

From Empire to Republic: Turkish Nationalism and the Armenian Genocide

by Taner Akçam, Zed Books, 2004, 288 pp.

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‘Welcome to regime change, European style.’ So wrote Madeleine Bunting in *the Guardian* (26 September) on the impending signing of the accession process for Turkey’s membership of the European Union. Bunting argues that the pressure for reform exercised by the lure of EU membership, has prompted what amounts to a peaceful ‘regime change’ in Turkey, the pivotal country for Christian-Muslim relations in Europe. In fact, what has taken place in Turkey in recent years is not so much regime change as regime evolution, with Turkey’s ruling politicians adopting increasingly more enlightened – or less reactionary – policies toward the rights of women, the Kurdish and Cyprus questions, abolition of the death penalty, elimination of torture by the security forces, and human rights generally. All the more remarkable that the greatest progress has been made under the government of the avowedly Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP.) Taner Akçam argues in his seminal study of Turkish nationalism – which focuses on the Armenian question but also ventures further afield – that the AKP’s ‘progression into power aims to merge Islam with a Western political structure. Such a successful merger would mark the first time that the divergent paths of Islam and modernity (and Western-style parliamentary democracy), which split in the nineteenth century, had been reconciled.’ (p. 3.) This is clearly a crucially important development for world politics, but it is also highly tenuous, and is being endangered by the resistance to Turkish membership of the EU on the part of reactionary elements in Western Europe.

Bunting contrasts the EU’s ‘quiet’ and ‘successful’ model of regime change with the US model employed in Iraq, which she claims involves first ‘an unprecedented onslaught of military power’ and then ‘disintegrates into violent chaos.’ Yet as Akçam shows, the dichotomy is not as clear as Bunting would have it, for the Iraq war was itself a catalyst to progressive change in Turkey: ‘It was within this context [of prevalent anti-Western xenophobia among the Turkish elite] that the Bush administration’s vocal policy in 2003 of liberating Iraq and democratising the region in general was perceived as a threat to Turkey’s existence. It is clear that as long as the US takes seriously its policy of democratising Iraq and the region,

it will come more and more into conflict with Turkey's authoritarian political structure. In this respect, Turkey's ability to effect a smooth political transition from authoritarianism to democracy is heavily contingent on the direction US foreign policy takes in the region.' (pp. 7-8.) The authoritarian Turkish political order was part and parcel of a wider authoritarian order across Eastern Europe, the former USSR and the Middle East. In Eastern Europe it collapsed in 1989, while in the former USSR and the Middle East democratisation is still in its early stages. Yet for the process to succeed in Turkey, and indeed in the Middle East generally, Western Europe too may need to embrace 'regime change' at home.

European Islamophobia

It is widely acknowledged that the prospect of Turkish membership of the EU was one of the principal reasons for the rejection of the EU constitution by the French and Dutch electorates. Germany's Christian Democratic leader Angela Merkel and France's Presidential hopeful Nicolas Sarkozy have emerged as opponents of Turkey's EU membership. At a time when the integration of Europe's Muslim communities is an increasingly pressing question, when European Muslims increasingly need a vision of Europe that includes them, and when the aging European population increasingly needs the influx of young and dynamic immigrant workers, the elected leaders of Western Europe are becoming less friendly to Turkey's EU bid, out of a mixture of petty great-power intrigue (the fear that Turkish membership would upset Franco-German domination of the EU) and a desire to pander to popular anti-immigrant racism and Islamophobia.

Whether held sincerely or cynically, Islamophobic prejudices are brought out to justify Turkey's exclusion from the EU. Former French President Giscard d'Estaing, one of the authors of the rejected European constitution, infamously argued that Turkey should not be allowed to join because 'its capital is not in Europe and 95% of its population lives outside Europe. It is not a European country' – an arbitrary geographic argument that would, if consistently applied, exclude also Cyprus (geographically part of Asia), not to mention France's own overseas departments. But it would not exclude Istanbul – Europe's largest and most historically illustrious city. Germany's former Social Democratic Chancellor Helmut Schmidt recently argued: 'The Turks belong to a completely different cultural domain from us.' This is an attitude that might equally be used to exclude Europe's Muslim immigrant communities from ever truly belonging. If predominantly Muslim Turkey can never belong to predominantly Christian Europe, the implication is that Muslim

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minorities can never belong to predominantly Christian France or Germany. Such prejudices play directly into the hands of the Islamic fundamentalists who likewise wish to widen the Muslim-Christian fault-line.

For the present author, the prevalence of petty Islamophobia in the West was most strikingly demonstrated by a surprise I encountered during my first visit to Turkey this spring. Istanbul is the capital of the Balkans, and for any self-respecting Balkan specialist, a visit to Istanbul is – like a Muslim’s pilgrimage to Mecca – something that must be undertaken at least once in a lifetime, and preferably more often. I was somewhat shocked, however, to find that the *Rough Guide to Turkey’s* list of ‘36 things not to miss’ when visiting the country, includes three Christian religious sites but not a single mosque or other Islamic building – not even the Blue Mosque or the architectural masterpieces of Mimar Sinan. It is as if one can visit the most important sights of a country that was for centuries the centre of the Islamic world, without visiting anything directly related to Islam.

Nevertheless, even a quick browse through the *Rough Guide* or any other decent guidebook is enough to shatter the ill-informed ‘clash-of-civilisation’ stereotypes regarding Turkey and Europe. Western Turkey was close to the epicentre of ancient European civilisation; the site of ancient Troy lies just off the Turkish Mediterranean coast. Christianity has existed in Anatolia for longer than in Western Europe, having arrived in the first century AD with St Paul himself. The city that later became Istanbul was made the capital of the Roman Empire by Constantine the Great – the first Christian Roman Emperor. Present-day Istanbul was therefore a great Christian imperial metropolis at a time when present-day Britain, France, Germany and Holland were mere pagan civilisational backwaters. Nor is it true that the arrival of the Turks in Anatolia in the Middle Ages meant the erasing of Byzantine civilisation: the Turks and the Byzantine Empire coexisted as neighbours for centuries, interacting culturally and economically. The Ottoman Empire that eventually emerged was as much the child of Byzantine Roman-Greek civilisation as of Islam.

Even in narrowly geographic terms, the Ottoman Empire was a European state: its capital was in Europe, as was the majority of its population until the sixteenth century. The Ottoman bureaucracy up to the highest levels was staffed by officials recruited from among the Christian European subject peoples of the Empire; during the Ottoman Golden Age in the early modern period, the largest numbers of its Grand Viziers were ethnic Slavs or Albanians, rather than Turks, and the

overwhelming majority came from geographic Europe. The Sultans chose as wives Christians and Muslims, Europeans and Asians, so the dynasty itself was of a wholly mixed parentage. It is the descendants of this heterogeneous Eurasian elite that still largely rules Turkey today. Furthermore, as the empire declined and contracted, large numbers of European Muslims emigrated to the Anatolian heartland. Thus, a significant proportion of the population of Anatolia today has its origins in geographic Europe; in some Turkish villages, the older inhabitants still speak European languages such as Serbo-Croat, Greek or Albanian.

The claims of Giscard d'Estaing and Schmidt are, therefore, expressions of pure chauvinism and ignorance. It is particularly ironic that Greece's entry into the European Community was championed by European statesmen citing the Greek foundations of European civilisation. Turkey, more than any other European country, shares with Greece a common cultural and historical heritage, one that goes back much further than the arrival of either Christianity or Islam in Europe. Moreover, both Christianity and Islam are Middle Eastern rather than European in origin, and both have made major, but by no means exclusive, contributions to European civilisation. The Islamic contribution perhaps needs to be stressed: gunpowder, coffee and Arabic numerals were all bequeathed to Europe by the Muslim world. Indeed, it was following the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453 that the world's first coffee shop was opened there two decades later, to be followed by the world's first cafes. And where would the EU be without its cafes?

The Armenian Genocide

Yet if the cultural objections to Turkey's membership of the EU are ridiculous, a more serious question is raised by the issue of the Armenian Genocide that occurred ninety years ago in 1915, involving the extermination of between 600,000 and 1,500,000 Armenians by the Ottoman authorities. In recent years, the European Parliament and the parliaments of several EU member states, including France, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands, have passed resolutions recognising the genocide. While the efforts of Armenian lobbyists to achieve recognition of the historic crime committed against their people can only be viewed with sympathy, the motives of the various parliamentarians may not have been so sincere. For it is questionable why this particular instance of genocide should have been singled out for recognition, rather than other, more recent ones for which the predominantly Christian nations of Europe were themselves responsible.

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Turkish parliamentarians responded to the French resolution recognising the Armenian genocide with a resolution of their own, condemning France's behaviour during the Algerian War of Independence as 'genocide.' While this may be an exaggeration, the Algerians were certainly the victims of massive French crimes, involving the forced uprooting of part of their population and losses on a scale comparable to the Armenians' losses several decades earlier. Italy was guilty of genocidal crimes against the Balkan peoples during World War II, which it has never genuinely confronted; indeed, some Italian politicians are increasingly unapologetic about this shameful period in their history. More recently, France aided and abetted the perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide of the 1990s.

Although the Bosnian genocide of the 1990s is universally recognised in the West (except by lunatic revisionist elements), the complicity of the British, French and Dutch governments has not been condemned by the European Parliament. The Dutch alone have had the decency to accept a measure of responsibility. And of course, the Christian nations of Europe have a long history of murderous crimes against other peoples – native Americans, Africans, Asians and other Europeans. It should be a matter of some pride to us in Britain that our current Prime Minister, shortly after taking power, apologised for Britain's role in the Irish Famine of the 1840s. Nevertheless, where the Armenian Genocide is concerned, European statesmen expect Turkey to engage in the kind of contrition that they have for the most part not sought from their own nations. In this way, the issue of the genocide has become a battleground between two rival sets of prejudices: Western European Islamophobia and anti-immigrant racism on the one hand and Turkish genocide-denial on the other.

The Turkish side of the equation receives an excellent introduction in Akçam's study of the subject. This is an intelligent, original and well researched study of Turkish nationalism's refusal to confront the reality of the Armenian Genocide, and is recommended both for its originality and for its objectivity. Akçam, himself a Turkish émigré academic, avoids the opposing pitfalls of demonising and apologising into which many commentators of the subject fall. The book has a rough, somewhat muddled structure and is filled with sweeping hypotheses that are not properly reconciled with each other, suggesting that the author is still very much in the process of formulating his thoughts on the subject, but this brings out ideas that might have been lost in a more polished product.

One of Akçam's most illuminating explanations for contemporary Turkish genocide-denial is that the victorious British and French statesmen who pressed the issue, following their victory over the Ottomans in World War I, conflated it with anti-Turkish imperialist agendas. The Armenian Genocide had been the work of the nationalist 'Committee of Union and Progress' (CUP) – or 'Young Turks' – that ruled the Ottoman Empire during World War I. Following their defeat in the war, the next generation of Turkish nationalists under Mustafa Kemal – who actually included many of the same individuals – was initially ready to recognise the crimes against the Armenians and to prosecute some of those responsible, as the price for international approval. Yet as Akçam shows, the anti-Turkish vitriol of the British and French leaders; their determination to punish not merely the perpetrators of the genocide but the entire Turkish nation; and their attempts to dismember what was left of the Turkish state, caused a sea-change in Turkish attitudes.

David Lloyd George greeted the Ottoman entry into the war on Germany's side as providing an opportunity to expel the Turks from Europe; 'an opportunity, for which Europe has waited for some 500 years and which wouldn't come again.' (p. 185) As British Prime Minister, Lloyd George presided over a disastrous attempt to dismember Turkey, using the Armenian, Greek and Kurdish nationalities in Anatolia as pawns. For his part, the French foreign minister announced in 1917 that '[t]he lofty war aims include the rescue of peoples now living under the murderous tyranny of the Turks and to uproot and cast out of Europe the Ottoman Empire, which has proven that it is, in extreme measure, foreign to Western Civilization.' (p. 185.) It is against this background that even the more reasonable Turkish nationalists quickly came to conflate prosecution of the perpetrators of the genocide, and issues of human and minority rights in general, with the imperialist goals of Turkey's enemies.

It is tempting to suggest that ninety years later, certain Western politicians are still manipulating the Armenian question for cynical anti-Turkish purposes. And it was certainly not the Armenians who benefited last time around: the Turkish nationalist reaction to Anglo-French aggression in the 1910s and 1920s essentially ensured the end of the Armenian presence in Anatolia. Conversely, the Turkish political classes still tend instinctively to identify pressure from the West on the Armenian and Kurdish questions with ploys to dismember their country; an attitude which, however unjustified, can only have been encouraged by recent Western European behaviour.

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It should not be taken from this that Akçam blames the Western powers for Turkey's unwillingness to confront past crimes. He places more blame on the Turkish political classes themselves, and offers a range of explanations for their behaviour, including their retention of a pre-democratic Ottoman official mentality, and their psychological difficulty in coming to terms with the loss of empire. He refutes the myth that the Armenian Genocide was simply a response to the wartime emergency occasioned by Armenian rebel support for the invading Russians, showing that the CUP began to plan and implement its genocide of the Anatolian Christians before the war had even broken out. Indeed, if anything, he focuses too narrowly on the culpability of the Turkish nationalists. As such, his model can be criticised on two grounds. Firstly, he traces the roots of the genocide only as far back as 1909, when the CUP began to move away from a multinational 'Ottoman' nationalism to one that was exclusively Turkish and based solely on the Muslim inhabitants of Anatolia, to the exclusion of the Christians. This appears to the present author as far too short a time-frame, leaving unexplained, for example, the massacres of the Armenians under Sultan Abdul Hamid in the 1890s.

One can link the genocidal impulse much more intimately with the process of modernisation; perhaps to as far back as 1826, when Sultan Mahmud slaughtered the janissary corps as an obstacle to his reform of the empire. Ironically, in light of the Islamophobic stereotypes of the Ottoman Empire still widespread in Europe, the Empire's rulers moved toward genocide as they reformed under Western European influences in the nineteenth century; the Anatolian Christian communities were swept away along with other institutions of the Ottoman state; the army that presided over this destruction was not a traditional Ottoman institution, but a creation of the military academies set up by the reforming Ottoman Sultans of the nineteenth century. Akçam portrays a Turkish elite retaining anti-democratic Ottoman traditions, but as he indicates elsewhere, this elite's consciousness has also been shaped by modern European ideas of nationality and race, ideas that were in large part responsible for the Armenian Genocide. This is not to say that the Ottoman past should be viewed through rose-tinted spectacles; merely to indicate the ambiguities of modernisation.

Which brings us to the second criticism that can be made of Akçam's thesis: he gives explanations of the Armenian Genocide and of contemporary Turkish genocide-denial that are specific to the Turks alone, without discussing the wider context of continuous genocidal actions carried out by the Russians and by the Balkan

Christian nations against the Ottoman Muslims throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As they conquered the northern Black Sea coast and the Caucasus, the Russians exterminated or expelled entire Muslim peoples, with the refugees usually fleeing to the Ottoman Empire. Hitler infamously asked the rhetorical question: 'who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?' A more difficult question is who speaks today of the annihilation of the Norgay or the Burkhas? Likewise, as they gained their independence from the Ottomans and expanded the borders of their new states, the Greeks, Serbs, Bulgarians and Montenegrins largely killed or expelled their Muslim populations. The Muslim refugees from these lands poured into the Ottoman Empire, bringing with them tales of horror that catalysed anti-Christian feeling among the Ottoman Muslims.

It is only against this background that the Armenian Genocide can be understood; the roots of post-Ottoman genocide stretch much wider and deeper than the specific developments in Turkish nationalist ideology and psychology that Akçam describes. The CUP members who orchestrated the Armenian Genocide grew up in the ethnically and religiously mixed Empire; to a very large extent, they learned their model of nationalism from their Christian neighbours, including the Armenians – Armenian Daphna nationalists and the Young Turks of the CUP had a history of collaboration against the autocratic regime of Abdul Hamid. None of this, of course, excuses the Armenian Genocide in the slightest, but it does show that it was a product of not simply a Turkish, but of a wider European barbarism to which both Christians and Muslims subscribed.

The Armenian Genocide is sometimes wrongly referred to as 'the first European genocide of the twentieth century.' Yet in the Balkan wars of 1912-13, the Christian states of Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece and Montenegro partitioned the Ottoman territories in Europe and slaughtered or expelled much of the Muslim population in the process. As the journalist Leon Trotsky, who reported on the Balkan Wars, wrote at the time, 'the Buglers in Macedonia, the Serbs in Old Serbia, in their national endeavour to correct data in the ethnographical statistics that are not quite favourable to them, are engaged quite simply in systematic extermination of the Muslim population in the villages, towns and districts[.]' The ethnic cleansing practised by the Christian Balkan states acted as a decisive influence on the CUP to adopt similar methods. The Armenian rebels who fought alongside the Russians against the Ottomans in World War I, and the Greeks who invaded Anatolia under Lloyd George's guidance, carried out systematic atrocities against Turkish Muslims.

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Yet neither Greece nor Bulgaria has been pressed to acknowledge these crimes as the price of membership of the EU; nor have European parliamentary resolutions recognised them.

The fact that the Armenian Genocide has been widely recognised throughout Europe, while the genocide of the Ottoman Muslims has not, in part has its origins in the prominence of the former in the propaganda of the victorious Entente powers of World War I. It was the Armenian Genocide that provoked the Polish-Jewish lawyer Rafael Lemkin to take up the study of genocide and, eventually, to coin the term 'genocide' itself. There are thus specific historical reasons for the fact that the Armenian Genocide is better known than the genocide of the Ottoman Muslims. Yet the continued failure of European statesmen to accord recognition to the latter, equivalent to that accorded to the Armenian victims, must be put down in part to Islamophobia, of which the Turkish political leaders, despite their own double standards on the matter, have every reason to feel aggrieved. This is particularly so, since, while there has been little in the way of Turkish persecution of Christian peoples since the invasion of Cyprus in 1974, the genocide and persecution of Europe's indigenous Muslims has intensified in recent decades, with Communist Bulgaria's ethnic cleansing of its Turkish minority, Serbia's and Croatia's ethnic cleansing of Bosnian Muslims and Kosovo Albanians, and the ongoing Russian brutality against the Chechens. Communist or ex-Communist rulers such as Tudor Zhukov, Slobodan Milošević, Franjo Tuđman and Vladimir Putin have, if anything, exceeded the brutality of their Christian predecessors. And, except for the NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999, the response of Western leaders has ranged from apathy to complicity.

Akçam argues that confronting the fact of the Armenian Genocide is a necessity if Turkey is finally to complete the transition 'from Empire to Republic;' i.e. the transition to a democratic state. He is undoubtedly right: Turkey should recognise the genocide. Yet the EU has no right to demand that it do so, so long as the Western European states themselves fail to recognise both their own historic crimes and the historic crimes committed against Europe's indigenous Muslims. What the EU does have, is the right to insist that Turkey allow the question of genocide to be freely debated. Indeed, the Turkish AKP government has itself recognised that the recent attempt of an Istanbul court to ban a university conference on the Armenian genocide 'has nothing to do with democracy,' and has allowed the conference to take place. The Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk is still facing criminal charges for his courageous raising of the Armenian and Kurdish questions. Turkey is at a delicate

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stage in the transition to democracy, which it is the duty of democratic Europe to assist. Yet this may require some commensurate reform of consciousness on the part of Western Europe. Turkey needs the EU to help it reform its consciousness; but for the same reason, the EU needs Turkey.

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