A CENTURY OF INJUSTICE

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Category: Opinions

By Margarita Krtikashyan, Yerevan, 2 May 2025

When Mustafa Kemal Atatürk declared the birth of the Turkish Republic in 1923, it was presented as a radical departure from the Ottoman past. A secular, Western-oriented nation-state was said to have risen from the ashes of the empire. According to the official narrative, it would usher in modernity, progress, and national unity. However, beneath this modernist rhetoric lay a disturbing reality: the Turkish Republic was founded on the physical destruction and cultural erasure of its indigenous Christian peoples, especially Armenians, and on the systematic denial of the Armenian Genocide.

One hundred years later, under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), Turkey appears to be undergoing another transformation. Yet while Kemalism and Erdoğanism may seem ideologically opposed, they share a profound structural continuity. Both systems are anchored in state control over historical narratives, deep-rooted nationalism, and the exclusion, even demonization, of minorities. For Armenians, this is not a story of reform, but of uninterrupted injustice.

The foundations of the Turkish Republic were not laid in a historical vacuum. Between 1915 and 1923, the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire, along with Assyrians and Greeks, was subjected to extermination, forced deportation, and mass dispossession. Survivors were left stateless and voiceless. Rather than acknowledging these crimes, the Republic's founding elite institutionalized their denial and codified a national amnesia.

The Treaty of Lausanne (1923), which granted international recognition to the new Republic, excluded meaningful minority protections for Armenians, Assyrians, and Greeks outside Istanbul. The "new Turkey" adopted a civic-secular appearance, but in practice enforced a monoethnic, monoreligious identity: to be Turkish was to be Sunni Muslim. Reminders of Anatolia's pluralistic past were systematically removed from textbooks and official maps to public monuments and place names.

The Kemalist regime's motto, "Happy is the one who says, I am a Turk," became a national creed. But for Armenians, this happiness was predicated on their absence. Armenian churches stood empty or were converted into mosques or storage depots. Armenian schools, where allowed, operated under strict surveillance. The trauma of genocide was compounded by the enforced silence of a state that claimed to represent progress and modernity, while erasing those who once embodied the land's diversity.

When the AKP came to power in 2002, Erdoğan promised democratization and historical reckoning, partly in line with European Union accession requirements. For a brief moment, civil society in Turkey grew bolder. In 2005, a groundbreaking academic conference on the Armenian Genocide was held in Istanbul. Public intellectuals like Hrant Dink began speaking out with unprecedented courage.



But the 2007 assassination of Dink, carried out with the complicity of state-linked networks, marked a tragic turning point. The so-called "deep state" had not disappeared; it had merely adapted. Erdoğan's regime quickly revealed that it would not dismantle the Republic's foundational taboos but would instead reinforce them, now buttressed by religion and populist rhetoric.

Under Erdoğan, the Turkish state has embraced a neo-Ottoman, Islamic identity, one that glorifies the imperial past while vilifying its Christian subjects. The Armenian Genocide remains officially denied, and the prosecution of individuals who label it as such is still permitted under Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code. Turkish foreign policy from northern Syria to Nagorno-Karabakh reflects the same ethno-religious expansionism that animated the Ottoman policies of 1915.

In 2020, Erdoğan offered full political and military support to Azerbaijan's war against Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh, including the deployment of Syrian mercenaries and Turkish drones. This conflict was not only geopolitical but deeply symbolic, a modern-day extension of the unresolved

violence of the past. Ankara's framing of this intervention as a historical mission, encapsulated in the phrase "One nation, two states," served as a chilling reminder to Armenians that the mindset of 1915 endures.

While Kemalism relied on top-down secular nationalism, Erdoğanism fuses Islamic conservatism with historical revisionism. Despite their apparent ideological divergence, both operate within a rigid political framework that criminalizes memory and suppresses dissent. The denial of historical atrocities, most notably the Armenian Genocide, remains state policy, as school curricula continue to exclude references to it and legal penalties are imposed on those who defy the official narrative. Nation-building proceeds through selective historiography: whether through Atatürk's statues or Erdoğan's sermons, Turkey's national story is curated to emphasize heroism and innocence, while omitting or distorting the experiences of non-Muslim populations.

Minorities persist as second-class citizens in both symbolic and institutional terms. The continued closure of the Halki Seminary, state interference in Armenian community foundations, and the cultural erasure of Assyrian heritage sites exemplify this enduring legacy of exclusion. The transition from Kemalism to Erdoğanism is not a rupture, but a remodeling of authoritarian governance. The tools of repression remain intact; only the ideological symbols have changed.

For Armenians, the story of the Turkish Republic is not merely one of denial but of deliberate continuity. Both Kemalist and Erdoğanist regimes have built their legitimacy on the suppression of the truth of 1915. Until that truth is fully recognized, Turkey's transformation, no matter how modern, religious, or populist it appears, remains fundamentally incomplete.

As Turkey enters its second century, Armenians and other minorities continue to be excluded from the national narrative. Memory is punished, justice is deferred, and impunity is normalized. But the Armenian people do not seek vengeance they seek recognition. From the ruins of churches in Western Armenia to the families displaced from Artsakh, Armenians live with the consequences of a century of denial. True peace begins with truth. And until the Turkish state, regardless of who leads it, reckons honestly with its past, the wounds of 1915 will remain open.

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Comments

Aram – 2025-05-15 09:49:24
Well written article!!! Armenians will never achieve liberation unless they collaborate with anti-imperial forces operating in Turkey.

Bedros Kojian – 2025-05-12 18:18:16
A well written Article. Nikolai is partially right. The problem is Erdogan says something to "please the world and us" but he does the opposite. Proof: The last Artsakh war and the depopulation of Armenians from Artsakh. During the war Turkish generals took over the command, fired all Azerbaijani Soviet generals, provided all kinds of weapons, soldiers and mercenaries. Therefore, we shouldn't believe what he says, and first and foremost blame ourselves. We knew that all these were coming but we didn't do anything to prevent them. And instead of relying on ourselves and getting ready as much as we could, as in the past, we relied on our so-called ally, the Western world and yes also prayed and said God help us. Even though we very well knew all of these had repeatedly failed in the past. In summary: Unless we come to our senses, have a united front, we are doomed.

Noubar Serabian – 2025-05-12 06:50:48
Based on the very statements made by Turkish President Erdogan, modern Turkey is nothing but a continuation of The Ottoman Empire under a new form. "Secularism" is just the window dressing hiding the previously mentioned fact. On February 10, 2018, during a ceremony marking the centenary of the death of Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid II held at The Yildiz Palace in Istanbul, Sultan Erdogan proudly declared:"The Republic of Turkey, just like our previous states that are a continuation of one another, is also a continuation of the Ottomans...Of course, the borders have changed. Forms of government have changed... But the essence is the same, soul is the same, even many institutions are the same." Sultan Erdogan continued his diatribe against "bigoted" secular Western democracies, that often referred to Abdulhamid II as "The Red Sultan", by insisting that Abdulhamid II, who slaughtered more than 200,000 Armenians (Hamidian Massacres), was one of the "...most important, most visionary and most strategic minded" ruler that left indelible marks on the political landscape of Turkey for the last 150 years. Sultan Erdogan concluded his speech by adding the following statement: "Some people insistently try to start this country's history from 1923. Some unrelentingly try to break us from our roots and ancient values...We take pride in our history without making discrimination."



Nicolai (Sr.) Romashuk – 2025-05-12 05:06:15

To Margarita Krtikashian. During Erdogan's Presidency, the Armenian minority in Istanbul is openly commemorating the victims of the Armenian Genocide, President Erdogan is openly speaking out about the black pages of the Ottoman Empire and about the very painful sufferings of the Armenian people and the other minorities during the Ottoman Empire, may be this is a good opportunity for the so called leaders of the Armenian communities in the Diaspora to arrange an official meeting with President Erdogan, to thank him for being more open, more frank and more flexible about the gruesome past of the Ottoman Empire, about the real identity of the Young Turks and politely ask him for more concessions, having in mind, that any Turkish President who openly acknowledges the Armenian Genocide may end up like late Yitzhak Rabin.