PLANNED SEIZURE OF ABANDONED ARMENIAN PROPERTIES

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By Alin Ozinian*, Today's Zaman, 13 October 2013 /

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While the 1915 issue is officially narrated as though it is an ethnic issue, suggesting that Armenians were deported because of treason due to the discussions over a "so-called genocide" or "nonsensical arguments" of the diaspora, this is actually the greatest economic victory of republican history.

The Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) announced a piece of legislation in 1915 without delay on how to deal with properties left behind by Armenians. Under this legislation, the government would set up commissions for abandoned properties in the regions where people were deported. The commissions would seal the abandoned houses and record the goods and properties left behind in the houses after being appraised. The remaining properties would be sold in auctions and the revenues would be transferred to the property bodies on behalf of the owners. Goods and items as well as sacred books in the churches would be identified and preserved on the spot.

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People who claimed that those who were murdered during this time owed them money were required to apply to the commissions within two months. This did not go as planned; the application

periods were reduced and some barriers were introduced. However, there was no need for barriers; those who were sent to exile in the Deir Zor deserts had no knowledge of this commission and they did not have the courage to look back. It was obvious at the beginning that no one would benefit from this legislation. Every decision and step was more painful than what was left behind. The murder of Armenian people, the deportation of those who remained, the mass killings en route, the destroyed families, the lost mothers, children and spouses… Now it was time to take care of the houses, gardens and fields of the Armenians who were no longer there.

A commission that wouldn't work

It was no secret that the commission would not work; some of the seized properties of Armenians were plundered by leading Turkish, Kurdish and Circassian figures; some of them were given to migrants from the Balkans. Some of these properties were even granted to persons and institutions for free so that they could emerge as Muslim-Turkish entrepreneurs. American envoy Henry Morgenthau, in his memoirs, said that Talat Paşa, one of the founders of the CUP, told him: "I wish you had applied to American insurance companies to get the full list of Armenian beneficiaries. Armenians are all dead now; they have no inheritors left to collect their monies. Their assets and properties are all left to the state."

Urfa Governor Nusret Bey, who was found guilty and then executed by a court-martial in 1921 because he ordered the massacres during the deportation, and Boğazlayan District Governor Kemal Bey, who was executed for the same reason, were declared national martyrs. Later, their families were given their share of the abandoned properties; this was one of the cruelest moments of the Armenian fate whose planning was never admitted to.

By a decree in 1927, real estate worth TL 20,000 abandoned by Armenians was transferred to family members of the Boğazlayan district governor. Properties were also given to the family of Urfa Governor Nusret Bey. The transfers were not limited to these: Dr. Bahattin Şakir, one of the cruelest leaders of the Special Organization (Teşkilatı Mahsusa), Diyarbakır Governor Dr. Reşid and Cemal Paşa, who was assassinated in Tbilisi, were also given properties. The punishment for massacring Armenians was mind-blowing. Hasan Cemal, the grandson of Cemal Paşa, in his book "1915: Armenian Genocide," refers to a mansion in Kurtuluş which was predominantly Armenian; the mansion was given to his family. In the same book, Cemal also refers to something that remained almost unknown. During the years he was working at the Cumhuriyet daily, he told the story of the Matosyan Printing House.

" Nadir Nadi had said: 'After the owner of Matosyan left the country, it was sold to my father. Atatürk rushed for the printing house. If you tried to bring in a machine from overseas, you would have needed a long time. However, there was now an idle machine…"

In fact, Yunus Nadi, the most favored and popular journalist of the young republic and one of the

close confidants of Atatürk, never paid a dime after taking over control of the printing house in 1924 for which he paid only a small amount. Subsequently, he even asked for a refund from the state because after the transfer of the machines, all were destroyed in a fire that erupted in the printing house; no trace of these properties was ever found. Nadi, who sold off all properties and items in the Matosyan Printing House, sold the books in the library to the Ministry of Education; these books were later transferred to the Gazi Education Institute. A news report published by the Tanin daily stated that the value of the Matosyan library alone was greater than the amount which Yunus Nadi paid for the Matosyan Printing House.

Disconnect people from the past

After the declaration of the republic, Turkey adopted the Latin alphabet. Unlike the conventional story, the alphabet revolution went beyond the goal of educating people and making them literate. In fact, this was an attempt to disconnect people from the past so that they would not have any link to their history.

The General Directorate of Land Registry and Cadastre in 2005 requested the digitalization of the deed records of the time and their storage in the digital medium. However, the National Security Council's body of war preparations noted that this was against national interests. As a result, this initiative was successfully aborted. In this way, the CUP was able to preserve its dark past.

The Matosyan Printing House, one of the most important printing houses of the Ottoman era, was transformed into the premises of the Cumhuriyet daily, which served as the watchdog of the regime, while one of the houses of the Kasapyan family was seized and later converted to the Çankaya presidential palace. In short, the newly established republican regime was based on the suffering of Armenians, their loss as well as their rights and properties.

In the aftermath of the law on abandoned properties which turned into a process of seizure, Armenian assets, the main basis of the republican regime, were Turkified along with Greek and Jewish properties. The seizure of the foundation properties was the last move in 1974. The traces of Armenian presence in these lands were almost wiped out after 100 years but some steps were recently taken despite problems with the Law on Foundations. The pro-CUP figures and structure are, for the first time, being defeated by these steps and measures.

**Alin Ozinian is an independent analyst.*