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The Armenian Genocide in Kurdish Collective Memory

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Within the Kurdish public sphere in Turkey a scattered and fragmented recollection of the Armenian genocide has been transformed over the last 30 years into an increasingly conscious and explicit confrontation with the past. The extermination of Armenians—an inaugural episode of state violence at the foundation of the country—continues to be denied officially.

In contrast, a major segment of the Kurdish political sphere has embarked on public recognition of Kurdish participation in the Armenian genocide based on the diffuse knowledge transmitted for more than a century through Kurdish language and communal memories as well as through traces left in the landscape.

Kurdish collective memory is emerging as a fundamental space of counter-memory where it is possible to document and preserve recollections of the Armenian genocide perpetrated in 1915, as well as to push for its official recognition. The events of 1915—the past that does not pass—still haunt the present. This history resonates not only in the ongoing struggle between the Kurds and the Turkish Republic, but also in intra-Kurdish conflicts themselves. The historiographic approach to memory developed and practiced by the Kurdish movement since the late 1990s, however, is propelling a gradual unification of all the victims of Turkish state violence over the course of the twentieth century through the amplification of their narratives.

Human rights activists hold portraits of victims during a demonstration to commemorate the 1915 mass killing of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, at Sultanahmet square in Istanbul, Turkey April 24, 2017. Murad Sezer/Reuters

Shifting Relations Between Kurds and Armenians

Before the establishment of the Turkish nation-state, Kulp (known in Kurdish as Pasor) was a district in the province of Bitlis. Integrated into what during the Ottoman period was called the Kurdish-Armenian highlands, Kulp lies in a deep valley, a corridor between the lowlands further south and the mountainous areas to the north. It is therefore an important route, especially for the nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes who take their herds to graze in the highlands every year. Historically, it is in the Sassoun hinterland, a region with a high proportion of non-Muslim inhabitants who comprised about one third of the local residents. Prior to 1915, the residents included Kurdish Sunnis, Kurdish Yezidis and many Christians, mostly Armenians. These groups lived in neighboring villages, although mixed villages existed too.

Until the end of the nineteenth century, a patronage relationship existed between the Kurds and the Armenians characterized by a tax regime where the Kurdish tribes imposed a tax (the *hafir*) on their Christian neighbors in return for protection of their villages and pasture areas from the attacks of other tribes. The Kurds and the Armenians of the region were also connected through the fictive ties formed by an institution called *kirivatî*, often invoked nostalgically by today's inhabitants as a metaphor for the happy times of what they consider harmonious cohabitation. The *kirivatî* can be described as an arrangement between a Kurd and his *kirîv,* which made it possible to overcome religious and ethnic otherness and establish a *modus vivendi*.[1] It could be established between two families, or between a leader of a tribe, a landowner (*agha*) or a Kurdish *bey* and an Armenian notable or craftsman, or even certain peasants. *Kirivatî* is an old tradition and existed well before 1915, which fostered mutual respect between the *kirîvs* in religious matters, enhanced daily solidarity and facilitated economic exchanges. This practice, however, should not obscure the reality of Ottoman Armenian life in Muslim-dominated regions, which was mostly characterized by discrimination and oppression, particularly in the Sunni-majority countryside of the Kurdo-Armenian region.

The ambivalence and gradual shift in Kurdish-Armenian relations in Kulp can be linked to certain episodes. Sassoun, for example, is the birthplace of the Armenian revolutionary movement in the 1880s, where the revolutionaries (*fedai*) left memories of admiration for their heroism, as well as condemnation for their betrayal.

Two historic moments of Armenian resistance, in 1894 and 1904, were repressed with bloodshed by the Ottoman army, the Hamidiye Cavalry and local Kurdish tribes. Some of these tribes, such as the Xiyan, took this moment as an opportunity to confiscate Armenian land and property. The participation of Kurdish tribes in the oppression of the Armenians was part of a larger process of cooptation of the tribes by the central government, which played a long-lasting and influential role in forming alliances and creating conflict within Turkey throughout the twentieth century.

The Xiyan tribe, for example, was one of the first to join the village guard system introduced by the Turkish state in the mid-1980s to fight the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).[2]

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The confiscation of Armenian lands, as occurred during the repression of the Sassoun revolts, continued and reached a peak in 1915. The consequences of Kurdish participation in the repression, and then in the genocide of the Armenians, remain tangible. In terms of land, for example, the fate of confiscated properties is a key factor in intra-Kurdish conflicts at the local level. Passed on from generation to generation, these appropriated properties are the symbolic and concrete carriers of persistent greed and conflict. The knowledge of their origin has never been forgotten. In the same way, the possibility of recuperation or revenge on the part of their original owners remains alive in the collective memory. The Turkish state has effectively utilized fears of this threat throughout the twentieth century to recruit local auxiliaries in the Kurdish region, such as some Kurdish notables and tribes with historical links to the central state, to fight on the side of the Turkish army against Kurdish rebels—from the revolt of Sheikh Said in 1925 to the war against the PKK since 1984.

The Persistence of Memory in Language

My own memories, fragments of recollections and perceptions of growing up in Kulp in a Kurdish family are set in this socio-historical context. As a child I heard stories about the Armenians and 1915. Armenians were almost always referred as *kirîvs*. I also heard the phrase "Armenian *fedai*" used to describe specific personalities such as Kevork Çawîş (Kevork Chavush, 1870–1907) in the stories told by my uncle's wife. She also told stories about the terrifying climate of 1915 when the Russian army was marching to the north of Kulp (people at the time were told that this army would kill children, even those in the wombs of pregnant women). I knew that my great-great-grandfather had an Armenian *kirîv* from Cixsê, a neighboring Armenian village. He was described as an honest and industrious man who sent us grapes during the harvest season. My great-grandfather, who was only ten years old in 1915, personally witnessed the dead bodies of Armenians being thrown into the river, which were then looted by the locals.

Once, on their way to Cixsê my great-grandfather and his family ran into a man from our village called Zilfo, who advised them to return. "The *ferman* has been proclaimed. The gendarmes picked up the men in Cixsê and took them to Lice," he told them. The *ferman* was the imperial Ottoman decree to deport the Armenians. Zilfo later joined the paramilitary *cendirmeyên bejik* (local gendarme militia), which played a significant role in the extermination of the Armenians in this region.

When I was a kid, the word Armenian always evoked an imaginary treasure in my mind. Many people believed that the Armenians buried their possessions before they left. At the time I started my fieldwork in Kulp and Silvan in 2013, the hunt for Armenian treasure was still going on. Many churches and monasteries had been excavated and ravaged in an attempt to discover hidden treasures, sometimes under the pretext of transforming them into mosques. While visiting villages for the interviews, I was warned several times not to mention that I was living in France, nor to ask any questions about the properties left by the Armenians. The

villagers, I was told, would suspect that I was there to search for Armenian possessions on behalf of surviving descendants.

Stories about two Armenian women from our village, who were kidnapped and converted during the genocide, left an important mark on my childhood. One is the story of my great-grandmother Ebo, who was 7 or 8 years old in 1915 and who could not forget an image of her mother lying dead on the ground with one of her younger sisters trying to suckle at her breast. Her family had been slaughtered, but Ebo managed to survive. She was captured by a paramilitary fighter from the *cendirmeyên bejik*, who gave her to a man named Suleyman Çawîşê Laz, a native from the Black Sea region and a sergeant in the Ottoman army on the Russian front. He seized many Armenian properties, thanks to his better command of Turkish compared to the locals. By the 1920s and 1930s he was a prominent figure in the local bureaucracy, rich and respected.

The other story concerns Şekir, wife of Kirko, renowned for her extraordinary beauty. Kirko owned many fields and vineyards in their village, Cixsê, and was also the *kirîv* of one of our village's inhabitants, Hamo. Following the *ferman*, they took shelter in Hamo's house to escape the massacres. But one day Hamo and his brother killed Kirko in a riverbed (now called Derê Kirkî) during a hunting trip. After the murder of his *kirîv*, Hamo forced Şekir to marry him and lived with her in her old house in Cixsê since he seized all of Kirko's properties. A few years later, Hamo was murdered by his enemies near the same river. In my childhood, this story was told to me by my uncles or my grandfather every time we passed near Dêre Kirkî, each time adding the comment: "Can you see the parable here? Hamo wasn't killed just anywhere, but precisely where he had killed Kirko."

In many cases, unfortunate events such as a brutal death, illness, infertility or murder that afflict people whose ancestors perpetuated crimes against Armenians are interpreted as a curse and a form of divine justice.[3]

This kind of eschatological grammar appears in the accounts I gathered in my fieldwork in Kulp and Silvan from residents of areas where Armenians used to live and shows how consciousness is processed by a kind of

In many cases, unfortunate events such as a brutal

symbolic confrontation expressed in various ways through superstition, fear, name calling or even silence. The interpretation of events as retribution demonstrates that a diffuse feeling of guilt is still alive in the memories passed on by the elders to the younger generations. Moreover, these memories seem unlikely to fade since traces of 1915 are present in essential elements of everyday life, such as language and landscape. The local topography is filled with material traces of the former Armenian presence and the places of massacre are still there, as well as the remains of looted property and goods such as churches, vineyards, orchards, fields, fountains and mills. As in the case of Derê Kirkî, many places linked to the events of 1915 have names that evoke those memories, like Newala Kuştiya (the river of the death), Korta Filehan (the Armenians' grave) and Şikefta Xwînî (the bloody cave). These names establish the presence of Armenians through their absence, which never ceases to haunt the present.

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Everyday use of certain terms in the Kurdish language not only helps to transmit the memory of genocide from the elderly to the younger generations, it also informs the young about the originating source of the violence and the identity of the perpetrators. For example, one of the most common terms used to refer to the genocide is *ferman* or *fermanê Armeniyan*, which clearly indicates the role of the Ottoman state as the central planners. Another expression in Zazakî dialect, used in my village, is very interesting: *firxûnê Armeniyan*. *Firxûn* is normally used to refer to hunting partridges in winter. If all the members of a group of partridges are killed during the hunt, it is said, *min firxûnê zerecan ard* (I eradicated all the partridges). The term *firxûnê Armeniyan* (eradication of Armenians) used for 1915 refers to the genocidal process, which is characterized by the desire to eliminate all members of a group.

My own interest in this topic was greatly influenced by a conversation with my father following the visit of some neighbors who came to congratulate my grandfather on the success of one of his sons. I was a high school student in the late 1990s when we learned that my uncle had passed the medical school entrance exam—

important news for a small village like ours and an event that deserved celebration. One of the guests, in a flattering tone, told my grandfather: "You can tell that your son drank Armenian milk!" The guest was clearly referring to Ebo, our Armenian great-grandmother. I had several questions for my father after they left: Why did the neighbor say that? What did it mean? My father told me that this double-edged expression used to bother him at school since on the one hand it attributed intelligence to Armenians while on the other it implied that one was *gawir* (unbeliever) or *bavfilleh* (Christian of Armenian origin)—an insult often directed to Armenian survivors of the genocide, who had mostly converted to Islam.

An Explosion of Memory Confronts the Past

In the 1999 general elections, candidates aligned with the Kurdish political movement in Turkey—the cadres and sympathizers of the PKK and the supporters of the legal Kurdish and pro-Kurdish parties, currently DBP and HDP—were elected as mayors and won the majority of city council seats in most municipalities in the Kurdistan region, including Diyarbakır. These gains inaugurated what imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan referred to as a Cultural Revolution. Urban spaces were now seen as the new organizational sphere for the Kurdish movement, where Kurdish past, identity and culture would be explored. At the same time, resolution of the so-called Kurdish question became strongly tied to Turkey's application for membership to the European Union—considered an indicator of liberal democracy and multiculturalism.

Combined with a boom in subaltern studies in the academy, the first decade of the twenty-first century led to an explosion in the public performance of local and minority identities, as well as open confrontation with official state historiography.

In this context, all cultural and artistic events organized in the Kurdish region by the Kurdish movement were shaped by a multicultural perspective, which prioritized a new historiography that represented all identities. The books by the Armenian writer Mıgırdiç Margosyan and the Kurdish writer Şeyhmus Diken had a remarkable impact on discovering and reconstructing the multicultural identity of Diyarbakır, recalling the cohabitation of Kurds, Armenians, Syriacs, Chaldeans, Jews, Gypsies, Arabs and Turkmen in the Suriçi district. Accounts of the past and the tragedies of (great) grandparents became a regular subject at gatherings of friends and in intellectual conversations.

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Inspired by this climate, I decided to work on the so-called Infidel Neighborhood (Gavur Mahallesi), a quarter in Diyarbakır known to be multicultural in the past and a ghetto in the present. I proposed to analyze this transition, which has been taking place since the establishment of the Turkish Republic. I had no knowledge of the period of the genocide, however, and due to my lack of English and French language skills at the time, it was not easy to find information about what happened in Diyarbakır's city center in 1915. Although the discussion around the Armenian genocide was more visible within both the Turkish public and academia, restrictions still prevailed. Despite my ignorance on the subject matter, I used the term *soykırım* (genocide) to refer to 1915 in my master's thesis and was immediately warned by my supervisor to remove it and use *tehcir* (deportation) instead. This incident is a fine illustration of the strong self-censorship at work in the Turkish and Kurdish academy.

In 2013, while pursuing a PhD in anthropology, I studied intra-Kurdish conflict in the 1990s, using oral history as my primary methodology. Over the next five years in the field, more specifically Diyarbakır's Kulp, Lice and Silvan districts, I interviewed a significant number of people of all ages. From the very beginning, I was astounded by the abundance of genocide narratives as vivid recollections and by the closeness of 1915 in my interviewees'

memories. All the violence of the 1990s directed at Kurds by the Turkish state connected in one way or another to the Armenians and to 1915.

A common theme emerged in those interviews that the Kurds were paying the price for their collaboration in 1915, which found voice in the Kurdish expression "*em şîv in hûn paşîv in*" (we are breakfast, you will be lunch). By drawing a connection between the Armenians' victimhood and the Kurds' experience of oppression, this expression is emblematic of the construction, since the 1990s, of what philosopher Johann Michel calls a victim-memorial regime of memory. As opposed to an official memory regime that emphasizes national unity, the victim-memorial regime highlights a plural or fragmented conception of the nation, points out shameful events in a nation's history and pays homage to its victims. [4] In Turkey, Armenian suffering has been included in the Kurdish victim-memorial regime, demonstrating the multi-directionality of memory as formulated by Michael Rothberg where the public articulation of collective memory by distinct marginalized social groups can productively enable other groups to articulate demands for recognition and justice.[5] In Turkey, 1915 becomes a prism for understanding the state violence that unites the different memories of marginalized groups: the Dersim massacres against the Kurdish Alevi community in 1938, torture in the Diyarbakır prison in the 1980s and the atrocities committed against the Kurds during the 1990s.

Although the linking of counter-memories paves the way to recognize the Armenian genocide in the Kurdish public sphere, it does not completely resolve the ambiguity around Kurdish responsibility. On the one hand, memorializing memories that are counter to the official state narrative is connecting Kurds and Armenians as victims of state oppression and is a means of expressing regret by acknowledging that Kurds were passive witnesses to the massacres. On the other hand, it also disguises the active participation of some Kurds in the genocide by only pointing out state violence. Nevertheless, the public revival of memory is an important step for a genuine confrontation with the past.

The End of Memory Work in Turkey?

Since the early 2000s, Kurdish society has undertaken intense memory work.[6] With the joint commitment of memory entrepreneurs in the world of literature, arts, academia and civil society, the Kurdish movement, in the form of municipalities and non-governmental organizations, initiated a major historiographical revision process. A new historiography that opposes existing official narratives has been made possible by intensifying the work of translating research on the Armenian genocide—and other critical histories—into Turkish and Kurdish. Through this process, the fragmented recollections of the genocide have been transformed into a strong counter-memory within the Kurdish intellectual and public sphere. Leaders of Kurdish municipalities have fully embraced this memory work, leading to important symbolic acts particularly in Diyarbakır, such as restoring the Armenian church, renaming streets and erecting monuments. Their efforts have resulted in a radically changed memorial landscape. In 2014, Ahmet Türk, one of the most eminent figures of Kurdish politics and mayor of Mardin at the time, gave a speech in Sweden, publicly apologizing on behalf of the Kurdish people for their partial participation in the genocide:

> In the years 1914–1915, during the execution of these decisions, unfortunately the Kurds were used in the name of Islam. Today, as children and grandchildren of our fathers and grandfathers, we are feeling the pain of their participation in this genocide. We will never be able to forget their suffering. We must never forget. We ask the Armenian and Syriac peoples and our Yezidi brothers to forgive us.[7]

The commemoration of the 1915 centenary in Diyarbakır in April 2015 was the culmination of this process.

It is important to underline the exceptional character of this new discursive and commemorative regime that is publicly deployed in the Kurdish landscape. Granting full space to the history and memory of Armenians and

honoring ethnic and religious diversity instead of denigrating it, is a perilous act in Turkey, where state authority imposes a vision of so-called national unity by combining the massive use of violence with the denial of history.

The explosion of memory work was brutally terminated first with the resumption of the war against the Kurdish movement in the spring of 2015, and then with the coup attempt of July 15, 2016.[8] State, military and judicial violence has once again massively increased, not only in the Kurdish regions, but also against all civil society actors who dare to raise a critical voice in Turkey.

In this assault, none of the individuals or institutions advocating for rights or for confronting the past have been spared. A wave of threats and condemnations has led all emblematic figures of civic and political engagement in Turkey's Kurdistan and beyond to exile or behind bars (for example, the imprisonment of Selahattin Demirtaş, Figen Yüksekdağ, Gültan Kışanak and Osman Kavala, and the assassination of Tahir Elçi).

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Perhaps the most emblematic act in the brutal termination of this memory work has been the physical destruction of the Sur district in Diyarbakır in two stages: First by the army during the 2015 Kurdish youth resistance that demanded self-governance and legal autonomy for the Kurds in Turkey and then by the expropriation and reconstruction policy that followed. This latest ruination of the urban landscape reveals the persistence of the state authorities' obsession with annihilating the Armenian presence at all costs: from the physical annihilation of the Armenians in 1915 and annihilation of their traces and last surviving communities throughout the twentieth century, to the annihilation of the conditions for their rehabilitation as well as of any gesture, practice or speech that aims to pay homage to them.

Despite all the violence of the ongoing memorycide, which is a direct echo of the violence of the genocide itself, it is unlikely that the Turkish state will succeed in forcing people to forget how it established—or attempted to

re-establish—its official truths.[9] History continues to prove that the survival and transmission of counter-memories, as well as the appropriation and amplification effects gained by the multidirectional dynamics of memory, have an astonishing capacity for resilience.

[Adnan Çelik is a postdoctoral fellow at Sciences Po Lille, France.]

Endnotes

[1] Adnan Çelik and Namık Kemal Dinç, *Yüzyıllık Ah! Toplumsal Hafızanın İzinde 1915 Diyarbekir*, (Istanbul: İsmail Beşikci Vakfı Yayınları, 2015).

[2] Adnan Çelik, "Temps et Espaces de la Violence Interne: Revisiter Les Conflits Kurdes en Turquie à l'échelle Locale (Du XIXe Siècle à la Guerre Des Années 1990)" PhD thesis, The School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS), Paris, 2018.

[3] Adnan Çelik, "Cent Ans de Malédiction: La Confrontation Symbolique Relative au Génocide des Arméniens Dans les 'Contre-Mémoires' des Kurdes," in *Le Génocide Des Arméniens: Représentations, Traces et Mémoires* (Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2017).

[4] Johann Michel, *Devenir Descendant d'esclave : Enquête Sur Les Régimes Mémoriels* (Rennes: PU Rennes, 2015).

[5] Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

[6] Paul Ricoeur, "Le bon usage des blessures de la mémoire," in *Les Résistances sur le Plateau Vivarais-Lignon (1938-1945): Témoins, témoignages et lieux de mémoires. Les oubliés de l'histoire parlent* (Éditions du Roure, 2005).

[7] "Ahmet Türk, Ezidi, Süryani ve Ermenilerden özür diledi,"*Radikal Gazetesi*, December 17, 2014.

[8] Regarding the war against the Kurdish movement, see Harun Ercan, "Is Hope More Precious than Victory? The Failed Peace Process and Urban Warfare in the Kurdish Region of Turkey," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 118/1 (2019).

[9] Adnan Çelik, "From Homicide to Memorycide: The Cultural Revolution in Amed Which led to the Decimation of Sur," *The Region* (blog), March 16, 2018.

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