A CENTURY AGO, FRANCE LET DOWN THE ARMENIANS

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Category: Opinions

By Tigrane Yegavian, France, October 2021

It was a hundred years ago when France and Kemalist Turkey signed an agreement which finalized France's abandonment of Cilicia and with it the Armenian population who had placed their hopes on "The Eldest Daughter of the Church" -- France.

In 1921, France signed an agreement ending the Franco-Turkish war with the Grand Assembly of Turkey, an unrecognized authority, leaving Armenian of Cilicia at the mercy of Kemalist forces. This agreement made France the first Entente power to recognize the Mustafa Kemal government.

Deeply weakened by the losses of the First World War, France no longer had the human and financial resources to advance its ambition. She longed to rebuild a devastated France. When the war ended in 1918, the French were eager to have their soldiers back although blood still flowed in the Near and Middle East where insurrections and revolutionary struggles prolonged the war.

France mobilized in Syria and Turkey. As a result, it encountered difficulties in its mandate against Kemal in Cilicia and against King Faisal of Syria who had proclaimed himself king of Syria and had rejected the French Mandate.

Kemal launched a national drive against the "ambitions of the European powers and against the signing of the Treaty of Sèvres." He organized a national reconquest drive and gathered soldiers and weapons while he proclaimed, "Turkey for the Turks." This is how the Kemalist nationalist movement was born.

The French troops (comprised of Armenian legionaries and Algerian soldiers sensitive to Turkish ambitions) faced the Turkish Army in Cilicia. The Turks quickly gained the advantage. The Franco-Kemalist confrontation was becoming increasingly more costly, and Paris did not have the resources to engage in a sustained struggle against the Turks and the Syrians. Quai d'Orsay thus preferred to make a deal with Kemal.

Although in 1920 France and the Kemalists had signed an armistice, the agreement was not respected. In fact, the clashes had become more violent. Weakened by the WWI and fearing a renewal of the costly military operations in Cilicia, France chose to pursue a policy of reconciliation with Turkey.

The following year France decided to conduct direct talks with the Kemalists. One can appreciate the French argument that it didn't have the ability to confront two guerrilla armies in Cilicia and Syria. But wasn't this a convenient means for Paris to harm its erstwhile British ally/rival by getting close to the Kemalists?

While the French and the British were allies, they did not take the same position vis-à-vis the Kemalist nationalist movement. Paris was in a hurry to sign an armistice agreement with Turkey. In the spring of 1920 the British were ready to resume the war against the Turks but public opinion was

against it. The French were also against such action.

The Greeks alone embarked on a two-year war which had tragic consequences for Athens. Divergent interests among the Allies benefited the Kemalists. If the Franco-British agreement had been real, it would have supported Greece.

France made matters worse when it supplied arms and material free of charge to Turkey—the long-time foe of its Greek ally! London saw the Franco-Turkish agreement a stab in the back because it had been a separate peace. Indeed, in 1915 the British and the French had signed an agreement that prohibited either ally from entering into peace agreements without consulting the other.

For his part, French president of the council Aristide Briand was focused on domestic politics and on reparations from Germany. France showed itself to be tough and uncompromising negotiator with Germany when it imposed on it the "dictated peace" of the Treaty of Versailles, as well as heavy reparations. But at the same time it bowed to Kemalist Turkey, even when the balance of power was in its favor.

Aristide Briand sent Franklin Bouillon, former journalist, former deputy and former minister, to congratulate Kemal on his victory against the Greeks, who were still allies of France. France feared political instability in Turkey and saw such an outcome as a risk to France's financial interests. As a result, Kemal dared toy with Bouillon who conveniently happened to be a Turkophile. To forge an understanding with Kemal, Bouibon arrived in Ankara with a case of the cognac. It was well-known that Kemal had a weakness for alcohol.

The distinction between winners and losers in the Great War did not exist to members of the above delegation. They dealt with Kemal as an equal. Meanwhile, the negotiations were conducted in an opaque manner.

The Turks proposed to Aristide Briand to send Franklin Bouillon, knowing that the latter was already on their side. By accepting all Turkish demands without obtaining parallel fulfillment of French demands, Bouillon placed France in a position of weakness and deference, especially as the Kemalist leader was ascendant. France therefore clearly did not pursue a winning policy against the Turkish nationalist movement.

The winning country of the First World War which had the most powerful army in the world, did not protect its mandate, nor the populations who lived there, particularly the Armenians who suffered genocide and the loss of their three-millennia old homeland.

Without consulting her British ally, France signed the bilateral agreement with Turkey.

Finally, France legitimized an unrecognized government even though the latter was waging a nationalist war against French positions. Thus, the Angora accords between France and Turkey were dress rehearsals for the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne which was the diplomatic death knell of the Armenian Question.

The Angora accords and the Lausanne Treaty illustrated a policy of renunciation – that of France in 1921 and then that of the Allies in 1923.

The scope of the Angora agreement is little known, is decisive: it conferred legitimacy to a revolutionary government that was not recognized internationally. Note that it is on this government that modern Republic of Turkey is based on.

The few vague promises of economic benefits contained in the Angora Accord were never honored by Turkey. The privileged economic partnership with French companies promised by the Turks did not fully materialize. It was the Turks who were the big winners: they obtained the departure of French troops from Cilicia and the end of war.

Prisoners were immediately released and were granted amnesty.

France renounced the disarmament of populations and gangs, as well as the constitution of a Turkish police force assisted by French officers. France was also humiliated by the chauvinist and vengeful attitude of the Turks who attacked French interests (schools, hospitals, and French private property) throughout Turkish-occupied territory.

Within a year, the failure of the Angora Accord was evident to all parties.

Not content with ignoring the terms of its agreement with France, Turkey created difficulties for France in the Syrian Mandate. In Damascus, the Turks were trying to exacerbate public opinion with propaganda, encouraging Syrians to revolt.

Bouillon did not obtain any guarantee of protection for minorities that France had encouraged to seek refuge in Cilicia after the Armenian Genocide. For the French military which remained in Syria, which denounced this departure, it was the abandonment of the “comrades in arms” of these Armenian volunteers who had formed the Eastern Legion.

France and the Allies, however, had pledged in May 1915 to punish the perpetrators of the Genocide.

In 1920 and 1921, they once again had the mandate to protect Christian minorities, and yet these surviving populations found themselves delivered to the vindictiveness of their former executioners.

It was once again exodus or death that awaited them.

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- *This article is reprinted from Greek City Times with minor editing and consent of the author.*
- *Books authored by Tigrane Yegavian may be obtained through Amazon.com : Minorités d’Orient: Les oubliés de l’Histoire, Arménie: À l’ombre de la montagne sacrée, Mission, Disaporalogue, L’âme des peuples,Géopolitique de l’Arménie, etc..*
- *The author would like to acknowledge the impact of “Aurore Bruna, L’accord d’Angora de 1921, théâtre des relations franco-kémalistes et du destin de la Cilicie, Cerf, 2018.”*

- *France is known as the "The Eldest Daughter of the Church", because the Franks were the first Germanic Tribe to convert to Catholicism.*

Comments

Tsakoug – 2021-11-12 08:18:14
Let us never forget imperial interests that have forever altered Baku, Cilicia and other Armenian strongholds. https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khaspush

Paul Manoukian – 2021-11-10 09:50:41
First, I contest the article because it narrates history from the British point of view. It was the English who armed [King] Faisal and who also armed the Turks against the French. All the documents pertaining to this are in *Quand les Anglais livraient le Levant à l'État islamique, Corruption et Politique étrangère Britanniques* authored by French-Lebanese writer Lina Murr Nehme (Paperback – November 10, 2016). In there you will find the reason for the abandonment by the French. Second, while Clovis was Frank, the French are NOT Franks. The Franks were Germanic tribes who controlled France for a short period. The French are Gauls. After the Roman invasion, the country became Gallo-Roman. Hence, they are described as Gallic and the rooster is the French emblem because the Latin word "Gallo" refers to poultry. The affinity of the French and Gallic [Celtic] traits also comes from the fact that Galitia (land of the Celts) was a neighbour of Historic Armenia. Galatia was, more or less, where Ankara is now located. So, Turkey was a Celtic land until the fourth and third centuries BC.