

Armenians Under the Turkish Rule

At the time when the Turks conquered Anatolia, there was not such a thing as an independent Armenian state on that soil. As for the period just preceding the Turkish conquest, Armenians had become the subject of long struggles first between the Byzantium (Eastern Roman Empire) and Iran, and afterwards between the Byzantium and muslim states. The Armenians were frequently exiled in great numbers for sectarian and political reasons.

As a sharp contrast to their previous pitiable lives, Armenians became land owners under the Turkish rule and had the opportunity of enjoying a free life, freely speaking their own language and practising their own religion under the muslim law.

The Turks have always treated the non-muslims in the territories under their rule in benevolence and tolerance in such a degree going far beyond the standards of their times. They let them free in all their business among themselves, in their language, religion and beliefs.

Under the principles adopted by the Ottomans in the field of governing people, christian communities were granted such a great freedom that they could preserve their religious and national identities. This fact only proves that the tolerance shown by the Ottomans to the non-muslims was far beyond their times, this is especially true when the contemporary practices in other countries were taken into consideration.

As is known, muslims and jews were not able to stay any longer in Spain after 1492 and they had to take refuge with the Ottomans. In France, massacres took place in 1572 at Saint Barthelemy. in peace, tranquillity and welfare under the just government of the Ottomans.

The Armenians were a trusted people in the Empire and could thus sometimes get themselves appointed to rather important posts in the course of centuries under the Ottoman rule and were called therefore "the loyal subjects". It was in this period, namely under the Ottoman rule that Armenians enjoyed the best and most stable years of their existence.

Armenian historian Oscanyan observes that "The Armenian community constituted the essence of the daily life. For the Turks accustomed to governing rather than serving for long had left all the branches of industry to them. Therefore bankers, traders, engineers in Turkey were Armenians. On the other hand there was a similarity in feelings and common interests between them. The Armenians became the most influential subjects by easily adapting themselves to the Turks and earning their trust."(D. Oscanyan: *The Sultan and his People*. London, 1957, p. 353)

"I believe that it won't be a mistake to consider this Third Period that is the Tanzimat to be the golden age of Armenians. During this period, which we regard as the most bountiful and favourable one of all, Armenians advanced in every field and could reach higher positions by proving their qualifications and earning confidence and trust of the Government." (*Y.G. Çark: Türk Devleti Hizmetinde Ermeniler, 1453-1953. [Armenians in the service of the Turkish State, 1453 – 1953]. İstanbul, 1953, p. 44.*)

Whilst the Ottoman Armenians were being protected under the Ottoman rule, in Russia foundations, schools and religious institutions belonging to Armenians were seized forcibly, education in Armenian banned and Armenian clergymen and successful merchants exiled. (*B.A. Boryan: Armeniyamejdunarodnayadiplomatiyai SSSR, çast I. Moskva, 1929, p. 217; S.M.Akopyan: Zapodnaya Armeniya v planahimperialistiçeşfkihderjav v period pervoy mirovoy voyn». Yerevan, 1967, p. 162*)

Russian Armenians were far from enjoying even one tenth of the rights enjoyed by Ottoman Armenians. (*Edgar, Granville: Le Tsarisme en Asie Mineure. Revue Politique Internationale, 1917, (Tranlated into Turkish: Çarlık Rusyası'nın Türkiye'deki Oyunları. Translated by Orhan Arıman. Ankara, 1967, p. 30.)*

Galich, Russian Governor General for the Caucasus, says in the Report he submitted to the Czar in 1898 that "Armenian revolutionary ideas have been disseminated by clergymen, the press and revolutionary organisations established abroad. Every one who is occupied with such ideas must be immediately expelled from the Caucasus and drastic measures should be taken to prevent its spread to the people. Since ideas of independence have been strengthened in schools, Armenian schools must be brought under control by subjecting them to the Russian System of Education. Therefore, 320 Armenian schools were shut down and the school buildings were placed under the control of the Ministry of Education. I respectfully submit this measure for imperial endorsement. As the press and the associations for public benefit are all occupied with politics, I respectfully ask for the permission to shut down their printing- presses as well as their associations."(*Neftide Kerem Demir: Bir fihit Anas›na Tarihin Söyledikleri: Türkiye'nin Ermeni Meselesi. [The Armenian Question In Turkey: History's Revelations To The Mother of A Martyr]. 3d edition. Ankara, 1982, p. 62.*)

From the second half of the 19th century, the Armenians, known to be the loyal subjects of the Ottoman state, were used especially by the Czarist Russia and Britain to break up the Ottoman state from within. The Armenians who were exempted from military service and whose commercial interests were protected, could thus build up significant wealth and they could also be appointed to high-level political positions as a result of getting well-educated by benefiting from the opportunities granted to them by the state. However, later they were instigated to revolt by the powers using the Armenians as a tool for their own interests. Those powers were indeed leading a hypocritical policy, by demanding "reform" and various rights in the Ottoman Empire on behalf of the Armenians on the one hand, while depriving the Armenians living on their own territory from the same rights on the other.