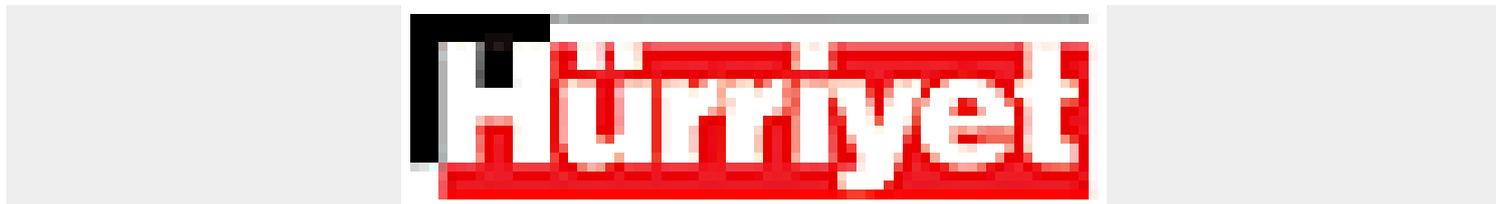


NOVEL INTERPRETATION OF WWI ARMENIAN DEPORTATIONS

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 Prof. Eberhard Demm, [Hürriyet](#), 30 November 2009

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This new name to genocide studies also inadvertently sabotages his questionable thesis by the frequent use of qualifiers--"many such cases", "in several places", "could", "probable", "sometimes", "some of the more radical Young Turks", "seemed very real", "a few isolated", "in some Turkish villages"...

Herr Demm unintentionally reveals that he is no scholar either: after all, in his own words he admits: "I had in vain through Turkish diplomatic channels, suggested such a step to the Turkish authorities, in order to ward off the forthcoming Armenian resolution by the German Bundestag, but the time was not yet ripe." Historian or Turkish diplomatic agent? You decide.

Finally, it will come as news to all historians of the period that Jemal Pasha, a member of the murderous Young Turk triumvirate, had opposed the deportations of Armenians and had saved hundreds of thousands of Armenians.

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During World War II, some 5 to 6 million Jews were murdered to destroy them as an ethnic group – the paradigm case of genocide. Now imagine for a moment that the Nazis had spared three categories of people: Jews willing to be baptized, pretty women in order to marry them and children to be brought up as “Aryans” in German families.

Would you still define this as genocide? Certainly not. Yet the German diplomats who compiled the most trustworthy and comprehensive documents about the Armenian deportations mentioned many such cases.

First of all, they reported that not only Armenians, but also members of other Christian groups – Nestorians, Jacobites, Chaldees, Catholic Syrians and Protestants, though no Orthodox – were deported as well. They also observed that during the deportations, “women disappeared in harems and children would grow up as Muslims.” In several places, Armenians could avoid deportation and probable death if they converted to Islam. Sometimes they were even forced to do so.

For instance, in Gemerek, near Sivas, 30 of the prettiest girls were rounded up and told: “Either you become Muslims or you die!” Although they refused to convert, the governor ordered that they be integrated into Turkish families. Such attitudes cannot be compared with the Shoah genocide, but are reminiscent more of medieval Christian crusades, when, for instance, in 1147, the abbot Bernard of Clairvaux, later sanctified by the Catholic Church, proclaimed for the war against the pagan Slavs “death or baptism.”

To avoid any misunderstanding: I do not deny nor excuse the tragedy that several hundreds of thousands of Armenians either died from starvation or were massacred during the deportations, mostly by Kurdish and Cherkess bandits and by the death squadrons of Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa, the secret police at the time, whose ranks were recruited from released convicts. I also do not deny that some of the more radical Young Turks intended an ethnic cleansing. But most of the murderers had different reasons: Apart from pure lust for slaughter and booty, they were motivated by a profound hate of Christians, reinforced by the first proclamation of modern jihad in November 1914 by Sultan Mehmed V and Essad Effendi, Sheikh-ul-Islam. To be sure, this had never been practiced in medieval jihad and traditional Islam, which tolerated Jews and Christians. Only the modern jihad has degenerated into indiscriminate killings of Christians and Muslims alike.

We must also not forget the political reason for the deportations. In spring 1915, the Ottoman Empire was in the deadly grip of a double menace – the Allied operation against the Dardanelles and the Russian invasion of eastern Anatolia – while German and Austrian support for Turkey was still blocked by neutral countries in the Balkans. At the same time, the threat of an Armenian “Fifth Column” seemed very real: A few isolated Armenian revolts had broken out, and tens of thousands of Turkish Armenians, led by the former Armenian deputy of the Ottoman parliament, Armen Karo, fought as traitors in the Russian army against their own country, with the special task to stir up revolts in eastern Anatolia.

Approximately one year ago, 200 Turkish intellectuals started the "özürdiliyoruz" internet campaign apologizing for the Armenian massacres, and more than 30,000 people have signed this declaration since. In spring 2006, I had in vain, through Turkish diplomatic channels, suggested such a step to the Turkish authorities, in order to ward off the forthcoming Armenian resolution by the German Bundestag, but the time was not yet ripe. However, I wonder now if the Armenian diaspora would be ready to offer an apology as well, because their people were not totally innocent either.

During the Russian offensive against Van, Armenians also committed atrocities in some Turkish villages, although on a much smaller scale. In the 1920s, they executed several Young Turks held responsible for the massacres, amongst them Ahmed Cemal Pasha, who, as governor of Syria, had been opposed to the deportations and had saved hundreds of thousands of Armenians in order to resettle them in Syria. In the 1970s and 1980s, they assassinated approximately 80 people and wounded 400, most of them innocent Turkish diplomats.

The international repercussions of the whole problem are sometimes underrated in Turkey. Most French politicians, partly under Armenian influence, are determined to block full Turkish membership in the European Union. In 2006, the French parliament even passed a law against the denial of an Armenian genocide. In light of a petition of protest signed by 800 historians from around the world, amongst them myself, harsh sanctions such as prison time were waived, but the law itself was not abrogated.

I sincerely hope that the new commission, set up according to the recent treaty between Turkey and Armenia, will reach an internationally acknowledged agreement on this hotly disputed question and pave the way for a definite reconciliation of Turks and Armenians.

Eberhard Demm is a retired history professor based in Germany. The views expressed here are the author's own.

