REGARDING DERSIM: WHAT ABOUT 1915?

Posted on November 24, 2011 by Keghart

TODAY'S ZAMAN

Category: Opinions

Orhan Kemal Cengiz, Today's Zaman, 24 November 2011
There is a question I have heard countless times from Westerners and other foreign diplomats visiting Turkey: "Why is it so difficult for Turks to discuss the Armenian situation?"

Some would query in a more sophisticated manner: "All nation states have histories marked with a variety of wrongdoings; why are the Turks still unable to talk about this topic, despite all the time that has passed?" And really, why is it that we are unable to talk about this?

Orhan Kemal Cengiz, Today's Zaman, 24 November 2011
There is a question I have heard countless times from Westerners and other foreign diplomats visiting Turkey: "Why is it so difficult for Turks to discuss the Armenian situation?"

Some would query in a more sophisticated manner: "All nation states have histories marked with a variety of wrongdoings; why are the Turks still unable to talk about this topic, despite all the time that has passed?" And really, why is it that we are unable to talk about this?

This is a question about which I have spent much time thinking. America, France, England, the Netherlands and other countries all carried out their "massacres," not only in the lands they occupied, but at other locations as well. As for us, we killed our neighbors. For those people who came to North America, the Native Americans seemed very "primitive" and alien people. To the British, Indians were a people who lived all the way over on the other side of the world. But for us, the Armenians were our next door neighbors. I believe it is for this that the massacre of the Armenians has left much deeper scars on our society than the massacres carried out by the Europeans and Americans.
Another factor that prevents us from discussing this issue is the fact that "modern Turkey" and the "Turkish identity" are founded upon a sort of "exclusiveness." Those who founded Turkey actually defined Turks as those who were not the non-Muslims. And there are even more painful factors, some of which have been pointed out by Taner Akçam and other writers. Some of those who played active roles in the massacres of the Armenians were also part of the founding cadres of the Turkish Republic. Thus, facing up to the past also means that we may lose our founding "heroes," and have them turned into a series of "murderers" to be embarrassed about instead.

It is now clear that we in Turkey have constructed an identity on top of this whole denial mechanism. Looking at this situation from this perspective, many things suddenly become clear.

The Çanakkale War was a very painful time in history for Turkey. It was a war that saw us bury tens of thousands of the nation's youth. Despite the pain that Turkey experienced at this time, we can tolerate monuments to the Anzacs (New Zealand or Australian soldiers who tried to invade Turkish

lands) that stand on our soil, as well as the descendents of these soldiers who come to Turkey every year to have "sunrise services" in commemoration of the Anzacs. So why is it that while we manage to pull this all off successfully, we are unable to shed a single tear for our Armenian neighbors, or build a single monument in their memory? When people face up to their pasts, and reckon with what has happened, they contribute to the evolution of their societies. But when we deny what has happened, mistakes from the past become greater than just those mistakes, they actually turn into a part of the society's identity.

These days, the Turkish agenda is dominated by another missed opportunity for us to face up to the past. There is an open debate in the Turkish press at this point over documents that indicate that Atatürk and his military comrades gave the orders for the massacres in Dersim themselves. We may be talking about the Dersim massacre for some time to come. This is because the ruling party thinks that a certain political path in this country is responsible for Dersim, and that the "mud" that surrounds it will never splatter onto them. But this same government does not wish to discuss the events of 1915. They are unable to approach 1915 in the same manner. When the truth of the matter is that in fact Dersim is nothing other than a repetition of the same sort of "problem solving" mentality that we saw at work in 1915.

At the time when the Dersim massacre took place, the Republican People's Party (CHP) was in power. If the CHP is actually able to face up to Dersim, there will be more to come. There is the "İzmir fire," the "İzmir assassination," the "İstiklal Courts," and many other events which our official history retellings have managed to skew. Of course, because the CHP was the "state founding" party its list of events to face up to is the longest. But as the people begin to face up to the past in Turkey, no doubt there are factions of society and political parties, which will encounter embarrassing and painful incidents from the past. The "ülkücüler" or "idealist" factions have never faced up to any of the many massacres that mark their pasts. Devout Muslims have never been able to face the fact that they were used by the deep state as forceps when it came to events such as the Sivas massacres, the killing of Alevis, and so on. The left refuses to look at its violence-filled past. And we in this country continue to live amongst unburied bodies and mourning periods that were never held. Will these debates, sparked by the Dersim topic, be a turning point for Turkey? Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has apologized for the Dersim massacre, and this is of course a very important development, but can we really speak of a genuine facing up to the past if we never touch on what happened in 1915, and simply cherry pick certain events from our history to focus on?