TURKEY...PLUS ÇA CHANGE, PLUS C'EST LA MÊME...

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Tatul Sonentz-Papazian, Boston, 20 June 2011
Along the millennia that Armenia's history has covered, a few decades can easily pass unnoticed, nevertheless, even a random assessment of crucial times would stop us in our tracks, and make us ponder with feelings of awe, sorrow or admiration the significance of certain years, months or days, that punctuate our nation's recent history with specific stress. One such date worthy of reverence – and surely destined to remain so – is the 28th of May, 1918, a date of miraculous renewal, shortly after the darkest date of our modern history, the 24th of April, 1915 -- a date that marks the start of the first full-scale genocide of the 20th century, planned and perpetrated to erase Armenia from the face of the earth.

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Almost 20 years ago, another date was added to these two historic ones: Sept. 21, 1991, the day of the re-establishment of Armenia's short-lived independence with the declaration of the 3rd Republic of Armenia.
Three momentous dates, all interconnected over a relatively brief period of time, yet profoundly different in their portent and consequences.

The Genocide of 1915 was the disastrous aftermath of a reasonable appeal to the reckless leadership of a decaying empire, to allow the divided Armenian people to serve faithfully their respective sovereigns now at war with each other.

This reasonable yet unrealistic stance "cost" the Ottoman Armenians one-and-a-half million casualties and some three-quarters of Armenia and our ancestral lands.

Many prominent activists of the Ottoman Armenian leadership -- after a long and costly struggle to bring reforms to a physically and morally bankrupt empire -- euphoric over the advent of *"Hurriet"* and a new constitutional order, were now occupying seats in the new Ottoman parliament, comfortable in their newly acquired status as honorable legislators, seemingly unaware of the coming catastrophe and their own impending demise.

The next watershed was, to a large extent, the result of the unprecedented ferocity of the crime of Armenocide. A genocidal onslaught that – through denial and rejection -- continues to be implemented to this day in various forms, by the successive governments of Turkey to annex, once and for all, the western regions of Armenia by falsifying history, by forced assimilation of the native Armenian population and systematic destruction of all physical evidence of monuments in any form-- from *khachqars* to cathedrals -- that may attest to an Armenian presence in Eastern Anatolia.

The First Armenian Republic – rising in the early spring of 1918 from the sweat, guts and blood of three heroic battles waged by the survivors of a battered and decimated nation fighting against a ferociously determined foe -- was the re-manifestation of the cruelly extinguished embryonic aspirations in *Vaspurakan*, reborn on the plains of Ararat, under the shadow of the twin peaks of *Masis*, the sacred mountain of all Armenians.

The bitter truth is that if it hadn't been for the Great War and the Genocidal policies put into action in its murky shadow – if it hadn't been for the heroic defense of *Vaspurakan*, and the faith and confidence in one's destiny, acquired on the field of honor, in desperate battle against the superior forces of an imperial power, the Ottoman Armenians would – quite possibly -- have continued to pursue the long promised "reforms" and would have settled for a bearably secure life under the rule of the Ottomans and their European satraps. Independence, in those dark days, seemed so remote and unattainable.

Whether we accept it, or not, the main midwife of the painful delivery of our hard-earned independence was the *Metz Yeghern*, from whose smouldering ashes rose the revived springtime of our national sovereignty. It is not surprising, either, that after her defeats at *Sardarabad*, *Gharakilise*, and *Bash Abaran*, Turkey, in its rush to reach the oil fields of Baku -- changing tactics -- was the first to recognize the new-born Armenian state. And years later, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, in a repeat performance, Turkey was among the very first to recognize Armenia's resurgence as a sovereign state.

In its dreams of becoming the predominant power of the region, today, Turkey strives to re-establish its old Ottoman dominance over her neighbors, as vassal states-- chronic imperial dreams that Turkey still follows in its policies, craving dominance over the oil-rich Caucasus and the Middle East.

To refresh our memories of the astounding state of wartime politics that prevailed in the strategic and tactical contortions of the belligerents at the waning days of the Great War, it is worth to relate the following: While representatives of the new Armenian Republic, sent on a mission to Constantinople to request immediate assistance from the imperial government, to be able to feed and shelter a flood of refugees from the war zones, in Baku, Armenian volunteer fighters, along with a small battalion of British troops, were striving to stop Turkish-German forces from entering the city and occupying the oil fields.

While the British and allied news media were describing the last-ditch stand of the Armeno-British

troops, the War Cabinet of Great Britain, in secret session, in view of the spreading revolution in the Russian Empire -- and its unpredictable consequences -- passed a resolution to let the Turks occupy Baku -- since they deemed the Ottomans' defeat and surrender imminent – rather than let Baku remain in the hands of the Armenian and allied revolutionary forces, since they feared an eventual take-over by Bolshevik Russia.

Hardly aware of these goings-on, the fragmented Armenian leadership, with no united national agenda or focus, had set its hopes either on the countless promises of "Christian" Europe and the Allied powers, or on "godless" Russian Bolsheviks' "fraternal" protection. Thus, caught between heaven and hell, between a rock and a hard place, the young Armenian Republic agonized, as the new Kemalist forces, backed by both East and West, picked up the genocidal campaign against the Armenians where the Ottomans had left off.

The faith and passion of national emancipation – that from *Vaspurakan* to the plains of Ararat had made it possible to open the actual and legal roads to Armenian independence, towards the Treaty of Sevres and international recognition – in a maelstrom of opposing doctrines and cultures, had already started to drift away from its reliable ethnic sources,

An alienation, that on the eve of the formal adjudication of the *Wilsonian boundaries*, with the fall of the free Armenian Republic, would continue its destructive influence until 1965, until the watershed of the politicized 50th Commemoration of the Genocide, giving rise to almost two decades of united struggle marked by increasing commitment and militancy.

Up to the '60s, the prevailing Cold War had not only set the two superpowers and their allies against each other in a deadly competition, but also – in our reality – it had pushed the Diaspora and the Homeland to a continuous confrontation, to the detriment of the higher interests of the Armenian nation.

Until the detente started during the days of Khrushchev, reaching its peak with Gorbachov's "*glastnost*" movement, both Eastern and Western establishments maintained a ferociously imperialist confrontation, masked behind endless and misleading ideological slogans, in a greedy competition for the acquisition of global resources, seeking worldwide dominance at any cost.

This bi-polar era of world domination by two competing super powers, forced on the world by a contrived threat of mutual annihilation by huge arsenals of nuclear weapons, finally came to an end by the collapse of the Soviet Union.

As an inevitable consequence of the demise of the Communist Russian Empire, and the dismantling of its structure consisting of 15 interdependent republics, one more date-- Sept. 21-- the day of the re-emergence of Armenia's sovereignty was added to the calendar of the most outstanding dates of our recent history.

Here, we need to face the truth and admit, that on Sept. 21, 1991 Armenia declared independence

before being liberated, before it could cleanse itself from a foreign imposed "*nomenclatura*" – an establishment that for some 70 years had tried to distort our history and language, eradicate in bloody purges the clergy and non-conformist intellectuals alike, treating our forefathers' faith and traditions with contempt, and deny the very existence of the *Armenian Cause*, thus creating a deep chasm between the Homeland and the Diaspora-- between our past and our present.

Were it not for the blood shed in the heroic struggle for the liberation of Artsakh -- although jubilant for the long-awaited reestablishment of our nation's sovereignty in an independent state, we could hardly claim a valid reason for pride in the achievement of an independence, that – unlike the heroic battles that led to the declaration of independence on May 28, 1918 – historic events beyond our reach or control returned to us our sovereignty on Sept. 21, 1991, as 14 other former Soviet republics, including Russia, were going through an identical process, willingly or not.

As we look back with a critical eye, we realize, that -- given the present dismal situation-- it will take time for the relics of the old "nomenclatura" to relinquish power to a truly social democratic regime in Armenia, and for the debilitating exodus of the dispirited population to decrease, and cease altogether.

Years had passed from the days of the Ter Petrosyan administration's divisive and defeatist regime. Yet, fairly recently, our nation was faced with the challenge of foreign-inspired "Protocols" which threatened the very bases on which the entire structure of our "*Hai Tahd*" Case stands. It took collective action on the part of our Homeland and Diasporan groups and organizations to restrain the Sarkisian government from ratifying them in their present context.

In the meantime, it is sad to observe, that aside from the concentrated efforts for the international recognition of the Armenian Genocide, in essence, very little has changed in the dormant area of reparations and irredentism, except, perhaps, signs of newly emerging interest in the fate of the remnants of Armenians in Turkish-occupied Western Armenia.

Periodically, we must take stock of our status: Of around 9 million Armenians, hardly one-third resides today within the boundaries of the 3rd Republic, the majority of whom remains unemployed or in poverty. The remaining 6 million are Diasporans or live on foreign occupied Armenian lands, such as *Javakhq* and Western Armenia, whose numbers are gradually dwindling due to brutal policies of coercive assimilation leading to despair and exodus from ancestral lands. A process that UN protocols classify as forms of genocide.

While these populations are dwindling, large numbers from Armenia, *Javakhq*, Western Armenia and our Middle Eastern communities are ending up, among other regions, in Russia, Eastern and Western European countries, North and South America and Australia, increasing our numbers in the four corners of the Diaspora at the expense of our Homeland and our ancestral lands, making a mockery of a cherished Diasporan slogan of not too long ago: "*Tebi Yergir*..."

The panorama of consecutive upheavals across North Africa and the Middle East, that we are

witnessing today, is the delayed but direct result of the betrayal of the moral bases of Woodrow Wilson's "14 Points," conceived to create a just and open social order for the world that had just gone through the horrors of the Great War.

Drafted in the Wilsonian spirit, the Treaty of Sevres formulated solutions which, if followed, would have eliminated most of the festering problems that we see re-emerging today.

Unfortunately, surviving imperial and colonial interests interfered and the result was the shameful Treaty of Lausanne that redrafted the political aspect of the region, not to suit the legitimate interests of the peoples living there, but to accommodate the ambitions of colonial powers and oil cartels.

Although never implemented, the Sevres Treaty retains its legitimacy as an instrument drafted and signed by representatives of the Great Powers of the time and never abrogated by their successors.

Conclusions reached in that treaty and the solutions emerging from them are beginning to look not only possible after all these eventful decades full of crises, but also acceptable as permanent solutions to most problems that plague the region, in direct contradiction to the Ottoman-inspired Turkish dreams of neo-colonial hegemony over former provinces of a defunct empire.

That is why, along with other memorable dates, we should remember with pride and celebrate with joy the date of the signing of the Treaty of Sevres, August 10, 1920. Not as an unfulfilled promise, but as a great diplomatic victory for the Armenian nation, and an instrument of hope for all nations still waiting for the blessings of freedom and justice.