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Question: Can nationalism make room for ethnic minorities? Why or why not?

Focus: How did Turkish nationalist rationalize violence against ethnic minorities in the Ottoman Empire during the genocide in the year 1915?

Theory: Anthony Smith's theory of ethno-symbolism

Case study: Armenian Genocide

1. INTRODUCTION

In the early 20th century, the Ottoman Empire was a dominant empire residing in three different continents; Europe, Asia and Africa and also had 29 provinces. This empire was an agricultural society which was controlled by a Sultan. It comprised of diverse ethnic and religious individuals, whose identity were mainly based on religious beliefs. It was also dominated by the Turks and included other ethnicities such as the Arabs, Kurds, Greeks, Armenians and other ethnic minorities (Üngör n.d., p.47). In addition, the Ottoman Armenians which this essay focuses on were a population of Christians and had a mixed community of class status. They resided mainly in the eastern provinces alongside with other ethnic groups. Before the occurrence of World War I, the Ottoman Empire had around two million Christian Armenians. Nevertheless, in the year 1915, a group of Turkish nationalist planned to banish and exterminate Armenian citizens who resided in the empire. At the end of World War I, an estimate of about 1.5 million Armenians were recorded dead or deported from Turkey, specifically from the region of Anatolia (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2015). This essay aims to critically discuss why nationalism does not make room for ethnic minorities. It focuses on the event of the Armenian genocide, and how the Turkish nationalists were able to rationalize violence against this ethnic minority during the genocide.

This essay begins by defining the key terms central to the discussion. It then provides a brief overview of the Armenian Genocide as the primary case study. Next, it examines the factors that contributed to the rise of Turkish nationalism and considers its implications. The essay subsequently explores Smith's theory of ethno-symbolism and evaluates its relevance to the question at hand. Finally, it presents a reasoned response to the essay question before concluding with a summary of the main arguments.

2. DEFINITIONS

According to the United Nations Genocide Convention as cited in Hovannison (1999, p.14), “genocide means to destroy with intent, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group; causing serious bodily or mental harm; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life and to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births

within the group and forcibly transferring children of the group to another group”. On the other hand, ethnic minorities are a group of people endowed with ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics which differ from the majority of the population, as they often constitute to the numerical minority of the state (Deschenes 1985, p.31 as cited in Alia & Bull 2005, p.2). While nationalism according to Smith (2013, p.4) can be defined as an “ideological movement for maintaining autonomy, unity and identity for a population which some of its members deems to constitute a potential nation”.

3. BRIEF: ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

During the Ottoman Empire, Armenians resided in north-eastern Turkey. They were a distinct ethnic group that originated in the Caucasus, an area which surrounds Turkey and Russia. They had their own language, culture and even their religion differed from other ethnic groups in the empire. Christianity was the main religion of the Armenians, as the earliest Armenian Christian churches date back as far as the first century CE (Freedman 2009, p.7).

The Armenian genocide often referred to as the first genocide in the twentieth century involved the physical annihilation of Armenian Christian citizens who resided in the Ottoman Empire (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2015). This event was carried out during World War I between 1915 to 1918 by Turkish nationalists also known as the ‘Young Turks’. According to Junkin (2014), the Young Turks were a group of nationalist who gained massive support amongst the Ottoman citizens and eventually succeeded in overthrowing the Sultan in 1908. They reinstated the Ottoman parliament and promised greater reform efforts (Junkin 2014). What they did not advertise was their plan to create a Pan-Turkey and Islamic empire, which eventually led to the forceful removal of Armenians during this period, from the region of Anatolia to Syria where they were sent into the desert to die of thirst and hunger (Armenian National Institute n.d.). An estimate of over a million Armenian people lost their lives during this event as many of them were either subjected to deportation, expropriation, abduction, torture, massacre and starvation (Hovannison 1999, p.15).

4. TURKISH NATIONALISM

“Turkey’s last century has been shaped by the ideology of a social, cultural and economic policy of aggressive and at times racist and ethnic nationalism” (Oktem 2003, p.4). This nationalism came into existence during the Ottoman Empire in the late 19th century and was derived from Western Europe. Although before the 19th century, it was almost non-existent as many of the Turks did not have a sense of belonging to a ruling ethnic group, nor did members of the political and intellectual elite care to be called Turks (Azarian 2011, p.72). Nevertheless, Bloxham (2002, p.39) explains that Turkish nationalism came into existence as the Turks sought to preserve their heritage and land, particularly the land of Anatolia, as a large Armenian population resided there. This place was later destroyed during the war to secure the region for the ‘new Turkey’. The trigger for the policy of destruction was due to different factors ranging from the idea of creating a homogenous Turkish state and other factors such as religion and class.

4.1.1 Creating a homogenous Turkish state

According to Gol (2005, p.121) “national identity can hardly be imagined without a narrative of myths, and the Turkish nation is no exception”. The homogeneity of a nation can be considered a myth which is the root of many nationalist ideas. The Turkish nation was therefore imagined as a modern state with territorial sovereignty after the erosion of traditional ‘Ottoman umma’ identity (Gol 2005, p.122). During the process of this imagination, the Armenians became the first ethnic group, whose claims over eastern Anatolia were perceived as a real threat to Turkish territoriality and identity; reasons being that by the 19th century, several radical Armenian political groups formed and pushed for equality. Therefore, this led to the rise of Armenian nationalism, which became a threat to the Ottoman Empire especially the Turks (Junkin 2014). Additionally, Armenians had also participated in all aspects of the society and made significant contributions to commerce, industry construction, and also music (Armenian National Institute, n.d.). The Young Turks therefore attempted to ultimately exterminate most of the ethnic Armenian population because they were a threat to them, as they sought to build a more ethnic and religious homogeneous Turkish State (Menendian n.d.).

4.1.2 Religion

Religion was one of the main elements that instigated the genocide. According to Bartov & Mack (2001, p.1), violence and religion can be closely linked in a variety of ways, since the earliest period of human civilization. Bartov & Mack (2001, p.1) further explains that “despite the widespread trend of secularization in the twentieth century, religion has played an important role in several outbreaks of genocide since World War I”.

In the case of the Ottoman Empire, the collective identity in this Muslim-dominated empire was defined according to religious affiliation rather than ethnic or modern national criteria. Although, Christian Armenians could rise to a certain position of relative economic and political status in the Ottoman state, Islam was still the preferred religion. Through the years, Armenians began to define themselves more as people rather than a Christian minority. Therefore, the Turkish leadership began thinking of the empire in exclusionary nationalist terms. Here religious fanaticism increased precisely at a time when religion was being replaced by strident nationalism as the focus of collective identity; in the multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire it was this process that generated the genocidal policies against the Armenians (Bartov & Mack 2001, p.4). Junkin (2014) explains that the Young Turks formulated a plan to cleanse the empire of its Christian Armenian minorities to protect the integrity of an Islamic Empire.

4.1.3 Class factors

As mentioned above, the success of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire was a threat to the Turks. In this empire, religious minorities were governed using the millet system. Under this system, minorities were given the right to rule themselves, although according to the religious laws and as long as they paid special taxes (Junkin 2014). In theory, this system would work, but in practice the Armenians and other ethnic minorities received fewer rights from their Muslim counterparts. Junkin (2014) further explained that as time passed, Armenians who had generally been poor farmers left Anatolia to travel abroad to study in prestigious universities. When they returned, they brought with them wealth, education and yearning for rights. This made the Armenians in the society more respected and influential. The Turks saw this as a threat to them, as they believed that they were an ethnic majority who had to be the most influential and

wealthiest in the society. This feeling of threat was one of the factors that contributed to the event of the genocide.

4.2 DISADVANTAGES OF TURKISH NATIONALISM

Although the rise of Turkish nationalism to the Turks developed the idea of maintaining autonomy, unity and identity between themselves. Nonetheless, it also led to negative consequences for other ethnic minorities such as;

Led to violence and hostility- The Turkish nationalism bred contempt within the empire and led to war and hostility which was directed at other ethnic minorities particularly the Armenian citizens, as mentioned so far in this essay. This nationalism was the kind of modern fanaticism which breeds jealousy, hatred and suspicion among various ethnic groups rather than building their national integrity (Farooq 2016). Forms of violence and hostility directed at the Armenians included incidence such as deportation, expropriation, abduction, torture, massacre and starvation.

Led to gender and child exploitation- In addition, during the genocide, children were often separated from their parents. Some were forcefully converted to Islam and joined Muslim families, while others were killed if they refused to convert. A number of women were also given a chance to convert and compelled to join Islam (Facing History and Ourselves, 2017). Actions from the nationalist also led to the systemic abuse and exploitation against the Armenian women, which included sexual violence and rape (Strom 2016).

Negligence of Human Rights- In reference to the above point, the Turkish nationalism which led to the exploitation of women and children ultimately resulted in the negligence of their human rights. According to the Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights (2015, p.3) “the United Nations condemned the crime of genocide, calling it a denial of the right of existence of entire human groups that shocks the conscience of mankind, results in great losses to humanity and is contrary to the moral law of the United Nations”. The Turkish nationalist neglected the idea of rights, as the Armenian citizens were equally entitled to the rights to life and freedom.

5. SMITH'S THEORY ON ETHNO SYMBOLISM

The theory of ethno-symbolism was coined by Anthony Smith, as it emerged as a theoretical critique of modernism. This theory focuses on nationalism and therefore refers to an “approach that emphasizes the role of myths, symbols, memories, values and traditions in the formation, persistence and change of ethnicity and nationalism” (Bašić n.d., p.1). The study of ‘ethnies’ is a vital element in the ethno-symbolist theory. Ethnies refers to the human populations with common ancestry, myths, histories and cultures, having an association with a specific territory, and a sense of solidarity (Smith 1986, p. 32 as cited in Guibernau 2004, p. 126).

Additionally, Smith argues that nationalism is founded on the idea of favouring dominant ethnicities in existing nation states, whilst disregarding the many submerged ethnic minorities incorporated within the society. This argument can be seen in the Turkish nationalism and how it favoured the Turks, ultimately disregarding the Armenian ethnic minorities (Guibernau 2004, p. 126). Additionally, Smith contends that ethno-symbolist approach first helps to explain which populations are likely to start a nationalist movement under certain conditions and what the content of this movement would be. Finally, Smith views nationalism as an ideology that involves the pursuit of symbolic goals.

6. WHY NATIONALISM DOES NOT MAKE ROOM FOR ETHNIC MINORITIES

As seen in the above examples of Turkish nationalism, nationalism often provides an ideological framework for the manipulation and social control of groups of people. Although it provides a sense of collective belonging and unity of purpose, it simultaneously helps to justify the massive application of state violence towards perceived others, which can be seen in the case of the Turkish nationalist to the Armenians. Miller (2015) explains that the “belief that one ethnic group is better than another, affects many aspects of the quality of life for everyone”.

Additionally, nationalism often leads to discrimination; therefore causing groups of people from a particular ethnic group or nation to believe they are far better than someone from a different or

minority group. In the case of the Ottoman Empire, Turkish nationalism did not make room for other ethnic minorities, instead it led to violence, hostility, exploitation and the negligence of their human rights.

7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this essay has been able to critically discuss why nationalism does not make room for ethnic minority, by using the case study of the Armenian genocide, and how the Turks were able to rationalize violence against this ethnic minority during the genocidal war. It has also been able to apply the theoretical perspective of Anthony Smith's idea of ethno-symbolism. Although nationalism tends to make one feel more patriotic about one's country, it disregards the existence of other minority groups in the society and develops the belief that one ethnic group is better than the other. Finally, actions from nationalist tend to lead to systemic abuse and exploitation of other individuals in the society.

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