ARCHIVAL RESEARCH

Organizing Oblivion in the Aftermath of Mass Violence

If the Party could thrust its hand into the past and say of this or that event, it never happened—that, surely, was more terrifying than mere torture and death.1

By Ugur Umit Ungor

Over the last decades, there has been an upsurge in the study of memory. Scholars have studied how memory, especially historical narrative, is produced, consumed, transformed, and transmitted by social groups. This burgeoning field of research has yielded a large amount of knowledge about the nature of memory and mass violence.2 In the context of mass violence, memory bears special significance as perpetrating regimes always seek to control, destroy, and prohibit a range of memorial practices related to the violence. One commentator on the relationship between memory and mass violence is Tzvetan Todorov, who identified at least two strategies that totalitarian dictatorships have used to manage and control memory: the erasure of the traces of the crimes and the intimidation of the population. Both of these policies include the control over knowledge, for example the prohibition of collecting and spreading information.3 Paul Connerton’s analysis of how totalitarian regimes have used memory as a tool of power is noteworthy:

“The attempt to break definitively with an older social order encounters a kind of historical deposit and threatens to founder upon it. The more total the aspirations of the new regime, the more imperiously will it seek to introduce an era of forced forgetting...A particularly extreme case of such interaction occurs when a state apparatus is used in a systematic way to deprive its citizens of their memory. All totalitarianisms behave in this way; the mental enslavement of the subjects of a totalitarian regime begins when their memories are taken away.”4

In totalitarian dictatorships, undoubtedly the most violent regimes throughout the 20th century, the democratic dissemination of narratives and the free exercise of memorial practices is prohibited. Instead, the population is enveloped in a cognitive system of official propaganda including the denial and cover-up of the regime’s atrocities. The famous works of George Orwell, Primo Levi, and Milan Kundera are but three examples of literary representation of memory control under Nazism and Communism.5

The decade from 1912 to 1922 saw unprecedented levels of mass violence in the Ottoman Empire. War, genocide, forced migration, famine, flight and displacement had deeply affected the fabric of society and scarred the memory of all participants and witnesses. After so much violence in the Ottoman territories, it was only logical that hundreds of thousands of people were physically wounded and psychologically traumatized. Demobilized soldiers came home with frightening stories of mass death, entire neighborhoods had been emptied, families had lost their male populations, widows were begging by the roadside, miserable orphans were roaming the streets naked. Despite the self-healing ability of families and communities, the violence had caused severe lasting damage to the psychological development of the region and society at large. But in comparison to Nazi Germany (1933–1945) and Stalinist Russia (1924–1953), the study of their contemporary, the Young Turk dictatorship (1913–1950), has lagged behind in empirical treatment, theoretical analyses, and normative assessment. Research on Young Turk memorial practices are no exception to this rule.6 This article will draw on examples from Diyarbekir province in an attempt to problematize the memory-scape of the Young Turk regime and argue that it is characterized by silencing—not only of their perpetration of mass violence but also of their victimization.

DESTRUCTION OF MEMORY

How did the Young Turk dictatorship deal with their legacy of violence? First of all, it needs to be understood that their policies regarding memory was not static but fluctuated. A poignant illus-
teration of the vicissitudes of Young Turk memory politics was the representation of the Greco-Turkish war. In March 1922, Mustafa Kemal denounced the "atrocities" of the "Greek princes and generals, who take particular pleasure in having women raped." The general continued to decry these acts of "destruction and aggression" that he considered "irreconcilable with humanity" and most of all "impossible to cover up and deny." But after the establishment of the Republic, the tide turned and the accusatory tone of moral indignation was dropped. The 1930s saw a diplomatic rapprochement between Turkey and Greece as relations improved with the signature of several agreements and conventions. By then the Greek Premier Panagis Tsaldaris (1868–1936) visited Turkey in September 1933, the same Mustafa Kemal now spoke of the Greeks as "esteemed guests" with whom the contact had been "amicable and cordial." Throughout the interbellum, the Turkish and Greek nations were portrayed as having coexisted perennially in mutual respect and eternal peace. Friendly inter-state relations in the service of Turkey's acceptance and stabilization into the nation-state system had gained precedence over old griefs, without any serious process of closure or reconciliation in between.

Lacking statehood, the Armenians and Syriacs were not accorded the same treatment as Greeks. They were either deeply traumatized survivors living in wretched refugee camps or terrified individuals keeping a low profile in ruined villages. The Kemalist regime continued the CUP policy of effacing physical traces of Armenian existence on all fronts: Architecture was defaced, destroyed, and rid of engravings. Although the Armenians were gone, in a sense they were still deemed too visible. In Diyarbekir city, an important stage of the erasure of memory was the razing of its Armenian cemeteries. One of the main men who were responsible for the destruction of the local Armenians, Muftuzade Abdurrahman Seref Ulug (1892–1976), who had become mayor after 1923, ordered the erasure of one of the city's last vanishing Armenian landmarks two decades after the genocide. That this was not merely a function of "urban modernization" but a willful expunction of the Other's memory appeared from the fact that not only on the west side (where "modernization" was carried out) but also on the east side of town, Armenian cemeteries were either willfully neglected into oblivion, outright flattened, or used as paving stones for floors or roads. Obviously, no relative ever had a say in this process, since most deportees and survivors were peasants living undercover or in Syria. Another critical event that marked the erasure of memory was the collapse of the church, Sourp Giragos. In the 1960s, the roof collapsed into the deserted building and in subsequent decades the structure languished, was stripped of its assets, and neglected into misery.

For the same reasons, the Diyarbekir Armenians had no chance of writing and publishing memoirs. Thus, the production of memory among them did not take off until much later or until the next generation(s). The killing and displacement brought by Young Turk rule created an archipelago of nuggets of memory spread across the world. Well before groups of survivors could formulate narratives about what had happened, a master narrative was being constructed by the perpetrators. In one of his speeches in parliament, Interior Minister Sukru Kaya (1883–1959) asserted that:

"... it has been the livelihood of certain politicians to foster the notion that there is an eternal enmity between Turks and Armenians... Turks and Armenians, forced to pursue their true and natural interests, again instinctively felt friendliness towards each other. This is the truth of the matter... From our perspective the cordiality expressed by the Armenian nation towards us has not diminished."

Such an assessment of Turkish-Armenian relations in the wake of the genocide (nota bene by one of its organizers) was to be expected only from a political elite pursuing a distinct memorial agenda. Ever since its rise to power, the Kemalist dictatorship continued the CUP policy of suppressing all information on the 1915 genocide. When the regime caught wind of the memoirs of Karabet Tapikyan, subtitled "What we saw during the deportation from Sivas to Aleppo" (Boston: Hairenik, 1924) the book was prohibited from entering Turkey for "containing very harmful writings." Marie Sarrafian Banker, a graduate of the Izmir American College, had written her memoirs in 1936. Her book, too, was prohibited entry to the country. All existing copies were ordered confiscated and destroyed for containing "harmful texts." When Armen Anoosh, an Armenian survivor living in Aleppo, wrote his memoirs titled The history of a ruined city: Urfa the volume was prohibited from entry and existing copies that had found their way into the country were ordered confiscated.

At times the policy extended beyond the prohibition of genocide memoirs and included "normal" history books. When Turkish customs intercepted Arshak Alboyajian's classic two-volume History of Armenian Kayseri (1937), sent from Syria to Istanbul by surface mail, it was ordered confiscated, destroyed, and prohibited. An Armenian-language book published in Cairo in 1940 on the small town of Bahcecik was prohibited simply for the fact that it produced a history of a region that fell under Turkish national jurisdiction. What is striking about these prohibitions is that they generally limited themselves to the Turkish Republic. For the regime it did not matter much that Armenians wrote and circulated memoirs among themselves—as long as memory was produced and consumed within an Armenian milieu and did not trickle back into Turkey. One of the exceptions to this rule was the September 1935 incident between the United States and Turkey over plans by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer to film Franz Werfel's novel The Forty Days of Musa Dagh. After strong diplomatic pressure from the Turkish embassy, the idea was abandoned. The Young Turks had already officially prohibited the book itself in January 1935, two years after the Nazis. The same fate befell Paul du Véou's less fictional book on the Musa Dagh Armenians on the eve of the Turkish annexation of Hayat province. That book, too, was blacklisted and barred from entry to the country. The regime did not want these narratives to enter local history and memory, on which they claimed a strict monopoly.

All in all, the mass violence of the first decades of the 20th century was repressed and ousted from public memory through silence, amnesia, and repression, rather than reflection, discussion, processing, and memorialization. What is striking about this process is the fact that the violence that was repressed was not only that in which the Young Turks had been perpetrators, but also that in which they
had been victims. A whole century of Ottoman-Muslim victimization in the Balkans, in particular during the severely traumatizing Balkan wars, was dismissed and forgotten in favor of “looking towards the future” and amicable inter-state relations with neighboring countries. The Young Turks assumed that society and man himself are completely malleable, that no crumbs of memories remain after shock and trauma, and that people can and will forget. After all, they themselves had tried to bury the unpleasant memories that would come to haunt Turkey decades later. Those minorities who were victimized by their regime, such as the Armenians, Kurds, and Syrians, did not have a chance at healing their wounds or memorializing their losses. The new memory of the nation did not permit cracks, nuances, shades, subtleties, or any difference for that matter. Much like the new identity, it was total, absolute, and unitary.

CONSTRUCTION OF MEMORY

The Turkish nation-state that was constructed after 1913 needed, as all nation-states, national myths.26 According to Ana Maria Alonso, “power and memory are most intimately embraced in the representations of official histories which are central to the production and reproduction of hegemony.”27 These official histories are prepared for “creating a usable past, which is a hallmark for collective memory.”28 Nationalist political elites in particular have used official histories to craft the nation-state’s memory to their desire as historians are often appointed by the regime to this end.29

The function of these new histories is the construction of a logic of a “national narrative,” of which Victor Roudometof defines four characteristics: First, the narrative is a “quest for origins” according to which the researcher’s task is to trace the beginnings of a people as far back in history as possible. Second, it aims to construct continuity among the different historical periods, thereby showing the preservation of the culture, tradition, and mentality of the nation. Third, it seeks to identify periods of glory and decline, including moral judgements regarding the actions of other collectivities vis-à-vis the nation. Finally, narratives are always a quest for meaning and purpose, the identification of the nation’s destiny revealed in the progression of history.30 While silencing certain memories and narratives, the Young Turk regime produced other memories and narratives. During this process of defining and fine-tuning national memory, again the violent past was muted.

One of the most exemplary history books ordered to be written by the Young Turk regime was prepared by the regime propagandist Bedri Gunkut. It was unimaginatively titled The History of Diyarbekir and was published by the Diyarbekir People’s House. In his study, Gunkut ascribes a universal Turkishness to all of the regions of Diyarbekir province, harking back to the Assyrian era. But unlike previous books, Gunkut’s study went to far greater lengths to identify “Turkishness” and erase all non-Turkish cultures from Diyarbekir history. His book is worth examining it in some detail. The second chapter was titled “History” and “began” history with the Sumerian era: “The Turkish nation, which was living the world’s most civilized life even in Prehistory, fled westwards 9 to 10,000 years ago due to natural and inescapable reasons and undoubtably also passed through Mesopotamia and the vicinity of Diyarbekir…”31 Gunkut went on to state that “the nation to first have eked out a civilized existence in the Diyarbekir area is the Turkish nation.” He did not deviate from the party line when portraying the myths of origin: “Despite temporary invasions and destructions by the Assyrian, Persian, Greek, and Roman regimes, the great Turkish race has always lived in this country.”32 Through the lens of this particular foundational myth, the origin of Turkish culture was located so early in history that it was lost in the mists of not real but mythic time, which symbolized the timelessness of the nation. Under the title “Stories about the foundation of this city,” Gunkut reviewed nine historical narratives about the “origins” of the city: the Akkadian, Persian, Assyrian, Arab, Parthian, Greek, Armenian, Hittite, and Turkish theses. The author evaluated all myths and dismissed, with increasing severity, disapproval, and contempt, one by one, the first eight theories. For example, according to Gunkut, “the claim that Amid was founded by Arabs can be nothing else than a lie, a ludic fabrication by Arabs and arabophiles.” Out of disdain, the names of non-Turkish ethnic groups were consciously and consistently written not with a capital but with a small letter: The literature spoke not of Kurds, Arabs, and Armenians, but of kurds, arabs, and armenians. As a grand finale, Gunkut repeated the Young Turk mantra: “Diyarbekir city has never lost its Turkishness, its National Existence and has always remained Turkish.”33

After ignoring six centuries of Ottoman history, Gunkut leapt straight to the first decades of the 20th century. His historical portrayal of the Young Turk era of violence is most striking. In a region in which more than 100,000 Armenians were destroyed, this author pioneered the denial of the genocide: “In the Great War, this region was saved from Russian invasions and armenian massacres and arson.” With the massacres of the 1925 Kurdish conflict only a decade ago, Gunkut’s narrative on that episode of mass violence was more elaborate. The Kurdish resistance to the regime was almost exclusively attributed to conspiracies from outside: Its leader Shaikh Said (1865–1925) was portrayed not as a member of the Kurdish intelligentsia or elite but as “an extremely ignorant fanatic…who became the tool of foreigners…with several other uncultured vagabonds.” The narrative then took a turn towards misinformation as Gunkut argued that the Kurds had “committed bloodcurdling atrocious acts in Lice and Silvan,” where they had purportedly “monstrously dismembered young Turkish patriots.”34 In this remarkable reversal of the historical account, all violence in Diyarbekir had been committed by the Armenians and Kurds against the Turks. Misrepresentation could only be called so if there was a body of knowledge to counteract it. Whatever counter-narratives were being produced abroad in any language, the Young Turks did not allow them to compete for consumption by the population. Especially when it came to the violence, the dictatorship held hegemony over memory politics and debates over the past.

With its obviously varied architecture, Diyarbekir needed symbolization and discourse for the retrospective “Turkification” of its cityscape as well. Gunkut went on to claim that no other culture than the Turkish one had ever contributed to Diyarbekir’s architectural heritage. Writing about the Behram Pasha mosque, he denied: “Nowadays whether in or on the building there is no single trace of persian and arab work,” accusing anybody claiming “that Behram Pasha was an arab” of “fabricating this from scratch.” The author then explored the architectural history of the Great Mosque, an
Orthodox church which was converted to a mosque following the Muslim capture of Diyarbekir in 639 AD. He attacked noted Ottoman historians, observers, and travelers such as Evliya Celebi for noting that the minaret had been a bell tower, concluding, “In short, no matter how one interprets this, it is not likely but absolutely certain that this mosque was built by the Turks.” Although Gunkut simply ignored the Syrian Orthodox and Chaldean churches, and Jewish synagogues of Diyarbekir, his depiction of Armenian heritage was most radical: “Above all, I can state with absolute certainty that nowhere in the entire city there is even a single trace of armenianness to be found.”

**DISCUSSION**

**T**his article discussed how the Young Turks silenced the violence in the politics of memory they pursued during their dictatorship. By meting out a new identity for the country, the Young Turks also needed to mete out a new memory for it. During the 1920s and especially 1930s, the Young Turk treatment of the past ranged from the organization of oblivion regarding the traumatic past and construction of an official narrative that included heroic and eternalized images of the nation. All throughout the country, but particularly in the eastern provinces, orders were given to write new local histories. These official textbooks, nationalist canons, and city histories did not only impose broad silences on critical historical issues, but they banished all ethnic minorities out of (regional) histories. The significance of Young Turk hegemony in memory politics cannot be overestimated. In a peasant society where illiteracy figures were as high as 80 percent, the official texts were not only the first ones the population would read, they were also the only ones available to the population. The organization of a hegemonic canon through exclusion and inclusion aimed at the formation of a “closed circuit of knowledge.” This act precluded the possibilities of a participatory memory and identity formation, especially in the eastern provinces. The regime warded off both external penetration and internal criticism of their belief system by banning and destroying texts on a scale perhaps only matched by the Soviet dictatorship. “Turkishness” was measured by the level of exposure to that body of knowledge as subsequent studies of cities and regions were to quote the “classics” of Young Turk historiography in order to be “scientific” enough to be allowed to be published.

Memory is closely linked to identity as every identity requires a memory. By mass educating several generations of citizens, the memory that the regime instilled in official Turkish identity became relatively solidified. A “recivilizing process” of unlearning Young Turk culture and memory such as in Germany never took place after the Young Turk dictatorship lost power in 1950. Therefore, the Armenian-Turkish conflict is very much a conflict of memory: Armenians wish to remember a history that Turks would like to forget. This would not have been a problem if memory was not a core component of identity. Therefore, loss of memory entails a loss of identity, something fundamentally problematic for many people. Since these constructed memories are a prime component of group identity, both Armenians and Turks experience any deviation of that memory as a direct attack on their very identity. Turks who express a sincere, agnostic interest in history are accused of having a dubious (read: Armenian) ethnic background. Then, according to the paradigm of nationalism, any deviation from the official memory automatically implies a deviation from the identity, which in its turn disturbs social closure in the group. A conflict of absolutely exclusive memories has expanded to a conflict of absolutely exclusive identities.

“Turkey denies the Armenian Genocide” goes a jingle in genocide studies. Indeed, the Turkish Republic’s memory politics towards the Armenian Genocide was and is characterized by denial. But, not unlike the genocide itself this too was part of a larger campaign, namely to exercise all violence from the memory of society. This imposition of collective amnesia on Turkish society was a double-edged sword. The Young Turks never commemorated and memorialized the massive tragedy of their expulsion from the Balkans but chose to move on and look towards the future. Here, too, silences were imposed on society: no sane Turk would dare to call Mustafa Kemal a refugee from Salonica, which he was nevertheless. Moreover, Turks do not perceive Macedonia or Epirus as the Germans view Prussia or Silesia. There is relatively little nostalgic tourism and Turkish nationalism in principle excludes claims on territories beyond the borders of the Republic. It remains a challenge to describe this process of amnesia and explain why this was the case, but one can sketch at least one omni-nomological scenario of counter-factual history with reference to this issue. The call for Turkey to remember the past, captured in Santayana’s now hackneyed dictum that those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it, needs to be uttered with care. It might be argued that Turkey’s interwar burial of the past was a blessing in disguise that facilitated neutrality during World War II. The example of Germany, another country that had lost territories as a result of losing World War I, could have easily found a pendant in a bitter and vindictive Turkish-nationalist offensive on the Balkans, the Caucasus, or the Middle East—depending on what side Turkey would be on. In the age of total war and mass violence against civilians, this is a sequence of events that was fortunately spared the population of those regions.

The most powerful symbol of the silences imposed on the mass violence of the Young Turk era must be the strongly fortified citadel in the northeastern corner of Diyarbekir city. Many urbanites and neighboring peasants revere this ancient redoubt as one of the most important historical monuments of their country. The stronghold stands on a small elevation overlooking a meander in the Tigris River. It is impressive if only because of its position: both the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic built their state apparatus in the compound to instill a long lasting deference. Anyone who comes here, enticed by one or another historical narrative, is at least vaguely familiar with Diyarbekir’s record of violence and assumes history to be dormant within these dark, crumbling walls. The compound shelters the governorship, the provincial court, and most notably the infamous Diyarbekir prison. The latter building might be considered as the single landmark of mass violence in Diyarbekir: In it, Bulgarian revolutionaries were incarcerated in the late 19th-century, Armenian elites were tortured and murdered in 1915, Shaikh Said and his men were sentenced and executed in 1925, various left-wing activists and Kurdish nationalists were kept and subjected to torture during the junta regime following the 1980 military coup, and PKK members were tortured and frequently killed in the 1990s. Up to the year 2000, it housed the security forces of the Turkish war
machine including gendarmerie intelligence operatives and special counter-guerrilla militias.

This sad account of Diyarbekir’s central prison reflects the city’s century of violence, during which at no time was any of the violence commemorated in any way at any of the sites. In the summer of 2007, the area had been cleared of security forces—and was being converted by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism to an open-air “Ataturk Museum.” The future of the past remains silent.

END NOTES
6 A recent volume dealing with this subject, although a notable exception, does not deal with the treatment of memory by the Young Turk regime itself: Esra Ozyurek (ed.), The Politics of Public Memory in Turkey (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2006).
9 For a study of Turkish-Greek rapprochement after 1923, see Darla Demirozuz, Savastan Bar’sa Giden Yol: Ataturk-Venizelos Donemi Turkiye-Yunanistan Iliskileri (Istanbul: Iletisim, 2007).
12 For a website commemorating Sourp Giragos, see www.surpgiragos.com
15 Basbakdan’k Cumhuriyet Arşivi (Republican Archives, Ankara, hereafter BCA), 030.18.01.02/46.49.5, Prime Ministry decree, June 10, 1934.
17 BCA, 030.18.01.02/79.82.14, Prime Ministry decree, Sept. 28, 1937.
18 BCA, 030.18.01.02/118.98.20, Prime Ministry decree, Feb. 10, 1949.
19 BCA, 030.18.01/127.95.11, Prime Ministry decree, Dec. 31, 1951.
20 BCA, 030.18.01.02/95.60.3, Prime Ministry decree, July 10, 1941.
22 BCA, 030.18.01.02/51.3.2, Prime Ministry decree, Jan. 13, 1935.
25 BCA, 030.18.01.02/90.12.7, Prime Ministry decree, Jan. 25, 1940.
26 Anthony D. Smith, Myths and memories of the nation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
32 Ibid., p. 27.
33 Ibid., p. 45.
34 Ibid., pp. 144–5.
35 Ibid., pp. 122, 133–5, 141.
36 Ibid., p. 156. This discourse of total denial of anything Armenian was reproduced in Kemalist texts on the districts of Diyarbekir as well. One author wrote that Armenian existence in Ergani “had not had the slightest significance.” Muhtar Korukçu, “Ergani’in Zulkif Dag,” in Karsacadag vol. VII, no. 85–86 (December/January 1945–1946).