

**SOME PSYCHOANALYTICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL
APPROACHES TO THE ARMENIAN-TURKISH QUESTION: AN
ASSESSMENT**

Gökçe AYTEKİN*

Geliş Tarihi: 09/05/2022

Kabul Tarihi: 03/06/2022

Summary

The Armenian-Turkish question has a multidimensional content and its psychological dimension is only one among a few. After mentioning that the interaction among those dimensions shapes the future of the question, this article focuses on the psychological dimension using a psychoanalytical approach by Vamik Volkan and then an approach from social psychology. Thanks to these two approaches, it then tries to assess two other articles on the subject. Those two articles exemplify many others written by Turkish psychologists and psychiatrists on the psychological dimension. They are based on themes such as the guilt felt by Western societies after World War II, the abuse by the Armenian diaspora of developments on the subject of human rights, non-Turk Armenians' "psychology of having excuses", and identity crisis. According to Volkan's approach, Armenian claims of genocide can be regarded as an "entitlement ideology" because we can find reasons for a sense of loss and humiliation on the part of Armenians in the Ottoman history. For example, they had not been regarded by the state as equal to Muslim Ottomans in some important respects before Tanzimat Edict of 1839. Moreover, they had suffered Hamidian massacres in 1890s, when more than two thousand Armenians were killed. Thus we can assume the formation of a chosen trauma on the part of Ottoman Armenians, a trauma already tied to Armenian identity before WWI. The alternative social psychological approach helps us focus on the decision of forced emigration made by the Ottoman rulers. In other words, we can analyze that decision using the alternative, which can be called "person x environment". This article assesses that the two exemplary articles lack a model or theoretical framework such as "person x environment" to be used while studying some of the psychological traits of the Armenian diaspora as well as of Armenians living in Armenia.

* İstanbul Aydın Üniversitesi, Siyaset Bilimi ve Uluslararası İlişkiler Bölümü, Öğretim Görevlisi, gokceaytekin@aydin.edu.tr, Orcid ID: 0000-0002-5565-340X

Keywords: Forced Migration, Armenian Qestion, Ottoman Armenians, Diaspora

ERMENİ MESELESİNE PSİKANALİTİK VE PSİKOLOJİK BAZI YAKLAŞIMLAR: BİR DEĞERLENDİRME

Özet

Ermeni meselesi çok boyutlu bir içeriğe sahiptir ve onun psikolojik boyutu birçok boyuttan yalnızca biridir. Bu makale, bu boyutların etkileşiminin sorunu şekillendirdiğine değindikten sonra, Vamık Volkan'ın psikanalitik yaklaşımından ve daha sonra sosyal psikolojik bir yaklaşımdan yararlanarak psikolojik boyuta odaklanır. Daha sonra bu iki yaklaşım sayesinde, konuyla ilgili başka iki makaleyi değerlendirir. Bu iki makale Türk psikologlar ve psikiyatristler tarafından psikolojik boyut üzerine yazılmış birçok makaleye örnek oluşturur. Makalelerin temelinde; İkinci Dünya Savaşı'ndan sonra Batılı toplumlar tarafından hissedilen suçluluk duygusu, insan hakları konusundaki gelişmelerin Ermeni diasporası tarafından istismar edilmesi, Türk olmayan Ermenilerin “mağduriyet psikolojisi”, ve kimlik bunalımı gibi konular bulunur. Volkan'ın yaklaşımına göre, Ermenilerin soykırım iddiaları bir tür “hak görme ideolojisi” gibi görülebilir çünkü Osmanlı tarihinde Ermenilerin kayıp ve aşağılanma hissetmelerine neden olabilecek olaylar bulunabilir. Örneğin 1839 tarihli Tanzimat Fermanı'ndan önce Osmanlı Devleti tarafından, Müslüman Osmanlı uyruklarıyla önemli bazı açılardan eşit görülmemişler. Dahası 1890'larda iki binden fazla kişinin ölümüne neden olan bazı katliamlara maruz kalmışlardır. Dolayısıyla Osmanlı Ermenilerinde seçilmiş bir travmanın oluşumunu varsayabilir, bu travmanın Ermeni kimliğine henüz Birinci Dünya Savaşı'ndan önce bağlandığını düşünebiliriz. Alternatif sosyal psikolojik yaklaşım ise Osmanlı Devleti yöneticilerinin zorunlu göç kararını vermelerine odaklanmamıza yardımcı olur. Diğer bir deyişle bu kararı “kişi x çevre” yaklaşımıyla analiz edebiliriz. Bu makale, örnek iki makalenin “kişi x çevre” benzeri bir model ya da teorik çerçeveden yoksun olduğunu, bu nedenle Ermeni diasporasının ve ayrıca Ermenistan'da yaşayan Ermenilerin bazı psikolojik özelliklerini yeterince tahlil edemediğini bulgular.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Zorunlu Göç, Ermeni Meselesi, Osmanlı Ermenileri, Diaspora

The Armenian-Turkish question (which can just be called “Armenian question” from Turkey's perspective) is an international question indeed. It has political, historical, socio-cultural, legal and psychological aspects. The interaction among these aspects shapes the future of the question. For example, the draft resolution written by the European Parliament

(EP) on 15 April 2015 (the one that described the events of 1915 as genocide) was a political resolution, which also included a proposal falling within the discipline of international relations, namely the proposition that Turkey and Armenia make use of successful examples of reconciliation between European states and follow an agenda focusing on cooperation between Turkish and Armenian societies. As for the answer by Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the resolution, it underlined the legal and historical aspects of the question. It said that the decision by the EP exceeded its authority and also contradicted with international law and with the history of the question. I think that those two occurrences show the multidimensional content of the question. This article focuses on the psychological dimension or aspect of the question. It uses the psychoanalytical approach by Vamık Volkan and then an approach from social psychology. Thanks to these two approaches, it then tries to assess two other articles on the subject: One by Erol Göka and the other by Sevinç Göral.

Introduction

The Armenian-Turkish question revolves around the alleged genocide and factual massacres during the Ottoman era. At the center of the dispute there is the forced emigration of Ottoman Armenians to Syrian deserts in 1915-1916. The emigration caused the loss of hundreds of thousands Armenians' lives. Some of them died of hunger and illness while they walked through mountains and deserts. Others were murdered. Ottoman rulers' decision of emigration stemmed from some Armenians' cooperation with the enemy during World War I (WWI). Historians dispute intentions of the Ottoman decision-makers, whether they had the intention of causing the death of their Armenian citizens or not. A lot of them says "no, they did not", including American Jew Guenter Lewy.

Similarly, French Gilles Veinstein argued that there occurred a massacre but not a genocide (1995, pp. 40-41). Nevertheless, another French historian, Jacques Sémelin regards the massacres as an example of "acts of ethnic violence" without doubt (2011, pp. 148-149). He writes that those acts exemplify the political use of massacres as written in the title of his book *Purify and Destroy: The Political Uses of Massacre and Genocide*. But he also writes that ethnic cleansing was widespread in the history of Europe and that in the 19th and early 20th centuries many instances of it were seen in the Balkans.

Because of the question, Turkey-Armenia relations have been very weak, almost non-existent. An important improvement seemed to occur in 2009 when Turkish and Armenian governments signed two protocols. The first protocol foresaw the establishment of diplomatic

relations and the second one anticipated the opening of the common frontier, among other things (Oran, 2021, p. 169). Nevertheless, the protocols were not approved by the parliaments; hence they were not materialized. At this point, it is worth noting that the prospect of Turkey-Armenia relations have been very much dependent on Azerbaijan's foreign policy towards both countries. For example, Turkey, as a result of pressures from Azerbaijan, has been connecting the subject of establishing diplomatic relations with the question of Nagorno-Karabagh (Baskın, 2021, p. 168). Since Azerbaijan recaptured an important part of Nagorno-Karabagh and its surrounding territories in 2020, the aforementioned connection may become looser; hence it may be easier for Turkey to start diplomatic relations with Armenia with possibly less objection from Azerbaijan.

Moreover, the question is an obstacle to Turkey's possible membership of the European Union because Armenians living in France and in other EU member states demand that Turkey admit the so-called existence of "the Armenian genocide of 1915". Moreover, the French Parliament passed a law that acknowledged the alleged genocide on 18 January 2001. In fact, France is not the only EU member having acknowledged it. Belgium, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, Slovakia, Sweden and Switzerland all acknowledged it during a period between 1996-2004 (Oran, 2012, p. 187).

In round figures, half a million Armenians live in France, three million in Armenia, one million in Russia, one million in the United States, and seventy thousand in Turkey. Turkish Armenians generally live in Istanbul. In the Ottoman era, they lived mostly in Eastern Anatolia. They lived in the Ottoman Empire for centuries. An important and recent development occurred when the US President Joe Biden commemorated the "Armenian genocide" both on 24 April 2021 and 2022. Those two commemorations formed the first instance of a US president publicly describing the forced emigration as genocide.

Two Approaches

Armenian claims of genocide can be considered an "entitlement ideology" because we can find reasons for a sense of loss and humiliation on the part of Armenians in the Ottoman history (Volkan, 2008). For example, they had not been regarded by the state as equal to Muslim Ottomans in some important respects (for instance, before the law) before Tanzimat Edict of 1839. Moreover, they had suffered Hamidian massacres in 1890s, when more than two thousand Armenians were killed.

Thus we can assume some difficulty in mourning, and the formation of a chosen trauma on the part of Ottoman Armenians, a trauma already tied to Armenian identity before WWI. That trauma may have been reactivated during WWI because in a time of war, a large group's need to support its identity becomes acute. Moreover, after the war, the trauma may have become a much stronger large-group amplifier and may have fueled the entitlement ideology (the claims of genocide).

Therefore, when Turkey started to attain its goal of EU membership during the first years of 2000s, the chosen trauma may have been reactivated by Armenians living in the EU. For instance, Armenians living in France in those years declared that Turkey's admittance of the alleged genocide and apology for it should be a necessary condition for its EU membership (Lewy, 2005).

As I mentioned before, the alternative approach comes from social psychology instead of psychoanalysis. With the alternative approach, we can focus on the decision of forced emigration made by the Ottoman rulers. In other words, we can analyze that political behaviour (decision) using the alternative, which can be called "person x environment". The "person x environment" approach was set forth by social psychologist Kurt Lewin and was adapted by political psychologist Kathleen McGraw. It can be used to conceptualize political behaviour considering the interaction between person and environment (McGraw, 2006, p. 144). Analyzing the decision of forced emigration with this approach can provide us with a different angle from which we can look at the ongoing disputes. As I mentioned before, these disputes are about intentions and hence the alleged genocide. What's more, historical documents have not been able to calm the disputes yet (Lewy, 2005).

It would not be adequate to explain the events of 1915-1916 only with political reasonings and emotional states of the decision makers, which were the Ottoman rulers of that time. It is needed to consider those people's interactions with their environment, in other words with situations both in Ottoman society and in other countries. It is important for disputes over the alleged genocide to understand the political behaviour of the rulers of the Party of Union and Progress (the Ottoman rulers). At this point, the psychological aspect comes to the forefront.

Kathleen McGraw argues that we can always relate continuities in political processes to three determinants: Individuals' qualities, qualities of the environment, and their interaction (2006, p. 135). In terms of the first determinant, the decision of forced migration may be regarded as an example of motivated political reasoning, which is a kind of biased reasoning (McGraw,

2006, pp. 136-137). This may mean that the decision makers' biases on Armenian people led them to the decision even though they did not intend death for Armenian people.

In terms of the second determinant, we may consider the proposition that environment may cause ordinary people to exhibit violent and antisocial behaviours. This proposition is based on research made by scientists such as professor of psychology Ervin Staub on the Holocaust and on other genocides (McGraw, 2006, pp. 139-141). Lastly, in terms of the third determinant, we can make two propositions. We can assume that significant and systematic effects on behaviour are based on individuals' qualities, and that effects may occur only in certain environments. Alternatively, we can assume that the effects are based on the qualities of the environment, and that they may occur only to individuals of certain types (McGraw, 2006, pp. 143-144).

An Assessment

We can find and read a lot of articles written by psychologists and psychiatrists in Turkish on the psychological aspect of the Armenian-Turkish question. For example, we can easily find on the internet two articles published by the Institute for Armenian Research and written separately by psychiatrist Erol Göka and psychologist Sevinç Göral. Those articles are based on points/concepts such as the guilt felt by Western societies after World War II, the abuse by the Armenian diaspora of developments on the subject of human rights, non-Turk Armenians' "psychology of having excuses", and identity crisis. They (the articles) lack a model or theoretical framework such as Kurt Lewin's (person x environment) to be used while studying some of the psychological traits of the Armenian diaspora as well as of Armenians living in Armenia. Moreover, Göka doesn't mention the necessity for studying corresponding psychological traits of Turks and Turkish Armenians. Therefore, his article raises a doubt about the article: Propositions in the article might be oversimplified and modified to the writer's political goals.

Moreover, Göka's article doesn't take into consideration contingent causality, which is a term explained in McGraw's article (2006, p. 151). He refers to the Ottoman past when Turks and Armenians lived side by side in a relatively peaceful manner but he doesn't address the fact that the Turkish state's attitudes towards its Armenian citizens are very different from those of the Ottoman Empire. Especially in the 19th century, Armenians were appointed to important positions in the Ottoman ministry of foreign affairs and they were represented by a considerable number of representatives in the Ottoman parliament. On the contrary, Turkish

Armenians don't possess a similar representative power and they are not subject to any positive discrimination in politics. In summary, one needs to take into consideration today's conditions as well as the state's relationship with Armenian citizens while studying the psychological dimension of the question.

According to Göral and Göka, "psychology of victimhood" and even hostility against the Turks have played an important role in the formation of national identity of the diaspora as well as of Armenia. But psychological concepts that are primarily used for individuals remain inadequate for explaining the question unless some methodology of social and especially political sciences is utilized. The concepts such as victimhood, hostility, and formation of national identity do not provide by themselves an adequate explanation in terms of political science. In addition, a one-way usage of those concepts makes the causality too simple. For example, one could also consider that separatist demands by Greek, Armenian, and Kurdish groups during the Ottoman era might have played an important role in the formation of Turkish identity. Historian Raymond Kévorkian makes a more assertive point writing that the elimination of Armenians had been thought of as a necessary condition of establishing Turkish nation-state (2015, p. 15).

Göral argues in her article that psychology of victimhood is one of important factors that continue the Armenian-Turkish question. In fact, she bases her explanations mainly on psychology of victimhood, which is a concept based on Vamik Volkan's work on political psychology, more specifically on his model of large-group identity and psychology. Therefore it might be useful to try to reassess Volkan's model in this section.

On Volkan's work on large-group behaviours, *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology* refers to his book written in 1988 (Sears et al., 2003, p. 12). He also has an article written in 1985, which has a title very similar to the title of that book. In his article, he argues that the need to have enemies and allies forms the connection between individuals' psychological development and the area of political actions (Volkan, 1985, p. 219). According to him, that need, together with individuals' stubborn commitment to identify with her/his group when she/he faces a difficulty and danger, form the basis of political psychology.

Volkan argues that abstractions such as ethnicity and nationality are creations of our psyches, therefore we can see psyche as the creator of the concept of enemy too (1985, p. 243). Enemy emerges in the individual's developmental process. He also warns readers against seeing the complexity of politics as the objective counterpart of the development of individual psyche

(Volkan, 1985, p. 244). Nevertheless, we should not overlook the convergence/unification of individual and group developments.

On the basis of Volkan's arguments, I think that if one decides to use Volkan's developmental approach, she/he needs to study Armenians' developmental process beginning from a time that precedes the start date of the Armenian-Turkish question. For example, the articles by Göral and Göka mention the history of the question beginning from the 1900s but arguably they should have studied the developmental process and the formation of the concept of enemy going back more in history, beginning from the classical age of the Ottoman Empire for instance.

On the other hand, one may focus on the 1900s in order to understand the concept of internal enemy on the part of Ottomans/Turks. Historian and political scientist Jacques Sémelin writes that the politicization of the WWI paved the way for a political and cultural mobilisation against national minorities who were presented as internal enemy (2011, pp. 174-175). In that way, Ottomans saw Armenians as an internal enemy who conspired with the external Russian enemy against Ottomans during the war. He also writes that Young Turks referred to Armenians "as an obstacle before the establishment of a modern state" (Sémelin, 2011, p. 175). Therefore we can think that the WWI may not be the only reason for the formation of internal enemy.

On the subject of the causes of cultural groups' need to have enemies, Volkan refers to Erik Erikson's work (1985, p. 224). Nevertheless, Erikson's work as well as psychoanalysis in general are criticized for establishing a weak connection between the concepts of self and culture. For example, sociologist James M. Jasper argues that the passing by psychoanalysis from individual to society resembles to a short-circuited jump because of that weak connection and that Erikson could bring no comprehensive solution to that problem (2004, p. 244). Similarly, cultural theorist Philip Smith argues that there are

"enduring problems with the application of a model designed to cure troubled individuals to the sociological analysis of collective phenomena. Slippages and ambiguities often occur in this movement from micro to macro levels of analysis" (2001, p. 213).

In fact, similar criticisms can be found on the subject of methodological individualism, which is one of the methodological choices made in political psychology (Erdoğan, 2014, p. 4).

Methodological individualism tends to explain causes of social events with individuals' actions and motivations, and to highlight individual psychology as a level of analysis. It sometimes even tends to explain social facts as an aggregate of individual behaviours.

References

- Baskın, O. (2021). Ermenistan ve Ermeni politikası. In Baskın Oran (Ed.), *Türk dış politikası: Kurtuluş Savaşı'ndan bugüne olgular, belgeler, yorumlar, cilt III (2001-2012)* (pp. 163-189). İletişim Yayınları.
- Erdoğan, E. (2014). Siyasal psikoloji siyasal katılım hakkında ne öğretebilir? *Kocaeli Üniversitesi Siyasal Psikoloji Çalıştayı*
- Göka, E. (2001). Ermeni sorununun (gözden kaçan) psikolojik boyutu. Ermeni Araştırmaları Enstitüsü. www.eraren.org/index.php?Lisan=tr&Page=DergiIcerik&IcerikNo=202
- Göral, S. (2007). Psikoloji ve psikanaliz penceresinden Türk-Ermeni meselesi: mağduriyet psikolojisi ve büyük-grup kimliğinin etkisi. Ermeni Araştırmaları Enstitüsü. [www.eraren.org /bilgibankasi/tr/index4_1_1.htm](http://www.eraren.org/bilgibankasi/tr/index4_1_1.htm)
- Jasper, J. M. (2004). Intellectual cycles of social movement research: From psychoanalysis to culture?. In J. Alexander, G. T. Marx & C. Williams (Eds.), *Self, social structure, and beliefs: explorations in sociology* (pp. 234-253). University of California Press.
- Kévorkian, R. (2015). *Ermeni soykırımı*. İletişim Yayınları.
- Lewy, G. (2005). Revisiting the Armenian genocide. *Middle East Quarterly* 12(4), 3-12. <https://www.meforum.org/748/revisiting-the-armenian-genocide>
- McGraw, K. M. (2006). Why and how psychology matters. In R. E. Goodin & C. Tilly (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of contextual political analysis* (pp. 131-156). Oxford University Press.
- Sears, D. O., Huddy, L., & Jervis, R. (2003). The psychologies underlying political

psychology. In D. O. Sears, L. Huddy & R. Jervis (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of political psychology* (pp. 3-16). Oxford University Press.

Sémelin, J. (2011). *Arındırma ve yok etme: katliam ve soykırımın siyasi kullanımları*. İletişim Yayınları.

Smith, P. (2001). *Cultural theory: an introduction*. Blackwell Publishing.

Veinstein, G. (1995). Trois questions sur un massacre. *L'Histoire* 187, 40-41.

Volkan, V. D. (2008). Large-group identity, international relations and psychoanalysis. *Deutsche Pschoanalytische Gesellschaft e.V. (DGP) Meeting*.

Volkan, V. D. (1985). The need to have enemies and allies: a developmental approach. *Political Psychology*, 4(2), 219-247.