



Taner Akcam

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University of Minnesota



"The Armenian Genocide in the Ottoman Sources"

Wednesday, January 11, 2006
2:30 p.m.
Mershon Center
Room 120



*Sponsored by the Center for Middle Eastern Studies
 Center, the Department of History, and the Mershon
 Center for International Security Studies.*

Taner Akcam is a self-described refugee of conscience and scholar from Turkey. At Mershon, he discussed his research on the years of transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic; in particular, he has focused on the events of 1915 in the Eastern Anatolia region of current Turkey which involved the Ottoman government and the local Armenian population. Akcam called the events that transpired during the WWI the "genocide" of Armenians.

The "Armenian Genocide" is a highly contested issue. On the one hand, the Armenian diaspora which traces its roots to Eastern Anatolia insists that a high number of Armenians were knowingly killed at the hands of the Ottoman authorities. On the other hand, the position of the Turkish government and some scholars is that the deportation of Armenians from Anatolia was not an attempt at genocide. This was a period of interethnic conflict in which many Muslims as well as Armenians lost their lives.

Akcam believes this issue can be best resolved by examining the Ottoman archival materials of the period, though the two sides differ in their view of the Ottoman archives as well. The official Turkish position is that these sources are infallible and foreign sources such as German, British and American accounts of the events of 1915 distort history. Armenians, on the other hand, argue that only the Western archives are reliable and many Ottoman documents have been fabricated. Akcam's position in this debate is that Ottoman archives are reliable. In fact, he argued that though there is evidence that some documents relating to this matter were in fact purged out following the armistice, the archives nonetheless support and corroborate tales of Armenian deportations and killings that are also found in Western sources.

Akcam said that researchers now have unrestricted access to Ottoman archives in Istanbul and the Ottoman documents should be trusted. He argued that his own research in the archives shows a systematic policy of extermination directed at the Armenians in 1915, and discussed seven primary points that support his view.

First, Akcam argued that there was a general population policy in place at the time by the Ottoman government which aimed to expel the Christian Greeks from Anatolia and homogenize the area. Second, there is evidence that the Ottomans acquired maps which showed the ethnic demography of each Ottoman province before the war. This meant that Muslims were no longer treated as one single group, and that the Ottoman government wanted to know the number of Turks residing in proportion to the number of Kurds and Arabs in a given region. Third, the Ottoman Empire implemented a general plan of resettlement which aimed to repopulate the regions cleared of Christians with Muslim immigrants. They also sought to relocate those groups, such as various Kurdish and Arabic tribes, which were potentially problematic for the central authority.

Fourth, the resettlement of the Muslim population began immediately after the expulsion of the Christian peoples. Fifth, the aim of the population (re-)settlement plan was to Turkify the regions. Various Muslim groups were dispersed throughout Anatolia so that they would not hold a strong national identity

and could be assimilated. Sixth, Akcam said Ottoman documents explicitly show that the central government ordered regional authorities to ensure that the relocated group not exceed a certain proportion of the local population. Hence, the Ottoman government kept track of population changes in various regions to enforce this rule. And finally, Armenians were treated differently from other group, said Akcam. He argued that there was clearly a genocidal intent on the part of Ottoman authorities towards them. Letters and telegrams sent by the members of the elite of the governing Union and Progress Committee provide evidence of the plan for the deportation of Armenians and the complete elimination of the Armenian problem.

While some scholars believe that the Ottoman government nor the Ottoman army knew about or participated in any programs to eliminate the Armenian population, Akcam said that this policy directed at the Armenian population was carried out under the plan and supervision of the Interior Ministry. In his view, despite laws passed in this period for the provision of food and settlements for deported Armenians, Ottoman authorities intended for them to never come back and distributed their properties to the new Muslim settlers without compensating the Armenian owners. These funds would be used for social services for the Muslim immigrants, to cover war expenditures, and to contribute to the creation of a Muslim bourgeoisie.

Akcam argued that the principal goal of the ruling UPC was to relocate and eliminate the Armenians from Ottoman regions and create a governable territory under their control. He acknowledged that many Muslim lives were lost during the turmoil of the same period as well as during the ethnic cleansing of the Balkans in the creation of Christian states. But he said that more research needs to be done to ascertain whether there was an active Armenian rebellion in the region during the war to warrant as drastic a response as deportation from the Ottoman authorities.

Taner Akçam, born in the province of Kars-Ardahan in the northeast of Turkey, became interested in Turkish politics at an early age. As a university student, he was involved in the improvement of democracy in Turkey, later becoming editor-in-chief of a political journal. In 1976 he was arrested in Turkey and sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment. One year later he managed to escape and fled to Germany as a political refugee where he focused, among other social issues, on immigrant rights and worked actively in developing dialogue among various ethnic groups in Germany, especially Turks, Greeks, Serbians, Portuguese, and Kurds. He also collaborated with organizations that promoted understanding across religions.

Dr. Akçam received his Ph.D. from Hanover University with a dissertation titled *Turkish Nationalism and the Armenian Genocide: On the Background of the Military Tribunals in Istanbul Between 1919 and 1922*. He has since lectured and published extensively on this topic, with four books and half a dozen articles in Turkish and German. *From Empire to Republic: Turkish Nationalism and the Armenian Genocide* (2004) is his most recent book in English. He has said of his approach to the issues covered in his new book, "Any effort towards democratization in the region today must begin with a dialogue about history and, most importantly, the events that transpired during the transition from Empire to Republic. Scholarly activity has been locked into a cycle of verification or denial of what happened in history, as opposed to analyzing the socio-political and historical factors that allowed that history to unfold." *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility* is forthcoming (May 2006).

For many years Dr. Akçam held the position of Research Scientist in Sociology with the Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung in Germany, and has been Visiting Scholar at the Armenian Research Center, University of Michigan-Dearborn and Visiting Professor at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor. He is currently Visiting Associate Professor in the Department of History, University of Minnesota – Twin Cities.