

# SHERLOCK HOLMES OF WORDS

*Posted on January 27, 2020 by Keghart*



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By **Jirair Tutunjian**, Toronto, 26 January 2020

As soon as they conquered Asia Minor, the Ottomans launched a campaign to Turkify Armenian, Greek, Kurdish, Assyrian, and Arab place names. But five centuries later, when the so-called Young Turks came to power, the job was far from completed. Thus in a new effort to "homogenize" the country, Enver Pasha sent (Dec. 23, 1915) a directive to the authorities in the province of Trabzon regarding the wholesale substitution of toponyms. The directive said: "It has been decided to convert into Turkish all names of provinces, *sancaks*, towns, villages, mountains, rivers...etc., all names in Ottoman realms that are currently derived from Armenian, Greek, and Bulgarian, in short, from the languages of non-Muslims. I ask your assistance in realizing this objective in order to swiftly take advantage of this opportune time." After the war, the Ataturk's Republic of Turkey continued the campaign. The job of appropriating what belongs to non-Turks is not finished.

Turkish-Armenian scholar Sevan Nisanyan, who has dedicated most of his career to determine the origin of Turkish words, is also world-authority on the six-hundred-year Turkish campaign to erase traces of non-Turkic place names.

Nisanyan, who speaks twelve languages and has written twenty book, talked about his twin obsessions on Jan. 23 to an audience of more than one-hundred people at the Magaros Artinian Hall of the Holy Trinity Armenian Church in Toronto. The event was organized by the Bolsahay Cultural Association of Toronto. Writer-activist Raffi Bedrossian introduced Nisanyan.

With a dozen maps, Nisanyan showed the concentration of Armenian, Greek, Kurdish, Assyrian, Arabic, Circassian, Alevi, Georgian, and Azeri place names. He pointed out that a concentration of place names of an ethnic group in an area doesn't necessarily mean there are a large number of people from that ethnic

group who still live there. Nisanyan's maps cited the existence of 2,800 Armenian and 2,100 Greek place names.

Among the twenty books he has written is the "The Wrong Republic" which exposed the untrue stories and foundational myths the Republic of Turkey and its founder Ataturk. The Istanbul-born intellectual-polymath is also the author of "Etymological dictionary of Turkish" which is popularly known as "The 'Nisanyan Dictionary' and is, by far, the most popular book on the subject. It contains the origins of 15,000 "Turkish" words. Talking about the huge number of Persian and Arabic words in Turkish, he said the Arabic language is the "kitchen of the Turkish language". Another of his celebrated books is "Index Anatolicus" which unearthed the roots of 15,000 place names in Turkey. The 900-page book traces the Arabic, Armenian, Assyrian, Greek, and Kurdish... words in Turkish. Yet another book—to be published soon—is "The Country that forgot its Name". The 1,800-page tome lists 56,000 "Turkish" place names and roots. It took the author eleven years to compile the massive book which, like most of his other books, can be read through Google.

Nisanyan has had a checkered career. While popular among Turkish readers, intellectuals, and human rights activists, he has been a thorn on the side of the government, nationalists, and fundamentalists. He has been jailed a number of times for his unacceptable-to-the-authorities opinions. The last time he was jailed was for making controversial remarks about Prophet Mohammad. He escaped from prison in a boat and landed on the island of Samos, Greece where he sought political asylum. He now lives on the island with his wife.

While his subject is etymology, journalist-researcher Nisanyan's work has an undeniable political dimension: by revealing the non-Turkic names of places and the roots of thousands of Turkish words borrowed from other peoples Nisanyan puts the spotlight on Turkey's theft of other peoples' lands and culture.

The historian-linguist revealed an important fact which few Armenians are aware of. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup>

century, when a million Circassians were exiled by Russia, the majority of the Circassians settled in Turkey. Because of their martial tradition and loyalty, some Circassians were settled near Istanbul to protect the government in case of public unrest. However, the majority of the Circassians were settled on lands south of the Black sea. The settlements, which started on the Black Sea shores, went south vertically almost slicing Asia Minor. East of the Circassian settlements were the Armenian lands. Researcher Nisanyan speculated that by building the almost one-million strong Circassian urban "wall", the Ottoman government was preparing to lose Armenia. East of the settlements were to be recognized as Armenian.

Turkey's biggest challenge is its campaign of homogenization, said Nisanyan. The 80-million-country which has about 30 minorities is challenged daily by the ambition to turkify all ethnic groups. Nisanyan cited some of minorities such as the 600,000 Abdals, the one-million Georgians, the pagan Qarapapaq, Daghle, Yoruk, Bosniacs, Crimean Tatars, Abkhazians, Laz...and seventeen million Kurds.

What's Nisanyan's next project? He is researching a book about Turkish names. He estimates there are 100 million names. How many are truly Turkish? Nisanyan will surely tell us.

