

**Abstract of a talk on the Armenian issue given by  
Dr. Andrew Mango on March 15, 2001 at a meeting  
of the Society for the Promotion of Democratic  
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There are two aspects to the Armenian issue, in general, and to the problem of Turkish-Armenian relations, in particular. One relates to the past and concerns historiography - the task of establishing an accurate and balanced account of Turkish-Armenian relations in history. The other concerns the future - the place of Armenia and Armenians in the world and their relations with their neighbours, among whom the Turks are most numerous. But the two aspects are inter-related: the past, or rather perceptions of the past, impinge on the present and future, and the present is projected back to the past. The immediate task is to save the future from the past and to stop not only misperceptions of the past, but its exploitation for the furtherance of political ambitions.

One fact stands out as one looks at the past. The Armenians came under Turkish rule after the battle of Malazgirt in 1071. During the eight centuries that followed, relations between Turks and Armenians were peaceful and constructive. The majority of Armenians came to adopt Turkish as their main language; they contributed their skills to the economy and culture of the Seljuk and then of the Ottoman state. Their prosperity grew until, by the middle of the 19th century, they became one of the richest communities of the Ottoman empire, prominent not only in trade and the professions, but also in the service of the state. As opportunity drew the Armenians to the four corners of the Ottoman state and beyond, many moved out of their original homeland in eastern Anatolia, where they were outnumbered by Muslims. Armenian nationalism did not become a political force until after the Ottoman defeat at the hands of the Russians in 1878. Armenian nationalists aimed at creating an Armenian state in an area which had a predominantly Muslim and largely Turkish population. Within one generation, this attempt ended the friendly coexistence of Armenians and Turks and led to the elimination of the Armenian communities from Anatolia.

The tragedy of the Armenians was not unique. The historical process which substituted more or less homogeneous nation states for multinational empires made millions of victims from all nationalities. As the Ottoman empire contracted, Turks and other Muslims provided most of the victims in a retreat which started at the end of the 17th century and ended in 1923 with the Turkish victory in the Turkish War of Independence. In the final count, the number of victims - people who were killed, who were expelled or who fled - was not balanced as between any two nationalities. Thus the number of Greeks forced out of Turkey was larger than the number of Turks who left Greece, while the number of Turks who left Bulgaria was much larger than that of Bulgarians forced out of Turkey, and while millions of Turks and other Muslims left Hungary, Romania, former Yugoslavia and Russia, many perishing in the process, there was no flow in the other direction. In the case of the Armenians, their losses were greater proportionately than that of their Muslim neighbours, although in absolute numbers the latter perished in greater numbers.

Armenian nationalists gambled on a victory by Czarist Russia in the First World War, and lost. Nevertheless, they did establish their nation state in a territory which, small as it was in comparison with their original ambitions, had originally a majority of Azeri Turkic inhabitants. The historical process which ended the Armenian presence in Anatolia is clear enough, although there is much historical work to be done to establish the details. Argument is bound to go on about the number of victims on both sides, about the extent to which the mayhem was willed or accidental, about the identity of persons guilty of atrocities. Historians should be left to do their job, even if it is a grisly job. One can only hope that collectively, if not individually, they will look at all sides of the picture, at victims from all communities, and situate the sufferings of them all in the proper context - the bloody history of the creation of nation states. And here I must add that the Turks did not start the process, for the simple reason that, as rulers of a multinational empire, they had no interest in breaking it up.

We now come to the next stage. The dissolution of empires has meant that nation states have become the building blocks of the world community. This is implied in the very name of the world organisation - the United Nations. The name posits an ideal - that nation states should be united in peace. As the biographer of Atatürk, I know that peace was the aim pursued by the creator of the Turkish nation state - peace with one's neighbours in the first place and then in the world at large. The Turkish Republic has been faithful to this ideal throughout the 77 years of its existence. Atatürk was determined that the past should not be allowed to imperil peace. The 1923 treaty of Lausanne, he believed, had closed the accounts of centuries. These should not be reopened - at least not by politicians. But this is precisely what politicians are trying to do with regard to the Armenians - Armenian nationalist politicians in the first place, and also such political allies as they can enlist in other countries. They are doing so not in the cause of historical accuracy, which should be left to historians, but for a variety of reasons, none of which is productive of good.

Some wish to build Armenian national identity round feelings of grievance and revenge. Others have hopes of material gain through claims to compensation - claims which would turn the whole world into an arena of litigation, if descendants of refugees everywhere followed suit. Yet another group of Armenian and pro-Armenian politicians use the past as a justification for irredentism. But the difficulty inherent in Armenian irredentism is that there are no unredeemed Armenians. What we see instead is Armenian expansionism at the expense of neighbouring Azerbaijan. Thus the attempt to revive memories of dead Armenians aims at drawing attention from the sufferings of live Azeris, more than one million of whom have been driven from their homes as the Armenians remain in occupation of one fifth of the territory of Azerbaijan. And this one fifth includes not just the district of Karabakh, where an Armenian majority enjoyed autonomous government, but a large slice of Azeri territory surrounding it. And just as in the past Armenian nationalists relied on Russia and the West in their attempt to carve an Armenian state out of Ottoman Anatolia, so today their successors are relying on Russia and the West to create a greater Armenia in the Caucasus. It is a risky undertaking, because the number of Armenians is relatively small, and whatever their skills, their future safety and prosperity must depend on good relations with their neighbours.

Armenia is a small, landlocked upland country, poor in resources. It is sustained by remittances from the Armenian diaspora. It is a land of emigration not immigration. In spite of today's strained relations, Armenians are trying to get jobs even in Turkey. Armenia has only two important assets - the skills of its people and its geographical position astride the route across Transcaucasia. A policy of hostility towards Turkey and Azerbaijan limits the area within which Armenians can exercise their skills, and transforms the country into a dead end. As they attempt to damage Turkey's interests, Armenian nationalists are doing much more damage to their own countrymen.

Foreign support for laws and declarations stressing the sufferings of Armenians in the past does not help to improve their present condition. The Armenians need a friendly and prosperous Turkey much more than the Turks need a friendly Armenia. Relations between the two countries are not a zero-sum game, in which one party's gain is the other's loss. Both stand to profit from a cooperative relationship. Third parties should realise this too, and refrain from stoking up old animosities. There are some politicians and journalists in the West who feel good and believe themselves to be liberal and progressive when they champion the Armenian version of history. They would do better to serve the cause of Turkish-Armenian reconciliation and cooperation - it is that which is the genuinely liberal and progressive cause.