

THE SILVER BELT

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George Bowater, [GRANTA](#) Magazine, 2006

This is an abridged extract from "We Have No Minorities" by George Bowater (GRANTA, Summer 2006). Bowater is the pseudonym of award-winning British journalist and author Christopher de Bellaigue who spent several years in Turkey and wrote "Rebel Land: Unraveling the Riddle of History in a Turkish Town". The town was Varto, an Armenian settlement near Mush. While stationed in Turkey, de Bellaigue visited Armenia and wrote the extended version of the below article for the British GRANTA magazine--Editor.



On that day in October, I happened to be in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia. Armenia is a small and ruggedly beautiful country, the eastern limb of what many Armenians wistfully refer to as "Greater Armenia"--a much bigger ancestral homeland that takes up a lot of Eastern Turkey. From Yerevan's Genocide Memorial, overlooking the city, you get a superb view of Mount Ararat, which has an important place in Armenian's literature and mythology, but which lies across the Turkish border. In 1993, the Turks closed the border in protest at Armenia's annexation of an Armenian-majority part of Azerbaijan, which borders eastern Armenia, during a war that was marked by ethnic cleansing on both sides. Few of the non-official Armenians I met seemed inclined to distinguish between the inhabitants of Turkey and Azerbaijan. In their eyes, all are ethnic Turks who can be expected to manifest generic traits of treachery, fanaticism and cruelty. "You have read *Karamazov*?" I was asked on more than one occasion. "Dostoevsky understood the Turk."

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Azerbaijan, which borders eastern Armenia, during a war that was marked by ethnic cleansing on both sides. Few of the non-official Armenians I met seemed inclined to distinguish between the inhabitants of Turkey and Azerbaijan. In their eyes, all are ethnic Turks who can be expected to manifest generic traits of treachery, fanaticism and cruelty. "You have read *Karamazov*?" I was asked on more than one occasion. "Dostoevsky understood the Turk."

One afternoon I was invited for tea by a philologist and his family. The philologist's wife had baked a delicious apricot-cake, of which I had several slices. While I ate, he told me that, for much of the Soviet era, the massacres of 1915 had been a taboo subject. The Communists had been wary of anything that might fuel ethnic nationalism. He also spoke of 'national shame'--a traumatized reticence of the kind that one might associate with a victim of rape. There had been poets, he went on, who touched on the national tragedy, but a more general expression of interest came only in the 1960s. Young Armenians started pressing their grandparents, survivors of the deportations, to relate their experiences. The Communists allowed the Genocide Memorial to be built. In the 1970s and 1980s (though my host did not mention this) illegal Armenian groups in various countries honored the dead by assassinating dozens of Turkish diplomats and members of their families.

During the week I spent in Yerevan, I got to know a courteous architect called Armen. During the 1970s and 1980s, when he was a young man, Armen spent many months travelling surreptitious around eastern Turkey, taking photographs and recording physical evidence of the former Armenian presence--mostly churches, graveyards and ornate carved stoned called *khachkars*. Armen and his companion, a Turkish-speaking European were arrested several time; among the Kurds they often met with hostility. Occasionally, they came across Armenians, or the children of Armenians, who had converted to Islam in order to save their own lives. The children of these people tended to marry each other; the Kurds, Armen said, refused to marry converts.

It is several years since Armen was last in Turkey; younger men have taken over the detective work. Their findings have been gathered in a multimedia archive in Yerevan. From this, it is clear that, slowly but surely, all evidence for the Armenians' settlement of eastern Anatolia is disappearing. Here, the stone wall of a church is incorporated into a new house; there, a graveyard is ripped up and ploughed over. Armen told me of an eleventh-century Armenian church that he had seen before and after it was used for target practice by Turkish gunners.

Armen was such an engaging companion that it was unsettling to be reminded, as I occasionally was, that he was driven by a resilient hatred. One late afternoon, sitting in a room at the archive, I remarked that some Armenians I had met in Yerevan believed that relations between Armenia and Turkey should be allowed to normalize, provided the Turks apologized for the events of 1915. Armen's face darkened. "They are fools," he said. "How do you think we will exchange one and a half million murdered ancestors for an apology? That's our land the Turks are sitting on."

We sat in silence. Outside, in Marshal Baghramian Avenue, municipal buses were driving people

home. Armen brought in coffee. As we drank, I mentioned some villages in Mush that I had visited with Celal. Armen nodded; he had visited the same villages. As a matter of fact, he went on, he remembered an interesting incident that had happened in one of them.

"It must be over twenty years ago. My friend and I were driving through, and we stopped for a glass of tea in a teahouse.

"As soon as we entered the teahouse, the chatter died and everyone looked at us. We must have been the only non-Kurds. You know--those faces, those moustaches. We sat down on stools and ordered tea. We drank quickly because the atmosphere was hardly congenial, but as soon as we had finished that first glass, they brought another.

"I had been looking furtively around, and my attention had been drawn to something. There was a big Kurdish fellow sitting there; he was wearing a belt, and it glinted like silver. When they brought us our second tea, the serving boy pointed at the man and said that he'd sent it over to us. Then, before we knew it, the man had brought up his stool and was sitting next to us."

Armen paused. The office was dark and silent; everyone had gone home. He finished his coffee and went on.

"This fellow had seen me looking at him but he thought I was interested in the revolver he was carrying. He whacked it down on the table so I could have a look. I spoke to him about the calibre and where it was made and so forth, and my stock rose because I know a bit about firearms. Everyone in the teahouse had gathered round to hear what we were saying. The place was an enormous cloud of cigarette smoke. But I was interested in his silver belt.

There was more tea and more cigarettes and my friend kept looking at his watch and saying to me, 'We should get going. We don't want to be on the road after dark.' I kept having to shush him and say, 'No! There's something I have to do here.'

"Eventually, I summoned up the courage to ask to see the man's belt. He took it off and handed it over. It was composed of embossed detachable sections and had leather on the back. It was inscribed in Armenian and there was a date on the back. I was sweating and trembling, but, in the end, I managed to buy the belt from the Kurd."

Armen fell silent. He had become a silhouette in front of the window. After a few moments, I said, 'Presumably only rich men could have afforded a silver belt.'

"He became animated. 'Not men! Men didn't wear such belts! These belts were given to Armenian girls when they got married. They were meant to last their whole married life; that's why they were made up of removable sections. During pregnancy, they added sections. After giving birth, when they were getting slim again, they took the sections away.'"

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