HOW TOPONYMS CHANGED IN TURKEY

Posted on July 14, 2011 by Keghart



Category: Opinions

Orhan Kemal Cengiz, Today's Zaman, 14 July 2011
On Wednesday I quoted from Sevan Nişanyan's latest report on the changed names of places in the republican era in Turkey (Hayali Coğrafyalar: Cumhuriyet Döneminde Türkiye de Değiştirilen Yeradları) that indicates more than 15,000 names that were Armenian, Greek, Jewish, Kurdish, Arabic and so on have been changed.

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I also wrote that everything began in 1916 with the decree issued by Enver Paşa immediately after the massacres of non-Muslims took place.
Let's read the rest of the story from the report:

"A radical transformation began in the second half of the 1950s. As of this date, the making of things into Turkish was practically espoused as though it was a 'state policy,' which superseded the political powers. In 1957 the Changing of Foreign Names Commission was established … to determin the non-Turkish names of places and suggest new names.

"Efforts bore their first fruits immediately in the aftermath of the May 27, 1960 coup. During the four months that followed the coup, approximately 10,000 new village names were made official. Prior to 1965, almost one-third of all places in Turkey were changed. Roughly 12,000 villages, some of which had thousands of years of history, and 4,000 towns and districts, thousands of rivers, mountains and geographical structures met their new Turkish names as a project of the bureaucratic mindset.

"In an effort to erase the old names completely, very harsh policies were implemented. The printing of the former names, even in brackets, on maps, their entry into the country and their distribution was banned. The Maps General Command was established for the purpose of functioning as a map censorship committee under the auspices of the General Staff. All printing and sales of maps relied on permission from this committee. Publications that presented old names on a local scale were confiscated, with sometimes even simple plans being considered as maps.

"Simultaneous with the banning of old names were efforts to erase traces on Turkish land that was not Turkish or Muslim. Many Greek and Armenian churches that had been abandoned, in addition to cemeteries, were destroyed by certain military and civil commissions, whose natures are still not clear. The special status granted to Greeks on İmroz and Bozcaada islands through the Treaty of Lausanne was lifted, and the Greek population was moved. A good deal of the İstanbulite Greeks

were deported in 1964. The Armenian population that remained in the country was forced into internal exile in İstanbul or abroad following increased pressure after 1955 and 1956.

"The period of location name changing, which entered a lull after completing its active phase around 1965, showed signs of revival in the years that followed another coup -- that of Sept. 12, 1980. Old names that were used, however seldom, in formal transactions until 1980 were removed from circulation entirely following the military administration's determined interventions."

A counteractive movement

Voices that rejected the changing of location names in line with "national" politics were quite limited in the 1980s and the 1990s; however, in the 2000s, these voices began to influence the public agenda.

The first important signals indicating that the official policies vis-à-vis the changing of location names began in 2009. President Abdullah Gül, while addressing the people of the town of Güloymak on Aug. 8, 2009, used the Kurdish name of the town, "Norsin." Immediately afterwards, on Aug. 12, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan used the term, "Potamya'lıyız ezelden" (We are from Potamya since eternity), in reference to Rize's Güneysu town, his place of birth. These moves, which created a public buzz, brought to the public agenda the possibility of abandoning this taboo, which had been protected with great sensitivity for years, at the highest levels of political authority.

Around the end of the 1990s, many villages in Artvin were given highway signs that contained both their old and new names. And as of 2004, newly populated Syriac villages in Midyat and Nusaybin were granted signs in two languages.

It is known that the mindset that changed the names of old locations and erased their traces is also the same mindset that destroyed churches, memorials, graves, inscriptions, graveyards, houses and neighborhoods. These were conducted at the same time and most probably by the same groups.

The destruction of churches, etc., which was until recent years, considered a "national duty," or at least excused as such, is now accepted as a crime and in accordance with Law Number 2863 Clause 65/a, is punishable by two to five years in prison. Fifty years ago, historic monasteries and churches around Lake Van were destroyed systematically, with the church on Akdamar island escaping this destruction only by way of coincidence. Today, the church is being repaired with significant funding by the government.

A lack of reflection of this mental evolution that we are witnessing, where historic monuments are concerned vis-à-vis old location names, is saddening.

Quantitative results

"In the frame of changing location names in 20th century Turkey, 15,585 changes have been noted … The regions in which there have been the largest number of location name changes are the East

Black Sea region coastal strip and the provinces of the Southeast, which have a predominantly Kurdish population.

"It is known that the first of these two regions that most strongly experienced cultural and identity transformation, has better conformed to the process of "Turkification," -- perhaps due to having started the race earlier -- while the latter has been unable to conform."