

TODAY'S ZAMAN

Leading historians object to Akçam's anti-methodical construction of Armenian memory *by Tal Buenos**

The myth of Sarkis Torosyan tells the story of a patriotic Ottoman Armenian who graduated from the military academy and went on to fight against the enemies of the Ottoman state in World War I. Stationed as a captain in the Battle of Çanakkale, also known as the Gallipoli Campaign, he excelled in his duty and heroically defended the peninsula and the Ottoman capital against the Anglo-French naval onslaught. It is Torosyan, the story goes, who sank several enemy vessels, among which was the first British battleship. At the end of the battle, it is said that in appreciation of his superior bravery and leadership, Torosyan was awarded an official Ottoman war medal by none other than Enver Paşa, the war minister.

He then moved on to fight in Romania, and there, again, was awarded a medal of honor, this time by Abdülkerim Pasha. In 1917, after being fully dedicated to the Ottoman cause, and while on the Syrian battlefield, Torosyan learned that the Turks had broken their promise not to deport his family. Brokenhearted over being betrayed by the same Ottoman leadership that had just praised him for his incredible heroics, Torosyan rushed to the rescue of his sister whom he eventually found in the Arabian desert. Having lost dear family members in the deportations, he proceeded to successfully avenge their deaths by bringing defeat upon the Turks and earning more medals of honor, this time from the British and the French.

This grandiose tale was told in the published memoirs of Torosyan, written in Massachusetts in the 1920s, amid a political push by Armenians in the United States to influence matters of Armenian sovereignty in the Caucasus. Nowhere else was it told, and there was no evidence to support it.

An attempt to politicize history

Nearly a century has passed, and from the same distant state of Massachusetts, and for the cause of the same Armenian political agenda, came

an attempt by Taner Akçam, and his extension in Turkey, Ayhan Aktar, to politicize history. An important difference between the cases of Torosyan and Akçam is in the level of scrutiny they each receive: Torosyan was an unknown individual; Akçam is a well-known historian. The Torosyan memoirs offered a myth of political service to the Armenian narrative; Akçam offers his services as an historian to turn the politically laden myth into a piece of history.

The political capital of the Torosyan story is the following: It offers a perception that counters historical facts regarding Armenian rebellion prior to the World War I deportations, and it does so by presenting a narrative of an Armenian who was the very opposite of a rebel -- a stout defender of the Ottoman barely beating heart -- and who only fought against the Turks in the name of justice after they had betrayed his trust and harmed his family. Torosyan's character reflects a positive image of the Armenian, with traits such as innocence, loyalty, integrity, bravery, resilience and determination to succeed, whereas the Turk is absolutely vilified. Therefore, if this myth is taken seriously as a historical document, it is expected to lend a hand to the Armenian political mission at Turkey's expense. This, then, is the political pretext that motivates Akçam's brand of work. For him, so it seems, history is in the service of today's politics.

Unfortunately for Akçam, this does not sit well with actual historians of the late Ottoman period. When Aktar's edition of the Torosyan myth, "Yüzbaşı Sarkis Torosyan: Çanakkale'den Filistin Cephesi'ne" (Captain Sarkis Torosyan: From Çanakkale to the Palestinian Front), came out last year, the presentation of the myth and its long reintroduction by Aktar failed to meet the methodological criteria expected of an academically sound historical work. In the name of his profession and historical decency, Hakan Erdem, a historian from Boğaziçi University, who is known to hold left-leaning views, wrote "Gerçek ile Kurmaca Arasında: Torosyan'ın Acayip Hikayesi" (Between Fact and Fiction: The Peculiar Story of Torosyan) to great effect. This started a chain reaction of solidarity among historians, in particular late-period Ottomanists.

Interestingly, the most vocal of them are not nationalists, but liberals. Aktar desperately sought to appeal to a wide Turkish audience, and toward that end he even omitted comments that Torosyan made against Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in the original text so as not to lose public support. Instead, however, he has lost the trust of a wide spectrum of scholars. The momentum, which started with Erdem's critique, was then picked up by two professors from Boğaziçi University: Edhem Eldem, who wrote an article on the matter for *Toplumsal Tarih* in February, and Halil Berktaş who used his platform as a columnist for *Taraf* to address this issue. Their critique is apolitical, and it not only resents the idea of politicizing history, but also the anti-methodical ways in which both Akçam and Aktar have attempted to promote the historicity of this myth.

For example, the question of the authenticity assigned to Torosyan's war

medals has been brought to the fore. This involves the certificates of decoration for the Dardanelles and Romania. While one of them is signed by Enver Paşa, the other one is signed by Abdülkerim Paşa. However, a close study of the two documents has shown that they were both written by the same person, and that person is neither of the two. It is thought to have been the same person because both certificates show the same handwriting and the same phrases; it is thought to have been neither of the two, and not even an Ottoman citizen, because the two documents show errors and awkward phrasing that simply do not fit the terminology of the period. This combination of similarities, errors and the similarity of errors has led Ottomanists to conclude, rather convincingly, that the two certificates are inauthentic. In addition, with regards to the Romanian certificate, Erdem has found evidence, based on American documents, that Torosyan entered the United States in 1916 and could not have been in Romania during that time to earn a medal of honor.

Stooping low to create a narrative

To make matters worse, in reaction to the strong criticism, Akçam stooped as low as to utilize Torosyan's granddaughter, Louise Shreiber, in order to receive from her a confirmation that the Torosyan narrative is historically accurate and that the medal certificates are authentic, as if any level-headed historian would accept a two-generations-removed relative as an authority in the matter. However, while Akçam has reduced himself to a blogger who belittles the strong position of established Ottomanists, and while Aktar was circulating emails to create an illusion of support for Akçam's online posts, Turkish public opinion had already overwhelmingly accepted that Torosyan's narrative is a myth, and if presented as a piece of history, then it is a fake one.

The power of the historians' erudition, and their solid arguments, reaching audiences through mediums such as book reviews and TV shows, even persuaded the publisher of Aktar's book to avoid reprinting it as there was no longer a market for it.

Yet, despite what is known about the failed authenticity of the Torosyan story, the website of the Armenian museum in Yerevan dedicated to the Armenian memory of the massacres still exhibits an English translation of a fake certificate that is falsely signed under the name of Enver Pasha. This is so, because of two main reasons: Political agenda, by its very nature, is not inclined to always consider historical decency; also, quite significantly, although the Turkish public has witnessed an open and learned discussion of the fallacies surrounding the Torosyan narrative, this concerning issue has not received its due attention outside of Turkey.

There are significant questions that are begging to be raised in the United States, where typically the standard of professionalism in academic fields is

among the highest in the world: Why are false presentations in the field of late Ottoman studies not subjected to the same level of scrutiny as other fields of study in the US?

How is it that Akçam, who is discredited as an historian by Ottomanists for having no solid background in Ottoman Turkish, continues unchallenged to present himself in the US as an expert in the field?

Why is there no debate in the US over whether the Zoryan Institute, which was established in Massachusetts and is accountable for publishing much of Akçam's work, is sponsoring anti-methodical scholarship?

How is it that Armenian memoirs from the 1920s, written in the US, of which the Torosyan narrative is one example, pass for history simply because they serve the Armenian political cause?

The full realization in Turkey over the Torosyan narrative will not suffice. If the questions above remain unasked in the US, not to mention unanswered, then history, as it pertains to Ottoman and Armenian memory, and as a profession, will continue to suffer at the hands of those whose commitment is not to historical methodology, but to political ideology.

**Tal Buenos, an Israeli, has a master of theological studies from Harvard Divinity School (2005).*

2013-04-11
