investigation and by some precise features that only research could contribute to clear up. But while in the case of Nazism, there were plenty of documents and evidence, the retroactive analysis of Armenian massacres proved to be by far more difficult. First of all, the organization of the Ottoman Empire during WWI could not be compared to the Nazi one in terms of institutional structure, of centre-periphery relationships, hierarchy, transparency and legal culture. The bureaucratic organization of the Ottoman Empire was not well-developed and could not be compared to the

European models. As a consequence, also the hierarchy of power and the administration were not as well-defined as to facilitate a historical and legal research. It is not a case that the term genocide is contextualized in the contemporary age, in the age of Nation-State, as it involved a whole of bureaucratic and legal measures which could not be found in ancient and medieval massacres.

The question of the Armenian massacres, therefore, is a very controversial one and is conditioned by the availability of documentary and archival sources that are necessary to clear up the issue. The intentionality of the operations could be proved only thanks to original documents and texts, while, unfortunately, the documents that have been collected until now do not show to have a necessary level of authenticity. While the Armenians argued that a lot of evidence was produced in front of the Turkish tribunals at the end of the war, their opponents replied that those documents were not accepted by the international Malta tribunals, which had to suspend their indictments because of the lack of any serious evidence.³⁰

The anti-genocide supporters underlined the general conditions of the empire, which were very critical and caused many casualties in all the different ethnic groups. Another point which is much discussed is the theory of provocation, according to which the Turks only reacted to the continuous attacks of the Armenian revolutionaries and acted primarily to defend their country and its strategic military needs during the war. Also the amounts of victims changed from author to author and varied from the reductive estimate of Halaçoğlu, which could sound as ridiculous (less than 100,000) to the excessive number of two million suggested by Karajian.³¹

The confrontation between the two opposite thesis could not avoid concentrating on the material executors of the massacres, who were mostly bands of armed Kurds, bandits and criminals who were released from prisons and sometimes recruited among the ranks of the police.

In absence of a clear evidence about the manifest order of eliminating Armenian communities –the documents that were mentioned by the Armenians were often discussed and criticized– an important feature to take into consideration was the interpretation and the evaluation of the connivance of local authorities. In the majority of cases, the latter participated or tolerated the violence against the Armenians and so they were the first to be charged. But the question lay on their effective response with a general policy which was directed by the government and implemented by the local authorities. All these points –and many more– have been fully analysed and debated by historiography, which is divided

more or less into two opposite factions confronting on the compatibility of the genocide category in the case of Armenian massacres.

On the side of the pro-Armenian historiography a special attention should be given to V. N Dadrian's works, whose conclusions were shared by many other authors such as V. Yeghiayan and R. Melson. On the other side, a more prudent approach was showed by Guenter Lewy, who tried to find a balance between the two visions, and by Turkish and foreign authors who were clearly in disagreement with the thesis of genocide, such as McCarthy, Lewis or L.R.Sonyel, who spoke about a "Greco-Armenian conspiracy".³²

The matter has been discussed even in the last few years and has been connected with the Turkish candidature for entering the European Union, as many saw in the Turkish refusal to talk about genocide –and in Turkish laws concerning the attacks against the national pride– an insurmountable obstacle to the country's acceptance of European democratic values.³³

Notwithstanding the different political and historical positions to be found behind the two visions of the 1915-1918 massacres, some points could be taken for granted without any further discussion: the massacres involved large portions of Armenian population all over the country; the ground for violence was prepared by many decades of hatred and brutality and by many legal dispositions during the war; the level and the historical antecedents of the massacres excluded the fact that the violence was just an occasional episode due to the difficult and tragic situation of the conflict.

Moreover, it is quite acceptable to talk at least about the objective responsibility of the state. If the operations of deportations needed policemen and soldiers to be accomplished, the state admitted among the ranks of gendarmerie, police and army all kind of bandits and thieves and so the violence against the Armenians could be easily foreseen. If the state decided to make its population march from one part to another of its territory, it was undisputed that the security of the migrants ought to rely on state authorities. Generally, it could be argued that if the massacres were perpetrated by a lot of different agents, the preliminary acts that made those massacres possible were created by the state with special provisions: the expulsion and disarmament of the Armenian soldiers, the creation of labour camps, the deportations...

Another historical truth which could not be forgotten is that the 1915-1918 massacres were perceived as brutal, unjust and inhuman directly by the witnesses and by the public opinion of those times and, as a consequence, could not be considered just the result of contemporary thought and morality. As a matter of fact, the whole affair had an

outstanding influence on the international decisions that were taken at the end of the war with regard to the protection of minorities. The echo of what had happened with the Armenians surely contributed to the acceleration of the definition of a whole of different measures for the protection of minorities; not only the special treaties of 1919 or the dispositions of the Treaty of Sèvres, but also the intervention of the League in the arrangement of the forced exchange of populations under the provisions of the Convention of Lausanne in 1923 were with no doubts carried out in a very particular climate.

The perception of international observers viewed the facts of Armenia as a powerful warning for the future, as it was underlined by professor Gilbert Murray at the second Assembly of the League, when he expressed his worries about the possible repetition of the abuses that had occurred in the past in the territories of the Ottoman Empire, “in remote places, where the civilization could not reach”.³⁴

The tragedy of the Armenians was to remind international diplomacy of the risks of nationalism and of a radical interpretation of self-determination, thus, conditioning all the interwar period. The massacres were the symbol of the brutality of WWI and the failure of international tribunals, which manifested the international impotence *vis a vis* the terrifying attitudes of the governments. At the same time, the postwar tribunals could be interpreted as an antecedent of the Nuremberg trials and, similarly, the *Aghet* was interpreted by the dominant opinion as the dangerous precedent of Nazi *Shoah*. This connection could not be considered just a speculation but it could be proved by the words that many attributed to Hitler himself, who was accused of rhetorically asking: “Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?”³⁵

Notes

¹ R.G.Hovanissian, *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*. New York, St.Martin's Press, 1997; G.A. Bournoutian, *A History of the Armenian People*, 2 vols., Costa Mesa, California, 1994; G.A. Bournoutian, *Eastern Armenia in the Last Decades of Persian Rule, 1807–1828: A Political and Socioeconomic Study of the Khanate of Erevan on the Eve of the Russian Conquest*, Malibu, California, Undena, 1982; M.Chahin, *The Kingdom of Armenia*. Reprint: Dorset Press, New York, 1991; K.Aslan, *Armenia and the Armenians from the Earliest Times until the Great War*, New York: Macmillan, 1920; B.Braude-B.Lewis, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society* (2 vols.) New York, Holmes and Meier, 1982.

² During the last years, the matter has been treated several times by Italian historiography, A.Biagini, *Storia della Turchia contemporanea*, Milano, 1998;

G.Motta (a cura di), *I turchi il Mediterraneo e l'Europa*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 1998; M.Jacov, *L'Europa tra conquiste ottomane e leghe sante*, Roma, 2001.

³ The news were reported by the correspondent of the “New York Times”, who talked about confusion and disorder and stated that everything was going in a bad way. *Scenes In Serbia. Military, Political, And Social Manufacturing War Intelligence*, in “New York Times, August 07, 1876, p.1. The Serbs were regarded as “brave people” who were subjected to “Mussulman oppression”. Also in Bulgaria, the insurrection was “increasing in intensity. The people are in a great state of excitement”, *The Turkish Rebellion*, in “Sheffield Daily Telegraph”, May 13, 1876.

⁴ A. Tamborra, *L'Europa centro-orientale nei secoli XIX-XX (1800-1920)*, Milano 1971, p. 350. The conditions of Armenians and other minorities in the Ottoman Empire were regulated through the *Millet*. It was a form of organization and legal status arising from the submission of followers of other monotheistic religions to the authority of Islam. Thanks to the payment of taxes as the *cizye* and the *haraç* – and other obligations as wearing different clothes- Christians and Jews could exercise freely their creed, being subjected to the legal authority of their religious chiefs. I.Ortayli, *Ottoman Studies*, Istanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayinlari, Istanbul 2007, pp. 15-22. For the socio-economic conditions of Christians under Ottoman rule, W.S. Vucinich, *The Nature of Balkan Society under Ottoman Rule*, in “Slavic Review”, Vol. 21, No. 4 (Dec., 1962), pp. 597-616.

⁵ This approach has been pursued by one of the first Turkish author who handled this topic and openly analysed the genocide of the Armenians. Taner Akçam was also obliged to exile after a condemnation in 1976, just because of his studies. T. Akçam, *Nazionalismo turco e genocidio armeno. Dall'Impero ottomano alla repubblica*, Milano 2005, pp. 47-48.

⁶ This argument was shared by Turkish and western historiography and by authors like William Langer, *Diplomacy of Imperialism*, New York, 1956; J.McCarthy-C.McCarthy, *Death and Exile: The Ethnic Cleansing of Ottoman Muslims, 1821-1922*, Princeton, 1995; L.Nalbandian, *The Armenian Revolutionary Movement: The Development of Armenian Political Parties Through the Nineteenth Century*, Berkeley, 1963; A.Ter Minassian, *Nationalism and Socialism in the Armenian Revolutionary Movement*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, Zoryan Institute, 1984.

⁷ “It is too soon to know with certainty the details of the massacre at Sassun. It is doubtless true that the number of persons massacred was placed in the first reports too high, but on the other hand the denial of the Turkish Government that there has been any such massacre and the statement that the atrocities claimed to have been committed were perpetrated by Armenian brigands, are on their face false and ridiculous”. *The Armenian Massacres*, in “New York Times”, December 06, 1894. “Nearly the whole of Van has been burnt to the ground”, *Van Burnt to the Ground*, in “Sheffield Daily Telegraph”, June 28, 1896.

⁸ A correspondent of “The Daily News” at Tabriz, Persia, in a dispatch dated August 6 reported about the attacks of two Armenian bands helping the leader Antranik, while Turks and Kurds “attacked and destroyed the villages of Outchkilissa, Koomlouboujak, Gougan, Karabazar, and Sayto, butchering men and