“That much ignorance is only possible with education.”

By Khachig Mouradian

On May 30, long-time human rights activist in Turkey Prof. Baskin Oran received an email from the Turkish Revenge Brigade, a group responsible for the assassination of a prominent human rights activist in 1998. The email included a death threat and swear words aimed at Oran and the Armenians. The text was similar to the one Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink received before he was killed last year on January 19 in Istanbul.

Worried that this interview, conducted in May, could cause more problems for Oran in Turkey, I decided to postpone its publication and shelf the transcript indefinitely. I sent it to Oran, however, with a note explaining my reluctance to publish it. These are my words, he confirmed they will not change because of threats.

Baskin Oran is a regular contributor to Dink’s newspaper, Agos, and to Radikal in Turkey. Unlike Dink, he does not use the term “genocide” when referring to the massacres of the Armenians during World War I. Yet, Oran is not being called “a genocide denier” and is an outspoken critic of the Turkish state’s denial of the suffering of the Armenians. He also believes that Armenian Genocide resolutions in countries like the U.S. make the job of Turkish democrats more difficult when it comes to educating the Turkish public about 1915.

Later, and especially after Turkey’s candidacy became official in 1999, we started reading publications by Taner Akcam and some members of the Armenian diaspora, and we came to learn that a lot had happened in 1915-16.

But, passing of time, the word “genocide” was so frequently pronounced that two parallel alleys developed among us: the first was learning about what happened in 1915 and the second was reacting to the word “genocide.” Because for the Armenians, “genocide” means one thing: 1915. But for the Turks, “genocide” means one thing also: 1933-45. That simply means that Turks felt the Armenians were telling them, “Your grandfather was a Nazi.”

On the other hand, a wing of the diaspora was (and is) trying to obstruct Turkey’s candidacy to the EU. This was (and is) totally unacceptable for us Turkish democrats because this candidacy was (and is) the very occasion that had permitted us to learn things that were concealed from us until then. The laws called “EU Harmonization Package” enacted between 2001-04 have been a benediction for democracy in Turkey, and they were made possible thanks to seeing a light at the other end of the tunnel. By this I mean member- and non-member countries.

To sum up, this is a very typical case of dialectics: The diaspora has taught us, the Turkish democrats, what our “grandfathers” have done, and by the same token the diaspora has prevented (and is preventing) us passing it on to our people. People block their ears (and is preventing) us passing it on to our people. People block their ears when they hear the “g-word.” I personally have no objection to the horrors of 1915 being called “crimes against humanity,” for instance. But this word is definitely counterproductive in Turkey.

The diaspora ended its terrorist tactics in 1995. The outside pressure on Turkey would ease. Any nation-state is cre-
In 1915, Armenians should learn more about the period from the 1800s on. In 1828, the last Qajar Dynasty in Persia was driven out of Christian Rus- sia, upon the defeat of Sheikh Shamil. In a manner of speaking, the Cossacks—Ottoman Empire. The easiest way for them to feed themselves was to pillage people and livestock, and these were the Armenians of eastern Anatolia, who also happened to be Christian. Although the Ottoman State had only enough food for its own people, the Kurds started doing the same. The Kurdish tribal leaders had revolted (1806–43) against the centralizing policies of the Tanzimat and were beaten at the end. The last and most powerful of them, Bedirhan Bey, was exiled to Crete. Then, the Kurds lost their tribal hierar- chy and, as a consequence, started to cut the herds that laid golden eggs instead of continuing to do what they had been doing for centuries: collect the golden eggs once a year, meaning collect the ‘wealthy protection money’ from the Armenians who were much wealthier and much weaker than the Muslims. But this did not work.

Under the pressure of the emigred Circassians and the Kurds, the Armeni- ans made their grievances known to Istanbul—to the Armenian Patriarchate and the Amir (the Armenian bour- geoisie and nobles who were in very good terms with the Russian tsar) and to the sultan. Neither of them cared. The Patriarchate would care only after Khrimian, from Sivaz, became Patriarch (and this is why the Armenian question is also the product of a class struggle). The sultan would have cared, but he was in an even worse situation than the Patriarch. He could not possibly give the Kurds, for instance, the Monarchical protection that he was protecting the non-Muslims against the Muslims, especially because the Muslims of the empire were already very much in favor of the Western course of Tanzimat. Also, the Western powers had happily started using the grievances of the eastern Anatolian Armenians to interfere with the domes- tic affairs of the empire: The famous “Eastern Question” became nothing but the “Armenian Question.”

In this mess, the Armenian petty bourgeoisie waspredated with nationalist and also pan-national/pan-ethnic ideology in places like Saint Petersburg, Paris, Geneva, etc., found that the only way of surviving was to set up revolu- tionary bands and parties, and attack Muslim villages. This further provoked both the Muslims of eastern Anatolia and the sultan. Whether or not they intended to, the Armenian revolution- aries perfectly remained the adminis- tration in Istanbul of the “Bulgarian Model,” i.e., the tactics of setting up armed clashes to attract the attention of Paris, Geneva, etc., found that the only way they could find a solution by founding in the country.：<br>

“The state kills when there’s an armed rising. But the Ottoman state was harsher; when it was only a matter of distress, espec- ially if they were considered as being an ‘instrument’ of the outside Christian powers. I must remind you that the latter used the ‘Eastern Question’ and then for- got all about the Armenians in the Treaty of Lausanne.

Everything was made even worse when the CUP entered the scene, adding its Turkish and even Turco-Tatar nationalism to the list of grievances. The Armenians were together to annihilate the Armenians, starting with the panic prevalent in the minds of the CUP officials. As the result of the Balkan War of 1912 especially, the empire had shrunk to a mere Anatolia and to the sultan. Neither of them cared. The Patriarchate would care only after Khrimian, from Sivaz, became Patriarch (and this is why the Armenian question is also the product of a class struggle). The sultan would have cared, but he was in an even worse situation than the Patriarch. He could not possibly give the Kurds, for instance, the Monarchical protection that he was protecting the non-Muslims against the Muslims, especially because the Muslims of the empire were already very much in favor of the Western course of Tanzimat. Also, the Western powers had happily started using the grievances of the eastern Anatolian Armenians to interfere with the domes- tic affairs of the empire: The famous “Eastern Question” became nothing but the “Armenian Question.”

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