

The stand taken by the US Congress on the Armenian genocide should be seen principally as an internal political move. However, it is clear that the problem cannot continue to be ignored, as it is by Turkey,

Armenia: between history and Realpolitik

NATIONAL AFFAIRS

by Aldo Ferrari

which, despite undeniable progress in a number of fields, still appears to be balanced dangerously between past and present. And that does not make Europe's task any easier...

On 10th October the US Congress Foreign Affairs Committee adopted a resolution recognising the massacre of Armenians carried out by the Ottoman Empire between 1915 and 1917 as "genocide". The motion was approved despite a strong warning by American President George W. Bush who, only a few hours before the vote, declared that adoption of the text could endanger the safety of soldiers in Iraq and US efforts in the war against terrorism. A letter in the same vein signed by several former Secretaries of State and sent a few days earlier also proved ineffective.

Despite all this strong pressure, the document was approved by 27 votes to 21. Turkish reaction was immediate. The government in Ankara, which had explicitly asked for the motion to be rejected and threatened considerable deterioration in relations with Washington, recalled its ambassador directly after the vote. President Gul stated: *"This unacceptable decision of the committee (...) has no foundation and doesn't respect the Turkish people. Unfortunately, some politicians in the United States have once more dismissed calls for common sense, and made an attempt to sacrifice big issues for minor domestic political games. This is not an*



act that befits, or is of any use to, the representatives of a nation such as the United States". Amongst other things, the Armenian genocide vote occurred at a time of serious difficulties in the relationship between the United States and Turkey which, although excellent for a long time, has been difficult for some years now; particularly since the refusal by the Ankara government to permit the use of US bases in Turkey during the Iraq invasion. Added to this, there is the recent clear difference of opinion over the appropriateness of large-scale military raids in Northern Iraq intended to strike the bases from which the PKK Kurds mount their increasingly bloody armed action in Turkey. In the light of this situation, it's not surprising

_ Robert Gates and Condoleezza Rice announce the resolution adopted on 10th October by the US Congress Foreign Affairs Committee recognising the massacre of Armenians carried out in 1915



Grazia Neri/AFP

that on 26th October the main promoters of the resolution on the Armenian genocide requested the speaker, Nancy Pelosi, to postpone the plenary vote until 2008, or at least until the end of this year. The outcome of that vote is still uncertain, despite the confidence demonstrated by its supporters, who are convinced that a large majority will back the resolution at a "more favourable" moment. The request for the delay is obviously the result of pressure from the White House, which fears that further adverse effects on relations with Ankara will prejudice the already incredibly difficult situation in the Middle East. So US recognition of the genocide has again been put on a back burner, in order to suit Washington's international policy requirements. Nonetheless, the vote on 10th October can be seen as a very important move in this direction and merits further consideration.

This first, provisional, US recognition of the genocide has been the subject of comment from many points of view and in many diverse accents. Some have judged as positive the fact that the US too is proceeding, even if somewhat tardily, towards recognising the Armenian tragedy. Others have expressed concern over the possible consequences of this step, in particular the implications for the Middle East situation. It's a concern that can certainly be shared, since there seems to be some foundation for the doubts expressed by many parties as to the true motives that often induce political representatives of various countries to intervene actively in the internal affairs of other nations. There is no doubt that in this case approval of the document on the Armenian genocide was to a large extent an internal political move by the United States, with which the Democrat opposition has further weakened President Bush's position. The same can be said of other similar cases, for example the recent French law that makes denial of the Armenian genocide punishable in the same way as refusal to recognise the Holocaust. Moreover, the Armenians have been used as pawns in the game between the great powers ever since the mid-19th century, so much so that a great deal of their tragic history can in fact be attributed to excessive trust in international aid.

However, I think it appropriate to remember that alongside the pressing considerations of Realpolitik there is another, different level, by

no means separate, that is, history. And at this level the question becomes, on one hand, much simpler, but on the other, terribly complicated. Simple, because for the vast majority of historians, there cannot *honestly* be any doubt as to the *fact* of the genocide. But also terribly complicated because the Ankara government's systematic denial of this same *fact* has deep roots that it may not be possible to eradicate. The point is that if many countries – perhaps all – have skeletons in the cupboard, the Turkish Republic is stained by a peculiar kind of “original sin” that has determined both its present frontiers, especially those to the East, and its ethnic mix. The transformation of the multi-national Ottoman Empire into the Republic of Turkey was accomplished by means of horrific ethnic cleansing whose victims were mainly, but certainly not only, the Armenians. If the fight with Greece for control of Asia Minor's coastal regions can be considered as a war between equals in which, indeed, the Turks were the aggrieved party, so that the subsequent movement of peoples in both directions looks like a reasonable (if painful) process, it was a different story in Anatolia. Here the local Christian peoples, for the most part defenceless, were systematically annihilated so that complete Turkification of the territory could take place. It wasn't only the Armenians who paid the price, but also the Pontine Greeks and the Syrians, whose changing fortunes are less well known but just as tragic as those of the Armenians. The subsequent, harsh repression of Kurdish national hopes – a Muslim people and one too numerous to suffer the same fate – is a later development of the same policy. However, from the point of view of building the Turkish State, it is above all the Armenian genocide that is of fundamental relevance, in that the republic that emerged from the Ottoman disaster was able to maintain control of the regions of Eastern Anatolia claimed by Armenia at the Paris Peace Conference and, to all intents and purposes, recognised by the Treaty of Sèvres (1920) (which by the way was never ratified). Later, the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), which set the existing boundaries of Eastern Turkey, acknowledged not only the Armenians' lack of political weight but, most importantly, their general disappearance from Anatolia. There's yet another aspect that must be taken into account: in the decades that followed, the national Turkish State was also

built on the foundations of a complicated falsification of history. For more on this subject, I recommend the well-documented research by the French historian, Etienne Copeaux¹. In fact, in order to construct a “national” historic identity, the Republican authorities carried out one of the 20th century's most thorough jobs of “inventing tradition”, with results that are often aberrant. This falsification of history was not concerned solely with the Armenians and their genocide.



In fact, it has long been thought necessary to refute quite definitely the idea that modern Turkey is the continuation of the Ottoman Empire and Islam, which are considered to be insufficiently Turkish. Nor has due recognition been given to the very existence of Muslim ethnic groups and communities distinct from the Turks themselves: firstly the Kurds, but also the Laz, the Alawites, etc. It's an attitude which, especially for the Kurds, has also had tragic political, social and cultural side-effects. The procedure has been especially severe where it concerns the Armenians, whose history has been, for decades, omitted or drastically falsified. Ankara's stubborn denial of genocide is in fact simply the climax of the whole operation. As observed by Taner Akçam, the first Turkish historian to recognise the Armenian genocide: "*The tabooing of the Armenian genocide in a republic whose foundation was created in this way is 'understandable'. The devastation that would ensue if we had to now stigmatise those whom we regarded as 'great saviours' and 'people who created a nation from nothing' as 'murderers and thieves' is palpable. It seems so much simpler to completely deny the genocide than to seize the initiative and face the obliteration of the ingrained notions about the Republic and our national identity'*".²

The essence of this historically and morally unacceptable attitude is still maintained today by what, in all probability, can nonetheless be considered the best government the Turkish Republic has ever had, the most free from the Kemalist inheritance, a government which can be credited with the considerable economic development achieved in recent years and the real improvement in the country's cultural and social climate. Even so, despite this undeniable progress, Turkey is still balanced dangerously, at odds with the worst part of itself and its own past. The recent aggravation of the Kurdish problem (whose origins must, however, be sought in Ankara's severe nationalist policy over the last few decades), the assassinations of Father Santoro and the Armenian journalist Hrant Dink and the dreadful massacre of the three Protestants in Malatya last April, the

continual indictment of journalists and intellectuals on the basis of the notorious Article 301 ("Denigration of Turkish Identity") and the very violence with which the Turkish government "blackmails" and threatens States and parliaments that recognise the Armenian genocide are all extremely negative signs.

In a situation of this kind, it is certainly debatable whether or not the hand of the Ankara government should be forced on the issue of the 1915 genocide. It is no accident that some Armenian intellectuals, especially those better informed about Turkey's political and cultural situation, are also very critical of external attempts to impose official recognition of the genocide, fearing that this might prejudice the country's recent political and cultural progress and endanger the small Armenian community still living there. From this point of view, it would appear more appropriate, and more feasible, to create genuine opportunities for free discussion of the genocide in schools, universities and the Press, and to trust that the conspiracy of silence and the blockade of misrepresented history which have, for decades, victimised the Turkish people, will gradually give way. It's an interesting notion that might perhaps enable the current stand-off over the genocide question to be overcome. At the same time – and this principally concerns the Europeans, who are far from agreement on the prospect of Turkey joining the EU – I think I can say that it will only be possible to overcome the widespread mistrust of that country if it embraces total democracy, including an honest attitude toward the past and, first and foremost, toward the Armenian genocide. The considerations of Realpolitik are serious and unavoidable, but not exclusive.

¹ Some Armenian intellectuals are very critical of external attempts to impose official recognition of the genocide, fearing that this might prejudice the country's recent political and cultural progress

1. Cf. *La coscienza geopolitica turca attraverso le carte storiche*, in "Limes", 1993, no. 4, pp. 249-259; *Manuels scolaires et géographie historique*, in "Hérodote", nos. 74-75, 1994, pp. 194-240; *Espace et temps de la nation turque. Analyse d'une historiographie nationaliste, 1931-1993*, Paris 1997; *Une vision turque du monde à travers les cartes des 1931 à nos jours*, Paris 2000. See also article by S. Yerasimos, *L'ail et l'aignon. La Turquie à la recherche d'une identité plurielle*, in G. Bellingeri (ed.), *La Turchia oggi. I.*, Perugia-Venezia 2002, pp. 35-57.

2. T. Akçam, *The Genocide of the Armenians and the Silence of the Turks*, in idem, *Dialogue Across an International Divide: Essays Towards a Turkish-Armenian Dialogue*, Toronto 2001, p. 96.