correspondents at large

Teaching the Armenian Genocide in Turkey: Curriculum, Methods, and Sources

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SINCE 2001, I HAVE BEEN TEACHING COURSES IN CULTURAL STUDIES, EUROPEAN AND TURKISH LITERATURE, MODERN DRAMA, AND GENDER and sexuality studies at Sabancı University in Istanbul. During my fifteen years of teaching undergraduate and graduate students, the Armenian genocide was a particularly challenging theme to bring into the classroom. Even at Sabancı University, one of the rare liberal universities in Turkey to offer courses that challenge Turkish national myths, most students, including those who graduated from "liberal" high schools,[1] had received a nationalist education and came to college either not knowing anything about the Armenian genocide or denying it altogether. Denial of the Armenian genocide is still pervasive in Turkey; 1915 is identified in history textbooks as the year of the Battle of Gallipoli, the most important Ottoman victory against the British and French naval forces during World War I. For most of the twentieth century and up until 2005, when the seminal Ottoman Armenians Conference opened a public discussion of the topic, silence regarding the deportation and genocide of the Ottoman Armenians prevailed. If denialist myths in Turkey acknowledge the deaths of the Ottoman Armenians, they justify such deaths as "retaliation" for the deaths of Turkish Muslims during the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 or equate the massacres of Armenians with Turkish casualties of war from the same period. For instance, Talat Paşa, the mastermind behind the deportations and massacres of roughly one million Armenians in 1915–16, argues in his memoirs that an equal number of Turks were killed by Armenians during World War I and in its aftermath (51–56).

Amid a pervasive culture of denial, choosing the works to study in class was one of the initial challenges of teaching the Armenian genocide. Several of the works that had a profound impact on the students dealt with the tragedy of a single victim during the genocide. While Arsinee Khanjian, a renowned actor who has appeared in many movies about the genocide, recently remarked that "we did not have our own Anne Franks during my childhood," a plethora of memoirs by survivors of the Armenian genocide have been published since 2005.

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In my courses, students engaged with the tragedy of the protagonist of Fethiye Çetin's 2004 memoir *Anneannem* ("My Grandmother"), which recounts the story of Çetin's grandmother, Heranuş, who was renamed Seher when the Armenian women and children who survived the genocidal campaign of 1915 were Islamized and, in some cases, married off to Kurds and Turks. Heranuş was nine when almost all the men in her town were taken away and killed and her mother was sent off to join the death march to the Syrian desert Deir ez-Zor (never to see her daughter again). The story of Heranuş-Seher is narrated by her granddaughter Fethiye Çetin, who only learned about these events as an adult because her grandmother was silent for many years about her past. Heranuş-Seher was converted to Islam and adopted by Hüseyin Onbaşı, a perpetrator of the genocide, who had obeyed the orders of the Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa (the special organization that organized the genocide) to kill the Armenian men of Çermik, Heranuş-Seher's hometown.[2] Even though Heranuş-Seher's family members were either taken away or killed in front of her eyes, her narrative is not characterized by anger or hatred but by sadness, loss, agony, and hope for the future, as captured by a leitmotif of the memoir in her grandmother's words: "O günler gitsin bir daha gelmesin" 'Let those days be gone, never to return again . . .' (77; my trans.).

Students who empathized with Heranuş-Seher's pain and suffering found the testimony of Manuel Kırkyaşaryan, a seventy-four-year-old man who had escaped the deportation and massacres at the age of nine and fled to Cyprus, then to Australia, especially poignant because his memoir, *"M.K." Adlı Çocuğun Tehcir Anıları: 1915 ve Sonrası* (2005; "Deportation Memoirs of a Child Named M. K.: 1915 and Its Aftermath"), was accompanied by a recording of his testimony. His fluent Turkish mixed with Armenian and Kurdish expressions, his intonation and accent, which reflect the region he came from, made the students ask many questions, including "How does an Armenian know Turkish so well even though he has spent most of his life outside Turkey and recorded the tape at seventy-four?" and "What does it mean to speak Turkish combined with Kurdish and Armenian expressions, songs, and so on?" The alphabet reform of 1928 and the cleansing of the language of its Arabic and Persian borrowings in the 1930s began a standardization of the script and a turkification of the languages in the empire that made Manuel Kırkyaşaryan's unique combination of the Adana region's various languages alien to students of Turkish literature in the 2000s.[3]

As part of my course Literatures of Modern Turkey, I invited Marc Nichanian to deliver a talk in Western Armenian on Zaven Biberyan, an Armenian writer from Turkey. A second instructor, Sevan Değirmenciyan, translated Nichanian's lecture simultaneously into Turkish, adding his own commentary on the problems in the Turkish translation of the novel by Biberyan that we were discussing in class. The novel, *Mırçünneru Verçaluysi* ("Sunset of the Ants") was published in serial form in 1970 in *Jamanak* ("Time") and translated into Turkish as *Babam Aşkale'ye Gitmedi* ("My Father Did Not Go to Aşkale") in 1984.

Before Nichanian began his lecture, I talked to the class about the disadvantages of only being able to read the work in Turkish.[4] Listening to one of the native languages of Istanbul and Anatolia for the first time in their lives, most students entered into a trance as Nichanian spoke. This was the initial shock, listening to an "absent" language; the next shock came when they understood Değirmenciyan's translation. In the national imaginary, in lieu of Turkish—a language that, if spoken, would only articulate demands for retaliation for the genocide and compensation in the form of land, property, and money—the unintelligible "signifiers" in Armenian "signified" Armenian life in the late 1940s and early 1950s, describing poverty, fears of legal discrimina-

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tion against members of minority groups, and the precariousness of being an Armenian in Turkey three decades after 1915. Both lecturers also discussed the challenges of writing Biberyan's biography in the absence of personal documents, family members to interview, and general interest in Armenian authors.

In the last few years, many conferences and workshops have enabled research on the Armenian genocide, various panels have been organized to raise awareness of the genocide, and a multitude of testimonies have been published—some in the original Armenian, some also in translation. The boom in these testimonies started with memoirs that narrated the stories of child survivors. Such accounts of "critical storytelling," in Hannah Arendt's terms, were widely read, and readers found it easy to empathize with the child victims. However, these initial memoirs discussed neither the political and historical context of the genocide nor its perpetrators. The genocide seemed to be a deus ex machina, the perpetrators nonexistent or unnamed. To challenge the history and culture of denial, it is vital to read critically political memoirs in the Turkish context, such as those of the Unionists (e.g., Talat and Cemal Paşa), that discuss historical actors, perpetrators, and questions of agency. Further, one can study other survivor accounts, such as Grigoris Balakian's *Armenian Golgotha: A Memoir of the Armenian Genocide, 1915–1918* (2009), which is available in Turkey in both Turkish and English, to bring into the discussion the roles that state actors, local perpetrators, and Germans, as well as economics and labor, played in the genocide.

Instead of leaving Armenian memoirs and fiction to the realm of elective courses, I tried to incorporate works by Armenian authors into almost all my "mainstream" courses in literature and cultural studies, particularly the courses I taught in English. Classes on gender and sexuality, for instance, featured Arlene Avakian's memoir *Lion Woman's Legacy* (1992), Nancy Agabian's *Me as Her Again: True Stories of an Armenian Daughter* (2008), and Micheline Aharonian Marcom's *Daydreaming Boy* (2004), especially in the weeks focusing on queer theory and genocide. In fact, an American graduate student at Sabancı University remarked that even though she had studied literature in the United States, courses at Sabancı had given her the first opportunity to discuss queer literature and the Armenian genocide. Further, works by Marcom, Chris Bohjalian, and Nancy Kricorian became central to the syllabi of courses on modernist and postmodernist aesthetics and experimentation, such as Modernism/Postmodernism and Auto/biography.

The Turkish state persists in genocide denial; the Turkish prime minister screams that we should make the archives available to historians, knowing that the documents only prove the genocide of one million Armenians. As educators and activists, we should not shrink from linking genocide denial, the nationalization of literature and literary criticism, and nationalist historiography to the difficulties of studying the Ottoman Empire and its linguistic and literary polyphony. We also need to confront the fact that ethnic cleansing entailed a linguistic cleansing of the languages of the empire. The Armenian genocide has made Western Armenian next to extinct, and hence the efforts of writers, activists, and educators to publish works in Western Armenian are exceptional and need to be endorsed. Many students who were interested in studying Armenian literature left to pursue their studies in the United States, where Armenian studies programs exist, because it was impossible to do graduate work in Armenian studies in Turkey.

Equally important was studying the literatures of Turkey outside the parameters of the national canon, which prioritizes Turkish (male) authors at the expense of Armenian, Greek, and Jewish authors of the twentieth century. In the earlier sections exploring the history of publications (memoirs and fiction

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in Turkish), I tried to illustrate how moving from sources that provoke affective responses (primarily empathy) to those that would also initiate discussions of the political, historical, and economic context has succeeded in reaching students coming from a culture of denial. Working with sources in English has added advantages, helping us challenge preconceived notions of the "Armenian diaspora." Many Armenian American authors unsettle their "unequivocal" belonging to the Armenian community and write in terms critical of the association of the individual with the community. These texts also raise questions relevant to postgenocide narratives and studies, in line with the theoretical work of Giorgio Agamben and Nichanian that explores concepts like the witness, the survivor, the archive, and testimony.

If teaching needs to be supported by research, the workshops and conferences organized by Sabancı, Boğaziçi, and Bilgi Universities, with the collaboration of nongovernmental organizations such as the International Hrant Dink Foundation, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Anadolu Kültür, and Chrest Foundation, enabled new articles and books to be published. Good teaching of literature "strives to produce complexity, which goes beyond affective response and beyond even what we glibly call comprehension" (Guillory 670). In the academic papers students write in my classes, they question their own preconceived notions and attempt to analyze literary works as texts that both convey information and contain multiple layers of meaning and affect. In an attempt to expand our methods of teaching, we as educators have started experimenting with how students can produce their own "texts of complexity." Among other projects, "creative writing" competitions based on dialogue, peace, and genocide recognition point toward a promising future.

Notes

1. In their curricula, liberal high schools in Turkey endorse critical approaches to nationalist historiography and to the national literary canon.

2. The perpetrator's role in 1915 is not discussed in Çetin's memoir. We only find a depiction of Hüseyin Onbaşı after he marries Heranuş-Seher.

3. For an exploration of the alphabet reform that Atatürk initiated in 1928, as well as the linguistic-engineering campaign of the 1930s and its impact on Turkish literature and culture, see the January 2008 *PMLA* cluster of essays on Turkey that includes articles by Patricia Yaeger, Jale Parla, Nergis Ertürk, and me. Yaeger describes the demands of the Turkish state in the 1920s and 1930s for a "language purged of Ottoman influence" (11), and Parla borrows an analogy from Elif Şafak to show how linguistic cleansing might be compared to ethnic cleansing (30). The essays look at the sanctification of the Turkish language secured through its new function as the "symbol of the nation's unity and solidarity" (30).

4. My own Armenian is not advanced enough for me to read novels like *Mırçünneru Verçaluysi* in the original.

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