

Historian challenges politically motivated 1915 arguments

An interview with Hilmar Kaiser, a prominent German historian

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The general tendency to debate the events of 1915 – the killings of Anatolian Armenians during World War I – by employing politically motivated theories on the nature of these events stands as a barrier between the peoples of Armenia and Turkey, preventing them from adequately airing their deep, almost century-old grievances.

Prominent German historian Hilmar Kaiser is presently in Ankara carrying out research in the Turkish archives. In an interview with Sunday's Zaman this week, Kaiser says the field of history "is flooded with political advocates who are less historians than opinion-formers," drawing a picture full of gray areas, showing there is still ample room for research on the 1915 events.

In the 1990s, Kaiser was working exclusively in İstanbul and that period, he was only granted access to the Ottoman archives, which were under special regulations, and had been declined permission to carry out his research in any other library or archive by the then-Tansu Çiller government. Today, however, Kaiser believes that there aren't any issues as far as access to the state archives is concerned.

"Two weeks ago, I was in Washington, D.C., presenting my research and photos at an Armenian Assembly [of America] conference, and I suggested that if they are looking for a good director for their archives and genocide museum, they might consider hiring Yusuf Sarıay, the head of the Turkish state archives, or Mustafa Budak, the head of the Ottoman archives. These are two highly qualified people with vision, determination and commitment. Some people were surprised, but I was very serious about it," says Kaiser.

"Yes, there are still problems, but having said this, I should immediately add there are problems everywhere. The important thing is there is a process in place to overcome these problems. It's a huge administration, and encountering problems is part of the daily work. I can only say that, as far as I'm concerned, and I know the same for many, many researchers — both Turkish or foreigner — that they have had exactly the same experiences. If there is a problem, it's immediately addressed and resolved. That's all you can ask for. Turkey has gained a lot of credit with its new archive policy, and it will gain more credit if the present government would support the archives more strongly with additional funding," he notes.

Historical research and reassessments

Kaiser is critical of colleagues who prefer doing their work without researching the context of original documents and thus making "reassessments" of certain theses — one of which is that the İttihat ve Terakki (Committee of Union and Progress) had a racist motivation, acted premeditatedly and had developed a systematic extermination policy during the 1915 events.

"One should stop thinking of the [Committee of Union and Progress] CUP as a kind of monolithic party. Research on the Armenians in WWI has tended to try to create the impression of a Turkey that was like a small version of Nazi Germany, with a single party and with a poor man's SS named Teşkilat'ı Mahsusa. I think this is totally wrong; one has to study the Turkish-Armenian case on its own. Yes, there were some people within the CUP inspired by European positivists, who were partly racist, but thinking that this was not the general party line. That racism was not the driving motive behind the Armenian policy is quite

clear because if you compare it to the German racism, you cannot explain the survival of tens of thousands of Armenian women and children in Muslim houses, even in the government orphanages. This would have been completely impossible if the government had been inspired by the German type of racism," says Kaiser.

"People like to compare Young Turk-Turkey to Nazi Germany, but it is not a comparison; they equate it. A comparison should also stress the fundamental differences," he continued. "Racism as well as Muslim fundamentalism were not driving forces. Some allege that Islam was very conducive to large-scale massacres of Armenians. It's totally illogical. If Islam is very conducive to large-scale massacres of Armenians, why were they here for 600 years? Second, why did the survivors survive in Muslim societies in the Middle East?"

'Ridiculous' mega explanations

There is a major argument over demographic planning, suggesting that it was planned by the Committee of Union and Progress and culminated in the Armenian relocation.

Kaiser stresses demographic planning is as old as the Ottoman Empire, starting in the 14th century.

"There has always been demographic planning — before and after 1915. One has to establish a direct link between the policy against Armenians and demographic planning, more specifically that the demographic planning was a motive behind the policy. I'm very skeptical about this. Demographic planning played a role, but let's be realistic: When you have tens of thousands of Muslim refugees from the Balkans and from the Russian border areas camping in the open and you start deporting Armenians, and you have access to empty houses, what do you do with it? Of course, you use it. To make the claim that this was the driving force behind the deportations is, in my view, wrong because it cannot explain the timing of the deportations. This demographic argument is in a way a substitute for a blueprint," he asserts.

"People who believe there was more some kind of long-term planning, like since 1909 or 1912, have had a problem in showing a concrete link between what happened in 1915 and these alleged earlier plans. So we are faced now with a lot of substitutes after the earlier arguments had been dismantled. Yes, demographic planning is very important, but is not the driving motive. Not in my research; I haven't found any convincing proof — on the contrary, the evidence points in different directions."

Kaiser also is opposed to those who depict the Committee of Union and Progress and the Ottoman army as homogeneous bodies.

"Yes, the CUP was a nationalist group, but it also included very religious groups. These people cannot be united. They obviously put on a straight face in public, like some politicians do today. And even if you're a Turkish nationalist, that doesn't make you a killer. There were people who were famous Turkish nationalists like Halide Edip; she advocated assimilation of Armenians, but she very strongly opposed any kind of murder. On the other hand, this opposition against it was not just limited to nationalists; it also included anti-CUP opposition, for example, from the Liberal Party. Believe it or not, this opposition that concentrated on Cemal Pasha in the area of the Fourth Army cooperated — there is proof for this — with the Armenian underground against Talat," he explains.

"Let me say something more radical: The one person who saved most Armenians in World War I was nobody other than Cemal Pasha. That this hasn't been discussed so far is just due to the fact that we have a couple of political problems with the whole thing, and our field is really flooded with political advocates who are less historians than they are opinion-formers. We have reports from German navy officers who were on the staff of Pasha because he was also minister of the navy. Sometimes when he saw abuse of Armenian deportees, he just let the official be hung on the spot, he didn't even wait for it. There are many, many Armenian sources about this as well, like memoirs. On the other hand, one should not be too romantic about it."

And cheap political arguments

Kaiser also has crucial notes suggesting that the Turkish Republic was built by killers, and the alleged “Armenian genocide” was the founding act.

“Then you can also find other founding acts like the defeat in the Balkan Wars. I mean this is nonsense. You have to establish a direct link. The Armenian population base was destroyed, and look around Turkey today: It’s obvious, and this had a strong impact, but the republic wasn’t founded on this. This is very important; it was a part of the environment that the republic was founded in, and as far as I can see, I haven’t found anything from contemporary sources that would suggest that Mustafa Kemal was involved in the killings. The only thing I found is that he was very much opposed to it, very outspoken at the time. But that later his opinions about Armenians changed has something to do with the war in the Trans-Caucasus and then the Soviet-Turkish problems. But what we were told about what happened in 1915, 1916 does not lend itself to any kind of interpretation that Kemal followed any policy that was not dignified for a Turkish officer.

“Coming to the army — the Fourth Army, they have resisted. We do have a problem with the military; this is the Third Army because it is there where the big killing took place. The problem with the Third Army is that you have a kind of ‘çorba’ [soup in Turkish] among political officers who owed their quick advancement to positions of prominence to their party connections, or their dependency on Enver Paşa. These people were not very much liked by the standard career officers who had earned their position on merit.

“Secondly, you have all sort of elements of the so-called Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa, the special organization operator, and I remind you I was able to identify some of these units who were killing Armenian villagers before even Sarıkamış. So there you have elements and players that had been already active under Abdulhamid. They were just continuing that trade under a different name.

“We need precision in research and these mega explanations — the army, the Turks, the Muslims — this is simply ridiculous, and this is only useful if you want to make a cheap political argument, which I don’t.”

Sources

Source : TDZ, 22 March 2009