APRIL 24 AND TURKISH WORRIES

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Category: Opinions

Doğu Ergil, Today's Zaman, 27 January 2015

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Differences in opinion and historiography that subsequently ensued have shaped the psyches of both nations. For Armenians, the fatal measures of the Ottoman government against them have ended in the destruction of the Armenian presence in Anatolia. They were left bereft of a homeland and a history. Families were destroyed either by extermination or deportation. Children were separated from their families. Those who remained had to convert and change their ethnic identities.

The remaining Armenians hid themselves within other collective identities (Sunni Muslim, Kurdish or Alevi). Altogether, this havoc was named Medz Yeghern, or the "Great Calamity."

Armenians believe this painful past is further rendered unbearable because the Turks have not acknowledged what happened 100 years ago and instead have systematically denied any responsibility. They could have at least condemned the government of the time and those who took part in the execution of orders that put an end to the presence of Armenians in Anatolia. Their expectations were never satisfied formally.

World War I descended on the Ottoman Empire as an impoverished polity fighting to hold onto its disintegrating periphery composed of conquered lands and peoples. The choice of the Young Turk leaders to participate in the war was not out of expected spectacular triumphs, but was aimed at preserving what was left of the empire with the help and support of the shining German war machine and its imperial ambitions in the East.

The Russians and the British were obstacles to Germany's expansion toward the East. Rising Turkish nationalism idealized an all-Turkish union with Turkic peoples of Asia (the Turan utopia). This made removing Russia as an obstacle all the more important.

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While imposing an air-tight news ban on the disaster in the eastern front, Enver Paşa and his accomplices wanted to cover up their flop by accusing the Armenians of siding with the enemy and engaging in fifth-column activities. The rest was a human disaster.

Halil Paşa, the uncle of Enver Paşa and the man in charge of Ottoman forces in Persia, is on record saying, “The Armenian nation, which I had tried to annihilate to the last member of it, because it tried to erase my country … in the most horrible and painful days of my homeland …” This became the official view of Turkey and later generations have been greatly affected by it.

While Turkish officials acknowledge that many Armenians died during World War I, they present this misfortune as part of a wider war and say massacres were committed by both sides.

The argument is as follows: The campaign of Gallipoli in 1915 coincides with the time of the Armenian debacle in Anatolia. Faced with the Western onslaught, both the Ottoman Turks and the Armenians suffered the dire consequences of war.

Some commentators call this strategy “comparing and/or racing pain.” In accordance with this strategy, the government is organizing an ostentatious commemoration of the Gallipoli campaign on the same day of the accepted date of the Armenian Genocide (April 24).

What is odd is that there are two important dates in the aforementioned battle: March 18 is the day

of the naval battle when the passage of the Allied fleet was aborted. The other is the landing of ANZAC forces on the peninsula on the April 25, 1915.

Starting the commemorations on April 24 is a totally arbitrary move to associate Armenian losses with that of the whole country. The focus of attention is to be put on the fallen soldiers, among whom there were Armenians.

The invitation of Armenian President Serzh Sarksyan to Çanakkale on the same day he is expected to pay homage to the victims of Medz Yeghern at the Armenian Genocide Memorial in Yerevan may reflect an amateurish evasion of empathy with a suffering nation.