

Droits de l'homme sans frontières
Human Rights Without Frontiers

Avenue Winston Churchill 11/33, 1180 Brussels
Phone: 32 2 3456145 – Fax: 32 2 3437491
Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.org>



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SEYFO, THE GENOCIDE AGAINST THE ASSYRIANS

Revisionism and Denialism in Belgium of WW I Ottoman Genocide

The Ottoman Empire's widespread persecution of Assyrian civilians during World War I constituted a form of genocide, the present-day term for an attempt to destroy a national, ethnic or religious group, in whole or in part. Ottoman soldiers and their Kurdish and Persian militia partners subjected hundreds of thousands of Assyrians to a deliberate and systematic campaign of massacre, torture, abduction, deportation, impoverishment and cultural and ethnic destruction.

Up to now, the international community has been hesitant to recognize the Assyrian experience as a form of genocide. However, the Assyrian genocide is indistinguishable in form for its Armenian counterpart. Both are narrowly intertwined.

My presentation will deal with the debate about the genocide issue on the Belgian scene in the form that it has explicitly taken, the Armenian genocide, and implicitly and indirectly the Assyrian genocide, Seyfo. My analysis will identify a number of denialist actors in Belgium, highlight their objectives and their strategies, their links with Belgian political parties, with the Turkish embassy in Brussels and with not very commendable organizations in Turkey.

The Belgian State and the Ottoman Genocide

In 1998, the Belgian senate recognized the genocide committed by the Ottomans against the Armenians during WW I.

On June 6, 2005, the Justice Commission of the Belgian Senate rejected a draft bill (Ref. 51/ 1284) meant to extend the March 23, 1995 law criminalizing the denialism of the Nazi genocide against the Jews to all the genocides and crimes against humanity legally recognized.

The issue of the Armenian genocide which was recognized by all the parties was sneaked in during the debate, especially by the MRAX (Movement against Racism, Anti-Semitism and Xenophobia), but was excluded from the draft law because it had not been recognized by an international jurisdiction. The draft bill extending the criminalization of denialism divided the parties in power and was finally rejected with twelve 'no' votes to two 'yes' votes. If it had been approved in Parliament, Belgium would have been the first country to punish those who deny the Armenian genocide allegations.

Revisionist and Denialist Players in Belgium

Several Turkish nationalist organizations based and operating in Belgium but linked to sister-organizations based in Turkey are opposed to the qualification of genocide attributed to the mass-scale massacres of Armenians during WWI and even deny the very existence of such massacres.

The Association of Ataturk's Philosophy in Belgium/ Association de la Pensée d'Ataturk en Belgique (APAB-BADD) is a non-profit association linked to the Turkish Labor Party, a nationalist maoist party which is hostile to the United States and to the European Union. It receives public subsidies.

EYAD/ The House of Turkey is a social association. Strange though it may be, its chairman Metin Edeer is also a member of the municipal council of the Turkish town Emirdag (22,000 inhabitants) although he lives in Belgium. He was elected in 2004 on the list of the MHP (Green Wolves), the nationalist extreme-right party in Turkey.

The Turkish Islamic Religious Foundation of Belgium / Fondation religieuse islamique turque de Belgique (FRITB-BTIDV), better known under the name Diyanet whose president is the adviser for social affairs at the Turkish embassy in Brussels, Omer Faruk Turan.

The Belgian-Turkish Coordination Council (CCBT-BTKK), which was created in March 1996, is an umbrella organization for more than ninety Turkish associations. It gathers together nationalist extreme-right movements depending directly from the Turkish embassy in Brussels. Its leader, Kenan Daggun, was sentenced to nine days in prison due to the incidents that took place during the demonstration against the monument erected in memory of the Armenian genocide in Ixelles.

The Sports Federation of the Turks of Belgium/ Fédération sportive des Turcs de Belgique is an organization depending from the Turkish embassy in Brussels.

Yeni Belturk is an association which published a magazine and runs a nationalist and denialist website bearing the same name.

The symbolic target of the revisionist and denialist actors operating on the Belgian territory, and especially in Brussels, is an Armenian monument.

In 1995, the Armenian community in Belgium proposed to the municipal council of Ixelles (Brussels) to erect a monument in memory of the victims of the Armenian genocide at Square Henri Michaux in Ixelles (Brussels) The proposal was unanimously adopted.

The Revisionist and Denialist Campaign in Belgium

In March 2003, the *Association of Ataturk's Philosophy in Belgium* (APAB-BADD) organized a non-authorized demonstration in front of the monument dedicated to the Armenian genocide and spattered it with painting. The police had to intervene and to arrest several demonstrators. Elected members of Turkish descent belonging to several francophone political parties in power supported this campaign.

In the same year, during the campaign for the parliamentary elections, the APAB-BADD and the *Belgian-Turkish Coordination Council* (BTKK) pressured the mayor of Ixelles to remove the monument commemorating the Armenian genocide.

On May 29, 2004, during the political campaign for regional elections, Turkish extremists held a demonstration in Brussels under the slogan "Reject the assertions of genocide." On this occasion, the Committee for the Coordination of the Turkish Associations claimed the destruction of the Armenian monument in Ixelles. Emir Kir, who was to become State Secretary of the Brussels Parliament in charge of Monuments after those elections participated in the demonstration. It was also the case for a number of Belgian elected candidates of Turkish descent belonging to the Socialist Party, the Liberal Party, the Green, the Democrat and Humanist Centre. Among the participants, it is worth mentioning Afyon Mahmut Koçak, a member of the Turkish Parliament belonging to the party of the Prime Minister, the president of the Turkish Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the mayor of the Turkish town Emirdag and a number of Brussels municipal councilors of Turkish descent.

On December 16, 2004, Yves de Jonghe d'Ardoye addressed a question to the then mayor, Willy Decourty, and the councilors of Ixelles about a demonstration for the demolition of the Armenian monument. The opponents to the Armenian monument raised the issue of the legality of that construction but their attempt was unsuccessful. In his answer, the mayor admitted that Turkish movements had exerted pressure on him to remove the monument but he did not yield to it.

On February 15, 2007, a number of denialist associations organized a conference called "A look at the so-called Armenian genocide" with a controversial guest-speaker, Mr. Yusuf Halaçoğlu, President of the Turkish History Foundation. This foundation is not an academic institution but has always served the political agenda of Ataturk and his ideological heirs since its creation in the 1930s. Mr. Halaçoğlu is currently prosecuted by Swiss justice on the basis of article 261 bis of the Swiss criminal code pertaining to racial discrimination after he delivered a speech in Winterthur in 2004. Despite these charges, the Socialist mayor of the commune of Saint-Josse (Brussels) failed to prohibit this meeting.

Freedom of Expression and Denialism

Another tactic that was used to try to silence anti-denialist activists was to prosecute them on the grounds of defamation.

In November 2004, State Secretary of the Brussels Regional Parliament Emir Kir (Socialist Party) sued the persons in charge of the website *Suffrage Universel* who had called him "a denialist, a liar and a delinquent" regarding the issue of the Armenian genocide and his expenses during the last electoral campaign.

In the part of his complaint related to the genocide issue, Emir Kir declared : "It is a fact that the Ottoman Empire ordered the massacre of the Armenian populations and internal displacements (...). This policy can only be unconditionally condemned (...) but I cannot make the next step consisting in affirming that it is a genocide to be assimilated to the genocide of the Jews by the Nazis as long as an independent commission of historians has not qualified these facts."

The defendants were Pierre-Yves Lambert, an independent researcher, and Mehmet Koksal, a journalist of Turkish descent. Both are running the website in their personal capacity.

The trial started on September 14, 2005. Emir Kir was defended by a famous barrister, Marc Uyttendaele, the husband of Minister of Justice, Laurette Onkelinx, who belongs to the Socialist Party.

The King's Procurator Valery de Theux de Meylandt said about the accused that "the incriminated remarks were not off the acceptable limits."

The court decision was released on October 28, 2005. It was 100% in favor of the courageous defendants.

Links Between the Belgian Political Parties and the Revisionist Players

Due to the election system of proportionate representation, the political parties court the various cultural groups of foreign origin heavily present in Belgium, and in particular in Brussels, by putting Belgian citizens of Turkish, Moroccan, Congolese, etc... descent on their election lists to garner as many votes as possible from their respective communities. In the last local elections in Brussels, more than 50% of the candidates of the same political party were sometimes of foreign descent.

The problem is not their origin but the fact that the major political parties have failed to screen them on the basis of a number of legitimate criteria and that they have put extreme-right and extreme-left nationalist candidates on their election lists. A number of them have campaigned in their native language and are said to have held a double language within and without their communities. They have now been elected at various levels of the legislative and executive institutions and some are accused of double allegiance, which is incompatible with the Belgian institutions.

It must also be said that ministers and party leaders have campaigned in the premises of Turkish associations known to be denialist.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The debate around the terminology "genocide" or not is outdated. Those who delay their position on this issue until "an international independent commission of historians is put in place and publicizes its verdict" just do not want to recognize the first genocide of the 20th century. Such a commission exists: it is the international community of historians who throughout the last 90 years have amply demonstrated that a genocide was perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire against the Armenians and the Assyrians during WW I.

The Ottoman genocide of the Armenians and the Ottoman genocide of the Assyrians are the two sides of the same coin. They cannot be separated from each other. They are one and the same genocide.

Our organization "Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l" recommends

to the Belgian political parties

to recognize that genocide unambiguously
to ask their elected members to recognize it
to screen their candidates for the upcoming parliamentary elections.

to the Belgian elected people of Turkish descent

to have one and sole allegiance: the Belgian state

to the MRAX, the Centre for Equal Opportunities, Armenian, Assyrian and civic organizations

to lodge complaints against denialist statements, conferences and demonstrations on the basis of the legislation prohibiting racism and denialism.

Willy Fautré
Director
w.fautre@skynet.be
<http://www.willyfautre.org>

Sources:

Hannibal Travis, "'Native Christians Massacred": The Ottoman Genocide of the Assyrians during World War I.', *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 1,3 (December 2006): 327-371.

Suffrage Universal: <http://www.minorities.org>
<http://www.suffrage-universel.be>

Info-Turk : <http://www.info-turk.be>