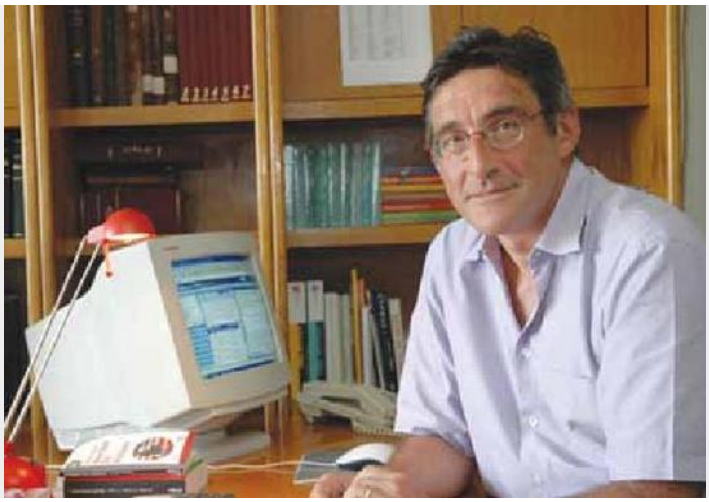
"THIS CONDUCT WAS A CRIME AGAINST HUMANITY:" AN EVALUATION OF THE INITIATIVE TO APOLOGIZE TO THE ARMENIANS

Posted on June 6, 2009 by keghart.com



Category: Opinions

By Ahmet Insel, Birikim, 238, February 2009

Ahmet Insel, a professor of economics at l'Université de Galatasaray and Paris 1 Pantheon Sorbonne University, is one of the initiators of the apology campaign (along with Baskin Oran, Cengiz Aktar and Ali Bayramoglu). This article was published in the Turkish leftist monthly Birikim February 2009 and was translated by Aysegül Ünaldi in May 2009. It is available in Turkish at the journal's website: http://www.birikimdergisi.com/birikim/.

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"My conscience does not accept the insensitivity showed to, and the denial of, the Great Catastrophe that Ottoman Armenians were subjected to in 1915. I reject this injustice and for my share, empathize with the feelings and pain of my Armenian brothers and sisters. I apologize to them."

As of January 21, 2009, 28,000 citizens of the Republic of Turkey had signed this statement. Joining in this entirely personal undertaking, listening to the voice of their own consciences, assessing the situation for themselves, persons have signed and continue to sign this "apology" text. This signature campaign constitutes an important step in the attempts, which have been in existence for over ten years, to confront the Armenian question. The apology initiative addresses not only the great human tragedy caused by the mass deportation and persecution of the Ottoman Armenians in 1915, but more than that, it addresses the collective reaction accumulated in response to the trivialization, even the denial and or inversion of this utmost serious event.

Before the signature campaign—thanks especially to Taner Akçam's pioneering writings and books, the studies of many historians questioning our recent history, perseverance of Belge Publications in translating and publishing into Turkish various studies on the Armenian question from foreign languages, presentations delivered at the conference at Bilgi University in 2005—an opposing voice that could countervail the official historiography's approach to the Armenian question, which has increasingly taken the form of a systematic denial, had begun to gain strength in Turkey. Many valuable studies undertaken in the last twenty five-thirty years on the subject of the formation and development of nationalism in Turkey have fed into this. Studies illustrating how being a minority in

Turkey means living in a constant state of anxiety as well as exclusion have proliferated and diversified in the last twenty years. A series of historic events that the average resident of Turkey had not hitherto heard of were given voice, their documents published and, even if restricted, debated. Certain manifestations of Turkish nationalism, which, from time to time, go beyond ordinary nationalism and turn into expressions of hatred or even murderous actions with blatant racist characteristics, have begun to be exposed in a bolder fashion.

Against this backdrop, on the publication of allegations regarding Sabiha Gökçen's Armenian origins in Agos newspaper, the death trap that had been set, worked irreversibly against Hrant Dink, and reached its aim on January 19, 2007. At the same time, however, a public reaction, not anticipated by those who set this death trap, erupted in Turkey. Those who thought that only a handful of people would mourn the death of an Armenian journalist and the incident would go by the wayside as "an isolated case due to grievous provocation" like the murder of priest Santoro, were this time mistaken. The massive crowd that gathered at Hrant's funeral and walked for kilometers behind his casket in Istanbul showed that some things had changed in Turkish society. Tens of thousands of men and women of all ages, who shouted the words "We are all Hrant, we are all Armenian," who wore them as pins and carried them as banners came as quite a surprise to the fierce Turkish nationalists and racists. It was perhaps this development that altered the preset course of the Hrant Dink murder trial.

By the end of 2008 it is, in a nutshell, these developments that brought about the private apology initiative of the Turkish people, whose consciences do not accept the trivialization and the denial of the human tragedy that took place during the mass deportations a century ago and the crime against humanity that was thereby committed.

Surely everyone signed this statement based on his or her own conscientious assessment. Therefore, it would be accurate to say that there are as many motives for signing it as there are number of signatures. These motives, which could not be reduced to a general purpose, which are meaningful in their plurality and dissimilarity, and which complement each other in their differences, convey a need that increasingly makes its weight felt in Turkey. This is the need to face our history without having to yield to any taboo, ban or pressure. Those who get hung up on the apology part of the text and state that they are content with "sharing the pain" and therefore refrain from signing are in essence expressing the same need to confront . So do those who note that an apology is not the responsibility of individuals, but of the persons who are liable for this crime against humanity along with the state authorities who brought the ethnic cleansing to completion by means of a cultural cleansing.

The apology initiative, simultaneously and more explicitly, revealed in Turkey a very powerful fear as well as the hatred that feeds from this fear. Part of the opposition to the private apology initiative arose from not knowing past events or knowing them solely from the versions expressed in our official historiography. There is hope that, in time, the violent outbursts displayed by those people

may give way to a more cool-headed state of listening and understanding as the information sources diversify. Hopeless is the case of those who purposely try to incite a backlash in society against this initiative by distorting the text of the statement. Those who try and present a text that does not use the term 'genocide' as "recognizing and apologizing for genocide" and who accuse the signers of being traitors, are fulfilling their duties as the guardians-of-the-taboos with heart and soul.

Since the term "genocide" was coined in 1944, it could not have been used by those who lived through the deportations of 1915 and mass massacres that followed. They called it "tehcir" , or "kafile", or "kıyım" . Later on the term "Great Catastrophe" caught on. The term "Great Catastrophe" truly reflected, with all its weight, the virtually total obliteration of the Armenians who were one of the ancient constituents of Anatolia.

When the First World War ended with our disastrous defeat, there was a strong consensus among many Ottoman intellectuals, except for those implicated in the crimes, and fanatic Turkish nationalists, regarding the ethnic cleansing conducted by the Union and Progress government. The deportation was referred to as "*taktil-i nüfus,*" i.e. mass murder. **Field Marshal Izzet Fuat Pasha** said, "As there is no other way but to admit to the occurrence of the undeniable 'Unionist' acts against humanity, our most urgent duty today is to proclaim it as such honorably, nobly and unhesitatingly, as befitting the reputation of a great people ".

The situation was crystal clear for **Halide Edip** in 1918: "We slaughtered the innocent Armenian population… We tried to extinguish the Armenians through methods that belong to the medieval times". For many writers and journalists, "The Union and Progress gang destroyed the entire constituents ". **Historian Ahmet Refik** wrote the following on September 20, 1915 in Eskisehir, where he witnessed the deportations first hand:

"It was said that the most distressing tragedies occurred in Bursa and Ankara; houses were ransacked, hundreds of Armenian families were put into cars and hurled into streams. Many women went insane in the face of such awful murders. Houses of wealthy Armenians were bought, but the payments were recovered by fiat upon transfer of title. This conduct was a murder against humanity. No government, in any age, had brought about a murder this cruel."(i)

On October 1, 1918, **Ahmed Riza** stressed in the Senate that the Armenians were annihilated as an outcome of an official policy that was carried out by the hand of the state. **Minister of Internal Affairs Mustafa Arif** expressed on December 1918 that the leaders of the martial period had carried out the deportation activities "in a manner that exceeded even what the most sanguinary gangs are capable of", that they had "decided to exterminate the Armenians" and that they had "exterminated" them.

In short, it was, "a massacre that began under the title of deportation," a repugnant act "planned at Union and Progress headquarters with the intention of uprooting certain constituents, and executed by civil servants and some army officials along with some of the population". The charges were clear

in the indictment filed against the Union and Progress leaders at the Court of War Crimes: "mass murder, pillaging of money and goods, burning of buildings and bodies, burning of villages, rape, torture and shameless acts of cruelty." "Consequent massacre and extermination of a group of people and plundering of their property" was highlighted in the indictments, and it was expressed that what was expected of the court was "justice' in the name of the rights of the humanity."(ii)

The prevailing mood in Turkey between November 1918 and March 1919 was to recognize what had been done to the Armenians as "taktil" , to denounce these crimes and to demand the punishment of those who had committed them. "Crimes committed against the humanitarian code," "deportation and persecution" "murder and extermination," "crime against humanity." These and other similar phrases used by Muslim Ottoman politicians, by men of law and by journalists to define what had been done were tantamount in weight to the term "Great Catastrophe" used in the apology statement. While using such terms, Ottoman Muslims paid special attention not to implicate the Ottoman Empire, the Muslims or the Turkish nation and pointed to local leaders and the leaders of the Committee of Union and Progress along with the Special Organization as the main offenders.

However, owing to factors such as the execution of Bogazliyan district's governor Mehmed Kemal on April 1919, which was the first instance of execution of a state official who was both a Muslim and a Turk for murders committed against non-Muslims, the invasion of the shoreline between Izmir and Ayvalik and along the Cesme peninsula by the Greek Army on May 15, the turning of the Entente Powers into an invasion force and their use of the Armenian massacres as grounds for their plans to carve up Ottoman territory, the escalating nationalist sentiment began to repress the outcry against the perpetrators of the deportation. A general sense of victimization soon overtook Turkish society and overshadowed the demand for punishment. Despite this , Mustafa Kemal on April 20th 1920 was still characterizing what had been done during the deportation of Armenians as "fazahat," that is, shamelessness and ignominy.(iii) Nevertheless, six months later, on December 1920, the TBMM (Grand National Assembly of Turkey), presided over by Mustafa Kemal, not only allotted retirement pensions to the families of Mehmed Kemal and Mehmed Nusret, who were executed for the massacres against Armenians, but declared these two state officials "National Martyrs." In between these two dates, the Treaty of Sevres was signed on August 1920, which served to reinforce the Armenian question as a national taboo.(iv) Once Turkish national identity coalesced—essentially against non-Muslims and particularly against Armenians—the attitude of state leaders and opinion makers toward the Armenian question changed completely.

After 1921 attitudes critical of the deportations were rapidly expunged from the collective memory in Turkey. A long era of silence on this issue commenced. Demands for the recognition of the Armenian Genocide as well as assassinations by the ASALA of Turkish diplomats, and THY (Turkish Airlines) passengers, strengthened the negative perception of the Armenian question in Turkish society. Afterwards, with the surge of the new wave of nationalism in the last twenty years, the dominant attitude towards the human tragedy the Armenians were subjected to shifted from

trivializing it through construing what had occurred as mutual violence to denial. In fact, completely turning the hierarchy of responsibility upside down, it reached the point of alluding to a genocide that was occasionally carried out by Armenians against Turks, as was the case with the officially named Armenian Atrocities Monument that was erected by state verdict in Igdır. The number of the massacred Ottoman Armenians that was estimated by the Senate to be around 800 thousand was reduced to 300 thousand in 1980 by Kamuran Gürün, and in the early 2000s further diminished to 50,000 with the efforts of then-president of the Turkish Historical Society Yusuf Halaçoglu.

The insensitivity and denial alluded to in the apology statement and the injustices therein described are essentially directed at the circumstances outlined above. The conspiracy theorists, who have become classic in Turkey, immediately began to work as part of a campaign that was launched without even waiting for the statement to be available for signatures over the internet. Being the expert text interpreters they are, ex-ambassadors immediately recognized that 'genocide' was implied by the term 'Great Catastrophe' in the text and exposed it as such. They declared 'Great Catastrophe' as synonymous with 'Genocide'. However, a number of people who defined the deportation of the Armenians as genocide had not signed the statement precisely because it did not include the word "genocide." Others who believed it to be genocide signed the statement nonetheless, saying it is better than nothing. Similarly, there were those who did not hold back from signing due to the importance they ascribed to the launching of such a signature campaign itself, even though they thought such an apology should not be the responsibility of persons, but of the state.

Besides, it was not a crime in Turkey to claim that the Armenians were subjected to genocide. So there was no legal barrier against the explicit expression of it. At least, this was generally asserted to be the case by the very same ex-ambassadors abroad. Consequently, the misunderstanding what is read, or not understanding it at all, one of the significant characteristics taught by the Turkish education system, had shown its effect again, this time in the reading of "Great Catastrophe" as genocide. However, the situation needs to be evaluated differently when those whom we assume to understand what they read, come to this conclusion. What is at work here is a deliberate distortion, insinuation of ulterior motives, identification of the internal enemy and the designation of the axis of treachery. As a matter of fact, those who manufacture evidence and allege that a number of the signatories were paid by the EU or the Armenians rolled up their sleeves and got to work right away. Such statements roaming the Internet found their way to the media through journalists whose raison d'etre is to produce these kinds of false reports. Once again, the launch button for the "traitors and defectors among us nurtured by our enemies" campaign was pressed. There is an urgent need in Turkey for an analysis of the psychological motives behind the popularity of the "sell-out traitors" theme in nationalistic spheres, along with reasons why people believe and distribute, with exhilaration, such information, which any rational human being should instantly recognize to be false. Could this be, in addition to the perennial psyche of self-victimization and egocentric perception of events characteristic of the pre-adult phase, a case of "it takes one to know one"? We cannot

substantiate the above given the lack of such psychological analysis.

The common expectation of all those who launched this apology initiative, those who supported and signed it, those fewer than 10 signatories who later had to withdraw their names due to heavy societal pressure , and those who couldn't bring themselves to sign although they genuinely wanted to or because they were not in a position to do so, was obviously not that the issue would be solved with a single signature. The objective of the signature initiative was to open channels of communication, and to take the first necessary step in order to be able to commiserate . The apology, in a way, was made because of the lack of an apology by those who actually should apologize. People apologized because of their inability to forestall the expressions of denial, falsehood and hatred in Turkey, because they were powerless to render those to be the expressions of a fanatical minority. They continue to insist on the apology for they have a prime minister who declares: "they must have committed such a genocide to be apologizing. The Republic of Turkey does not have such a problem. That is to say, if there is such a crime, those who committed it can apologize. But not I, nor my country or my people have such a problem". They recognize that it is all the more pressing to apologize in the face of a "social democrat" party leader who says: "these intellectuals are having an outpouring of conscience. We are in a position to assess what or who is lurking behind them." Turkey's card-carrying racists and radical nationalists staged a reaction that is staged by all racists and radical nationalists of the world in similar situations. This, in a way, was natural. Apology, however, is a true necessity born out of embarrassment for the hand in glove opposition of the leaders of the two biggest political parties in contemporary Turkey to the private apology initiative.

The apology campaign revealed, in the context of yet another issue, that the authoritarian statist reflex continues to be extremely powerful in Turkey. The signature initiative was an initiative of a free people with no regard for any foreign policy development, nor any intention to intervene in such developments in any way. It paid heed to neither the Turkey-Armenia relations, nor the attempts of any state to recognize or not recognize the "Armenian Genocide." Thousands of people in Turkey had decided to utter, here and now, an uneasiness in their conscience. This apparently could not be tolerated by the authoritarian statist mentality. Only the state is to decide what to do, when and how. In fact, not even the state, but the guardians of the state are to decide. The apology initiative was undermining a monopoly in this respect, which the guardians of the state have always endeavored to hold on to. Besides, the fact that all the strata of the state hierarchy set their quarrels aside on this issue to form a more or less uniform opposition shows how the archaic authoritarian state reflex is alive and kicking.

It is too soon to say that the apology initiative has shattered a powerful taboo in Turkey. Nonetheless, it certainly rendered this taboo more visible, and therefore more questionable. That a number of Armenians in Europe and North America responded to the apology with gratitude, and that the initiative was welcomed in Armenia even though the text in Turkey did not mention the term

'genocide' shows that a different taboo has also become questionable among the other interlocutors of the Armenian question. In his famous words, which the high judiciary in Turkey insisted on misconstruing, despite all the expert opinions, and which earned him a prison sentence, Hrant Dink was pointing exactly to the importance of this mutual shattering of taboos.

Today, there are those who demand the expansion of the apology initiative to include all state-victimized segments . Also, there are those who demand a reciprocation of the apology, and assert the prerequisite that Armenians apologize to the Turks as well. The first request, which on the face of it sounds somewhat reasonable, conflates issues that are positioned today at very dissimilar levels. The actual designation of the first condition are the cruelties, discriminations, murders, pogroms, exiles and prohibitions Kurds have been subjected to. Today in Turkey, there is a struggle against such exclusions and oppressions within society. The main characteristic that renders the Kurdish question different from the Armenian question is that today, in Turkey, a solution to the Kurdish question through democratic means and the punishment of those who have committed crimes against the Kurds in the recent past and are still alive, is possible. Therefore, not just a demand for apology, but demands for solution and punishment ought to be on the agenda regarding the Kurdish question. However, what we have in the case of the Armenian question is a great destruction that is utterly irredeemable. Hence, apologizing is the first essential thing to do about the purposeful and nearly complete physical wiping out of one of Anatolia's ancient and significant peoples from the Anatolian geography, and the similarly vast and purposeful removal of the traces of their cultural existence, and the decades of silence regarding it.

On the other hand, demanding such a reciprocation of the apology attempts to equate and thus ascribe equal responsibility to massacres, cruelties, and exiles that happened in different times, places, and to different groups of people. There is a fundamental difference between the insurgency of Armenian gangs in Van and mass deportations aimed at the ethnic cleansing of, and causing the deaths of, as well as the plundering of the property of, all Armenian Ottoman citizens through a temporary legislation which was in clear violation of the constitution that was in force in May 1915. Just as a major difference can be found between the massacres that were carried later out by Armenian gangs joining the Russian invasion forces essentially to avenge the great carnage during the deportations, and a year and a half long Armenian deportation that was enacted through the use of the official state forces by a certain segment of the Ottoman civil and military officials, deputies of the Ottoman government and the party in power at the time, along with members of the secret organization that was run by it. The difference being that the perpetrators of the massacres were gangs on one side, and state agents on the other. To make a comparison between the local acts of violence by an illegal entity such as a gang towards the segments of the public deemed enemies and a state's execution of an ethnic cleansing operation against a certain segment on the grounds of distinctions of language, religion, ethnicity, is tantamount to putting the state in question on par with a gang, at best. In fact, this is mainly the thesis put forth by the non-Unionist Ottomans between 1918-1919: The Armenian massacres were the deeds of the Unionist gang and there is more to the

gang's crimes than that. They had also led the state to its demise!

Yet today, with the exception of those leaders who were hanged as a result of the Izmir assassination, the rest of the leaders of the Union and Progress "gang," chiefly Talat Pasha, are today national heroes. While there is no Enver Pasha Boulevard in big cities, as far as we know, there is a Talat Pasha Boulevard on one of the most important avenues in both Izmir and Ankara.(v) There is also the Talat Pasha Street in Bahcelievler/Istanbul. There is no need to even bring up the Talat Pasha Committee, but the tomb of Talat Pasha, whose remains were brought to Turkey in 1943 with Hitler's permission, is on the Hürriyet-i Ebediyye (Eternal Liberty) hill, next to the Martyrs of Liberty. The one and a half year period during which he decreed and rapidly implemented the deportation, with what could almost be called an idée fixe, this 'national hero' was primarily responsible for 972,000 Armenians out of a million and a half to "disappear from the records" according to the very tally charts he kept so diligently in his notebooks.(vi)

Most probably, the leaders of the Armenian gangs who carried out massacres against the Muslim community in Eastern Anatolia are also heroes today in Armenia. However, this seeming equivalence does not take away from the unique situation caused by the crimes committed against humanity by civil and military state officials like Governor of Trabzon Azmi Bey,(iii). **Army Commander Mehmet Vehip Pasha**, ex-Minister of Internal Affairs and later on Grand Vizier Talat Pasha, who were exercising their state authority. There are armed gangs that committed massacres on one side, whereas, on the other there are state officials who embarked on systematic ethnic cleansing and adamantly executed it in their entire geographic jurisdiction along with those whom they governed and manipulated, The mass murder of the Armenians that was planned, executed and overseen by the Union and Progress government is a severe crime against humanity that cannot even be justified as an unavoidable action the state took out of desperation during its fight for survival. It is not a war crime either, for it is not a crime committed by a warring army against the civilians of an enemy state. It is an ethnic cleansing operation by a state, implemented up to its final stage against men, women, elderly and children alike, on the basis of the religious/ethnic attributes of a group of its own citizens who had not shown any signs of insurgency or who were guilty of any crimes whatsoever.

Those who say that they did it to us as well, have to openly express what "them" and "us" has come to mean in this case. When they start to do so, the racist streak behind the "us" of those who cling to the reciprocation claim will further be revealed. In fact, it already has. Those who attack the private apology initiative with rancor and hatred today, reveal the racist essence that has been cloaked in nationalist discourse for decades. Those who viciously attack this apology initiative, evaluate it entirely through their own self-centric world instead of a universal humane and ethical norm, a moral sense of responsibility or a specific conscientious position. They feel the need to look for the involvement of external entities, and enemy forces, as well as material expectations of those behind this deed. Because they feel great discomfort out of the mobilization of citizens who talk and act on an issue to which they bear no direct relation, who do not look for any material benefits, who are not

involved in political games, and who take a humane stance on the grounds of universal principles instead of values that change with circumstances.

Those who joined in the apology initiative do not necessarily turn their faces towards Turkish Armenians, or Armenians who live in Armenia, or the diaspora, or towards the EU or the USA, but primarily towards Turkish society. And maybe this is what is most disturbing to racists, denialists, and those who do not want to give up on their stranglehold on raison d'etat. If they are really disturbed by it, it only goes to show that this apology initiative is advancing its objective.

(i) Ahmet Refik (Altınay), *İki Komite İki Kıtâl*, Kebikeç Yayınları, 1994 (ilk baskı, İstanbul, 1919).

(ii) For quotes except Ahmet Refik's, see "*Tehcir ve Taktil*" *Divan-ı Harb-i Örfi Zabıtları,* eds. Vahakn N. Dadrian ve Taner Akçam, Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, Aralık 2008. Statements of certain officials of the period as quoted in the book edited by Osman Selim Kocahanoğlu, *İttihat-Terakki'nin Sorgulanması ve Yargılanması* (Temel Yayınları, 1998).

(ii) *Atatürk'ün Söylev ve Demeçleri*, M.E.B. Yayını, c.1, 1945, s.49.

(iv) On the formation of the prevalent taboo on the Armenian question see Baskın Oran, "Son Tabu"nun kökenleri: Türkiye kamuoyunun Ermeni sorunundaki tarihsel-psikolojik tıkanışı", İmparatorluğun Çöküş Döneminde Osmanlı Ermenileri, 24-25 Eylül 2005, İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi.

(v) An entry from www.birikimdergisi.com on the Talat Pasha Boulevard says it all: "The shameful street sign, which every time I pass by, makes me wonder in embarrassment how an Armenian would feel if s/he were to see it. Later on I think to myself what we would have felt had there been a street in Sarajevo named Ulica Radovan Karadzic."

(vi) Murat Bardakçı, *Talât Paşa'nın Evrak-ı Metrûkesi*, Everest Yayınları, 2008.

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