

# EFFACING ARMENIAN TOPONYMS

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✘ Toponyms: Turkification of the Toponyms in the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of  
Turkey" (Ararat Centre, February 2010, Armenia)--Editor.*

Toponyms represent persistent linguistic facts, which have major historical and political significance. The rulers of the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey realized the strategic importance of toponyms and carried out consistent policies towards their distortion and appropriation. Aiming to assimilate the toponyms of the newly conquered territories the Ottoman authorities translated them into Turkish from their original languages or transformed the local dialectal place-names through contamination to make them sound Turkish. Another method of appropriation was the etymological misinterpretation of the toponyms. A widespread method was also renaming the place-names altogether.

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Besides being linguistically stable phenomena, toponyms are valuable bearers of historical information. As such they can have an effect on current ethno-political conflicts, if applied with the aim of distorting and manipulating the historical evidence. The Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey devised and implemented consistent policies to falsify the origins and appropriate, through various methods Armenian toponyms.

1. The Turkish tribes who settled in Armenia in the 11th-15<sup>th</sup> centuries and later the Ottoman authorities changed original Armenian place-names in several ways. First, they translated place-

name meanings into Turkish such as Dantsout (place with a lot of pear trees) into Armoudlou, Aghpyurashen (a village of springs) into Kyankendi, and Garmrig (meaning "red" in Armenian) into Kezelja. Dzaghgatsor (ravine of flowers) into Darachichek, etc .

2. Some Armenian toponyms, which had already been transformed somewhat from their original shape under the influence of local dialects, were transformed to sound like a word with Turkic roots and pronunciation, thus utilizing the principle of contamination. Thus Armdic ("roots" in Armenian) was turned into Armoudi, Odzounkhach (a cross+snake) to Ouzounhach, Gyoudopaghat (a name which goes back to Latin "curator palatii," which was given to Armenian governors by the Byzantine emperors) to Gyurbaghdi, Karhatavan (settlement where stone is cut) to Karadivan, Jeghopourkents (place with a lot of walnut trees) to Chopurgens, etc.

3. A widely-spread method of distortion was to give names to old settlements in an attempt but bury their ethnic affiliation in oblivion. Thus, the famous Armenian monastery Varakavank was renamed Yedikiliseh (seven churches in Turkish) and Holy Echmidadzin was transformed into Ouchkiliseh (three churches).

4. Giving Turkish etymological explanations to the Armenian toponyms. Such faulty experiments were carried out, in particular, by Evliya Celebi, Ottoman historian of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, whose interpretations have often served as basis for modern Turkish scholars. In his *Book of Travels* (*Seyahatname*), the old Armenian place-name Paypert or Papert (which through dialectical and foreign lexical influences was pronounced Baybourd) is etymologically explained as "bay" (Turkish title) + yourd (settlement in Turkish). In fact, the name included two ancient Armenian components "Pay +Pert, which respectively mean a den or an impregnable shelter and a stronghold or a fortress.

Celebi went further to "reveal" that the original Armenian river name of Jorokh is a distorted form of the Turkish Joui-rouh, which according to him means "river of the soul". "Jorokh" originates in the Armenian verb "tsorel"- "tsorogh" (flowing) in which the initial "ts" has been transformed to "j" through sound interchange, a phenomenon particular to the Armenian language, as in "tsanatsel>janachel, and tshkani>jkhni. Celebi also links the name of the town Zarishat (built by the Armenian royal dynasty of Orontids-Yervantian (570 BC to 200 BC). He derives the town name of "Akn" from the name of Byzantine princess "Egin". However, "Akn" is an Armenian word meaning "eye", "spring" and "pit". In the place name of "Pertek, which is the deformation of the original "Perdak" (a small fortress), Celebi tried to find the Mongolian equivalent for the word "eagle".

The "corrections" introduced by Celebi were by no means innocent etymological verbiages, but pursued far-reaching purposes of establishing the Turkishness of the newly occupied territories. Celebi was a state official, who participated in Ottoman expansionist invasions. His etymological explanations had clear political motives.

Around the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Turkish authorities decided not only to distort or change the names of Armenian provinces, regions and villages, but to eliminate altogether the name Armenia as

well. This policy was pursued especially after the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78, when the Armenian Question was included in the agenda of international diplomacy.

The government of Sultan Abdul Hamid II substituted the name Armenia with the factitious terms of Kurdistan or Anatolia. Starting from 1880 the name Armenia was forbidden to be used in official documents. The Sublime Porte wanted to make everyone believe that the Armenian Question did not exist: if there was no Armenia, then there was no Armenian Question.

The Ottoman policy was continued by the Young Turks. Thus, on Jan. 5, 1916, Enver Pasha, the Minister of War, sent a decree to the Turkish military-political authorities demanding that all place-names of Armenian, Greek, Bulgarian and other non-Muslim origins in the Ottoman Empire be transformed into Turkish.

Inspired by Enver's decree, military officer Huseyin Avni (Alpaslan) Bey, the author of several articles about the Turkish language and culture, wrote: "If we want to be the owner of our country, then we should turn even the name of smallest village into Turkish and not leave its Armenian, Greek or Arabic variants. Only in this way can we paint our country with its colors."

The process of "nationalization" of toponyms was continued by the Kemalists. Starting in 1923 Western Armenia was renamed "Eastern Anatolia". After the Kurdish rebellion in 1925, 1927 and 1936, the authorities started renaming the Kurdish and Zaza settlements as well. For example, in 1935 Dersim became Tunceli. .

"Specialized Organization for Renaming of Toponyms", initiated in 1957, renamed 653 settlements in Erzurum, 169 in Adana, 366 in Erzincan (Yerznka), 224 in Adyman, 70 in Moughla, 88 in Afion, 70 in Eskishehir, 297 in Moush, 374 in Aghre (Ararat), 279 in Gaziantep, 24 in Nevshehir, 99 in Amasia, 167 in Giresoun (Gerasoun), 647 in Nigdeh, 193 in Ankara, 343 in Gyumushkhaneh, 134 in Ordou, 168 in Antlaya, 128 in Hakkari, 105 in Rizeh, 101 in Ardvin, 117 in Hatay (Alexandretta-Istkenderun), 117 in Sakaria, 69 in Ayden, 185 in Sparta, 110 in Balekesir, 112 in Ichel, 392 in Siirt (Sghrt), 32 in Bilejik, 21 in Istanbul, 59 in Sinop, 247 in Bingyol (Pyouragn), 38 in Izmir (Smyrna), 406 in Sivas (Sepastia), 236 in Bitlis, 398 in Kars (Gars), 19 in Tekirdagh, 182 in Bolu, 295 in Kastamonu, 245 in Tokat (Eudokia), 49 in Bourdour, 8 in Kayseri (Cesaria), 390 in Trabizond, 136 in Bursa, 35 in Krklarel, 273 in Dersim, 53 in Chanakkaleh, 39 in Kershehir, 389 in Shanli Ourfa (Urfa, Yetesia), 76 in Chandere, 26 in Kojalyeli, 47 in Oushal, 555 in Chorum, 217 in Malatya, 156 in Zongouldak, 20 in Edirne, 647 in Mardin, 555 in Diarbekir, 83 in Manisa, 383 in Elazegh (Kharpert) and 105 in Kahraman Marash.

After research work on 75,000 toponyms, the "specialized Organization" changed 28,000 names, among which 12,000 were village names.

The Turkish authorities realize that Armenian toponyms are the product of a civilization spanning several millennia and are vivid witnesses of the indigenous presence of Armenian in Western Armenia. The extermination of the native population, however, did not stop with the Armenian Genocide: it was followed by the destruction of Armenian historical and cultural heritage, including

the Armenian toponyms. Falsification of toponyms has been and remains an important constituent part of Turkish policies. Toponyms are not only linguistic facts, but also accurate and objective historical evidence. The ancient Armenian place-names are strong and firm linguistic evidence, which reveal the truth about the true native owners of the Armenian Highland. This is why the protection, maintenance and restoration of Armenian toponyms have invaluable strategic significance today.

