

Minorities and Diasporas in Turkey

Public Images and Issues in Education

edited by

Fulvio Bertuccelli, Mihaela Gavrila, Fabio L. Grassi



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In copertina | *Cover image:* Meeting of the Caucasian diaspora in remembrance of the Circassian genocide. On the banner in foreground: “21 May 1864 - We didn’t forget the genocide and the exile of the Circassians, we will not forget it, we will not allow it to be forgotten...”. Istanbul, 21 May 2018. Photo: Fabio L. Grassi.

*In remembrance of the
victims of the 6th of
February 2023 earthquake
in Turkey and Syria*

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Preface

The Republic of Turkey was born on 29 October 1923 as the final outcome of a very troubled historical process. For centuries the Ottoman dynasty had ruled a very plural society based on the coexistence of various monotheistic religious communities. The religious identity of the peoples in this society was far more important than the ethno-linguistical one. The Sunni Muslims were juridically the dominant and privileged group; Jews and Christians were generally permitted to sustain decent living conditions. This system started collapsing in the last decades of the XVIII century.

The forced population movements were one of the causes of the collapse. By 1912 Anatolia and the Balkans were hosting more than two million Muslim refugees, mostly coming from the Caucasus, with an exceptional inflow in the 1860's. These refugees, who would never return to their native lands, were relatives of many hundreds of thousands who did not reach Ottoman lands, because they had been killed or had died on their way. The last decade of the XIX century was further marked by massacres of Anatolian Armenians. Between 1911 and 1922 the Ottoman communities enjoyed only one and half years of precarious peace. In 1912-13, as a consequence of the Balkan Wars, another giant wave of Muslim refugees swept across Anatolia. Again, several hundreds of thousands were killed or died on their way. More tragedy was to ensue as, during WWI, hundreds of thousands of soldiers and civilians of all communities died in regular warfare, inter-communal clashes, epidemics, or simply starved. In particular, the Anatolian Armenians were subjected of bloody, "radical cleansing". In 1919-22 most of the Anatolian and Thracian Ottoman Muslims fought for their unity and independence – probably for physical survival as

well – under the leadership of a great military and political leader, the general Mustafa Kemal (the future Kemal Atatürk); in the same period, the Ottoman government signed the humiliating 1920 Sèvres peace treaty, which reduced Turkey to little more than an Anatolian “Bantustan”. New episodes of ferocious intercommunal conflict occurred, especially between the Muslims and the Orthodox Christians of the Black Sea. Mustafa Kemal won the war over the ephemeral independent Armenia, which had aimed at annexing North-Eastern Anatolia, then over the Greek army, which had invaded Western Anatolia. After this resolute turning point he overthrew the Ottoman government, obtained a substantial recognition of his victory in the Lausanne peace treaty and founded the Republic. After the Greek defeat and the later agreed exchange of communities, in 1922-23 approximately one million two hundred thousand Orthodox Christians living in Anatolia were forcibly resettled to Greece and some four hundred thousand Muslims living in Greece were forcibly resettled to Anatolia.

In sum, if during the XIX century the demographical landscape of the territories now belonging to the Republic of Turkey and the surrounding lands experienced a dramatic change, the developments of the years between 1912 and 1923 can be described as nothing less than a demographical catastrophe. The Turkish Republican regime was like a layer of concrete stretched over an exploded volcano. Born in Salonika, Mustafa Kemal felt the plurality of the Ottoman world to be a source of weakness and danger. He shaped the new Turkish state as a perfect Western-like nation state and Turkey as a country where the past should be as much as possible forgotten, excepting for some glorious events such as the Gallipoli battle in the WWI and the “Turkish Liberation War”. The multiethnic and multilingual Ottoman Muslim community was now the unchallenged master of the country but was forcibly refashioned as the Turkish nation. The nation-building policy was severe and intolerant towards non-Turkish identities. Paradoxically, little elements of separate identity were tolerated just in the cases of residual non-Muslim communities. Although the Republican regime adopted strongly secularist principles, on practical grounds the Turkish state and the majority of the public opinion have regarded being a Sunni Muslim as the *condicio sine qua non* of being a “perfect” citizen.

In these nearly 100 years Republican Turkey has scored many admirable accomplishments. But her genesis left a permanent imprint in the political and social development of the country. The “Sèvres syndrome”, *i.e.* the permanent (and continuously fueled) feeling that the integrity of Turkey is at stake, encourages and legitimates an authoritarian and centralist attitude and, as a consequence, a strong suspicion and hostility towards the claims of the “particular” (not historically Turkish) identities. Almost all of the chapters in this volume show the perpetuation of a repressive “syntax” over the decades. It is a repressive political and cultural frame based on a collective imaginary of siege from the outside and from the inside. However, if it is right and necessary to level criticism against the harmful consequences of the “Sèvres syndrome” in terms of democracy and human rights, it is also right and necessary to underline the role of the longstanding prejudicial anti-Turk hate speech which very often arises in public discussion and social media platforms outside Turkey. Even among scholarly publications, one-sided narratives and underhand moves to deny the historical legitimacy of the Republic of Turkey within her own boundaries are not uncommon.

This volume collects nearly all the papers presented in the online conference held virtually in Sapienza University of Rome on 30 November 2021 followed by a specular one, titled “Turkish Communities in Europe: Challenges, claims, international issues” and held on 23 May 2022. The authors are internationally renowned scholars who deal with the educational issues and the public images related to Turkey’s “particular” groups. Neither the conference nor this book could include all of them. However, we hope this volume is welcomed as a useful collective work inasmuch as it provides updated, rigorous, yet sympathetic information about the public images and the educational issues affecting the status of some minorities and diasporic communities in Turkey.

The first chapter provides a conceptual introduction to the topic of “Indifference as a treatable disease. Social Research as platform for a model in communication and education of Human Rights”. The conference and this volume have been realized in the scope of the project bearing this name. Indeed, the conference aimed at keeping alive the interest of international public opinion in the issues of pluralism and democracy in Turkey. In this perspective, we are proud to have hosted – alas only virtually – a scholar and public intellectual who has spent

a lifetime struggling for these values, Prof. Baskin Oran, whose paper (chapter 2) provides the historical and conceptual framework for the following contributions. The authors are experts in different disciplines and we left them free to choose the approach they preferred. However, all the contributions offer a historical perspective and touch the issues tackled in the project.

Among the communities addressed, two (the Rums and the Armenians) are officially recognized as minorities by the Republic of Turkey. The Rums are the Greek-speaking Orthodox Christians. Their name means Rome. Indeed, what we commonly call the Byzantine Empire was the Roman Empire, and for all the surrounding peoples Anatolia was the land of Rome. On the basis of the agreement that provided the legal frame for the aforementioned 1922-23 exchange, as well as the Muslim of Western Thrace were allowed to remain in Greece, the Rums of Istanbul and of the little islands of Imbros (Gökçeada) and Tenedos (Bozcaada) in the Mediterranean were allowed to remain in Turkey. Their number has been dramatically decreasing since the end of WWII, mainly due to the Cyprus question and the nervous relations between Turkey and Greece. Yet Istanbul (including the nearby little islands in the Marmara Sea) still hosts the most important patriarchate of Orthodox Christianity, schools, foundations and monasteries. Therefore, the political importance of this very small community is weighty.

The Armenians are a far bigger community, especially if we include the irregular migrants coming from Armenia. Apart from some sparse individuals, they all live in Istanbul. In the Republican age some Armenians held prestigious positions, such as the great linguist Agop Dilaçar (1895-1979), who was the main helper of Atatürk in the Turkish language reform program. It was Atatürk who chose for him the surname Dilaçar, literally meaning "the language opener". More recently another prominent Armenian intellectual, Etyen Mahçupyan (b. 1950) was senior advisor to the prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu in 2014-15. Nonetheless, many Armenians prefer to adopt a low profile, not only because they live in a fiercely nationalist country but also due to the neverending controversies between Turkey and Armenia (and the West) about the events that occurred during the WWI and the Nagorno-Karabakh war.

On theoretical grounds, and especially in a constitutionally secular state, it is quite questionable to categorize as a minority the Alevis of

Turkey, a distinctive Muslim sect. But, like Rums, Armenians and Jews, they are not part of the *de facto* privileged community of Turkish Sunni Muslims. As “wrong” and “perverted” Muslims, along the centuries, and in Republican era as well, they have been exposed to serious forms of discrimination and violence.

As for the Kurds, on theoretical grounds they are a classic ethno-linguistic minority, however they are such a large community, and so intertwined with the Turks throughout the country, that they cannot easily be perceived as a minority in the way that we generally think of minority groups such as the Germans in Italy or the Sorbs in Germany. Alevi Kurds cannot belong to the privileged space of the Sunni Muslim Turks, but Sunni Kurds can, and therefore many Kurdish or partly Kurdish individuals have attained the highest ranking positions in the Republic. Nevertheless, both Sunni Kurds and Alevi Kurds are subjected to stereotyping and suspicion, after having been the focus of policies aiming at their cultural cleansing in the single party era (1923-1945) and in the 1980s.

Of the two diasporic communities addressed in this volume, the Syrians who fled from their country due to the war and the five hundred thousand children born to them in the hosting country present a new feature of the Turkish human landscape. The Turkish government and NGOs have managed the massive inflow of Syrian refugees very well, but two factors have led a part of the Turkish public expressing a grudge with respect to these destitute people. These are: 1) the general loss of purchasing power due to the devaluation of the Turkish lira and the quick rise of prices; 2) the fear of a “re-arabization” of the country, a country that in Atatürk’s vision ought to be – as completely as possible – detached from the Arab world.

As for the Caucasian diaspora, the expression “last but not least” is here particularly appropriate, because my contribution to the “Indifference as a treatable disease” project was agreed primarily in reference to this community, which is far less debated and researched than the other ones discussed in this volume. Indeed, my primary purpose was to draw the attention of scholars and international readership to a community whose existence, let alone history and current situation, is not widely known, especially outside of Turkey. Later we decided to include the case of the Caucasian diaspora within a more general analysis. What I can say here, to excite readers’

curiosity, is that we face a case where the absence of discrimination coincides with the highest degree of invisibility.

I would like to express my gratitude to the speakers of the conference and the authors of the papers collected in this volume. I am very thankful to Prof. Mihaela Gavrilă, as the head of the Sapienza University project "Indifference as a treatable disease", for having invited me to join her team and for having wholeheartedly supported the realization of the online conference and of this publication; my thanks also go to Dr. Fulvio Bertucelli for his essential contribution in organizing the conference and editing this volume, to the dean of the Faculty of Political Sciences, Sociology and Communication, Prof. Tito Marci, and to the head of the Department of History, Anthropology, Religions, Art History, Media and Performing Arts, Prof. Gaetano Lettieri, for their warm support. Thanks are also due to Prof. Alessandro Saggiaro who, as Prof. Marci, delivered a dense and meaningful opening speech, and to the members of the scientific committee of the conference, Profs. Antonello F. Biagini, Paolo Montesperelli, Giovanna Motta and Baskın Oran. Finally, yet importantly, I would like to thank Prof. Marianna Ferrara and the staff of Sapienza Università Editrice for their careful and kind guidance in the realization of this book.

Rome, January 2023

Fabio L. Grassi