

# Stolen Identity: The Armenian People

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## Abstract

*This paper analyses the factors that have shaped the Armenian identity over time, based on the main historical events and strategic actors who made their contribution to the becoming of the Armenian people and their identity. The central issue of the article is the Armenian genocide which had a major influence on the way that Armenians see themselves and the world around them, today. The study revealed that not only the genocide that happened almost a century ago, had a major impact on the Armenian identity, but also the current recognition or denial of facts by the contemporary world. In this respect, the role of the Diaspora proved priceless, because they were the ones that pressured their host countries to recognize the genocide and to support Armenia. The topic is presented from a phenomenological perspective, trying to capture the human experience in the way it was perceived by the Armenian people.*

## Keywords

identity; Armenian genocide; European Union; Turkey; development

## 1. Introduction

Identity consists in a set of values that characterize a group or a society, its emergence can be temporarily placed at the foundation of the group/nation, evolving together with the said groups. Identity is the generator of specific ways of thinking and behaviors of a certain community, at economical, political, cultural and social levels<sup>2</sup>.

Former component of the Soviet Union, Armenia is the 143<sup>rd</sup> country in size, in the global hierarchy. It is situated on the belt that separates Europe from Asia, displaying a fascinating cultural identity, comprising elements from both European and Asian cultures. Armenia is characterized by a rich cultural heritage, being one of the first countries to adopt Christianity as its official religion, early in the 4<sup>th</sup> century<sup>3</sup>. As far as population is concerned, Armenia is a rather small and homogenous country;

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1 This work was supported from the European Social Fund through Sectorial Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007 – 2013, project number POSDRU/159/1.5/S/142115, project title „Performance and Excellence in Postdoctoral Research in Romanian Economics Science Domain”.

2 Mark R. Leary, June Price Tangney, *Handbook of self and identity* (New York: Guilford Press, 2003).

3 Vahan M. Kurkjian, *A History of Armenia* (Los Angeles: IndoEuropean Publishing, 2008).

according to the World Bank, the estimates for 2013 show that Armenia has a population of 2.976.566. 97.9% of the population are Armenians, 1.3% Kurds, 0.5% Russians and another 0.3% other ethnicities<sup>4</sup>.

Recent studies have uncovered traces of the Armenians dating back in the 4000 BC, placing them among the oldest civilizations. The elements found so far show that Armenians had been an advanced civilization in the Bronze Age<sup>5</sup>. Armenia has an interesting past having been subject of outside intervention for several periods which alternated with bursts of autonomy. During the past two millenniums Armenia has been part of the Roman, Byzantine, Arab, Persian and Ottoman Empires, each of them influencing to a certain degree the Armenian people, culture and identity.

The Ottoman Empire had the strongest influence because it was the one that ruled over the Armenian people for the longest period and also due to the ideologies they have embraced over the time. Ottomans had a very strong and prominent national identity manifested through strong ideologies such as panturcism, panislamism and panturanism. **Panturcism** was a political movement which begun at the dawn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century whose main goal was the unification of all Turkish speaking people from the Ottoman Empire, Russia, China, Iran and Afghanistan under the same modern state. Panturcism is defined by the idea of ethnical, political and cultural unity of all Turks<sup>6</sup>. **Panislamism** was another political movement that aimed at unifying all Muslims in an Islamic state; panislamism is a derived form of nationalism projected through religion<sup>7</sup>. **Panturanism** was a rather utopian political movement whose goal was the unification of all turanian people; its followers thought that all uralo-altaic people: ottoman Turks from Istanbul and Anatolia, Turcomans from Central Asia and Persia, Tatars from southern Russia and Transcaucasia, Hungarians, Finnish, several tribes from Siberia, Mongols, Koreans and Japanese, should form a single state<sup>8</sup>.

Though these movements did not belong to the Armenian people, they are relevant to Armenians because they were part of the Ottoman Empire, when the above-mentioned movements had been the driving force behind the policies adopted by the Ottomans. These ideologies gave a sense of belonging to the ottoman Turks, reducing the minorities to second-class citizens. Due to these beliefs spread at all levels of the population, the ottoman administration was able to consolidate the loyalty of their people and to turn them against the minorities who wanted equal rights. Gaining the understanding and the support of the majority of the people had been the first step in the direction of attaining homogeneity for the Ottoman Turks by eliminating the *disturbing* foreign elements.

The ethnic cleansing from 1915 has been one of the filthiest operations in human history, a limitless injustice which still continues today due to the fact that Turkish and Armenian people cannot find a common language to understand each other, being unable to put an end to their ancestral problems. The Armenian history after the genocide cannot be understood without acknowledging the impact that it had upon the first, second, third, and now, fourth generation of Armenian people. Though it has passed almost a century since the events that took place between 1915-1916, Armenians have not forgotten what happened then, the impact

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4 The World Factbook – CIA, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>, visited 02.09.2014.

5 Martiros Kavoukjian, *The Genesis of Armenian People* (Montreal, 1982).

6 Robert Melson, Leo Kuper, *Revolution and genocide: on the origins of the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 139.

7 Azmi Özcan, *Pan-Islamism: Indian Muslims, the Ottomans and Britain (1877-1924)* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1997), 164.

8 Phillip H. Stoddard, *The Ottoman Government and the Arabs, 1911 to 1918: a preliminary study of Teşkilât-ı Mahsusa*, (Princeton: Princeton University, 1963).

of the genocide continuing to remain an important component of the becoming of the young Armenians – the third and fourth generations, and also of how they see themselves and the world around them.

This topic has become one of the important priorities on the international agendas of several countries brought together by the common goal of mediating the Turkish-Armenian conflict and contributing to the reinforcement of peace into the area.

## **2. The Armenian Genocide and the Correlation Between the Recognition/Denial of the Genocide and the Shaping of the Armenian Identity**

The Armenian Genocide can be divided into two stages: the *Hamidian massacres* and the *Young Turks* deportations. There are several hypotheses which can be considered explanatory for the events that took place at the dawn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of these hypotheses consists in underlining the cultural differences between the dominant population and the tolerated minorities, Turks being Islamic and Armenians being a Christian minority, in fact the first community ever adopting Christianity as official religion in 301, even before the Roman Empire. These differences generate others which were best reflected in the life styles of the two ethnic groups and in the inverted ratio between the rights and obligations of each party. During this period Armenians were deprived even of basic rights such as freedom of expression, property, safety, up to the point of their right to live. They lived as sidelined beings, burdened by taxes and frightened by those meant to protect them: the forces of order.

If at its beginnings the Ottoman Empire seemed an unstoppable force, the 19th century was marked by important changes concerning this great power. After having reached its climax, the evolution of the Ottoman Empire began to be characterized by a descendent trajectory; by 1914 it had lost all its territories from Europe and Africa. This shameful decay has unleashed a lot of tension within the territories occupied by Ottomans. Turks had been humiliated by losing the land conquered through the blood spill of their ancestors, land now lost to people that the Ottoman Empire had considered as being its own, after having integrated the nations whose territories they had occupied. Thus, the Armenian people aspiring to being part of the decision making process raised suspicions among Muslim Turks, for whom sharing power with minorities was an unbearable thought<sup>9</sup>.

A third hypothesis is the need for the Ottoman Empire to raze any chance for Armenians to ally Russians - the main political opponent of the Ottomans in the area. Due to the outspoken desire of the Armenians to have equal rights with the Turks, they were perceived by the Turks as being a dissatisfied part of the population always willing to strike against the ottoman administration in order to acquire equal status. This potential of betrayal could have harmed the Empire and its interests. The existence of a buffer belt inhabited by the Armenians was perceived twofold: on the one hand, shield in case of an invasion providing the Turks precious time to double back; and, on the other hand, menace due to the fact that the inhabitants had no connection with the Turkish state, other than political, which made their loyalty susceptible<sup>10</sup>.

Regardless of the hypothesis we choose to support, the impact is real and it can be measured in human lives, more correctly, in human deaths. We will never

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9 Arnold Toynbee, *Experiences*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).

10 Toynbee, *Experiences*, 214.

know for sure how many of them, but one thing is sure: there have been over 1,5 million. 1,5 million people killed with cold blood by the Turkish guards or by the nomad Kurdish tribes, or who died by hunger, thirst, exhaustion or diseases like cholera, typhus, dysentery during their marches through the deserts of Syria and Mesopotamia, or who were taken off coast and drowned in the waters of the Black Sea or the Euphrates river. The number of those killed during the *Young Turks* rule of the Ottoman Empire equals the sum of the population of the 22 smallest countries in the world today; this means that if this ethnical cleansing exercise would have taken place today in these countries, they would be wiped out from the face of the Earth. At this number, whatever it would be, one must add the number of those tortured through the most diverse practices inspired from the Spanish Inquisition and from the darkest acts recorded in the human history, practices like crucifixion, nailing horseshoes on human feet, burning on pyre, raping women and children and many others applied with total lack of humanitarianism – it is like people had forgotten that they were dealing with people.

It is a fact that a century ago information didn't travel as fast as it does today, but even then it was impossible to bury in the desert a million people and hope that nobody will notice. There are both spoken and written testimonials, there are images, documents and letters, all describing what happened in Armenia between 1915 and 1916, and even so, there isn't unanimous recognition of the genocide. The world today is divided into three categories based on the position adopted towards the Armenian genocide: those who recognize it, those who remain neutral and those who deny it.

Turkey, together with Azerbaijan, strongly denies the genocide, motivating that Armenians have augmented the number of victims in order to attract international compassion. Even more, Turkey affirms that it has never led massacres against the Armenians and that those who died during the Young Turks era, have been victims of the World War I, which didn't decimate important parts just from the Armenian population, but also from the Turkish population<sup>11</sup>. Researchers affirm that denial of genocide is a common fact for perpetrators, the situation being similar in the Cambodia Genocide or Jewish Holocaust.

Most world states have a neutral position, either because they don't have all the needed information in order to shape a clear opinion, either because they have various external affairs with one of the two countries involved or with the supporters of one or other side. Recently there appeared a new perspective, namely the fact that genocide recognition should be debated by researchers and historians and not by politicians, which aims at justifying the lack of position of some countries.

The third category consists of those who recognize the genocide and according to the Zoryan Institute it includes 28 states and several organizations or groups. It is recognized and sentenced at several levels: public opinion, researchers, states, international organizations or movements, political formations etc. The first state that recognized the Armenian Genocide, after Armenia, of course, was Uruguay in 1965. Though today Turkey doesn't recognize the genocide as it didn't over the past century, there was one Turkish government that recognized it<sup>12</sup>. This was the

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<sup>11</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *Turkey Denies History* (2010), <http://historynewsnetwork.org/article/125231>, visited 07.09.2014.

<sup>12</sup> Though it is hard to say that it recognised the genocide, taking into account that the word was first used in 1943 by Raphael Lemkin; but Damad Ferit Pasha's government convicted the Young Turks leaders for crimes against humanity, underlining that the genocide scheme wasn't drawn up quickly, but rather methodical with the clear purpose of eliminating the Armenian population. These are the elements that the United Nations General Assembly uses today to define the term 'genocide' (according to the *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* from 1948).

government led by Damad Ferid Pasha, the same government that has organized the trials during which the leaders of the Young Turks, Talât, Enver and Jemal, have been sentenced to death in absence<sup>13</sup>.

The genocide produced a strong imprint in the Armenian consciousness. It is difficult to be rejected even by a single person, but to be rejected by a whole community must be dreadful. What is even worse, is the fact that Armenians weren't blamed for what they did, but solely because they had a different ethnicity. This had a strong impact upon the Armenian identity because it proved that all their values had no worth for the perpetrators. Due to the lack of intervention from the international community they could have believed that their values had no worth also for the other countries. And what is a value without worth? It is a worthless value. This is how Armenians lost their identity due to the genocide. All their values being reduced to nothing and their own value being reduced to statistics of deaths resulted in the deprivation of their identity. It is debatable whether their identity was kept in relation to each other, within their community.

After the genocide ended, the Armenian identity entered a reconstruction process. In this phase they stepped in with a mentality of survivors, they had overcome the worst that can ever happen to someone. They were much stronger, keen on living and on proving their value by rebuilding their identity. Both the local community and the Diaspora were committed to building a new Armenia, one that could be home to the Armenians, that could offer them protection, a place where they could fulfill their goals and raise their children.

### **3. The Role of the Diaspora in Preserving and Promoting the Specific Cultural Identity Elements Of The Armenians**

The main group that fights at the international level for the Armenian genocide recognition, by Turkey and by the whole world, consists of Armenians. They can be divided into two subgroups: residents of Armenia and Diaspora. Diaspora is the most active due to its efforts in the countries of residence to promote the Armenian question and to keep it alive for almost a century now. Through continuous efforts, they managed to pressure the different governments of the world to recognize the genocide, hoping that this way they will be able to determine Turkey, indirectly, to recognize the genocide as well. The Armenian Diaspora consists of the survivors of the deportations which have spread all over the world. At the moment, the number of the Armenians from the Diaspora (6 millions) is twice as high as the number of Armenians living in Armenia (2,9 millions). They have formed communities in 85 different countries, the largest communities being in Russia, USA, France and Canada<sup>14</sup>.

Regardless of their origin, Diaspora groups present a few common particularities: they keep alive the memory of their country of origin; they create myths about their homeland, myths that they pass on to the next generations; they feel a strong connection with the country of origin due to which they encourage the following generations to return to the homeland after the conflicts cease; they struggle to help their country; in order to keep their ethnical identity until they can return to their country, they organize a series of cultural, artistic and historical events<sup>15</sup>. The Armenian Diaspora presents all these characteristics and this justifies their need to

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13 M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *The Young Turks in Opposition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

14 Ayse Hur, „Turks cannot be without Armenians, Armenians cannot be without Turks!”, *Taraf Newspaper* (2008), <http://www.zoryaninstitute.org/dialogue/Turks%20cannot%20be%20without%20Armenians.pdf>, visited 22.09.2014.

15 Melvin, Ember; Carol R. Ember; Ian A., Skoggard, *Encyclopedia of Diasporas: Immigrant and Refugee Cultures Around the World, Volume II: Diaspora Communities*, (New York: Springer Science + Business Media Inc., 2005), 36.

keep alive the Armenian identity. The recognition of the genocide is part of their identity and this is why they need the world to support them, because the recognition of the genocide has for them the same value as the recognition of their identity. An essential characteristic of the Armenian identity is the persistence with which they demand the truth. This drive is now stronger than ever; the first generation after the genocide wasn't so active because they preferred forgetting, not remembering what happened then. The second generation passed through the Second World War which prevented them from taking any consistent measures in this direction. But the third generation has all the means needed: has the appropriate context, benefits from the burst of technology, and together with it, the burst of information. They are the ones that need to prove the existence of the genocide, that need to acquire confirmation from the whole world, but even more important, to pressure Turkey to admit that it is the successor of the Armenian genocide perpetrators.

There is no doubt that the Armenian Diaspora has played a key role in preserving the Armenian identity, but there is another factor which contributed strongly to its preservation: the sealed borders which prevented foreign elements to enter and alter the local values. This is an interesting case because, even if we live in a globalized world, connected in every possible way and even if Armenia stands on the confluence of Europe, Asia and Africa, it is an isolated country. Out of its 1254 km of borders, 1055 km are locked, functioning like a barrier that blocks any transfer of people, goods, money, information or culture. Armenia is today thwarted by its own borders.

Identity has two components: the way it is perceived by its beholder and the way it is perceived by the outsiders. Sometimes the two coincide, but sometimes they are completely different. The role of the Diaspora is to make sure that the outside world sees the Armenian identity in the right way, that they understand and accept the Armenian values in the same way the Armenians do.

#### 4. Where does Eu Stand and Why?

European Union is among the powers that recognize formally the genocide. This is attested by several documents and resolutions issued since 1987 until today. On the 18<sup>th</sup> of June 1987, the European Parliament has recognized the Armenian genocide and has launched an initiative by which it asked Turkey to recognize it too. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of April 1998, on the Armenian Genocide Memorial Day, the European Council adopted declaration 275/24.04.1998 by which the signatories recognize the 24<sup>th</sup> of April 1915 'as being the date on which began the implementation of the plan to annihilate the Armenians that lived in the Ottoman Empire'. The European Union tried to contribute also to the solving of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno Karabagh through the Minsk Group, but without any visible results.

The position of the EU is somehow surprising if we take into account the fact that Turkey is a candidate country for the EU integration since 1999, but its integration process has started much earlier, in 1963, by signing the *Ankara agreement*. Though it came a long way, Turkey still has a series of steps that need to be taken in order to become an EU member, and one of those steps consists in solving its conflicts, among which, the one with Armenia.

Is the Armenian Genocide the real reason why Turkey hasn't entered the EU or is it just an excuse? It is hard to tell, the only one that can answer this question is Turkey. If Turkey would admit the Armenian genocide and would solve its conflicts with Armenia, it would be one step closer to the EU. There are, of course, the *Copenhagen criteria*, but Turkey is on the right track there. At the moment, we

would be tempted to say that the genocide is the obstacle that hinders Turkey's integration. It would be interesting to see what would happen if this obstacle would be removed.

Though the EU has not stated a clear position on the major cultural differences between Turkey and the rest of the Union, some member states expressed their concern about integrating 70 million Muslims in a supra-structure otherwise Christian. Though the EU doesn't have an official religion, the majority of its population is Christian and though the EU's slogan is 'Unity in diversity', it seems that the diversity it wants to display is rather strict, being chosen by the representatives of the member states.

Asked about his personal opinion on the integration of Turkey into the EU, Orhan Pamuk, the winner of the Nobel prize for literature in 2006, one of the most appreciated Turkish writers, said that 'keeping Turkey outside the EU represents a source of economic and cultural costs for both' and that the decision of integration depends 'less on the politicians and more on the citizens'. We consider his opinion as being realistic because both EU and Turkey are democratic structures that rely on the will of their citizens and that have a bottom-up approach for solving such dilemmas.

Including Turkey into the European Union is a strategic action not only for the two, but also for many other actors who interact with any of them. On one hand, for the EU, the accession of Turkey would mean increased recognition, new markets, cheap work force, stronger influence in the Middle East – all these being attributes which cannot be overlooked. On the other hand, for Turkey, the EU would mean reducing its costs generated by the import-export activities, an incentive to continue its democratization process, the feeling of belonging to one of the most prestigious, functional, superstate structure in the whole world – all these being priorities for the Turkish state.

## 5. Conclusions

The identity of a people is a set of values that forms over time. Being immaterial, one would say it is impossible to be taken away, but history proves us wrong. The year 1915 changed the course of history for the Armenian people, being the climax of their suffering, of their poor governing and also the beginning of the avulsion of their identity consolidated over thousands of years. What it took the Armenian identity 5 millenniums to build, the Ottomans needed a few months to destroy. The Armenian identity can be studied from various perspectives, but for this paper we have chosen the phenomenological perspective that captures the human experience as it was felt and not transposed into a data set. The ethnical cleansing performed by the Ottomans in 1915 has eradicated a third of the Armenian population, has destroyed their spiritual and material values, culminating in the shatter of the Armenian identity.

After being crippled by the Ottomans, their identity remained a myth brought to life by the survivors of the genocide. After having overcome the genocide, the survivors rose stronger, determined to make amends, and so did the Armenian identity.

In a speech for the international conference 'Turkey, EU and the Armenian Question', dr. Fatma Muge Gocek, sociology professor at Michigan University stated 'As Turkish citizen, I don't bare a fault, but I am responsible for what happened to Armenians in 1915'. The meaning of this sentence lies in the fact that the today Turkish citizens cannot be blamed for what happened a century ago, but they bare the responsibility to admit the genocide as being part of their national history. Most Turkish citizens are aware that admitting the genocide is a must, not because it is

the moral thing to do, but because it is an important step in the direction of democratization. They blame the Turkish state for not allowing them to discuss openly about it, especially now when the two states have started the negotiation process; they consider unjust the fact that discussions are held only at highest levels when the issues concern the whole nation<sup>16</sup>.

After a century of silence, Turks and Armenians have the chance to resume discussions, the only precondition being their mutual availability to listen. This could result into the removal of the psychological stereotype that the citizens of the two states created for each other; Armenians will find out that Turks are not the enemy they were taught to hate and Turks will learn that the goal of the life of an Armenian is not the discreditation of Turkey for his/her own benefit<sup>17</sup>.

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16 Public Lecture „Turkey, the European Union and the Armenian Question“, the 12<sup>th</sup> of December 2005, transcriptions, <http://www.zoryaninstitute.org/dialogue/Gocek.htm>, visited 22.09.2014

17 Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan, „Armenia-Turkey Rapprochement: The Most Significant Positive Event in the Region Since 1994 (If it Happens)“, *Caucasus Analytical Digest* (2009), <http://www.css.ethz.ch/publications/>, visited 22.09.2014.