THE HIDDEN HISTORY OF GEZI PARK

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By **Vicken Cheterian**, Le Monde Diplomatique, 2 July 2013

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History is a sensitive question in Turkey, even controversial, and it has done much to forget its own history. So it's surprising to see such a fierce struggle now being waged in its name. Amid the host of media reports, documentaries etc, only a very few recalled that the park had a history. The Prime Minister could have remembered, for example, that the architect of the original barracks built in 1806 was Krikor Balian, an

Armenian belonging to a famous family of architects who were in the service of the Sultans.To mention the architect of the old artillery barrack that Erdogan is aiming to re-construct is not a secondary issue. It is the part of Turkish and Ottoman history that modern Turkish politicians have invested enormous efforts to erase and forget: the participation of religious minorities, such as Greeks, Assyrians, Jews, but especially Armenians, in the country's cultural, economic and political life.

More important than the architect though is the memory of a former Armenian cemetery left to oblivion. The place in which Gezi Park stands, where the Turkish Prime Minister now wants to build a shopping mall and a mosque, was once an Armenian cemetery. In 1551, following an epidemic, the land was given to the Armenian Church by Sultan Suleyman. It was later enlarged and walled. In 1837 Surp Haop (Saint James) Armenian Hospital was constructed next to it, and continues to function. On the ground of the cemetery a church, Saint Gregory the Illuminator, was also built. And between 1919 and 1922 a monument dedicated to the Armenian victims of 1915 was erected. The cemetery was confiscated in 1930, on the pretext that the Armenian Church did not have a property title for the cemetery. The Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul, Mesrob Naroyan, attempted to reclaim the cemetery through the courts, arguing that Turkish law permitted ownership after fifteen years of uncontested occupation. But the court supported the government decision, and imposed a heavy

fine on the Church.

The government allowed only two weeks to remove the graves. Some were taken to the Sisli Armenian cemetery, most were left behind. The cemetery was then taken over by the authorities, which sold off the tombstones. Some of the remaining marble stones were later used to build the staircases and fountain of Gezi Park while the confiscated land was sold to private businesses -- the Turkish radio company TRT offices, and luxury hotels such as the Divan Hotel, Hyatt, and Hilton.

No one expected the small, environmentalist protest that started to protect the 600 trees of Gezi Park to become a nation-wide protest against the policies of Erdogan. “The movement started as environmental issue and for the protection of cultural heritage. The reason it grew was because of police violence,” said Sevil Turan, the co-spokesperson of the Turkish Greens. The way the movement started was unbelievable, Turan said. “I did not imagine so many people would join the protest movement. People came because they were so angry with the government, but at the same time they were so calm, there was no violence.”

“You captured our graveyard, but you can’t capture our park!” A youth movement called Nor Zartonk (Armenian for “new awakening”) raised this slogan. Sayat Tekir, its spokesperson, said that “from the first day we were at Gezi Park.”

This movement resembles the mobilization that followed the assassination of Hrant Dink, bringing together people from all horizons. Dink was a Turkish-Armenian journalist and chief-editor of bilingual weekly Agos, who was assassinated in Istanbul in 2007. Over a hundred thousand people came out on the streets for his funeral.

The Gezi Park mobilization was equally diverse: various Turkish political trends (a militant wrapped in the red Turkish flag walked hand-in-hand with another dressed in a flag with the image of Abdullah Ocalan). Leftists and nationalists, Turks and Kurds, environmentalists and anti-capitalists, all came together to oppose what they saw as increasing authoritarianism of the new Turkish strongman.

Nor Zartonk started as an email discussion forum back in 2004, made up of Turkish Armenians. But people remained fearful of taking political action, said Tekir, because of the traditional fear Turkish Armenians have lived in since 1915. “The assassination of Hrant Dink was the motor that pushed us to action. We organized conferences and discussions on the Armenian question, minorities in Turkey, relations with the European Union, etc., but also took part in demonstrations. They were part of the mobilization against the closing down of the Emek movie theatre where, like Gezi Park, municipal authorities wanted to build a shopping centre. Like Gezi, Emek has a secret story: It was confiscated from its Jewish owners during the second world war.

On the second week of the latest demonstrations, a group of anti-racism activists wanted to erect a monument at Gezi Park referring to the 1919 monument there dedicated to the memory of the victims of the Armenian genocide. They also wanted to name one of the streets adjacent to the park “Hrant Dink Caddesi.” They carried banners on which it was written: “Burdayiz Ahparig!” -- we are

here, brother!

Tekir said: “Until recently, the Armenian community in Turkey were frightened and closed in upon themselves, the result of a series of massacres and repression that started in the late Ottoman period and continued under the Republic. We want to ask for our rights, to claim a democratic society.”

Erdogan’s answer to the “Occupy Gezi” movement came in his usual defiant manner, unmoved by the thousands of citizens demonstrating against his projects in the face of police repression. “A mosque will be built in Taksim,” he said, then added that “he did not have to receive permission from the main opposition leader or a ‘few marauders’ for the projects.” After returning from a tour in North Africa, the Prime Minister was even harsher in his announcements: “These protests must end immediately. No power but Allah can stop Turkey’s rise. The police are doing their duty. These protests, which have turned into vandalism and utter lawlessness must end immediately.”

Sevil Turan said: The “AKP has become so strong, it sees there is no political alternative. Erdogan wants to leave behind him a monument on Takism Square, build a new, conservative culture. The Prime Minister remained silent that this was an old Armenian cemetery.”

For Turan, Gezi Park has introduced a new political culture: “It was an experience of direct democracy.” Tekir agrees: “Those who entered the park, and those who went out of it weren’t the same people anymore. Gezi became a laboratory for political formation.”

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