

RENEWAL AND SILENCE - UNIONIST POLICIES AFTER WORLD WAR I

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PRELIMINARY VERSION WITHOUT ANNOTATION. NOT FOR QUOTATION

Introduction: Refugees, Muslim nationalism and Anatolia

Slightly over twenty years ago I published my first book, called *The Unionist Factor*. The theme of the book, as some of you may know, was the continuity between the Young Turk period in Ottoman history and the history of the early republic. It charted the way in which leading members of the Committee of Union and Progress had taken the initiative for the national resistance movement after World War I and the way in which Mustafa Kemal Pasha gradually managed to take over this movement and concentrate power in his own hands by eliminating his former Unionist colleagues.

Generally, the book was received quite favourably, both in Turkey (after its Turkish translation appeared as *Milli mücadelede İttihatçılık*) and abroad. One day, an Armenian friend and colleague of mine brought to my attention a review in an Armenian journal (which he had kindly translated) that, although on the whole quite favourable, was critical on one important point. In the eyes of the author of the review, the analysis of the power struggles within the Unionist/nationalist camp lacked a historical context. In the words of the author, I had “depicted figures in an empty landscape.” He referred, of course, to the persecutions of the Armenians and their aftermath in Anatolia.

At the time, I thought the criticism misplaced. Although I had no intention of denying the Armenian “holocaust” (to quote Bernard Lewis), my book simply had not been about that. It was about something else. Later, however, I came to realise that the reviewer had been right. Study of the ideological changes that occurred in the period between 1908 and 1928 made me aware of the degree to which identity formation in the period had been defined by the opposition between Muslims and Non-Muslims, a process in which the ethnicization of religious identity had ultimately resulted in the emergence of a fierce Ottoman-Muslim nationalism. As Deringil and Yavuz have shown, the foundations for this had been laid during the reign, and through the policies, of Sultan Abdülhamid II, but it was the ten-year period of war between 1912 and 1922 that gave rise to mass mobilisation on this basis.

This mass mobilisation was effected by a Young Turk leadership, both civilian and military, that overwhelmingly hailed from the Balkan provinces and the Aegean littoral. Although they are never denoted as “muhacir”(refugee), a term reserved for lower class migrants, many of them were in effect refugees after the loss of the Dodecanese to Italy in 1911-12 and the Balkan War of 1912-13. The

same is true for the first generation of leaders of the Republic of Turkey. In the years that followed they had to grapple with this trauma and find a new basis for their identity and they did so in different ways. From 1913 onwards we see four different types of reaction to the loss of their ancestral lands, which were not mutually exclusive and in fact often overlapped: 1. irredentism: perhaps surprisingly, this was relatively subdued, although the hope of recovering at least some of the lost territory did play a role in the decision to go to war in 1914; 2. Panturkist escapism: the loss of a real empire in the West certainly encouraged dreams of a virtual empire in the East, especially after war with Russia had broken out, but to my mind the importance of Panturkism in the events that followed has been drastically overstated by Armenian scholars; 3. Resentment: there is no doubt that the resentment against the Christian minorities that had been growing since the Eighteen Sixties and had become very tangible after the constitutional revolution (as Murat Belge and Halil Berktaş have shown), was given a strong impetus by the sometimes blatantly disloyal behaviour of the Christian communities in the Ottoman Empire during the Balkan War; 4: the discovery of Anatolia as the true Turkish fatherland. There had been a rise in interest in Anatolia since the constitutional revolution, but after 1912 it was embraced as the true home of the Turks even, or perhaps primarily, by those (like Mustafa Kemal Atatürk or Şükrü Kaya) who had been born and bred in South-Eastern Europe and discovered their new homeland when in their thirties. The same can be said for the smaller but also influential group of immigrants from the Caucasus and the Black Sea littoral.

The combination of resentment against the Ottoman Christian communities and the adoption of Anatolia as the new homeland caused a determination to make sure that Anatolia was and would remain an Ottoman-Muslim land and thus directly to the policies of ethnic cleansing that started in the summer of 1914 with the expulsion of the Greeks from the coastal areas in the West.

In the post-war environment, when the carve-up of Anatolia by the Entente and their Greek and Armenian clients seemed imminent, the leaders of the resistance movement that emerged from November 1918 onwards again had recourse to mobilisation on the basis of an ethnicized religious identity. The dominant discourse of the movement between 1919 and 1922 is one of “us” and “them”, in which the other is defined as the Non-Muslim. In fact, as I have argued elsewhere, it is precisely in the post-war era, under Mustafa Kemal’s leadership, that Muslim nationalism reaches its climax, something illustrated and symbolised by the text of Mehmet Akif’s strongly Islamic Independence March of 1921, which paradoxically went on to become the national anthem of the secular republic.

In ideological terms there is thus a great deal of continuity between the period of 1912-1918 on the one hand and that of 1918-1923 on the other. This should come as no surprise: After all, even though the top echelon of the Committee of Union and Progress had been smuggled abroad by the Germans or was interned in Malta by the British, the cadres of the national resistance movement almost without

exception consisted of former Unionists, who had been shaped by their shared experience of the preceding decade.

In other words, and to turn back to where I started, I must now concede that my Armenian reviewer was right: one can only fully understand the post-war policies of the former Unionists who made up the national resistance movement by taking into account the experiences that shaped them in the preceding period. Of these, the persecution of the Armenians is no doubt the most important one. Leaving this out indeed risks turning the nationalist leaders into figures in an empty landscape.

Time, then, to look again at the impact of the Armenian massacres on the post-war attitudes of the Unionists. I want to do this by looking at their public statements in order to establish to what extent an effort was made either to distance themselves from, or to justify, the ethnic policies of the war years. After all: if this was the defining moment in their immediate past, they would have to deal with it one way or another, when trying to find a new role.

Post-war Unionist organisations

The activities of the Unionists in the post-war environment can be brought under three headings: the activities of the secret underground networks, both in the capital and in Anatolia that can be regarded as a continuation of the activities of the equally secretive *Committee* of Union and Progress; the activities of Unionist parliamentarians in new parties and parliamentary groupings that can be regarded as successors to the *Party* of Union and Progress (the C.U.P.'s parliamentary party that was ostensibly merged with the committee in 1916) and finally the embryonic national resistance movement that was to a large extent based on the local branches and Unionist *clubs* in the provincial centres. Of course, individual former Unionists quite often played a role in more than one of these.

The Unionist underground

Underground networks trying to prepare for the post-war situation became active as soon as the armistice had been concluded. Members of Enver Pasha's "Special Organisation" (*Teşkilati Mahsusa*), especially those of Circassian origin, seem to have formed the backbone of these networks.

The most important of the networks was *Karakol* (The Guard), founded in October 1918 at the behest of Enver and Talât Pashas. This network smuggled quite significant amounts of weaponry and equipment as well as a large number of people to Anatolia in the period between November 1918 and March 1920. Many of those smuggled to Anatolia were people who not only brought vital skills to the emerging resistance movement but who could also be expected to be arrested for alleged war crimes. In 1919-20 *Karakol* also nursed political ambitions, trying to determine the course of the national resistance in Anatolia and establishing independent relations with the Bolsheviks.

Obviously, underground organisations like *Karakol* have to be judged on their actions as they did not produce public statements. They therefore fall outside the purview of this paper.

The heirs to the Party of Union and Progress

Two political parties were clearly identified at the time as being heirs to the old Party of Union and Progress, which had dissolved itself at its final congress on 5 November 1918: the Renewal Party (*Teceddüt Fırkası*) and the Ottoman Liberal People's Party (*Osmanlı Hürriyetperver Avam Fırkası*).

The Renewal Party was founded by the Unionists present at the final C.U.P. party congress on 9 November 1918. The party officially denied that it was a continuation of the C.U.P, but it did take over all the assets of the C.U.P, both in terms of organisation and its tangible assets such as real estate (the clubs) and cash.

The party published a detailed party programme (prepared by a commission during the C.U.P.'s last party congress), containing 175 articles on all aspects of internal and external policy. This is in some ways a very interesting document. In part it reads like a constitution, not as a party programme at all, suggestive perhaps of the degree to which the Unionists had come to identify themselves with the state. The first 33 articles describe the principles underpinning the Ottoman state order and its main institutional elements. It deals with issues like sovereignty, the role of the dynasty, state religion and language and the fundamental rights of the citizen. The party itself is not mentioned even once in this whole section.

The document is also interesting in the way it presages some of the later reforms of the Kemalist republic. Article 22 announces the abolition of all civilian honorary titles. Article 54 calls for the introduction of a national anthem, an official name and arms for the state (all of which the Ottoman Empire never had). The next article, 55, states that the constitution will be modified to comply with the principles of national sovereignty (*hakimiyeti milliye*) and parliamentarism. This of course reminds one of the Law of Fundamental organisation, adopted by the assembly in Ankara in 1921, with its famous first article "Sovereignty belongs unconditionally to the nation." Article 70 calls for a reform of the calendar, 96 for the introduction of family names and 118 for a reform of the Turkish language. Improvement of conditions in the countryside is sought through the reclamation of marshland (article 130) and the abolition of the tithe (159), precisely in the way the republic was to do. In other words: the party programme of the Renewal Party is quite an elaborate and also a forward looking document, which announces a number of bold policy initiatives. It also seems to be totally divorced from reality. There is no mention of the war, of the dire economic circumstances of the country or, indeed, of the persecution on the Armenians. Security of life, honour and property is emphasized as a common right

of all Ottoman citizens and the rights of minorities are guaranteed (articles 3-6) but no mention is made of any past transgressions, let alone of the need to deal with the past and punish the culprits.

The Liberal People's Party had come into being as the result of a split within the C.U.P. It was founded in mid-October 1918 by Mustafa Kemal's old friend Ali Fethi (Okyar) and Hüseyin Kadri, the member of parliament for Karesi, who, together with a small group of Unionist parliamentarians, announced their departure from the C.U.P. Although all its members had a Unionist background and were even invited to the last party congress of the C.U.P. after they had split off, the Liberal People's Party was not a successor of the C.U.P. in the sense that it took over C.U.P. assets as the Renewal Party did.

The Liberal People's Party, too, published a very detailed (94 articles) party programme immediately after its foundation. Like that of the Renewal Party, its first sections are strongly reminiscent of a constitution and describe the state order rather than formulating any party policies. In the rest of the document we encounter many of the elements that we have seen in the programme of the Renewal Party, although it lacks the more radical reform proposals of the latter – surprising, perhaps, if one bears in mind that Mustafa Kemal was close to the party and even became co-owner of the party newspaper *Minber* after his return from the Syrian front. Like the programme of the Renewal Party, that of the Liberal People's Party seems to have been drawn up with great care, but in complete isolation from the realities of the day. Those realities – rocketing inflation, severe shortages, displaced persons, mass desertions - are not mentioned and there is no call for any kind of reckoning, redress or persecution of the culprits. This is perhaps more surprising in the case of the Liberal People's Party than in that of the Renewal Party, as Ali Fethi's group had officially and openly resigned from the C.U.P. and thus could be expected to feel more freedom in this respect.

Both parties were closed down on the orders of the government in May 1919 because they were considered direct successors to the C.U.P. but they were quite active and vocal in parliament and outside it in the early months of 1919.

The Anatolian Resistance Movement

By the time the parties were closed, the efforts to organise a resistance movement in Anatolia, based partly on the network of Unionist clubs and branches and partly on the infrastructure of the army, were well and truly underway. As we know, the Congress of Sivas (4-11 September 1919) was the first attempt to unite all the regional resistance initiatives in a common national front. It was there that the Society for the Defence of the National Rights (a reference to President Wilson's Fourteen Points) of Anatolia and Rumelia was founded. The congress was dominated by people with a Unionist background, but like the parties discussed earlier, those present made a point of denying any

continuity between the Committee of Union and Progress and themselves, even going so far as to swear a solemn oath that they would not revive the C.U.P.

The formal declaration of the congress formed the basis of the nationalist programme that was officially adopted by the final Ottoman parliament as the “National Pact” four months later. Unlike the documents produced by the parties in Istanbul, this declaration was very much focused on the actual events and circumstances of the day. What did this text have to say about the Armenian issue? The text refers to the Armenians and Greeks explicitly in article 3 and implicitly in article 4. Article 3 states that struggle against the attempts to found independent Greek and Armenian entities (*Rumluk ve Ermenilik*) on Ottoman soil is legitimate and article 4 promises equality before the law to Non-Muslims, but rejects the reintroduction of the capitulations.

It could be argued that the document deals with the current situation and with political goals and that it is therefore natural that it should not refer to the events of the immediate past. One could, however, expect the issue of the persecution of the Armenians to come up in the discussions on the oath not to revive the C.U.P. This oath was debated quite seriously, opinions being divided between those who merely wanted to swear not to work for personal gain or party political interests and those who expressly wanted to mention the C.U.P. Some of these last-named persons, like Bekir Sami Kunduh or Rauf (Orbay) referred to the “Unionist nightmare” and to the “disasters to which the C.U.P. had led the country” while others like Mehmet Şükrü said that the C.U.P. had had an exalted idealist programme, which still commanded respect in the greater Turkic and Islamic world and that it would be unjust to reject its legacy just because of the misdeeds of a few individuals. Ultimately, the argument that there was a great deal of suspicion in the country that the congress would revive the C.U.P. and that it was therefore necessary publicly to vow not to do so, carried the day, on the understanding that the oath would be valid only for the duration of the congress. The interesting point is that nowhere during these discussions was the treatment of the Armenians mentioned, not even by those who were most critical of the C.U.P. The same is true for Mustafa Kemal’s opening speech at the congress, which set out the necessity of organising national resistance. He mentioned the Armenians but only to say “In the East the Armenians have begun their preparations to expand their state up to the banks of the Kızılırmak and even now their genocidal policy has started to reach our borders.”

This set the tone. In the first public speech Mustafa Kemal gave after establishing his headquarters in Ankara in December 1919, again warned about the dangers facing the country both from the victorious Entente and from the Non-Muslim minorities, and especially from the combination of the two. He firmly rejected the idea that the Turkish nation was an oppressor (*zalim*), praised the tolerance shown

by the Ottoman Muslims in the past and had this, and only this, to say about the Armenian massacres during the war:

“Whatever has befallen the Non-Muslim elements living in our country, is the result of the policies of separatism they pursued in a savage manner, when they allowed themselves to be made tools of foreign intrigues and abused their privileges. There are probably many reasons and excuses for the undesired events that have taken place in Turkey. And I want definitely to say that these events are on a level far removed from the many forms of oppression which are committed in the states of Europe without any excuse.”

All the classic elements in the defence of violence are here: They asked for it; it was not really so bad and anyway, others have done the same and worse.

Conclusion: the dog in the night-time

In a sense the outcome of these findings resembles Sherlock Holmes' famous “curious incident of the dog in the night-time”. In other words: when we scan the policy documents of those post-war organisations that had a clearly Unionist character for references to the persecution of the Ottoman Armenians barely two years earlier or for attempts to either express regret or justify the events or unequivocally distance the said organisations from them, we draw a complete blank. As is well known, there were those in the postwar Ottoman environment who did call for the culprits of the genocide to be brought to justice. These were not limited to the Liberal opposition (people like Ali Kemal). They also included the Young Turk eminence grise Ahmet Rıza, but the two parties that directly sprang from the bosom of the C.U.P. did no such thing. Both the Renewal Party and the Liberal People's Party came up with detailed, one might even say, remarkably mature policy documents, but one looks in vain for a single reference to the treatment of the Armenians in the immediate past. This is the more surprising for Fethi Okyar's Liberal People's Party, as that group was a dissident grouping that had broken away from the C.U.P. before its last party congress. The same is true for the leadership of the national resistance movement in Anatolia. The language employed with regards to the Armenians and Greeks where their political or territorial claims are concerned, in Erzurum, Sivas and Ankara is quite uncompromising and references to the events of 1915-16 are completely lacking save for the one very severe statement of Mustafa Kemal in Ankara, quoted in extenso above.

In this respect, Halil Berktaş's argument, which he put forward in newspaper interviews in Turkey, that Turks do not have to fear a reopening of the debate on the Armenian issue, because the republic is clearly distinct from the late empire and Mustafa Kemal “has never spoken in support of the genocide”, sounds rather weak. When it mattered, 1918-20, Mustafa Kemal never spoke out against the genocide either and he surrounded himself with people, his own bodyguard Topal Osman among

them, who were quite notorious for having blood on their hands. His keynote address in Ankara in December 1919 put the blame squarely on the victims.

Taner Akçam in a recent article argues that the attitude of the Turkish nationalists after the war can be explained by the fact that the British at the same time conducted an aggressive imperialist policy aimed at the destruction of the empire AND took the initiative in opening the case against the people responsible for the genocide, so closely identified the two that supporting the legal persecution of the Unionists became an unpatriotic act by association. His argument is that a different policy on the part of the British, which would take seriously the national aspirations of the Turks, might have allowed Mustafa Kemal's nationalists to distance themselves from the Unionists who were responsible for the genocide. I have to say that I very much doubt if this is realistic. After all: the party programmes of the Renewal Party and the Liberal People's Party (with which Mustafa Kemal was associated) date from before the arrival of the British. Still, both parties denied themselves the opportunity to distance themselves from the crimes committed during the war. The Unionist underground organisation *Karakol* was founded as early as October 1918 to smuggle arms and people to Anatolia with the twin aims of strengthening any future resistance and to keep those who were at risk of arrest out of the hands of the British. It thus linked the two elements of national resistance and sabotaging the persecution of Unionist officials right from the start. Also, when Mustafa Kemal finally decided to deal with the remaining Unionists and eliminate them once and for all, in the show trials conducted in the summer of 1926, they were fiercely attacked by the Independence Tribunal before which they had to appear for the way they had dragged the Ottoman Empire into World War I and for their behaviour in the after-war years, but not for their ethnic policies. In other words: when an effort was made to publicly disgrace the former Unionist leaders, the treatment of the Armenians apparently was not considered something to disgrace them with in the eyes of the Turkish public.

I fear that it was simply impossible for Unionists in 1918-19 to distance themselves to visibly from the crimes of 1915-16 and those who had committed them. Those crimes formed the culmination of a period in which the population had been mobilised by the Unionists themselves on the basis of a Muslim-Ottoman identity, which was formed in continuous and conscious opposition to the Ottoman Christians. The Unionists depended on this sentiment for their grass-root support and could not afford a break with the past. This was as true for Mustafa Kemal and his men in Anatolia as it was for the politicians in the capital. Therefore, the silence of the post-war documents on the issue does not, I think, indicate a conspiracy of silence, an effort to cover up the past. Nor does it indicate that the Armenian massacres had become a taboo. Quite simply, I think the most logical explanation is that for an effort to generate political support among the Ottoman Muslims, whom they clearly regarded as their constituency (witness Rauf Bey's statement in Sivas: "the aim of the Defence of Rights Association is to unite the Muslim population"), was counterproductive and thus politically irrelevant.