

# ARMENIAN GENOCIDE AND EAST GERMANY

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*Born in Istanbul but now a longtime resident of Cologne, Germany, Sandy Zurikyan is a scholar with degrees in history, art history, and Hittitology. From 1996 to 2014 she was also cultural and art reporter for "AGOS" of Istanbul. Three years ago she was awarded the Nerses Shnorhali medal by Holy Echmiadzin. In a first in Armenian Genocide scholarship, she has written a thesis about East German views of the Armenian Genocide. Below is a summary of the thesis.—Editor.*

The Armenian Genocide is a loaded research subject in Germany. Various reasons have led to a resentment of the Genocide and a refusal to deal with it. The complicity of the Kaiserreich (Kaiser Wilhelm II's Germany) in the crime is a major reason. The Second World War and the division of Germany did not change this negative attitude. After the war, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG-West Germany) needed Turkey as a reliable trade partner and as a source of foreign labor. Hence the FRG did not want to reopen this closed chapter of history.

What about the situation in the German Democratic Republic (GDR)? Was socialist German historical scholarship, having acquired a radically different understanding of history, able to treat the Armenian Genocide differently than scholars in West Germany?

Historians have not focused exclusively on the GDR's treatment of the Armenian Genocide as a subject in its own right. Similarly, no research has been conducted into the GDR's public discourse surrounding the Genocide.

The Armenian Genocide did not suddenly occur from one day to the next, but went through a long incubation period and was portended by two earlier bloody incidents: the pogroms of 1895/96 and the Adana Massacre of 1909. These two events belong to the Armenian Genocide just as the Kristallnacht (Night of Broken Glass) belongs to the Holocaust. My thesis will provide detailed data on the related sequence.

Any form of genocide discussion was taboo in the USSR and the GDR. According to their founding myths, the German Democratic Republic defeated Hitler's dictatorship through an anti-Fascist pact with the USSR. Historians in the GDR assigned all blame for the Holocaust to "foreign rule", so as to deny broad Nazi support among the precursors of their own society, the East German population. The Holocaust was interpreted as class struggle, and hardly received any in-depth coverage in public discussions or sufficient coverage in the classroom. Even in the late 1970s, any discussion of the Holocaust would inevitably give sole credit for the defeat of the Nazi regime to the Communist Party (KPD) and the Socialist Unity Party (SED).

A similar approach was used in the official GDR treatment of the Armenian Genocide. The Genocide was seen as a crime carried out by "monopoly capitalists" and "imperialists." The foundation of these crimes among the broader Turkish population was ignored. Rather than being perpetrators, the Turkish people were portrayed as victims who had been misled. The Ottomans and Turks were

never called "exploiters" or "imperialists," despite their behavior as such in the Balkans, North Africa and the Middle East. Instead, the murder of the Armenians was blamed on the ruling party of the Young Turks. The Turkish people were defined as a revolutionary force, and were absolved of any historical blame with the establishment of the New Republic under Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) in 1923.

The categorization of the Armenians was also negative. They were depicted as "bourgeois" and/or as "collaborators" representing a "well-to-do society." When on occasion the Armenians were portrayed as workers or farmers, they were always shown to be more powerful than their Turkish counterparts. Thus their bourgeois status created a justification for Turkish behavior prior to the Armenian Genocide. In North American parlance, Armenians "were asking for it."

Beyond these basic currents, the Armenian Genocide received treatments of varying intensity throughout the history of the GDR, depending on larger political events. When completed, my paper will focus sharply on this development across historical periods.

