

The Armenian Genocide and Germany's Ignominious Role in the Past and Present

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Five years ago in the Bundestag (German parliament), a noteworthy debate took place on the parliamentary motion presented by the CDU/CSU (Christian Democratic / Christian Social Union) faction. It dealt with a crime that had been committed 90 years earlier, and had cost the lives of 1.5 million Armenians. The motion was entitled: "Remembrance on the Occasion of the 90th Anniversary of the Beginning of the Expulsions and Massacres of the Armenians on April 24, 1915, Germany Must Contribute to Reconciliation between Turks and Armenians," and the parliamentary faction had agreed beforehand on 45 minutes for the discussion. In the course of the debate, all the speakers stressed that "their main concern was to contribute to understanding and reconciliation between Turks and Armenians on the basis of the historical truth." Apparently, the Bundestag factions had agreed not only on a precise time limit for the discussion, but also, at the conclusion, to formulate a cross-party motion aimed at ensuring that their mission as mediators of "understanding and reconciliation" would lead to success. They were also in agreement that the elimination of 1.5 Armenians should not be designated as genocide. In June 2005, the cross-party motion was passed, in that the Bundestag expressed regret for "the deeds of the Young Turk government of the Ottoman Empire, which led to the near-total extinction of the Armenians in Anatolia." The "ignominious role of the German Empire" was also recalled, "which, in view of the diverse information on the organized deportations and elimination of the Armenians, did not attempt even once to stop the atrocity."

"These people have been sacrificed for the sake of Turkey"

After the European Parliament back in 1987 had established in a resolution "that the tragic events that took place in 1915-17 were directed against the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire, constitute genocide in the sense of the Convention for Prevention and Punishment of Genocide voted by the General Assembly of the UNO on Dec. 9, 1948," several national parliaments (most recently in Sweden) followed this example and also designated the crime as genocide. Although imperial

Germany – as the Bundestag simply had to admit – had played an “ignominious role” in the genocide during World War I, the Bundestag evaded taking any position on this question until 2005. However Germany did not assume its “ignominious role” first in 1915, but already in the years 1895-96, when massacres took place under the reign of Abdul Hamid, during which about 300,000 Armenians were killed. In a speech in the Reichstag on April 1913, Eduard Bernstein recalled how the imperial government, following the Berlin Congress of 1878, increasingly became a reliable ally of the Turkish ruler and provided backing for his bloody policy: “Since the Berlin Treaties of 1878 on the basis of Art. 61, Turkey has been duty-bound to create orderly conditions in Armenia which would give the population a certain self-government and protect it against the violence of the Kurds and [Turkish] officials. The Armenian population does not strive for separation from Turkey, it does not even desire provincial autonomy. Its demands are as modest as possible, and despite this they have not been met. Those who bear the guilt for the fact that they have not been met are Russia and Germany. When, in the 1890s, an outrageous slaughter took place, when Armenians after that were massacred in Constantinople, the ambassadors met and the cabinets of the governments of France, England, the U.S., Austria, and Italy agreed to force Turkey to finally implement the decision of the Berlin Treaties which it had accepted. And who was it at the time who supported Abdul Hamid's resistance? It was above all the German Empire. In order to maintain its warm friendship with Turkey, the German Empire saddled itself with the blame for further butchery. This population, the first people – they do after all call themselves Christian – who introduced Christianity there and with indescribable sacrifices upheld it, this people has been sacrificed for the sake of Turkey.”(1)

When, in 1908, the Young Turks deposed Sultan Abdul Hamid with a “revolution”, it seemed for a time that Germany would lose its influence in the Ottoman Empire. The Armenians cheered the “Young Turk revolution” and hoped that now the reforms promised at the Berlin Congress would be implemented. But very soon, an extremely nationalistic, reactionary, and pan-Turkist current asserted its hegemony in the Young Turks. Germany's influence grew again thanks to the Germany military mission. It was thanks to Talaat and Enver Pasha – two key figures in the Young Turk leadership – that the Ottoman Empire entered World War I on the side of Germany. Interior Minister Talaat and War Minister Enver Pasha numbered among those most responsible for the crime against the Armenians.

**“... to keep Turkey on our side until the end of the war,
no matter whether or not the Armenians go under.”**

In the Bundestag debate in April 2005, the CDU parliamentarian Christoph Bergner stated: “Actually, dear colleagues, the debate on the fate of the Ottoman Armenians could have taken place here in the Reichstag back in 1916. Not far from here, Johannes Lepsius informed the press on Oct. 7, 1915. But Germany military censorship prevented the diffusion of his Report on the Situation of the Armenian People in Turkey. So the debate did not take place.” Bergner failed to mention the fact that Karl Liebknecht had presented a parliamentary question in the Reichstag on Jan. 11, 1916, to obtain information from the government about the events in the Ottoman Empire. Liebknecht made explicit reference to the information spread by Johannes Lepsius on the deportations and massacres. “Is it known to the Imperial Chancellor that, in the course of the current war in the allied Turkish Empire, hundreds of thousands of Armenians have been driven out of their places of residence and slaughtered? What steps has the Imperial Chancellor taken with the allied Turkish government to bring about the necessary atonement, to ensure humane conditions for the remaining Armenian population in Turkey, and to prevent the repetition of similar slaughter?” This is what Liebknecht wanted to know from the government. A representative of the Foreign Ministry answered: “The Imperial Chancellor is aware that the Sublime Porte, compelled by rebellious activities of our enemies, recently relocated the Armenian population out of certain regions of the Turkish Empire and settled them in new places of residence. Due to certain effects of these measures, an exchange of views is taking place between the German and Turkish governments. Further details cannot be communicated.” In the Reichstag there was neither interest in a debate, nor in “further details of the exchange of views” between the two governments.

The German Foreign Ministry was fully informed of everything that went on in the Ottoman Empire. The numerous documents kept in their archives prove this. They provide a precise picture of the total dimensions of the crime.⁽²⁾ Among these documents is a note from Imperial Chancellor Berthmann Hollweg, from December 1915, which leaves no doubt about what was of primary interest to the imperial government and the military leadership: “Our only aim,” Berthmann Hollweg noted, in reference to a report by his ambassador in Constantinople, “is to keep Turkey on our side until the end of the war, whether or not the Armenians go under as a result.” ⁽³⁾

Ninety years passed before the Christian Democrats of all people took the initiative to put the crimes against the Armenians on the Bundestag agenda. In the cross-party motion that was passed on June 15, 2005, the crime was, however, not named by name. The CDU parliamentarian Pflüger was convinced, as he stated, "It will not impress the Turks very much if we take the decision here, as other parliaments have done, that we are also of the view that it is genocide." The German parliamentarians could more easily impress the government in Ankara if they called upon the German government to "intervene for the establishment of a historians' commission, in which not only Turkish and Armenian scholars would participate, but also international experts." With this move, one of Ankara's main demands was accepted. The Turkish government honored this willingness to cooperate by renouncing its otherwise usual threats, protests, and diplomatic rituals which would have followed an official recognition of the Armenian genocide. The nationalistic Turkish associations in Germany had merely expressed their displeasure with the debate, through a signature collection initiative, but carried out no further protest actions.

"The German government openly represented the official standpoint of the Turkish government"

With a 45-minute debate and a resolution which was kept within acceptable limits for Ankara, one of the most gruesome chapters of the 20th century would have been closed, had not the Left Party (Linkspartei) presented several "small questions" to the government, questions which are raised and answered in writing (Kleine Anfragen – KA). On March 19, 2007 this parliamentary faction inquired about the "consequences of German co-responsibility for the Armenian genocide" (4) and wanted to know if the German government were ready "to promote politically and support financially a process in Germany of examination and analysis of the genocide, committed solely to the historical truth, especially in cooperation with Turkish and Armenian scholars." "The German government welcomes all initiatives which serve further examination and analysis of these historical events. An evaluation of the events of this research should be carried out by historians." Such was the response of the German government.

In a successive question on July 7, 2008, the Left wanted to know what concrete steps had been taken since passage of the motion so that "Armenians and Turks may work through [the historical record] to achieve reconciliation and forgiveness for the historical responsibility?" (5) The German government's answer again

stated: "The German government welcomes all initiatives which serve further examination and analysis of the historical events of 1915/16. An evaluation of the results of this research should be carried out by historians." Finally, the Left faction presented a question on Feb. 10, 2010, which explicitly asked whether or not the German government evaluated the Armenian massacres of 1915/16 unequivocally as genocide, in accordance with the UN Convention of 1948. The Foreign Ministry answered with the well-known words: "The German government welcomes all initiatives which serve the further examination and analysis of the historical events of 1915/16. An evaluation of the results of this research should remain reserved for scholars. At the same time, the German government is of the opinion that the examination and analysis of the tragic events of 1915/16 is above all a matter of concern for the two countries affected, Turkey and Armenia." Cornelia Pieper, Undersecretary in the Foreign Ministry, simply repeated almost verbatim what her predecessors had answered in regard to similar questions on this matter since 2001: "The German government is of the view that the question of the Armenian massacres of 1915/16 is essentially a historical question and thus an subject for the science of history and in the first place a matter for the affected countries, Armenia and Turkey." This was the answer of the Red-Green (SPD Social Democratic Party/Green Party) government in March 2001 to a question presented by the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism). No matter who is in the government, no one wants to talk about the genocide against the Armenians.

To deal with question related to this apparently uncomfortable subject, the Foreign Ministry has found a very practical solution: The Bundestag resolution contains the following statement: "Germany, too, which contributed to the suppression of the Armenian genocide, is duty-bound to face its own responsibility." Whereas the European Parliament, other national parliaments, scholars, and scientific institutions have long since qualified the crime against the Armenians as genocide, the government in Berlin stubbornly insists on the standpoint that the events of 1915/16 still have to be examined and analyzed, and the results of research must be evaluated by historians. Katrin Werner, a member of parliament from the Left Party, wrote in an open letter to the Foreign Ministry: "With this position, the German government is very openly representing the official standpoint of the Turkish government." In the „Armenian question“, no other position would ever be taken. And there can be no discussion of working through Germany's complicity in the Armenian genocide, which was openly admitted in the 2005 Bundestag debate – Fritz Kuhn had even called for an apology to the Armenians. The most recent position of the German government shows rather that attempts will continue to evade any responsibility.

1) Reichstag, 139 Session, April 14, 1913

3) Wolfgang Gust, Der Völkermord an den Armeniern 1915/ 16, Dokumente aus dem Politischen Archiv des deutschen Auswärtigen Amts

4) Bundestag-Drucksache 16/ 4750

5) Bundestag-Drucksache 16/ 9965