THE URGENT DIRECTIVE

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Editorial, 25 August 2013

A few years ago an urgent directive was dispatched from the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Turkish diplomats around the globe. While the message was sent to all Turkish diplomats, the key targets were those stationed in Europe and in North America.

To dispense with the bureaucratese, in plain English the ministry ordered its diplomats to dig up—in the regions they served--for anything, anyone, any incident, any place related to Turks or to Turkey. The rationale was simple: Turkey, and its predecessor Ottoman Empire, have had for centuries, "bad press" in the Western world. As recently as a few decades ago, Italian mothers would threaten their misbehaving children that the terrible "Turci" would come and get them. "Turk", in English slang, means a brutal person. According to the 'Maledicta' scholarly journal (Winter 1979), Turk also means pederast and sexual degenerate. And to say "fights like a Turk" means to fight savagely. The head of the Klux Klan is called the Grand Turk. Then there are all the stories of lewd harems, executioner-eunuchs, kidnapped white women held in seraglios, fratricidal despots, and tales of people tossed into the Bosporus at the whim of a corrupt, obese sultan.

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It was time to erase the negative image of Turkey. Turkish diplomats were expected to do yeoman duty to eliminate centuries of "bad press" and invent a brave new Turkey—progressive, democratic, friendly, civilized… and to tell Westerners that Turks have contributed to the culture and societies of the Western world.

Which brings us to Ali Riza Gunay, Turkish consul general of Toronto. Seemingly an eager-beaver, he took Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's order to heart and set out to find anything Turkic to

please his bosses in Ankara. And then… miraculously a great "Turkish" story fell into his well-tailored lap: a Brantford, Ontario man, who for decades had been researching the history of the city, had discovered that 100 Brantford "Turks" had been interned by the Canadian government during the First World War and that perhaps some of the 16 ""Muslims" buried in a corner plot of the city's Mount Hope Cemetery were Turks.

Here was a lost "Turkish" jewel of a story right in the heart of Southern Ontario. A veritable Turkish delight. Here was a story which could get Mr. Gunay many brownie points in Ankara. He could become a new rising star in the Turkish diplomatic firmament. And even more important than establishing a historic Turkish presence in Canada, the discovery would offer Ankara a God-sent opportunity to punish Canada for recognizing the Genocide of Armenians. Through the "mistreatment" of the "Turkish" internees Ankara could portray Canada as racist, intolerant, cruel; undemocratic… that should teach Canada a lesson for nosing into affairs which are not Ottawa's business.

The ambitious diplomat enthusiastically jumped into action. He quickly met the Brantford researcher; he wooed the mayor; he networked with interested parties in Brantford. His goal? To persuade them the "Turks" who had been interned during WWI, and the "Turks" who had been buried at the Mount Hope Cemetery, deserved a monument.

The news soon reached the shores of the Bosporus. "Sabah" and "Bugan" newspapers reported on the "heart-wrenching tragedy of the Turkish prisoners…"; TV documentaries were planned; a Turkish scholar wrote her thesis on the topic. Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Bekir Bozdag was scheduled to lead the monument unveiling ceremonies during July.

And then disaster hit.

News leaked out, thanks mostly to the nosey Alevi and Armenian media, that the internees were NOT Turks; that they were not mistreated; that the internment was a federal "job-creation project" at a time of widespread unemployment, poverty, and even hunger; that there was no evidence the people buried in the Brantford cemetery were Turks; that four-fifths of the internees returned to Turkey after the war because of the false promises of the Ataturk government that the bad old days of Alevi repression were over. And the biggest arrowhead? The Canadian government said there were no Turkish internees.

But why let bad news get in the way of a juicy—albeit false--story? Undeterred by the facts, the Turkish diplomat plunged deeper into his fabrication. He visited the cemetery; near the gravestones of the "Turks" he got himself photographed by a Toronto Turkish news outlet, looking pensive. He continued networking with the mayor and the nascent "lobby group" he had helped create in Brantford. The unveiling of the monument would proceed as planned. The Turkish blood-red flag would flutter at the occasion.

Bur sadly for the up-and-coming star of the Turkish diplomatic galaxy, people started to pay

attention to the Alevi and Armenian media. The evidence that the internees were not Turks, that the people buried in the cemetery were most likely Alevis was undisputable. The Alevi-Armenian version had traction.

But the situation further deteriorated for the stressed consul general: the researcher, who had discovered the "Turkish" story three-four years ago, stated publicly that he was no longer convinced the internees were Turks. He said they were probably Alevi Kurds. The mayor was getting edgy because of the controversy--Alevi and Armenian delegations were "pestering" him. By late August the monument had been demoted to a plaque. The unveiling, scheduled for July, still had not taken place.

Meanwhile, the Alevis and the Armenians continued their efforts to put "finis" to the whole misbegotten Turkish farce. Addressing the Erdogan government, the "Yeni Hayat" Alevi newspaper in Toronto published a hard-hitting article titled "Leave Our Dead Alone!" The Alevis and the Armenians said they wanted the 33 ft. by 33 ft. area of the cemetery, where Alevis—and NOT Turks--are buried, named Alevi plot.

So much for the Turkish Plot.

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