

## *Medz Jeghern* – history

*Medz Jeghern*, meaning “Great Crime” is a term used by the Armenians for the genocide that their nation suffered in 1915-17 in the Ottoman Empire. The number of its victims is estimated at 1,5 million. The pogroms also gave the start to the Armenian diaspora. Despite being one of the most richly documented crimes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it has still not been recognized by Turkey, whose only, officially adopted standpoint is that the Armenians died as a result of an epidemic.

At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries there had occurred mass killings of the Armenian people: the Hamidian massacres, as well as the fights in the Adana province had taken between 300 and 400 thousand victims. The European countries have adopted a neutral stand in relation to these atrocities, giving Turkey a sign that the world would not stand for the Armenian cause.

In 1914 Enver Pasha, the commander in chief of the Turkish army has suffered a defeat at Sarıkamış. This event was turned into a reason for reorganizing the Turkish forces, demilitarization of the soldiers of Armenian origin, as well as persecution of the Christian part of the society (also Greeks and Assyrians), accused of supporting Russia in the conflict. Rumours had been spread of an Armenian – or, more generally, Christian – plot on an international scale, aiming at ousting the Young Turks from power. Ultimately, it became a pretext for putting into practice the plan of the authoritarian Young Turks government to annihilate the whole Armenian population.

April 24, 1915 is a symbolic date: Talaat Pasha, the Turkish minister of internal affairs, gave out a directive to arrest all representatives of Armenian political parties, together with all spiritual and intellectual leaders, priests, lawyers, doctors, and teachers – all of whom were apprehended on the same day and put to tortures. In Istanbul alone there were 2345 arrests, most of which led to execution. The events, carefully planned, escalated rapidly after the Armenians had been demilitarized and deprived of weapons, and the intelligentsia had been arrested: deportations, a parliament-approved expropriation law. Annihilation of the Armenian people has taken on a mass scale. On May 27<sup>th</sup>, Armenians from Anatolia were relocated for Syria and Mesopotamia. By the end of 1915 half a million of people had been driven away to the Syrian Desert, where they died of exhaustion in death marches, deprived of food, water, medical help, and rest. According to the reports of the witnesses, Armenians were burned alive in great numbers, drowned in the Black Sea, poisoned by gas, and put through inconceivable tortures. Women, children, and the elderly alike were being murdered; babies were ripped out from the torn wombs of their mothers; people had their limbs or tongues cut off. Those who managed to survive the desert were sent to concentration camps in Azaz, Katma, Radjo, Dipsi, Del-El, Lale, Ra's al-'Ain, or Tefridje, where they were put to extremely hard labour. Not many had survived, however: out of 18.000 people driven out from the Harpoot province by September 1915, only 185 women and children arrived at the settling area near Aleppo. Out of the 19.000 that had set out from Erzurum, only 11 survived. At the same time as the marches were being perpetrated, all material evidence that Armenians had ever been present in the Ottoman Empire was being destroyed: churches and monasteries were being demolished, and scriptures burned. The persecution lasted until 1917 in some regions, whereas in other they continued until as late as 1923.

The genocide has been recognized in literature and the arts: as early as in 1919 the American film *Ravished Armenia* was created by the director Oscar Apfel, basing on the memories of the survivor Aurora Mardiganian and fragments of documentaries filmed during the war; the Polish writer Stefan Żeromski wrote of the slaughter of Armenians in his in 1924 novel *Spring to Come*; Franz Werfel told the story of the extermination in his 1933 novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, which later became the reading matter of the Nazi camps prisoners.

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of August 1939, a week before the Germans invaded Poland, Adolf Hitler is

reported to have given the memorable instructions to the commanders of the Wehrmacht: "I have issued the command — and I'll have anybody who utters but one word of criticism executed by a firing squad — that our war aim does not consist in reaching certain lines, but in the physical destruction of the enemy. Accordingly, I have placed my death-head formations in readiness — for the present only in the East — with orders to them to send to death mercilessly and without compassion, men, women, and children of Polish derivation and language. Only thus shall we gain the living space (Lebensraum) which we need. Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?"<sup>1</sup>

From the second half of the 20th century onwards many testimonies and accounts of the *Medz Jeghern* have been created and published – among them documentaries, animated films, novels and academic publications. Nevertheless, Turkey still denies its role in the crime, blocking the access to the documents to researchers from around the world. In 1997 a life ban for browsing the Ottoman archives was given to the German scholar dr. Hilmar Kaiser because he had researched the history of persecution of Armenians in Turkey. In 2007, Hrant Dink, editor-in-chief of the weekly magazine *Agos*, who had demanded telling the truth about the Armenian genocide, was shot in Istanbul by a Turkish nationalist. In the same year the Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk was accused of "slandering Turkey" in an interview for a Swiss newspaper, where he had reproached Turkey for the extermination of the Armenians.

In his 1977 book *Armenians, history of a genocide*, Yves Ternon compared Armenia to a boy described in some testimonies of the genocide, whose tongue has been cut off by the Turks. This child hid himself in a hole in the sand by the road to Dejr ez-Zor to warn the passing convoys about the peril awaiting at the end of the road. He would gesture for as long as the convoy turned back, after which he would go back into his hiding place to wait for the next convoy of exiles.

April 24<sup>th</sup> 2015 is a symbolic 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the crime that has not yet been condemned nor critically reviewed, and whose current *status quo* differs little from what Yves Ternon described in the 1970s. Therefore, we strongly encourage you to read the available historical sources and to broaden your knowledge about the forgotten genocide.

Sources:

Grzegorz Kucharczyk: *Pierwszy holocaust XX wieku*, Warszawa 2012.

Yves Ternon: *Ormianie. Historia zapomnianego ludobójstwa*, Kraków 2005.

Jakub Wojczyński: *Eksterminacja Ormian w Turcji na przełomie XIX i XX wieku - przyczyny, przebieg, oddźwięk międzynarodowy*. BA thesis written under supervision of dr. Radosław Fiedler: [http://wojczyn.polskikosz.pl/eksterminacja\\_ormian.pdf](http://wojczyn.polskikosz.pl/eksterminacja_ormian.pdf) [accessed: 16.03.2015, 15:28]

---

1 Por. <http://www.armenian-genocide.org/hitler.html> [accessed: 25.03.2015, 21:39]