



## The Greek Genocide in the Ottoman Empire: Parallels with the Armenian Genocide

*An interview with Dr. Gevorg Vardanyan<sup>1</sup>*

*by George N. Shirinian<sup>2</sup>*

**Shirinian:** You contributed the chapter in *Genocide in the Ottoman Empire: Armenians, Assyrians, and Greeks, 1913-1923* titled, “The Greek Genocide in the Ottoman Empire: Parallels with the Armenian Genocide.” What are some of the parallels you have identified?

**Vardanyan:** Strictly speaking, drawing parallels was not the primary aim for me. I found comparison with the Armenian Genocide one of the essential ways to understand the Greek Genocide. In this regard, I was following the path of the pioneer of Armenian Genocide studies in Western academia, Vahakn N. Dadrian. He paid considerable attention to comparison between the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust because he wanted to show the similar aspects of two cases, in order to demonstrate that the Armenian case is indeed genocide. To determine whether an event is genocide or not, considerable effort is required on the empirical level. Theories and hypotheses do not always help, because the word *genocide* demands facts and only facts. The scarcity of scholarly articles and monographs based on the primary sources made the Greek Genocide an area of prospective research involving an important and challenging topic that is in need of more rigorous academic exploration.

The Greek Genocide was carried out by the same state, and almost at the same time as the Armenian Genocide. From this perspective, it is obvious that the Greek Genocide must have common features with the Armenian (and also Assyrian) Genocide, because they all are Ottoman Genocides and share many aspects more than with any other genocides. That is why I choose to compare it to the Armenian Genocide rather than any other genocide. On the other hand, the Armenian Genocide is one of the best studied genocides, so this fact also helps me to conduct such research.

From a methodological perspective, my article is based on the “anatomical” understanding of genocide. Like any anatomical scheme, genocide has its “organs,” from the most important to the least important. In my paper, I break the genocide into three

chronological parts: before, during, and after, each with its subtopics. Following this approach, firstly, I drew parallels between the prehistories of the two cases, including the economic, cultural, and political backgrounds. Then I compared the events, including planning, implementing, and consequences.

Although I tried to observe the Greek Genocide as a separate case, the research on the Greek case proves that it has so much in common with the Armenian case: prehistory, the perpetrators, process of the deportations, and methods of killings. The observations on the similarities, and even generalities, help me to understand that the Greek case is definitely genocide. For me, however, there is one special phenomenon of the Greek Genocide which particularly parallels the Armenian case. This is the ongoing approach of the Turkish authorities in their anti-Greek and Anti-Armenian campaigns. Also, for me, as someone whose research interests are in the broader field of Genocide Studies, the failure of prevention is a very important connection between these two cases.

Adolf Hitler's infamous words, "Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?" has become, in scholarly literature, one of the best indicators of the significance of the failure of genocide intervention or prevention. However, there is also another untold story of a failed genocide prevention. And this is a link between the Greek and the Armenian cases. The indifferent attitude of the international community towards the deportations of the Greeks in 1913-14 made the anti-Greek policy a kind of precedent for the Armenian Genocide. It is enough to cite American Ambassador Henry Morgenthau's words, "It was probably for the reason that the civilized world did not protest against these deportation that the Turks afterward decided to apply the same methods on a larger scale not only to the Greeks but also to the Armenians, Syrians, Nestorians, and other subject peoples."

**Shirinian:** Explain some of the significant differences.

**Vardanyan:** As mentioned, comparison was just a tool for me to understand the Greek Genocide. The identification of the differences, like similarities, is a way to draw the singular specific identity of this genocidal case that sets it apart from others, while not forgetting also about common features with other genocides. The comparison of the two cases reveals many differences, which are essential for definition of the Greek Genocide.

In the case of the Greeks, it is very difficult to insist on the existence of a certain plan. Putting the Armenian Genocide on a parallel with an anti-Greek policy from the viewpoint of planning, it is still difficult to find the sources of the latter in a single document. This fact became a tool for pro-Turkish authors, who state there was no genocidal intent to destroy the Greeks. However, our research on the topic helps us understand that the 1913-23 deportations and massacres of Greeks formed a single, state policy and were realized with a certain systematization.

One of the key differences is the phased development of the Greek Genocide. I mean the anti-Greek policy in 1913-1914, in 1915, and in 1916-23 has peculiarities related to the process and means applied. For example, if in 1913-1914 the violence against the Greeks was manifested by mass deportation, then in the subsequent years, they were accompanied by violent massacres. Thus, the anti-Greek policy in the Ottoman Empire in 1913-1914 and 1916-23 had certain differences, i.e. they had a phased development. However, in both cases there was a consistent policy of Turkification. In the case of the Armenians, though, it is more difficult to find such distinct phases.

This difference is closely related to the factor of Greece as the nation-state of the Greek people. My article illustrates this important factor and its impact on the Ottoman anti-Greek policy. The phased development of the Greek Genocide was conditioned by the presence of Greece. It is obvious that without the existence of Greece, the number of Greek victims would have been incomparably larger. This important fact is missing in the Armenian (and Assyrian) case. Russia could not play the role for the Armenians that Greece did for the Greeks of the Ottoman Empire. This fact has a very simple explanation: in general, the interest of the Greek state and the Ottoman Greeks were balanced, whereas in the policy of the Russian Empire, first and foremost came the interests of the Russian state. In the case of Armenians, no there was no external state position to mitigate or stop the Armenian massacres.

Another important difference is the Kurdish element. The Kurds were used extensively by the Ottoman state during the Armenian massacres, which was not the case with Greeks. Of course, in different parts of the Ottoman Empire, Turkish authorities also used the Muslim element against the non-Muslims; however, it cannot be compared with the role of the Kurds in the Armenian Genocide.

There are differences in the mechanisms of implementation; particularly notable are the methods of murdering the intelligentsia, and the patterns of extermination of the peaceful Armenian and Greek populations.

For me, however, is important what we learn from the identification of the differences. Firstly, it contributes to a better understanding of the Young Turks' nationalist policy, and that there is no difference between their view of the Greeks and the Armenians. All differences are conditional and affect the methods and timeline of the Greek Genocide. On the contrary, the whole process and results of the anti-Greek policy certainly insist on the existence of genocidal intent, even without the availability of an explicit Ottoman document. Another important conclusion is that the differences show the nonsense of many of theses of the Turkish denial of the Genocide. If rebellion was the justification for the deportations and massacres of the Armenians, what was the justification for the massacres of the Assyrians and the deportations and massacres of the

Greeks? Such comparisons give scholars new perspectives and counter-arguments to fight against biased and denialistic approaches of the Turkish side.

**Shirinian:** What about the Assyrians? What parallels have you found between them and the Greeks?

**Vardanyan:** The Assyrian case is an integral part of the Ottoman genocide. Moreover, the Assyrian case helps scholars to identify other important factors and aspects of that. In general, Assyrians have much in common with both the Armenians and the Greeks. However, there are also some differences. First and foremost is the fact that the number of Assyrians was relatively small. They were not such a factor in the Ottoman Empire as the Greeks and the Armenians; they could not present a real danger for the Young Turks. The Assyrians were more vulnerable than the Greeks and Armenians in regard to their economic and political situation in the Ottoman Empire. The traditional areas inhabited by the Assyrians were far from European eyes. But even with this fact, they were subjected to massacres. This is another counter argument against the thesis that the Armenian massacres were the result of Armenian nationalist aspirations.

If we want to draw parallels between the Greeks and Assyrians, again, we should not forget about the existence of Greece. The Assyrians did not have such an external factor. In addition, the Assyrians did not have serious political parties like the Armenians, or support from the Caucasus, like the Armenians. The Russian attention toward the Assyrians was not so large, compared to the Armenians, because they lived far from the Russian border. At the same time, we also shouldn't forget that Russia could not prevent the Armenian Genocide.

In regards to the implementation of the genocide, there is an important difference: Assyrians were largely massacred in their villages and dwellings, while the Greeks mostly died during the deportations. In the case of the Assyrians, like the Armenians, the impact of the Kurdish factor is big. Unlike the Greeks, the Assyrians lived in Kurdish populated areas. This means they were in a very vulnerable condition and the Assyrians suffered great violence historically from the Kurdish tribes.

In regards to the aftermath of the Genocide, both the Greeks and Armenians were massacred and lost their native lands. However, Greeks had their statehood in the Balkan peninsula, and the Armenians got independence in 1918, albeit very briefly, in the South Caucasus. Moreover, many survivors found shelter as refugees in Greece and Russia, and then independent Armenia. Meanwhile, the Assyrians never got independence or national statehood.

**Shirinian:** How much interaction was there during the period of the Genocide, 1913-1923, between the Greeks and the Armenians? Did they try to help each other?

**Vardanyan:** This is very interesting question. And the answer is definitely YES! There were many attempts at interaction between the Greeks and Armenians under the Ottoman yoke that even go beyond the period 1913-1923. In earlier examples, this interaction was manifested in the participation of Armenians in Greek revolts against the Ottoman yoke, such as the Cretan war of 1645-1669, or the Greek War of Independence, 1821-1832. During the Greek War of Independence, for example, the Greek secret organization, *Filiki Eteria*, had Armenian members, who joined because they hoped to achieve independence also for the Armenians. Even in the Greco-Turkish War of 1897 (Thirty Days War), hundreds of Armenian volunteers fought alongside the Greeks. The Armenians had a pro-Hellenic position and tried to help them.

During the period of the Genocide, 1913-1923, there were many interactions between the Greeks and Armenians. However, during the years of World War, 1914-1918, these interactions had no serious results. After the exile of the Armenian patriarch, Zaven (1913-1922), to Baghdad in 1916, there was no chance to cooperate with the Greek Patriarchate. In addition, the very old and sick Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Germanos V (1913-1918), did not have sympathies for anti-Turkish activities. That's why the interactions between the two peoples in this period displayed mostly separate initiatives.

In places where the Armenian and Greek populations lived near each other, they helped each other. For example, there was military cooperation between the Armenian and Greek *fedayis* in the mountains of Trapizon and Samsun (Pontus) in order to protect the Armenian and Greek populations. After the long battles in the mountains of Djanik, for example, in November 1916, near Trapizon, an Armenian *fedayi* group managed to help transfer many Greek families to the zone occupied by Russian forces.

The Greeks also, in their turn, helped Armenians. Many Armenians found shelter in the homes of the Greeks during the massacres. In this regard, considerable efforts were made by the Greek archbishop of Trapizon, Chrysanthos Philippides, who saved Armenian children. It is interesting that after the deportation and massacres of Trapizon, the Ottoman state put Armenian property at auction, however the Greek metropolitan forbade the Greeks to buy the Armenian goods.

However, all these are just examples of sympathy toward each other. There was not effective collaboration between the Greeks and the Armenians during World War I. The Greeks and the Armenians could not form a strong front against the Young Turk perpetrators.

The separate attempts at cooperation acquired an institutional character after the Mudros armistice on October 30, 1918. The Armenian and Greek deputies of the Ottoman parliament started to cooperate in relief efforts for orphans and refugees, to blame the Ottoman authorities for the anti-Greek and anti-Armenian campaigns, and even

cooperate at the Paris peace conference. For example, during the Paris Peace conference, Eleftherios Venizelos, while representing the Greeks, also spoke in support of the Armenian Question.

Cooperation was displayed also during Greco-Turkish war of 1919-1922. Many Armenians fought in the Greek army. Even during the Smyrna catastrophe in September 1922, some Armenians tried to organize a self-defense and managed to save the lives of many Greeks and Armenians.

**Shirinian:** How would you characterize Greek-Armenian relations today?

**Vardanyan:** The interactions between Greeks and Armenians go back thousands of years. Of course, their relations also had difficult periods in the past; however, the two nations always had sympathy towards each other and good relations at least during the last few centuries. This kind of mutual perception could not impact their relations on the institutional level, however. The current phase of Greek-Armenian relations started after the declaration of the independence of Armenia in 1991. Over the past 20-25 years, I would characterize the Greek-Armenian relationship as more than satisfactory.

Diplomatic relations between the two countries were established on January 20, 1992, and high-level visits and contacts between two countries have taken place. The two countries cooperate in various directions and have signed more than 40 agreements, protocols, and memoranda concerning political, economic, military, and cultural cooperation.

In the relations between Greece and Armenia, their diasporas play a great role. Although very small, the Greek community in Armenia is very active. For example, each year they organize an event dedicated to the Greek Genocide, in which I have participated, and last year, I was honored to be the key speaker. There is also a big Armenian community in Greece, with their churches and cultural institutions.

Greece officially recognized the Armenian Genocide in 1996, and Armenia the Greek Genocide in 2015. Apart from Greece and Armenia, the diasporas cooperate in many countries on the issue of the Genocides, including genocide recognition by different states and scholarly collaborations. Mr. Shirinian, as you know, the conference in Skokie and the resulting book is also the product of great Armenian-Greek scholarly cooperation.

**Shirinian:** You have done extensive work on the Greek Genocide. Why do you, as an Armenian historian, devote so much attention to the Greek experience?

**Vardanyan:** I have written a book on the Greek Genocide entitled, *The Greek Population in the Ottoman Empire and the Asia Minor Disaster, 1914-1923*, exploring many aspects of its prehistory, process and consequences. This was based on my PhD dissertation. I started

my research on this topic ten years ago, when there was so little scholarly literature on this topic in English.

It may sound as a paradox, however, at least in the beginning, but the research on this topic for me was a great way to learn more about the Armenian Genocide. And indeed, the research on the Greek Genocide reveals so much about the Armenian case. It helps to better understand the Young Turks' nationalist policy, and also to understand that the Greeks, like the Armenians, need historical justice. That's why scientific interest in the topic merged with the desire to do my best to contribute to the investigation of this example of a "forgotten genocide." In some way, it is also my personal battle against the denial of both cases of genocide.

Moreover, I think no matter whether you are Armenian or Greek or Assyrian, you are a representative of a nation which experienced genocide, so you should apply your efforts in all three directions. These genocides are interconnected not only in their implementation, but also in the quest for recognition and historical justice.

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