

# Mea Culpas, Negotiations, Apologias

## Revisiting the “Apology” of Turkish Intellectuals<sup>1</sup>

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“History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.” Stephen Dedalus

JAMES JOYCE, *ULYSSES*

The long nineteenth century of the Ottoman Empire’s dismantling that started with the Serbian revolt of 1804 culminated in a series of events leading to the years 1915-1918 during which the Christian populations of the Empire, among them Armenians, Assyrians and Pontic Greeks, were annihilated in their homelands. Justified by the official narrative both as a response to the deportation and ethnic cleansing of Muslims from the Balkans and Russia and as a structural necessity to save the remains of the Empire, the last thirty years of Ottoman policies in the imperial territories that will become contemporary Turkey still remain a taboo.

Even though since the 1990s there has been considerable change in the Turkish state discourse and policy,<sup>2</sup> the Armenian Genocide and its institu-

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1 I thank Marc Mamigonian and Axel Bertamini Çorluyan for their valuable critiques and comments for several versions of this paper. I cannot thank Birgit Schwelling enough for her comments and patience during the editorial process. Lastly I would like to thank the participants of the Political Reconciliation and Civil Society in 20th Century Europe Workshop for their inputs.

tional and political/economic repercussions occupy the center-piece of this taboo. Among other things, contemporary street names and boulevards, schools and memorials honoring key figures in the planning and perpetration of the Armenian Genocide<sup>3</sup> offer testimony to the lack of the Turkish state's institutional commitments regarding gross human rights violations.

However, the Turkish state has not been the only enforcer of the taboo surrounding the issue of the Armenian Genocide. Turkish civil society and the academic and intellectual establishment within that civil society have also been either actively in denial or in some cases in service of a denialist state agenda or standing passively silent – another form of denial – for over 90 years. As a result, all late Ottoman historiography and the social sciences and related high school curriculum in Turkey<sup>4</sup> have been highly problematic in their evident obscurantism in both historical and economic data concerning the late Ottoman and early Republican periods. Historical sociologist Taner Akçam's pioneering work on the Armenian Genocide<sup>5</sup> has been the first crack in the long history of silence in Turkey, yet its trickling down to the popular journalistic discourse in Turkey is still very limited.

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- 2 For an elaborate take on the history of the change of the Turkish state discourse since the 1970s see Seyhan Bayraktar, *Politik und Erinnerung: Der Diskurs über den Armeniemord in der Türkei zwischen Nationalismus und Europäisierung* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2010).
  - 3 Ahmet İnel, Katilden Milli Kahraman Olur Mu?, *Radikal*, 26 April 2004, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/Default.aspx?aType=RadikalYazar&ArticleID=1047371&Yazar=AHMET%20%DDNSEL&Date=26.04.2011&CategoryID=99>. Unless otherwise mentioned, all internet sources are accessed on 12 April 2012. All translations from Turkish by the author.
  - 4 For an extensive debate on Armenian Genocide and Turkish high school curriculum see Jennifer M. Dixon, Education and National Narratives: Changing Representations of the Armenian Genocide in History Textbooks in Turkey, *The International Journal for Education Law and Policy*, Special Issue: Legitimation and Stability of Political Systems: The Contribution of National Narratives (2010), 103-126.
  - 5 Taner Akçam wrote a series of books from *Turkish National Identity and the Armenian Question* (İstanbul: İletişim, 1992) to *The Young Turks Crime Against Humanity: The Armenian Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

The apology campaign initiated by four Turkish scholars in December 2008 and endorsed by over thirty thousand Turkish citizens, the subject matter of this chapter, might be considered as another “crack” in the long history of silence. I argue that despite the apology initiators’ presentation of the apology as a purely “personal” gesture, framing it as a matter of “conscience”, the campaign nonetheless cannot be viewed as falling outside the domain of political apologies. But their potentially important place in seemingly solving contemporary political crises aside, what are political apologies? Are they empty rhetorical tools with which states or citizens try to score public relations points in situations where there is neither the possibility of a direct remedy because of passage of time, nor the willingness to follow a transitional democratization process with direct economic and/or political consequences including retribution and reparation? Do contemporary apologies rather “signify the death twitches of expiring moral systems”, and do those who complain about “disingenuous,” “inauthentic” or “commodified” apologies suffer from nostalgia for a more principled age that probably never have existed”?<sup>6</sup> Are apologies new ways of “imagining”, hence transforming the “nation”? What kind of institutional or civil societal normative commitments does the language of the state-to-state, state-to-many, or many-to-many apologies communicate, if any? What differentiates a successful apology from a pseudo or non-apology? What is the difference between *apologia* and apology?

In order to analyze the apology campaign with regard to these questions, I will first clarify the term apology by touching upon its evolution from the Greek word *apologia* (speech in defense) to the current word apology (a speech act of contrition), then very briefly go over the literature itself and possible political pitfalls both in the literature and actual acts of state-to-many and many-to-many apologies, the latter being a rarity itself. Secondly, I will also revisit the context and text of the Turkish intellectuals’ *I Apologize* campaign to position and analyze it within the parameters of the present literature on apologies. I argue that although the *I Apologize*

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6 Nick Smith, *I Was Wrong: The Meanings of Apologies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 2.

campaign is a move in the right direction for changing the lens<sup>7</sup> of society by informing the public sphere of the necessity for recognizing that there is something grave to apologize for<sup>8</sup>, it falls short in too many aspects to be considered a successful apology that would lead to conciliation<sup>9</sup>. I also claim that the passive, unclear and negotiationist language of the text makes it more of an *apologia* in the old sense of word rather than an apology. While doing so I problematize the one-sided, top-down elitist/Jacobinist and preemptive/vertical politics of the preparation process of the “apology” text in which horizontal, large-scale deliberation clearly was lacking in at least two separate contexts: neither the necessity for nor the meaning of a personal apology, nor the wording of the text was widely discussed in the Turkish public sphere, nor were any Armenian representative organizations consulted about many issues ranging from whether they expected a personal apology to whether they approved the text of the “apology”. I also posit that this preemptive public negotiation, lacking deliberative input from the offended party, is offensive itself in its re-creation of historical vertical power politics once again to the detriment of the offended party.<sup>10</sup> The non-

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7 I thank Hella Dietz for the “changing the lens” metaphor she came up with during the discussions at the Political Reconciliation Workshop at the University of Konstanz.

8 This may not be a problem if one perceives apologies as repetitive performative actions to be bettered over time. In a parallel way Elazar Barkan argues in his *The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices* (New York: Norton, 2000), xxix: “An apology doesn’t mean the dispute is resolved, but it is in most cases a first step, part of the process of negotiation but not the satisfactory end result. Often, lack of apologies, demands for apologies, and the refusal of them all are pre-steps in negotiations, a diplomatic dance that may last for a while, a testimony to the wish and the need of both sides to reach the negotiations stage.”

9 I use the term conciliation instead of reconciliation in this context. Turks and Armenians never dealt with equal terms neither during Ottoman nor Republican times. The period leading to genocide recognition and post recognition will be the first where they will overcome animosity, hence conciliate.

10 Aaron Lazare dedicated Chapter 10 of *On Apology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 205-227, to the complex negotiation process between the offended and the offender before the actual apology gets publicized.

deliberated public nature of the apology is offensive in the present because if the offended party does not accept the apology, it will look non-cooperative and hostile. I finally argue that Armenians as a party not only disappeared from the historiography and the land itself but also from what should have been a non-preemptive, *dialogical* process of apology.

## APOLOGIES IN PROCESSES OF (RE-)CONCILIATION

### Apologia or Apology?

Most of the introductory courses in Western philosophy start with Plato's *Apology* – a philosophical work in which Socrates could not be farther from being apologetic, as the term has come to be understood later. Instead he provides an *apologia* as was customary in the classical Greek system in rebuttal to the prosecution's accusations. Its Greek root *apologos* means a story, from which *apologia*, an oral or written defense, will emerge and later be transformed into what we know as apology today. The *Oxford English Dictionary*<sup>11</sup> omits any reference to *apologos* as a story and begins from the Greek *apolyia* (*apo*, away, off; *loyia*, speaking), which is defined as a defense or speech in defense. As we understand the term now, an apology is an encounter between two parties, the offender and the offended, where the offender acknowledges responsibility for an offense or grievance and expresses regret or remorse to the aggrieved party. There is an overall tendency, well studied by the literature, to confuse an apology with a perfunctory "sorry about that", which is merely a compassionate or empathetic expression where there is no offender or offended in the classical sense and, hence, no necessity for the acknowledgment of grievances.

The present literature dealing with political, philosophical, linguistic, as well as psychological issues related to apologies, mostly refers to the two works of Tavuchis and Lazare, and takes the following criteria as the basis of a successful apology:<sup>12</sup>

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11 *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., 20 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

12 Nicholas Tavuchis, *Mea Culpa: A Sociology of Apology and Reconciliation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991); Smith, *I Was Wrong*; Lazare, *On*

- Explanation of the offense
- Expression of shame/guilt/humility/sincerity
- Intention not to commit the offense again
- Reparations to the offended party

The first three are the standard criteria for a successful apology and the last criterion becomes all the more significant in proportion to the extent of the crime/offense. Nick Smith took the existing literature a step further and came up with several other criteria for a categorical apology in order to distinguish it from non-categorical apologies. For Smith, a categorical apology consists of the following:

- Corroboration of Factual Record
- Acceptance of Blame
- Possession of Appropriate Standing
- Identification of Each Harm
- Identification of the Moral Principles Underlying Each Harm
- Shared Commitment to Moral Principles Underlying Each Harm
- Recognition of Victim as Moral Interlocutor
- Categorical Regret
- Performance of Apology
- Reform and Redress
- Intentions for Apologizing
- Emotions<sup>13</sup>

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*Apology*; Barkan, *The Guilt of Nations*; Elazar Barkan and Alexander Karn, *Taking Wrongs Seriously: Apologies and Reconciliation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); *The Age of Apology: Facing Up to Past*, ed. Marc Gibney et al. (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Danielle Celermajor, *The Sins of Nations and the Rituals of Apology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Roy Brooks, *When Sorry Isn't Enough: The Controversy over Apologies and Reparations for Human Injustice* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

13 Smith, *I Was Wrong*, 28-108. Smith's work is not just limited to identifying categorical apologies and differentiating them from the non-categorical kind, he is also interested in the varieties of meanings that even non-categorical apologies transmit.

Hence, issues of linguistic and intentional clarity are paramount for a successful apology. A sentence such as “I apologize for whatever I may have done” is not an apology since it fails to acknowledge the offense; indeed, the offender may not even believe that an offense was committed. Similarly, what is called a conditional apology, i.e., “if you were hurt, I am sorry”, is not an apology at all, because the implication is that perhaps it’s the aggrieved party’s sensitivity that is the problem. Another often cited example to illustrate the problems of an unclear language is President Nixon’s resignation speech (1974) where he deeply regretted *any* injuries that may have been caused, or Senator Robert Packwood’s “apology” for “alleged” offenses of sexually abusing female pages (1992). According to Aaron Lazare, “both failed to acknowledge definitively what the public believed to be true, thus insulting the intelligence of their respective audiences”.<sup>14</sup> Although measuring sincerity is difficult in any given situation, with apologies the issue is not only vagueness but also sincerity. One also has to understand that it is possible to deliver a sincere but unsuccessful apology; hence, despite the fact that sincerity has been cited as one of the emotional components of a successful apology it is not indicative of success on its own.

## Politics of Apologies

State, as well as non-state apologies from many-to-many, have proliferated especially since 1995<sup>15</sup> to the point where the Catholic Church had issued ninety-four apologies by 1998.<sup>16</sup> As Elazar Barkan pointed out, in the same period “questions of morality and justice” started to receive “growing attention as political questions. As such, the need for restitution to past victims has become a major part of national politics and international diplomacy”.<sup>17</sup>

The literature dealing with institutional or state apologies for gross violations of human rights has grown tremendously within the last forty years,

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14 Lazare, *On Apology*, 8-9.

15 Gibney et al., *The Age of Apology*, 2.

16 Ibid., 3. Not all of these apologies were directed towards the immediate victims themselves but “were apologies to God for the way the Church, or members of the Church, had behaved”.

17 Barkan, *The Guilt of Nations*, xvi.

but more so since the Canadian government's official apology to their native citizens in 2008. It can be said that civil rights politics in the United States and Europe along with the continental institutional commitments of the post-Holocaust world gave way to a new wave of movements, both domestic and international, which tried to limit the way the powerful operated vis-à-vis the powerless.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps the apology of Queen Elizabeth II (1995) and of Jenny Shipley, the Prime Minister of New Zealand to the Maori people (1998) or Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's recent apology "for the past wrongs caused by successive governments on the indigenous Aboriginal population"<sup>19</sup> (2008) have been informed by a world order more concerned about institutional impunity. It seems that "the problem of impunity became more and more of an issue, not only to new states but also to those still burdened by their colonial and world war pasts".<sup>20</sup> Or perhaps, scholars in memory studies as well as some victims of injustice are right in their suspicions of the usefulness of apologies themselves or the sincerity of several of these reconciliation policies in the 1990s. McLaughlin for example calls official apologies "symbolic and meaningless gestures made by leaders who have no intention of avoiding similar acts in the future".<sup>21</sup> Janna Thompson also refers to Aboriginal leader Patrick Dodson who thinks that "the only meaningful act an Australian government could perform is to guarantee the rights of indigenous Australians in the Australian Constitution". Thompson also reports that other Aboriginal leaders are highly critical of apologies they believe to be only a feel-good process for the apologizers that does nothing concrete to solve the issues of their communities.

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18 Jean-Marc Coicaud and Jibecke Jönsson, Elements of a Road Map for a Politics of Apology, in: *The Age of Apology*, 77-93. Coicaud and Jönsson also mention the Latin American shift from dictatorships to democracies and several other regions, post-Soviet republics and African countries in transition that underwent significant institutional transformation in the years following the end of the Cold War.

19 Australia apology to Aborigines, 13 February 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7241965.stm>.

20 Coicaud and Jönsson, Elements, 82.

21 Martin McLaughlin, Blair and the Potato Famine, *Socialist Equality*, 14 June 1997, quoted in: Janna Thompson, Apology, Justice, and Respect: A Critical Defense of Political Apology, in: *The Age of Apology*, 31-44, here: 32.



This is in line with Gibney and Roxstrom who criticize the West's highly selective and very ambiguous apologies mostly devised with an eye on preserving the international status quo.<sup>22</sup> De Laforcade also “notes that slavery memorial day, ironically, became an occasion for self-praise rather than for self-criticism since the commemorations focus on ‘enlightened values, generosity of French liberals in 1830’ rather than anti-colonial revolts and resistance movements in the Antilles”,<sup>23</sup> and he suggests that by “declaring slavery ‘a crime against humanity’, legislators intended to divert migrant public opinion from measures against contemporary issues of discrimination”.<sup>24</sup> Karen E. Till similarly argues that the commemoration of the abolition of slavery “positions France as a moral leader in a global order with ‘good’ nations acknowledging past actions. As tied to a neo-liberal agenda, acknowledging past crimes against humanity locates that legacy *in the past, not the present*, even in the face of stark anti-immigration laws and militant government responses to student and minority social unrest.”<sup>25</sup> In a similar critical vein, after revisiting several selective political apologies Jenna Thompson argues that “political leaders are willing to apologize only when they think that there will be no serious political or legal repercussions”.<sup>26</sup>

Political scientists have generally been less interested in apologies than philosophers, sociologists, linguists and anthropologists, perhaps because what state-to-state or state-to-many apologies achieve institutionally is not very clear. But although one can be conflicted about the meaning or function of collective apologies and acknowledge the validity of critiques of political apologies as diversions or fig leaves for regime crimes, especially if not accompanied with retributive and/or restorative justice measures, at the

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22 Mark Gibney and Erik Roxstrom, The Status of State Apologies, *Human Rights Quarterly* 23, 4 (2001), 911-939. Accordingly, the West “wants credit for recognizing and acknowledging a wrong against others, but it also wants the world to remain exactly as it had been before the apology was issued”.

23 Geoffrey De Laforcade, ‘Foreigners’, Nationalism and the ‘Colonial Fracture’: Stigmatized Subjects of Historical Memory in France, *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 47, 3-4 (2006), 217-233, here: 229.

24 Ibid.

25 Karen E. Till, Memory Studies, *History Workshop Journal* 62, 1 (2006), 325-341, here: 339.

26 Thompson, Apology, 31.

same time one can see the existence (or in some cases the non-existence) of formal and informal political apologies as indicative of the direction of the normative commitments of the society in question.

As Nicholas Tavuchis argues in his path-breaking work *Mea Culpa*, “apologies [...] are potentially sensitive indicators of members’ (and non-members’) actual, if unspoken, moral orientations”. Secondly, “as symbolic barometers, apologies register tensions and displacements in personal and public belief systems, that is, the contraction and expansion of interdictory motifs – what calls for an apology and what does not – that either precede or follow changes in social behavior and cultural expectations”.<sup>27</sup> “We not only apologize to someone but also for something. The analytical focus of the former is on actors, agents, and social relationships; the latter, by contrast, directs attention to rules and meta-rules, that is, rules about the rules.”<sup>28</sup>

In a parallel vein, the domestic and international demands of recognition have changed the way liberal theory classically thought about the social goods that the individual needed. Social recognition of present subaltern identities and the recognition of past sufferings were added to the traditional list until then headed by equality and liberty.<sup>29</sup> This also generated a critical discussion that exposed the Christian core of the politics of apology and made the parties more sensitive to local concepts, such as *ubuntu*, “which emphasizes restorative justice, including restored relations between perpetrators and victims, over retributive justice”.<sup>30</sup> This was a novelty in the way the West positioned itself and its previously unchallenged and Eurocentric claims for truth.

Overall, it is not clear exactly what apologies accomplish in international or domestic politics or what other considerations within the domain of *realpolitik* make apologies necessary, not for their intrinsic value as sincere acts of contrition, but more for their value as one in a stash of self-

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27 Tavuchis, *Mea Culpa*, 13.

28 Ibid.

29 For the new politics of recognition of “others” and minorities, see Michael Freeman, Historical Injustice and Liberal Political Theory, in: *The Age of Apology*, 45-60.

30 Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann and Mark Gibney, Introduction: Apologies and the West, in: *The Age of Apology*, 2-6, here: 5.

serving diplomatic moves. Leonard Jamfa brings to our attention such a possible calculus behind the German statement of apology for the 1905-1908 genocide of the Herero people of Namibia, for example, and correlates the apology to the German fear of possible land invasions of white farms in Namibia akin to those in Mugabe's Zimbabwe.<sup>31</sup> This rather vigilant way of reading the process and the context of apology, without reducing it to the text, is one of the reasons why apology cases need to be approached not only from within a linguistic or philosophical framework but also from a political and economic perspective and calculus of *realpolitik*.

Notwithstanding an apology's timing and considerations of the political context in which the statement is written, apologies also are relevant to political theory since they lead to questions of membership in a community and responsibility stemming from such membership, i.e., citizenship. Besides, present apologies for injustices that happened in the recent or distant past are relevant for the domestic and international debates on institutional continuity and path dependency, and normative commitments and responsibilities of polities living in the present. What makes present political communities, whose members also may or may not include formally disenfranchised or discriminated-against citizens, responsible for past acts of transgression, for example? These discussions are not merely futile attempts at restoring what is perhaps impossible to restore. They also hint at possible ways of re-imagining domestic as well as international politics. For example, the debate within the Netherlands or Belgium regarding apologies to the peoples of their former colonies informs us about what is legitimate for future international endeavors of both countries since the political spectrum is divided between those who think that colonialism was beneficial – hence there is nothing to apologize for – and those who think that colonialism's detrimental effects far exceeded its benefits. In that sense, the politics of apology is another political issue mirroring the divide between the liberals and conservatives of almost any given country. Bearing these considerations in mind, I will proceed to examine both the official and non-official responses to the Turkish *I Apologize* campaign in an effort to contextualize and position it within the larger domain of Turkish politics and its actors.

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31 Leonard Jamfa, Germany Faces Colonial History in Namibia: A Very Ambiguous "I am Sorry", in: *The Age of Apology*, 202-215, here: 206.

## THE I APOLOGIZE CAMPAIGN OF TURKISH INTELLECTUALS

There has been an increase in the frequency of the usage of the term Genocide in the Turkish media and in the general coverage of the events of 1915<sup>32</sup> especially since the assassination of *Agos* newspaper's editor-in-chief Hrant Dink in January 2007. Yet the Armenian Genocide is still largely seen as a security issue and foreign policy obstacle to be brushed aside. As a result, a genuine intellectual quest to understand what genocide means for the Turkish state's institutional framework *and* the grammar of ethnic relations in Turkey is lacking. Thus, it is not surprising that current or former ambassadors are viewed as legitimate parties to the discussion; such was also in the discussions leading to the *I apologize* campaign. In an interview given to *Taraf's* Neşe Düzel approximately three months before the Turkish intellectuals' "apology" campaign took off, and shortly after Turkish President Abdullah Gül's visit to Yerevan in the course of a series of events initiated by Armenian President Serge Sarkisian commonly referred to as 'soccer diplomacy',<sup>33</sup> Turkish former ambassador Volkan Vural clearly expressed the need for the state to apologize to Armenians.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, it is against this background of increased debate that the "apology" campaign launched by four scholars, Ali Bayramoğlu, Cengiz Aktar, Ahmet İnel, and Baskın Oran, in December 2008 should be understood. The text of the campaign was translated as follows:

"My conscience does not accept the insensitivity showed to and the denial of the Great Catastrophe that the Ottoman Armenians were subjected to in 1915. I reject

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32 For a non-exhaustive coverage of the subject from year 2000 to 2011, see <http://hyetert.blogspot.com/>.

33 For an extensive coverage of this particular process see Khatchig Mouradian, Soccer Diplomacy and the Road not Taken: An Alternative Perspective for building piece between Turkey and Armenians, *ZNET*, 13 April 2009, <http://www.zcommunications.org/soccer-diplomacy-and-the-road-not-taken-by-khatcig-mouradian>.

34 Neşe Düzel, Volkan Vural: 'Ermeni ve Rumlar tekrar vatandaş olsun', *Taraf*, 9 August 2008, <http://www.taraf.com.tr/nese-duzel/makale-volkan-vural-ermeni-v-e-rumlar-tekrar-vatandas.htm#>.

this injustice and for my share, I empathize with the feelings and pain of my Armenian brothers and sisters. I apologize to them.”<sup>35</sup>

The first newspaper that broke the news of the campaign was the center-right *Vatan* via an interview with Cengiz Aktar, on December 3, 2008.<sup>36</sup> Nergis TV station (NTV) followed with the actual text of the apology on December 5, 2008,<sup>37</sup> and slowly all other major news outlets picked up the following week. The moderate Islamist *Zaman*, the highest circulating newspaper in Turkey did not cover the story until December 16, whereas its English edition *Today's Zaman* started to cover ten days earlier.<sup>38</sup>

The organizers first announced on NTV and other outlets their plan to launch the campaign via internet at the beginning of 2009 so that citizens could join them.<sup>39</sup> However, the online campaign began three weeks earlier than had been originally announced. Coincidentally, intellectuals from Armenia sent a letter to President Abdullah Gül on December 9, urging him to recognize the Armenian Genocide.<sup>40</sup> This letter was lost in the shuffle and largely ignored by the international and Turkish press. Addressing the Turkish President, the Armenian intellectuals challenged Ankara's vehement denial of any government policy to exterminate Ottoman Turkey's Armenian population:

“[...] here we deal with an appalling crime perpetrated against humanity which has no expiration date. This is not only a position held by all Armenians, but also an expectation shared by the World community. The Armenian Genocide is a crime

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35 Özür diliyorum, <http://www.ozurdiliyoruz.com/default.aspx>.

36 Tülay Şubatlı, ‘Ermenilerden özür diliyorum’ Aydınlar, 1915’teki Ermeni tehciriyle ilgili imza kampanyası başlatıyor,” *Vatan*, 3 December 2008, <http://haber.gazetevatan.com/Haber/211898/1/Gundem>.

37 Apology campaign of intellectuals for the Armenian deportation, <http://arsiv.nvmsnbc.com/news/468300.asp>.

38 Ayşe Karabat, Turkish intellectuals give personal apology for 1915 events, *Today's Zaman*, 5 December 2008, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-160701-turkish-intellectuals-give-personal-apology-for-1915-events.html>.

39 Apology campaign of intellectuals for the Armenian deportation.

40 For the full text of the Armenian intellectuals see: Open Letter to Abdullah Gül, <http://asbarez.com/59724/open-letter-to-abdullah-gul/>.

against humanity and against the values of modern civilization, and no individual, organization or even government can put a question mark on these events.”

The letter further claimed that “[...] today’s Turkish state has inherited this responsibility” and “[...] Your generation of Turkish leaders must accept the undeniable truth and recognize the fact of the Armenian Genocide [...] Only then will both our nations be able to pursue a frank dialogue and achieve the true reconciliation so much desired.”<sup>41</sup> This letter was particularly significant since it originated from Armenia and was an indirect response to the long-standing cliché that genocide recognition was important only for Diaspora Armenians, not for Armenians from Armenia.

In effect, by enlarging the scope of the campaign earlier than had been announced, the organizers of the campaign successfully, if not necessarily intentionally, blocked the Armenian text and the demand of the offended party. The historically powerless side’s voice – the voice of those to whom the *I apologize* campaign was ostensibly directed – was thus muffled, and the historically asymmetrical character of the Turkish-Armenian relationship, itself a result of the Genocide, reasserted itself.<sup>42</sup>

The apology campaign led into a major backlash in Turkey – one that was hardly unexpected by those conversant with Turkish politics, but one that nonetheless went underreported in the international press or Turkish press in English: two major websites backed by several groups from the Turkish Republican left, center and the right appeared almost overnight, leaving the optimistic 13,000 number of the earlier days of the apology campaign pale in comparison.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, although the campaign

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41 Ibid.

42 The letter was covered as short news by NTV website, Evrensel newspaper (Left), and Yeniçağ newspaper (Right), but completely ignored by mainstream news outlets, columnists and journalists alike, including the apology campaign organizers themselves.

43 As of September 19, 2011 anti-apology websites *özür beklıyorum* (Iamexpecting anapology.com) has 201,142 (<http://www.ozurbekliyorum.com>), *özür dilemiyoruz* (Wedonotapologize.biz) that also carries the public endorsement of main opposition party deputies has 87344 signatures (<http://www.ozurdilemiyoruz.biz/index2.php>). The main site of the *I Apologize* campaign *özür diliyorum* (weapologize.com) has 31003 signatures (<http://www.ozurdiliyoruz.com/default.aspx>).

organizers, among them Cengiz Aktar<sup>44</sup> and Baskın Oran,<sup>45</sup> and various other participants and journalists<sup>46</sup> reiterated that the apology was not for the genocide itself nor, technically speaking, for genocide denial per se, news outlets in English and French reported it as Turkish intellectuals “apologizing for the Armenian Genocide”.<sup>47</sup> Nonetheless, on no occasion did the initiators of the campaign<sup>48</sup> offer a correction to this (mis)interpretation of the apology in effect, allowing this misunderstanding to flourish among audiences who would be receptive to such a (mis)reading. In this manner, the apology authors were frequently “credited” with apologizing

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44 Tülay Şubatlı, ‘Ermenilerden özür diliyorum’, *Vatan*, 3 December 2008.

45 Baskın Oran, Verdiğimiz huzursuzluk için özür dileriz, *Radikal*, 16 December 2008, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/Radikal.aspx?aType=RadikalEklerDetayV3&ArticleID=912867&Date=16.12.2008&CategoryID=42>.

46 See Hadi Uluengin who vehemently argued that Great Catastrophe does not and cannot mean genocide. Hadi Uluengin, Özür ve imza, *Hürriyet*, 24 December 2008, <http://hurarsiv.hurriyet.com.tr/goster/haber.aspx?id=10633079&p=2>.

47 Robert Tait, Writers risk backlash with apology for Armenian genocide, *The Guardian*, 7 December 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/dec/08/armenian-genocide-turkey-apology-petition>.

48 See for example *Le Monde* coverage and its language equating “Grand Catastrophe” to Genocide. Des intellectuels turcs demandent pardon à l’Arménie, *Le Monde*, 20 December 2008 ([http://www.lemonde.fr/web/recherche\\_breve/1,13-0,37-1063162,0.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/web/recherche_breve/1,13-0,37-1063162,0.html)) and another longer *Le Monde* piece aggregated by the website CollectifVan. Réveil des consciences, *Le Monde*, 19 December 2008 (<http://www.collectifvan.org/article.php?r=4&id=24972>). *Guardian* oscillated between alleged genocide and genocide, BBC Monitoring Europe did not use the term since it mostly translated and covered Turkish newspapers, which avoided the term. *The New Zealand Herald* was the only news outlet that got the avoidance of the term genocide correctly. See: Turkish Intellectuals Issue Apology for Past Atrocities Against Armenians, <http://www.armeniandiaspora.com/showthread.php?154411-Turkish-Intellectuals-Issue-Apology-For-Past-Atrocities-Against-Arme#.TngVrnN3E5s>. *The Independent* used genocide and ethnic cleansing interchangeably. Nicholas Birch, Turkish academics in apology to Armenians, *The Independent*, 15 December 2008, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/turkish-academics-in-apology-to-armenians1067066.html>.

for something which they explicitly stated elsewhere that they were not apologizing for.

*I Apologize* also received both official and unofficial reactions from the Turkish political elite, journalists and larger public alike. While it is impossible to give a full account of all unofficial reactions, an extensive coverage of several positions both for and against the apology among its endorsers and critics is paramount to understand the scope and variety of these arguments. It is also necessary to be able to soundly contextualize the endeavor and elaborate on the politics of both the text *and* the process leading to and following the campaign.

### **Official Reactions**

The official reaction to the campaign was initially mixed. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan categorically rejected the idea of contemporary citizens apologizing for past deeds, whereas President Abdullah Gül did not condemn the campaign and framed it as an issue of citizens exercising their freedom of speech.

Although President Gül's reaction would change in the week following his press conference due to pressure and personal attacks from the main opposition party and its deputies, his approach to the campaign was more accommodating than the Prime Minister's. Gül<sup>49</sup> viewed the campaign as a sign of freedom of expression in Turkey along with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that viewed both the apology and the counter apology campaigns launched by retired diplomats and others asking an apology from Armenians as part of the lawful exercise of freedom of speech.<sup>50</sup>

The main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) condemned the campaign claiming that it was the Armenian side that needed to apologize for siding with and supporting a foreign country against Ottoman Empire,

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49 Ayşe Karabat, Apology campaign triggers fierce debate, *Today's Zaman*, 18 December 2008, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-161594-apologycampaign-triggers-fierce-debate.html>.

50 Turkish Foreign Affairs views apology campaign for "1915 incidents" as part of freedom of speech, *Today's Zaman*, 17 December 2008, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-161530-turkish-foreign-affairs-views-apology-campaign-for-1915-incidents-as-part-of-freedom-of-speech.html>.



for massacring thousands of Azeri citizens and “for not persecuting or punishing ASALA terrorists who assassinated Turkish diplomats”.<sup>51</sup> In the same week, CHP deputy Canan Aritman besides calling the organizers of the campaign as traitors and asking for an apology for their deeds, also claimed that President Gül had not reacted negatively to the campaign because of his Armenian ancestry,<sup>52</sup> a claim President Gül would deny and later take to court. The leader of the second opposition party in the parliament, the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Action Party (MHP), Devlet Bahçeli, along with several other prominent figures from the party condemned the apology campaign along the same lines as CHP members.<sup>53</sup>

Two weeks into the apology campaign, the Turkish military also expressed its opinion during a General Staff meeting. General Staff Director of Communications Brigadier General Metin Gürak said: “We absolutely do not find the campaign right. Not only is apologizing wrong, it could also lead to detrimental results.”<sup>54</sup>

In the same week, the Pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party’s (DTP) objected to a joint condemnation statement by CHP and MHP, and as a result deputies decided to issue condemnation notes on an individual basis. DTP deputy Sırrı Sakık supported the apology campaign further and argued that “the state’s confrontation with its history would not be the end of the

51 Turkey’s Main Opposition Party Condemns Apology Campaign For “1915 Incidents”, 17 December 2008, <http://www.turkishpress.com/news.asp?id=255909>.

52 Ayşe Karabat, Critics of apology campaign turn to personal attacks, *Today’s Zaman*, 19 December 2008, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-161691-critics-of-apology-campaign-turn-to-personal-attacks.html>.

53 Bahçeli: Onlardan utanıyorum, 18 December 2008, <http://hurarsiv.hurriyet.com.tr/goster/ShowNew.aspx?id=10594801>; E.Bariş Altıntaş and Ercan Yavuz, Nationalists react to intellectuals’ courageous apology, *Today’s Zaman*, 6 December 2008, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-160813-nationalists-react-to-intellectuals-courageous-apology.html>.

54 TSK: Ermeniler’den özür dilemek doğru değil, 19 December 2008, <http://yenisafak.com.tr/Gundem/?t=19.12.2008&i=157194>. For a critique of military’s involvement in a civilian initiative see: Cengiz Çandar, Genelkurmay, sivil bireyler ve Ermeni tabusu..., *Hürriyet*, 20 December 2008, <http://hurarsiv.hurriyet.com.tr/goster/ShowNew.aspx?id=10609505>.

world”.<sup>55</sup> Still, the main opposition MHP went ahead and issued a condemnation note later signed by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and CHP representatives.<sup>56</sup>

Canan Aritman’s personal attack on President Gül led to a massive reaction even from center rightist newspapers. Fatma Dişli Zıbak of *Today’s Zaman* summarized the mainstream reactions both from center right and center left in her column under the title “Deputy’s ‘Fascist’ Remarks Met with Criticism”. Center-right journalist Ahmet Taşgetiren of *Bugün*, despite his disapproval of the apology campaign, argued: “What she (Canan Aritman) said about Gül is very ugly and disgraceful. Even if Gül has Armenian origins, presenting this as a very negative feature could only be the reflection of a fascist mentality.”<sup>57</sup> In spite of such support in the press, President Gül found it necessary to clarify that his family’s roots were Muslim and Turkish for centuries.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, the President took Aritman to court where she was charged with “denigrating the reputation of a public persona”.<sup>59</sup> A number of European deputies including Hannes Swoboda and Jan Marinus Wiersma, the two vice chairmen of the Socialist Group in the European Parliament, along with Joost Lagendijk, the Co-Chairman of EU-Turkey Joint Parliamentary Committee also harshly criticized both Aritman and her party.<sup>60</sup>

By December 20 the earlier milder position of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs changed with Foreign Minister Ali Babacan claiming in Brussels

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55 Press Roundup, *Today’s Zaman*, 20 December 2008, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-161741-press-roundup.html>.

56 MHP’den özür kampanyasına karşı bildiri, 18 December 2008, <http://hurarsiv.hurriyet.com.tr/goster/ShowNew.aspx?id=10597947>.

57 Fatma Dişli Zıbak, Deputy’s ‘fascist’ remarks met with criticism, *Today’s Zaman*, 20 December 2008, [http://www.todayszaman.com/columnistDetail\\_getNewsById.action?newsId=161748](http://www.todayszaman.com/columnistDetail_getNewsById.action?newsId=161748).

58 Gül Aritman’a cevap verdi, 21 December 2008, <http://hurarsiv.hurriyet.com.tr/goster/ShowNew.aspx?id=10615884>.

59 Cumhurbaşkanı Gül’den Aritman’a dava, 22 December 2008, <http://arsiv.ntvm.snb.com/news/469808.asp>.

60 Selçuk Gültaşlı, Aritman should apologize or resign, say European leaders, *Today’s Zaman*, 25 December 2008, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-162236-aritman-should-apologize-or-resign-say-european-leaders.html>.

that the campaign may “negatively affect the Turkish-Armenian dialogue”.<sup>61</sup> Indeed Gül’s position also changed over the course of the month of December. In an interview he gave to *Aktüel* TV station (ATV) and *Today’s Zaman* during the first week of January 2009, Gül said: “To be honest, it will affect the process negatively. Looking at the consequences and the latest debates, I don’t think that it has made a positive contribution.” While Gül insisted on freedom of speech, he nonetheless warned that the polarization that the campaign had triggered had brought negative consequences.<sup>62</sup> President Gül himself was criticized by CHP Parliamentary leader Hakkı Süha Okay for filing a symbolic 1 New Turkish Lira (YTL) lawsuit against Arıtmán. Okay said that “[f]iling this lawsuit is an injustice to our citizens of Armenian roots”, explaining that it implied that the president regards “Armenian ethnicity” as an insult. Emphasizing that “everyone’s roots deserve respect”, he added that Arıtmán’s words lacked “class”, but that the president’s action was inappropriate.<sup>63</sup>

### Semi Official Reactions

As previously stated, former Turkish ambassadors hold a special position on the discussions of the Armenian Genocide because of the linkage between state security and foreign policy. In fact, the first organized non-official reaction came from retired ambassadors of Turkey, some of whom were actively on duty during the period of Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA) activity. But there were differences of opinion among retired ambassadors: for example, retired ambassador Temel İskit supported the apology campaign whereas ambassadors Şükrü Elekdağ and Korkmaz Haktanır were not only against the apology; they al-

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61 Ayşe Karabat, State says ‘no’ to apology campaign, *Today’s Zaman*, 20 December 2008, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-161807-state-says-no-to-apology-campaign.html>.

62 Yavuz Baydar and Fuat Uğur, Gül says apology campaign hurts Armenia reconciliation bid, *Today’s Zaman*, 2 January 2009, [http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail\\_getNewsById.action?load=detay&link=162971](http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?load=detay&link=162971).

63 CHP members react to racist remarks despite party inaction, 25 December 2008, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-162237-chp-members-react-to-racist-remarks-despite-party-inaction.html>.

so were among those who started a counter declaration.<sup>64</sup> The group who came out against the campaign included former Foreign Ministry undersecretaries Korkmaz Haktanır, Şükrü Elekdağ and Onur Öymen,<sup>65</sup> who labeled the campaign “against Turkish national interests”. In a public letter, the ambassadors repeated the CHP and MHP line, further linked the issue to the Nagorno Karabagh conflict and stated that Armenians should apologize.<sup>66</sup>

One-time Minister of Education, now columnist for *Radikal* newspaper, right-conservative Hasan Celal Güzel claimed that “this traitorous text, which includes the expression ‘great catastrophe’ in capital letters and has captured the signatures of some of our spineless intellectuals, hands everything over to those who prepared the text. Even the title of this text is perceived by both the diaspora and Armenia itself as a reference to ‘genocide’. In other words, those who signed this traitorous text, no matter what they may insist on, are in fact accepting the allegations of genocide.”<sup>67</sup>

## Non Official Reactions

The non-official reactions can be categorized as protesters (left and right), supporters with reservations, and supporters.

### Protesters

The State-Employees Union (*Memur-Sen*) and Public Employees Union (*Kamu-Sen*) protested the campaign, asking for an apology from Armenians for ASALA and “the Azerbaijan territory that is still under occupation”. In

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64 Abdülhamit Bilici, Let us set up our own historical committee independently of Armenians, *Today's Zaman*, 20 December 2008, [http://www.todayszaman.com/columnistDetail\\_getNewsById.action?newsId=161764](http://www.todayszaman.com/columnistDetail_getNewsById.action?newsId=161764).

65 Ayşe Karabat, Apology campaign triggers fierce debate, *Today's Zaman*, 18 December 2008.

66 Zeynep Güranlı, Büyükelçiler isyan etti, *Hürriyet*, 15 December 2008, <http://hurarsiv.hurriyet.com.tr/goster/ShowNew.aspx?id=10574633>.

67 Hasan Celal Güzel, If you're all intellectuals, I guess I'm not!, *Today's Zaman*, 19 December 2008, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-161627-if-youre-all-intellectuals-i-guess-im-not.html>.

a statement on behalf of a platform comprised of ninety-six labor and trade organizations, including Ankara Trade Chamber (ATO), Union of Agriculturalists and Turkey Workers Union (*Türk-İş*), Bircan Akyıldız, the leader of *Kamu-Sen* said: “Turkish Republic is always under attack openly or indirectly by cooperatives who have been sold.” Atatürk University’s senate not only opposed the campaign but also the president of the university read a statement that condemned the campaign as a “disrespectful act against the Turkish nation” betraying “our martyrs who lost their lives in Armenian terror”.<sup>68</sup>

Although the apology text was signed by almost thirty thousand citizens, including two hundred academics and journalists in the first two months, there were prominent intellectuals on the left who refrained from signing the text. Some of these intellectuals withheld the reasons why they did not sign, but some spoke out early on and criticized either the endeavor, or the text, or both.<sup>69</sup> There also were instances of intellectuals critiquing the endeavor after having heard some of the campaign organizers’ denialist public speeches.<sup>70</sup>

The coordinator of the Association for Facing History Aytekin Yıldız, criticized the campaign on three grounds: that the campaign was redundant in the sense that Armenians were aware that there were people of conscience in Turkey. Secondly, while admitting the campaign was a good start, Yıldız criticized usage of *Medz Yeghern* as “great disaster”: “What do

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68 Ayşe Karabat, State says ‘no’ to apology campaign, *Today’s Zaman*, 20 December 2008.

69 One of those intellectuals is Ismail Besikci, “Büyük Felaket” mi, Soykırım mı?, 22 December 2008, [http://www.gelawej.net/modules.php?name=Content&pa=s\\_howpage&pid=2711](http://www.gelawej.net/modules.php?name=Content&pa=s_howpage&pid=2711).

70 For Ragip Zarakolu’s critique of Baskin Oran’s populist denialist language see Özü o kadar kolay değil, *Özgür Gündem*, 12 February 2009, <http://www.hyetert.com/yazi3.asp?s=&Id=394&DiId=1#>.

they mean by ‘great disaster’? Let’s name it, it is genocide.”<sup>71</sup> Finally, Yıldız also emphasized the fact that the state had to apologize.<sup>72</sup>

Historian Ayşe Hür, known for her work in popularizing the history of 1915 in newspaper articles, refused to sign the apology, criticizing both the idea and the implementation as elitist.<sup>73</sup> Hür also wrote a newspaper column, “I Apologize for not Apologizing”, where she further clarified her position towards the apology campaign, explaining why she refused to apologize for the faults of Turkish nationalism with which she does not identify.<sup>74</sup>

Ismail Beşikci,<sup>75</sup> one of the most important figures in recent Turkish intellectual history with his pioneering research and discourse on the Kurdish issue, and a group of Kurdish intellectuals explicitly criticized the vague choice of wording in the apology and the problematic usage of the term Great Catastrophe.<sup>76</sup> These intellectuals signed a joint declaration explaining the reasons why the apology campaign falls short trying to satisfy several constituencies, including the state. Beşikci, while criticizing the campaign organizers’ utilitarian calculus, said: “You can collect more signatures when you use a term such as ‘Great Catastrophe’ in order not to disturb the state. However, correctly understanding the content of factual connections is more precious than this. Quality (of the debate) must be more precious than the quantity (of the signers).”<sup>77</sup> In the same piece Beşikci also criticized the organizers for not referring to the “1915 Genocide against As-

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71 At the initial stages of the “apology” campaign there were different translations for the term *Medz Yeghern*, here Aytekin Yıldız, is referring to one of them. See page 83 et seq. of this chapter for further information on the reactions to the usage of *Medz Yeghern*.

72 Ayşe Karabat, Turkish intellectuals give personal apology for 1915 events, *Today’s Zaman*, 5 December 2008.

73 Ibid.

74 Ayşe Hür, I Apologize for Not Apologizing, *Armenian Weekly*, 20 April 2009, <http://www.armenianweekly.com/2009/04/20/i-apologize-for-not-apologizing>.

75 Ismail Besikci, “Büyük Felaket” mi, Soykırım mı?

76 Ortak Açıklama; Felaket Değil Soykırım, 26 December 2008, <http://www.nasname.com/tr/2464.html>.

77 Ismail Besikci, “Büyük Felaket” mi, Soykırım mı?

syrians, to the genocide against Kurds spread over time, and to the cultural and religious genocide against Alevi<sup>s</sup>”.<sup>78</sup>

In a lengthy article published in the popular news magazine *Aksiyon*, Taner Akçam, besides criticizing the close-ended character of the apology text and problematizing the issue of political responsibility like Hür and others, also criticized the avoidance of the term Genocide within the campaign by saying he found the arguments against the use of the term to be at a very low intellectual standard. While Akçam elaborately criticized the endeavour, he still found it important in its potential to start a debate on the issue and even could be considered a watershed moment for this reason alone.<sup>79</sup> This brings us back to the questions of what apologies are and whether this is really an apology or an *apologia* instrumentalizing the idea of apology for something else: A domestic “discussion starter” over the events of 1915 at the expense of Armenians?

### Supporters with reservations

Emre Aköz of the center-right *Sabah*, Ahmet Hakan of center-right *Hürriyet* and Nuray Mert of center-left *Radikal* newspapers all agreed with the necessity communicating regret, but disagreed with the last sentence that included the actual “apology”. They all claimed they found personal apology in the name of a nation politically problematic especially for something they did not take part.<sup>80</sup> Hakan and Mert signed the petition conditionally –

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78 Ibid.

79 For a republished version of Akçam’s article see Taner Akçam, Tartışalım ama bilgiyle, 26 December 2008, <http://hyetert.blogspot.com/2008/12/tartisalim-ama-bilgiyle-prof-dr-taner.html>.

80 Emre Aköz, “Özür” meselesi, *Sabah*, 11 December 2008, [http://www.sabah.com.tr/Yazarlar/akoz/2008/12/11/ozur\\_meselesi](http://www.sabah.com.tr/Yazarlar/akoz/2008/12/11/ozur_meselesi); Center Right *Milliyet’s* ex-editor in chief Mehmet Y. Yılmaz also argued along similar lines with a slightly different take asking why ordinary Turks will accept this, after all, he said, even the Holocaust is committed by Nazis and not Germans. Mehmet Y. Yılmaz, Bir rüşvet hikayesi! Muhalefet partileri nerede?, *Hürriyet*, 17 December 2008, <http://hurarsiv.hurriyet.com.tr/goster/ShowNew.aspx?id=10584497>.

up until the last sentence.<sup>81</sup> In an odd discriminatory tone Mert further reiterated a common stereotype in her column where she claimed she did not feel the necessity to apologize to well-to-do Armenians at all.<sup>82</sup>

Similarly, Murat Belge, a professor of English literature and one of the most prominent figures of the left, and Yıldırım Türker, columnist at the *Radikal* newspaper, also criticized the apologetic part of the apology on similar grounds to Mert, Hakan and Aköz. Belge further argued for a politically discriminatory approach to the surviving Armenians: “[...] if I am ‘apologizing’ or doing something else, it is neither possible nor meaningful to do this towards *all Armenians*. In the Armenian society, in the ‘home-land’ or in the ‘Diaspora’ there may be such persons that I may not even want to meet or greet, let alone apologize. Why should I apologize to an Armenian fascist because some Turks have done this act against Armenians in 1915?”<sup>83</sup> Türker, on the other hand, though he had initial reservations regarding the act of apologizing since this would mean his self-association with the denialists, ultimately decided to endorse it and condemned CHP parliamentarian Canan Aritman in very strong language.

“Aritman was not satisfied with implying that President Abdullah Gül’s mother might be of Armenian descent, but she also declared Armenians are the element that should be sought after every catastrophe and be labeled our eternal enemy. Aritman is proud. She is not only unapologetic but also brags about how many supporters she has. Is there anyone left who still doubts that this is exactly the right time for the campaign [of apology to Armenians by intellectuals] that we have been debating for a long time at a time when Aritman and those who like her proudly commit this crime in Parliament and declare a segment of the country’s population the national

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81 Ahmet Hakan, Aferin Cem Yılmaz, *Hürriyet*, 17 December 2008, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/10584434.asp?yazarid=131>.

82 Nuray Mert, Özur Değil, Paylaşma, *Radikal*, 16 December 2008, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/Radikal.aspx?aType=RadikalYazar&ArticleID=912950&Yazar=NURAY%20MERT&Date=16.12.2008&CategoryID=98>.

83 Murat Belge, Ermeni Kıyımı üstüne metin, *Taraf*, 14 December 2008, <http://www.taraf.com.tr/makale/3097.htm>.



enemy, creating threats against their lives? Aritman and those like her are the strongest reason we have to apologize to the Armenian community.”<sup>84</sup>

While Belge (along with Aköz, Hakan, Hür and Mert) expressed legitimate concerns about the uneasy relationship between individual responsibility regarding past crimes and apologies, a tension problematized within both communitarian and liberal theory,<sup>85</sup> his political categorization of Armenians who *deserve* an apology as only non-fascists shows that he completely misses the point of apology and gross human rights violations which are quite different than discriminatory politicides. On the other hand, Türker’s lengthy take on why they should apologize only shows the kind of anti-intellectual corner in which the Turkish liberal left is trapped: as can be clearly seen from the CHP-MHP-ex-ambassadors episode, the Turkish center and right were able to hijack the discourse and reduce the entire discussion to being pro or anti apology, without an informed and substantial debate on the kind of issues that are paramount in a dialogical process involving gross human rights violations and political responsibility.

The majority of the non-official reactions in English were published by the moderate Islamist *Today’s Zaman* that has a number of non-Islamist liberal scholars and journalists as columnists. One such liberal scholar close to the ruling AKP is İhsan Dağı, an International Relations’ Professor at Middle East Technical University. Dağı criticized the ultra-nationalist discourse used to justify the massacre of Armenians in the name of survival of the state then argued:

“We do not have to, and should not, accept that the 1915 events constituted genocide, but we must stop trying to find excuses for the massacres of Ottoman citizens of Armenian origin. Otherwise, we can find excuses for the suppression of the

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84 Yıldırım Türker, What if we are all Armenian?, *Today’s Zaman*, 23 December 2008, [http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail\\_getNewsById.action?load=detay&link=161978&bolum=130](http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?load=detay&link=161978&bolum=130).

85 Freeman, Historical Injustice and Liberal Political Theory.

Kurds, of Islamic dervish orders, of the girls who wear the headscarf, etc. If we allow the *raison d'état* to reign, then everything will be explainable and justifiable.”<sup>86</sup>

Dağı's position is indeed important in that it shows that even individuals close to government circles do not deny the massacres but refuse to acknowledge that the massacres constitute genocide.

Another columnist close to government circles, Hüseyin Gülerce, supported the endeavor as expressing the will of citizens, something that should not be condemned as traitorous. Yet he was critical of the timing of the campaign, claiming that because of the climate of animosity it generated among the citizenry, the campaign may disrupt an otherwise successful process of rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia.<sup>87</sup> He also criticized the text of the campaign, asking why it was silent on the issue of Turks massacred by Armenians or the Ottoman losses in Balkans. A position claiming reciprocity of massacres that is common among Turkish conservative circles.<sup>88</sup>

## Supporters

It will be extremely difficult to cover the arguments of all initial two hundred campaign supporters since a good number of them either in print or on

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86 İhsan Dağı, From Apology to Reconciliation, *Today's Zaman*, 22 December 2008, [http://www.todayszaman.com/columnistDetail\\_getNewsById.action?newsId=161892](http://www.todayszaman.com/columnistDetail_getNewsById.action?newsId=161892).

87 Hüseyin Gülerce, Apology is Valuable If It Works Out, *Today's Zaman*, 19 December 2008, [http://www.todayszaman.com/columnistDetail\\_getNewsById.action?newsId=161695](http://www.todayszaman.com/columnistDetail_getNewsById.action?newsId=161695).

88 See the links below for a more extensive response from centre-right journalists Enis Berberoğlu, Söz kılıçtan keskin, *Hürriyet*, 20 December 2008, <http://hurarsiv.hurriyet.com.tr/goster/ShowNew.aspx?id=10609508>, Tufan Türeñç, Gençler için bazı gerçekler, *Hürriyet*, 19 December 2008, <http://hurarsiv.hurriyet.com.tr/goster/ShowNew.aspx?id=10600787>, Rahmi Turan, Ağacın kurdu içinde olur, *Hürriyet*, 18 December 2008, <http://hurarsiv.hurriyet.com.tr/goster/ShowNew.aspx?id=10592881>, Bülent Keneş, Yes, but who will apologize to my grandmother and grandfather?, *Today's Zaman*, 17 December 2008, [http://www.todayszaman.com/columnistDetail\\_getNewsById.action?newsId=161457](http://www.todayszaman.com/columnistDetail_getNewsById.action?newsId=161457).

TV defended their position. However, the following support without a signature is meaningful since it exemplifies a very common misrepresentation of both the critiques and context of the campaign.

Although he neither signed nor disclosed why he withheld his signature, Yavuz Baydar of the center-Islamist *Today's Zaman* newspaper wrote favorably about the campaign while criticizing what he called the response from Armenia and Armenian diaspora – though without making it clear which Armenian authors or organizations he had in mind:

“It is encouraging that the international press gives it broad coverage. Reactions from the West are mainly positive, though the ‘response’ from Armenia and the Armenian diaspora was rather scarce, mainly because of the apparent discontent over the wording of the text, which, to them, falls short of calling it ‘genocide’. The shying away of Armenian support seems to have deviated from the focus that the individual apology addresses the consciences and exclusively highlights the (in)human dimension of what happened in 1915, rather than ‘minimizing it to a legal term that functions as a stumbling block for reconciliation and dialogue’.”<sup>89</sup>

Baydar’s portrayal of Armenians as a group hung up on a “minimizing” legal term – i.e., genocide, which “functions as a stumbling block for reconciliation and dialogue”, as opposed to the representation of Turkish individuals’ as attentive to “the ‘(in)human’ dimension of 1915”, is in line with the mainstream representations of diaspora Armenians in the Turkish press. In the same article Baydar quoted University of Michigan Professor Fatma Müge Göcek as one of the pioneers of Turkish-Armenian dialogue in academia. Göcek argued:

“I think this is a very significant step forward that needs to be congratulated and fervently supported for two reasons. First, it is an initiative occurring within the public sphere free of state intervention, unhindered by state interests and the denialist stand the state has promoted for so long. It actually openly counters it, trying to build a social movement against it. Second, it tries to do so with a very simple grass roots aim of acknowledgment, which comprises the first step in addressing a social problem.

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89 Yavuz Baydar, Public Apology Stirs Controversy, Angers, Breaks New Ground, *Today's Zaman*, 17 December 2008, [http://www.todayszaman.com/columnistDetail\\_getNewsById.action?newsId=161419](http://www.todayszaman.com/columnistDetail_getNewsById.action?newsId=161419).

In a country where the state has for so long officially denied that there has been such a problem, its acknowledgment would indeed be the first step forward and it could only be done through the public sphere. One therefore has to first get society to acknowledge there is a problem in order to start working on it: Since one relates to a problem interpersonally as an individual, through one's own interpretation, ideas, feelings, emotions, experiences or recollections, the best way to do this is to transform all those who individually acknowledge into a social group."<sup>90</sup>

Baydar's asymmetrical presentation of the "Turkish side" and "Armenian side" of the discussion and Göcek's argument need to be problematized separately. Although Baydar chose to frame the Armenian response in very general terms and as devoid of agency while framing and (mis)representing their critique in his own terms, he chose to feature prominently, and hence legitimize, a Turkish scholar's argument, all in service of praising an initiative that he calls "yet another strong signal of Turkey's undefeatable conscience".

In actuality, Armenian or other protesting responses were neither unified nor did they focus solely on the omission of the word genocide; indeed, although some Armenian responses did offer such a criticism this was by no means unique to Armenians. Much of what was expressed by Armenian and other critical scholars in the Armworkshop discussion list, an outlet of which Yavuz Baydar was a longtime member, was also later expressed at length by Marc Mamigonian,<sup>91</sup> Khatchig Mouradian,<sup>92</sup> Bilgin Ayata,<sup>93</sup> Seyhan Bayraktar and myself<sup>94</sup> on several occasions. These critiques were

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90 Ibid.

91 Marc Mamigonian, Commentary on the Turkish Apology Campaign, *Armenian Weekly*, 21 April 2009, <http://www.armenianweekly.com/2009/04/21/commentary-on-the-turkish-apology-campaign/>.

92 Khatchig Mouradian, From Yeghern to Genocide: Armenian newspapers, Raphael Lemkin, and the Road to the UN Genocide Convention, *Haigazian Armenological Review* 29 (2009), 127-137.

93 Bilgin Ayata, Critical Interventions: Kurdish Intellectuals Confronting the Armenian Genocide, *Armenian Weekly*, 29 April 2009, <http://www.armenianweekly.com/2009/04/29/kurdish-intellectuals-confronting-the-armenian-genocide/>.

94 For a review of a critical panel discussion on the *I Apologize* campaign, see Ayşe Günaysu, Silenced but Resilient: A Groundbreaking Panel Discussion in

similar to those expressed during the first days of the campaign and showed variety and depth, as opposed to being simply ‘hung up’ on a term. Thus, a historical discursive asymmetry was further exacerbated through Baydar’s editorial choice.

Göcek, in her remarks, reframes the debate as if the usage (or lack thereof) of the term genocide is completely irrelevant to the discussion and/or as if Great Catastrophe is equivalent to genocide – which it is not – either in linguistic or in historico-legalistic terms (something that will be discussed in length later in this chapter). Göcek also reduces genocide recognition (a term she refuses to use) to an interpersonal affair where individuals will decide with their own “interpretation, ideas, feelings, emotions, experiences or recollections”. For this reason, she sees the apology campaign as a “significant step” towards “acknowledgement”. Acknowledgement of what? Presumably of what Baydar terms Armenian “suffering” and what the apology statement calls “pain”.

However, what has been denied by the Turkish state and the public in general has not been whether Armenians suffered in 1915. The proponents of the Turkish state discourse, such as former ambassador and Turkish Armenian Reconciliation Committee member Gündüz Aktan, never denied that there was “suffering” or large numbers of Armenian deaths;<sup>95</sup> rather, the discussion has revolved around whether this “suffering” and these deaths were the result of a deliberate policy or policies, and thus whether the term genocide can be applied. Finally, Göcek’s remarks remain silent to the following socio-political question: “if individuals should decide on their own, as individuals, how to confront ‘the events of 1915’, why did intellectuals decide to mandate a text and a term *from above* without considering an open-ended, transparent and horizontal campaign along the lines of the Australian *Sorry Books*”.<sup>96</sup>

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Istanbul, *Armenian Weekly*, 3 August 2010, <http://www.armenianweekly.com/2010/08/03/gunaysu-silenced-but-resilient-a-groundbreaking-panel-discussion-in-istanbul/>.

95 For further discussion about Gündüz Aktan’s position see David Phillips, *Unsilencing the Past: Track two Diplomacy And Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005).

96 The Sorry Books project was an initiative of the group *Australians for Native Title* (ANT), which was formed in June 1997. They were seen as an opportunity

## The Armenian Responses

The several Armenian responses were marred by similar kinds of problems, ranging from vagueness to lack of wide-scale deliberation. The two largest representative American-Armenian organizations, the Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA) and the Armenian Assembly of America (AAA), both hailed the apology campaign by *reframing* it in their own way. Whereas the campaign organizers explicitly refrained from using the term genocide in the text of the apology and they also explicitly said they are neither claiming responsibility nor apologizing for the Armenian Genocide, the ANCA's statement said:

“The efforts of those courageous parliamentarians and historians in Turkey who have placed the Armenian Genocide center-stage must be commended. [...] By the same token, the campaign by Prime Minister Erdoğan and other Turkish leaders to quash honest discussion of the murder of 1,5 million Armenians from 1915-1923 must not be rewarded. Silence by the international community will be misinterpreted by Turkey's leadership as support for their genocide denial agenda.”<sup>97</sup>

Even though the voices in Turkey themselves did not send a clear message of neither responsibility, nor showed any incentive for formal recognition of genocide, ANCA communications director Chouldjian said, “Only by formally recognizing the Armenian genocide can the United States and democratic countries around the world send a clear message that they stand with the voices of truth in Turkey”.<sup>98</sup> The AAA's Executive Director Bryan

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for ordinary Australians who wanted to do something in response to the Federal Government's refusal to make a formal apology to the Stolen Generations. For more see The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies' website, <http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/collections/exhibitions/sorrybooks/introduction.html>.

97 Armenian National Committee of America, ANCA Statement on Recent Efforts in Turkey to Confront the Armenian Genocide of 1915-1923, press release, 22 December 2008, [http://www.anca.org/press\\_releases/press\\_releases.php?prid=1641](http://www.anca.org/press_releases/press_releases.php?prid=1641).

98 Ümit Enginsoy, US Armenian group hails 'apology', *Hürriyet Daily News*, 26 December 2008, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/english/domestic/10644886.asp>.

Ardouny's words also clearly indicated a reframing of reality, despite the fact that AAA's statement was more tuned to the difference between Great Catastrophe and genocide:

"Over 12,000 people in Turkey want history to be recorded truthfully, having already signed the Internet-based petition apologizing for what they call the 'Great Catastrophe' that befell the Armenians of Ottoman Turkey in 1915. This public apology is a first step in that direction and will inevitably lead to Turkey coming to grips with its genocidal past."<sup>99</sup>

A letter of support initially signed by 21 Armenian individuals, mostly Canadian and French Armenians involved in arts, was circulated in Armenian newspapers in mid January 2009. These Armenians seem not to have been aware of the kind of political discourse that surrounded the apology campaign other than its limited accounts in British and French newspapers, nor did they command the same kind of political clout that the apology campaign organizers and initial signers did. Whereas the campaign organizers wrote and acted within a consistent national political sphere in which they have been prominent political actors at least for the last ten years, the Armenian respondents lacked the same kind of national discursive space and have not been involved in active politics themselves.

Indeed this power asymmetry led to a scandalous event at the beginning of February 2009 when Armen Gakavian, an Armenian academic in Australia's Macquarie University, gave an interview to the Turkish daily *Radikal* which quoted him as saying, "Armenians should apologize to the Turkish nation for killing several thousands of Turks in the early 20th century and for the actions of ASALA".<sup>100</sup> Later Gakavian would issue a correction letter where he claimed his words were distorted by *Radikal* and that he

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99 Ayşe Karabat, Critics of apology campaign turn to personal attacks, *Today's Zaman*, 19 December 2008.

100 Erhan Üstündağ, Armenian Diaspora Reactions to Apology Campaign, 4 February 2009, <http://bianet.org/english/english/112323-armenian-diaspora-reactions-to-apology-campaign>; Adnan Gündoğan and Ertuğrul Mavioğlu, İki "özür" den sıkı bir kardeşlik doğar mı?, *Radikal*, 2 February 2009, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/Radikal.aspx?aType=RadikalDetayV3&ArticleID=919479&Date=01.02.2009&CategoryID=97>.

never spoke for all Armenians nor did he state that Armenians should apologize.<sup>101</sup>

Finally on February 2, 2009 the European Armenian Federation issued a statement that read:

“We have noted the development of a new campaign in Turkey by which the Armenian people would need appeasement provided by certain strata of Turkish society, thereby solving the Armenian question without causing too much damage to Turkey. While being fully receptive to genuine expressions of sympathy and outreach by Turkish individuals who choose to speak against their own government’s policy of denial of the Armenian Genocide, we must also make clear that the cause of justice with regard to this mass crime cannot be ‘apologized’ away by populist initiatives, however well-intentioned such actions might seem to be. The recently publicized ‘apology’ campaign in Turkey is, indeed, a populist initiative, which deliberately avoids the term ‘genocide’ and which, by so doing, intends to de-criminalize the destruction by the Ottoman Turkish government of 1,5 million Armenians, as precisely claimed one of its initiators, Mr. Baskın Oran in a Turkish newspaper (Milliyet, December 19, 2008).”<sup>102</sup>

All in all the Armenian side was underinformed regarding the intricacies of the Turkish politics. Both linguistic barrier and information asymmetry worked against the Armenians. Especially the initial statements from representational organizations show that the Armenian side heard what they wanted to hear notwithstanding what the Turkish intellectuals said.

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101 Armenian Academic Reacts To Apology Speculations, 4 February 2009, <http://bianet.org/english/world/112343-armenian-academic-reacts-to-apology-speculations>. The first distorted version of Gakavian’s initiative was not publicized by anybody but one of the initiators of the campaign, Baskın Oran, on February 1, 2009. See Oran’s article on the incident: [http://www.agos.com.tr/index.php?module=corner&status=old&author\\_id=5&corner\\_id=1079&cat\\_id=22](http://www.agos.com.tr/index.php?module=corner&status=old&author_id=5&corner_id=1079&cat_id=22).

102 Armenians still demand recognition and reparation of their genocide by Turkey, 2 February 2009, <http://eafjd.eu/spip.php?article521>.



## CONTEXTUAL CONSTRAINTS OR POLITICAL STRATEGIES? AN ANALYSIS OF THE “APOLOGY” TEXT

2012 is the twentieth anniversary of the publication of Taner Akçam’s first book.<sup>103</sup> Akçam, the first historian from Turkey to openly acknowledge the Armenian Genocide without resorting to euphemisms did not use the term genocide in this early work and later explained the kind of psychological barriers he overcame in the years to follow.<sup>104</sup> Akçam and others published several books and dozens of newspaper and scholarly articles on the issue and appeared frequently on TV since then. Hence, although the debates surrounding the Turkish apology campaign suggested or stated outright that as a result of the campaign Turkish society at large encountered the issue of Armenian Genocide the first time, this is not the case.

It is true that the Turkish public has not had many opportunities to receive a good education on the subject of the Armenian Genocide, and the Turkish press, on this issue, is either willfully denialist, completely unaware or ill-informed or simply politically biased. Nonetheless, the Turkish public at large is familiar with the fact that Armenians and others<sup>105</sup> are demanding the recognition of a particular kind of crime, that of genocide. Elsewhere in Turkey the term genocide has been non-problematically used for cases such as Bosnia, Algeria, and at times for Gaza or Palestine. Moreover a number of recent scholarly works have clearly established that the Turkish state never entirely denied the “tragic events” of 1915 as such. The core argument of the Turkish Republic has always been that the mass killings during and as a result of forced deportations were not a result of an intentional policy by the Young Turk regime to eliminate the Armenians, thus these events cannot be defined as genocide according to the UN Convention of 1948.

The apology text, the choice of the term *Medz Yeghern* and the campaign itself did not appear out of nowhere but exist in a historical and polit-

103 Akçam, *Turkish National Identity and the Armenian Question*.

104 See the introduction of Taner Akçam, *İnsan Hakları ve Ermeni Sorunu: İttihat Terakki'den Kurtuluş Savaşı'na* (Ankara: İmge Kitabevi, 1999).

105 See the letter of International Association of Genocide Scholars addressed to Prime Minister Erdoğan, 6 April 2005, <http://eo.tchobanian.org/en/communiq/e00010086.html>.

ical context; thus they must be the subject of a political, philosophical and linguistic analysis taking into account this context. In order to do so, one needs not only take into consideration the limits of the public sphere in Turkey and the place the left and the liberals occupy in it, but also to challenge and expose the ways in which the progressive discourse fails to deliver what it promises to do, i.e., acknowledgement of a particular crime against humanity in the full extent of the international legal framework. Since the text is the work of four writers, Ahmet İnel, Ali Bayramoğlu, Baskın Oran, and Cengiz Aktar, all known as public intellectuals in Turkey, it is safe to assume that they are, as Marc Mamigonian says, “acutely aware of the effects of language, that they chose their words with great care, and thus that the apology text was not arrived at by accident or in haste”.<sup>106</sup> For this purpose we need to read the text of the apology campaign closely, in addition to revisiting the speeches and writings of the campaign organizers as well as the way the campaign was publicized and managed in the public sphere. As is established in the literature primarily by Nick Smith<sup>107</sup> but also by others, non-categorical apologies or even non-apologies transmit meaning that may still inform us about intentions, offense, regret, shame, humility or the lack of any of these.

The first sentence of the text: “My conscience does not accept the insensitivity showed to and the denial of the Great Catastrophe that the Ottoman Armenians were subjected to in 1915” acknowledges that there is an insensitivity towards the Great Catastrophe that the Ottoman Armenians were subjected to in 1915, and that there is a denial of the same Great Catastrophe. Also the sentence posits that this is an issue of conscience. The second sentence: “I reject this injustice and for my share, I empathize with the feelings and pain of my Armenian brothers”<sup>108</sup> rejects *this* injustice and claims to personally empathize with the feelings and pain of Armenian brothers. The third sentence: “I apologize to them” claims to apologize to them.

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106 Mamigonian, Commentary on the Turkish Apology Campaign.

107 Smith, *I Was Wrong*, 17-27.

108 Following various critiques, “Armenian sisters” was added to the text after its first publication in the newspapers and the website.

The full extent of the political, philosophical and linguistic issues at stake here are beyond the scope of this chapter. Yet they need to be analyzed, even if briefly.

### **Linguistic Issues: Translatability, Clarity, Agency**

Aaron Lazare,<sup>109</sup> among others, cautions us to the first issue, that of translatability, which, in this case is not just a simple issue of translation between different languages and cultures. To begin with, the Armenian term *Yeghern*, the usual word for “pogrom”, cannot be translated to any other language as catastrophe for three reasons: As indicated by Marc Nichanian, “it seems that its root is the past form of the verb to be, as though *Yeghern* was the Event par excellence”.<sup>110</sup> *Yeghern* embodies an element of agency, in the sense that there cannot be a *yeghern*, slaughter, without a *yeghernagorts*, slaughterer. In contrast, neither the word Catastrophe nor its Turkish “equivalent” *Felaket* includes the element of agency.<sup>111</sup> However Boğos Levon Zekiyian used the poetic license to translate *Medz Yeghern* as Great

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109 Lazare, *On Apology*, 34.

110 Marc Nichanian and David Kazanjian, *Between Genocide and Catastrophe*, in: *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David Eng et al. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 125-147, here: 127.

111 Catastrophe is the translation of *Aghed* – one of the words used by Armenians to describe both 1915 and several pogroms and massacres before 1915, such as the Adana massacres of 1909 or 1895-96 massacres. Besides the issue of impossibility of translation for linguistic reasons, the term is also non-translatable from a cultural perspective, since it’s not a categorical proper name, but rather one that corresponds to a particular experience within Armenian history. Just as there is no *Yeghern* that means Catastrophe in the Armenian language, there also is no *Medz Yeghern* that means Great Catastrophe. So the Turkish intellectuals came up with a brand new concept Great Catastrophe that would have been the translation of *Medz Aghed*, and not that of *Medz Yeghern*. For a much elaborate discussion on the issue of impossibility of translation and further philosophical considerations such as impossibility of categorizing that which is uncategorizable and unimaginable see Marc Nichanian, *Catastrophic Mourning*, in: *Loss*, 99-124; Nichanian and Kazanjian, *Between Genocide and Catastrophe*.

Catastrophe in order to avoid the legal repercussions of Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code<sup>112</sup> and Turkish intellectuals referred to his translation.

The second linguistic issue, that of clarity, is not exclusively linguistic and has both political and philosophical implications. This dimension is well problematized in the literature under the subtitle of pseudo or failed apologies. Lazare cites eight – some slightly overlapping – ways that the statements of offense can fail. The following are relevant for our purposes since the *I Apologize* text does all: “offering a vague and incomplete acknowledgment; using the passive voice; [...] minimizing the offense; using the empathic ‘I’m sorry’; [...] apologizing for the wrong offense”.<sup>113</sup>

It is necessary to revisit the terminology used in the Armenian language use to describe 1915, in order to clarify what we mean by vagueness in this particular context. Armenians use *Medz Yeghern* (Great Pogrom), *Darak-rootoon* (Deportation), *Ahksor* (Exile), *Chart* (Chopping), *Aghed* (Catastrophe), *Vojir* (Crime), *Medz Vodjir* (Great Crime), and several other terms, and most commonly *Tseghaspanootoon* (Genocide). The Turkish terms *Tehcir* (Deportation), *Sürgün* (Exile), and *Kıtal* (Massacre) are even used within official Turkish discourse, though with some variety: For example, Turkish official sources and historians close to the Turkish official position prefer to use *Mukatele* (Mutual Massacre) instead of *Kıtal*.

By adopting the more sanitized and literary term Great Catastrophe the authors of the apology, firstly, introduced, via this campaign a brand new term to the Turkish public sphere. Even if the term meant something for Armenians, it certainly did not mean anything for the larger public in Turkey who heard the term *Büyük Felaketi*/Great Catastrophe or its Armenian “equivalent” *Medz Yeghern* for the first time. One of the campaign organizers, Baskın Oran, explicitly claimed on more than one occasion that *Medz Yeghern* was the only term Armenians used until 1965 when they “discov-

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112 Boğos Levon Zekiyan, *Tehcir ve Soykırım: Bağdaşmaz Görünümden Tamamlayıcı İşleve; Büyük Ermeni Felaketi ‘Medz Yeğern’ üzerine Düşünceler* (Lecture, New Approaches to Turkish-Armenian Relations, Türk Ermeni İlişkilerine Yeni Yaklaşımlar Sempozyumu, İstanbul Üniversitesi, 15-17 March 2006, 9).

113 Lazare, *On Apology*, 86.

ered” the political value of genocide.<sup>114</sup> Not only is the normative implication of Oran’s words problematic for its chastising of Armenians for using the term genocide, but also his argument is historically baseless, as shown earlier: Armenians used over a dozen terms besides *Yeghern* and started using genocide almost immediately after its being coined by Raphael Lemkin.<sup>115</sup>

Secondly, the authors of the apology text avoided the politico-legal aspect of genocide by divorcing the naming of the crime from its legal/political repercussions and pushing it, on the one hand, into the sphere of the parochial,<sup>116</sup> as opposed to the positive legal, and on the other hand, into the sphere of the past. By only partially acknowledging earlier generations, who expressed their experience via a dozen terms other than genocide and by choosing to obscure the ongoing political struggle of subsequent generations embodied in the term genocide, the “apology” authors managed to keep the past confined within a private sterilized linguistic terrain while attempting to avoid any current political or institutional consequences. Indeed Ali Bayramoğlu explicitly argued for a divorcing of several aspects of 1915 from each other and came up with the term “understanding by differentiating”, claiming that “understanding by differentiating” is simultaneously the indicator of a democratic culture, democratic maturity, democratic ethics and indeed of understanding itself. Bayramoğlu claimed the legal/poli-

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114 See Mamigonian, Commentary on the Turkish Apology Campaign, for Oran’s interview with Canadian Broadcasting Company and the text of his election campaign pamphlet where he publicly repeated his position on Armenians’ politicizing their pain.

115 Mouradian, From Yeghern to Genocide.

116 Indeed one of the campaign organizers, Cengiz Aktar, argued for this kind of romanticized parochialism vying for an Anatolian exceptionalism in his post-campaign *Agos* and *Radikal* piece. Soykırım ötesi Büyük Felaket, *Radikal*, 26 April 2009, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/Radikal.aspx?aType=RadikalEklerDeta yV3&ArticleID=933179&CategoryID=42>. Aktar claimed that the narrow “cold” term genocide is not able to capture the full scope of “the Anatolian tragedy”, and that a more humane term is needed. The entitlement to speak for the Armenian experience on the one hand, the odd aestheticization of a crime against humanity by reducing it to a parochial exception on the other is extremely puzzling to say the least.

tical dimensions and human dimensions of the catastrophe can be divorced and this divorce can contribute to their understanding of Armenians' pain.

Thirdly, the authors politicized a formerly non-political term, by instrumentalizing the term *Yeghern* for their own multidimensional utilitarian calculus to be discussed below. The irony of this is that some of the organizers have been extremely critical of the term genocide on the basis of its "politicized" nature. Seemingly unaware that any term used to refer to a historical crime of this nature is necessarily always already "politicized", when used in this context, just as when President Obama used the same term as a means of avoiding the word genocide, *Medz Yeghern* ceases to be a private term of communal mourning for Armenians, it becomes something else: a political instrument in the hands of others.<sup>117</sup>

Finally, the authors arbitrarily shifted the terrain of denial by redefining denial of "Great Catastrophe" as a general denial by the Turkish state and society of any Armenian suffering, which has not historically been the case. Using denial without a qualifier itself can easily become an instrument of denialist discourse, since even the most notorious denialists in parallel contexts, such as David Irving, for example, do not deny that something terrible happened. They deny that it happened the way and to the extent established historiography says it happened – that the resulting deaths were the product of intentional actions and policies. In this debate, denial means

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117 Mamigonian, Commentary on the Turkish Apology Campaign, points to a similar issue: "On April 24, 2005, President George W. Bush issued a statement reading, in part, 'On Armenian Remembrance Day, we remember the forced exile and mass killings of as many as 1,5 million Armenians during the last days of the Ottoman Empire. This terrible event is what many Armenian people have come to call the 'Great Calamity'.' The official Armenian-language version of the statement translated 'Great Calamity' as *Mets Yeghern*. It is unreasonable to suppose that during the reportedly two years that the apology was being pondered, the authors did not notice that *Medz Yeghern*/*Great Catastrophe*/*Great Calamity* was becoming the 'not g-word' of choice when a political agenda disallows the ineffable g-word. Unfortunately, rather than openly acknowledge this concession to political expediency, an imaginary history has been conjured in which this usage is the only one Armenians knew before they were tainted by political agendas and started insisting on 'genocide'."

genocide denial alone and not the denial of anything and everything. To reiterate a point, even the state discourse itself and pro-state historians do not deny that Armenians were massacred.

### **Lack of Offense, Lack of Agency**

The vagueness is not limited to the issue of denial alone. One of the central aspects of any successful apology, even for smaller offenses that concern the public, is the clear acknowledgement of responsibility for the offense or grievance and expression of regret or remorse to the aggrieved party. Here the first sentence acknowledges *some* offense but neither specifies any agency nor takes any responsibility for the said offense. The use of the passive voice is instrumental in hiding both the agency and responsibility. One could read the statement and have no idea who subjected the Ottoman Armenians to the “Great Catastrophe.”

### **Lack of Responsibility in the Past**

The organizers have chosen a language that neglects to specify agency for the historical crimes whose denial they are criticizing. Instead, a vague description of 1915 is used that neither addresses individual and collective responsibility nor steps in any significant way outside the politics of the state with regard to 1915.

It is true that the Turkish state has never apologized for Armenian suffering and in that sense the apology attempt is a novelty. Yet the new Turkish foreign policy discourse under Ahmet Davutoğlu is willing to acknowledge Armenian suffering within a certain safety zone.<sup>118</sup> Similarly, we note the comparatively mild reaction to President Obama’s use of the term *Medz Yeghern* starting with his Presidential Statement on Armenian Remembrance Day of April 2009. There were no threats of cutting diplomatic ties, no burning of American flags in the streets of Turkey, nor were there threats of trade reduction as has been the case with the French Parlia-

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118 Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu acknowledges the Armenian pain – to a point in his Harvard speech of 28 September 2010, <http://www.iop.harvard.edu/Multimedia-Center/All-Videos/A-public-address-by-Ahmet-Davutoğlu,-Minister-of-Foreign-Affairs,-Republic-of-Turkey>.

ment's acknowledgement of Armenian Genocide. Although the far right reacted strongly – as it reacts strongly to any mention of “the events of 1915” – the state appeared to regard *Medz Yeghern* as an acceptable and basically harmless variation on its own retooled, more humane policy of denial.

### **Lack of Responsibility in the Present**

An additional dimension of vagueness is the reason why many journalists, both domestic and international, intellectuals, politicians and lay people were confused about what exactly people were apologizing for. As indicated by Marc Mamigonian the text is not an apology for the events of 1915, but a meta-apology for “insensitivity towards and denial of *Medz Yeghern*”,<sup>119</sup> which brings us to a different kind of lack of responsibility, the one situated in the present.

In this sense the “apology” text not only does not identify agency for past crimes but also fails to identify agency in the present: Who is responsible for the denial? The state? The intellectuals? Lay people? All? To the same extent? And denial of *what* exactly? Is an apology text what everybody makes of it? Is it the place to start (and end) a negotiation over terminology? If so, how are we sure that this negotiation over terminology is not a sophisticated form of validating denialist discourse frames and minimizing the legal political extent of the crime?

Indeed one of the campaign organizers, Professor of International Relations Baskın Oran, said on December 19, 2008: “The Prime Minister should be praying for our campaign. Parliaments around the world were passing automatically resolutions. These are going to stop now. The diaspora has softened. The international media has started to no longer use the word genocide.”<sup>120</sup> While Oran's words should not cast doubt on the intentions of thirty thousand citizens, his take coupled with Cengiz Aktar's take on the term genocide (see footnote 116) gives one ample reason to rethink about the intentions of the campaign organizers. This concern was emphasized by longtime human rights activist Ayşe Günaysu, who wrote:

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119 Mamigonian, Commentary on the Turkish Apology Campaign.

120 Quoted in Mamigonian, Commentary on the Turkish Apology Campaign.



“We now hear some of the initiators of the campaign trying to use the apology as a means to fight the use of the word genocide and hamper the work of those who seek the recognition of the Armenian Genocide. They portray those seeking recognition as the twin sisters and brothers of the Turkish fascists, and they present the ‘diaspora’ as the enemy of any reconciliation [...]. [By] their discourse, they contribute to the demonization of those who do use the word genocide.”<sup>121</sup>

Obviously, a comprehensive critique of Turkish intellectuals in the past and the present is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, one can speculate via the apology campaign’s text and the nature of the debate surrounding it, that either the intellectuals themselves did not give serious thought to the connection between the responsibility of intellectuals and genocide denial, or that they thought about it extensively but consciously wanted to avoid responsibility. Since the intellectuals’ responsibility must be greater than regular citizens’, their silence has been more deafening than if they were “the man in the street”. This brings us to the close-ended, non-deliberative nature of the apology text also briefly problematized by Taner Akçam as cited earlier.

### **Jacobinism vs. Horizontal Deliberation**

Although the campaign looks like a participatory endeavor where citizens could individually decide on their own whether to sign or not, since the terms of the apology were defined by the intellectuals from above, it was rather mock-deliberative in character. The signers did not necessarily agree with the text, indeed a number of intellectuals, some referred to in this paper, signed the text while either disagreeing with the content publicly or criticizing it privately. Some did not agree with the idea of apologizing for the crimes or the denial altogether; some said they can only be sorry and cannot apologize for something for which they are personally not responsible. We are not even sure whether the signers agreed with the idea of apologizing. In stark contrast, several counter-“apology” campaigns were more horizontally deliberative in their being open-ended. Citizens who expected a counter-apology from Armenians or expressed their anger at the “apology” campaign signed their opinions individually with their own words.

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121 Ibid.

The campaign is not only Jacobinist in its nature, since the preparation process was not transparent even to the majority of intellectuals, but also Jacobinist in its approach to both the offended and the offender party. In the case of Turkish citizens, both the idea of apologizing for denial and the text are dictated from above without any attempt to broaden the base of participants in drafting or pre-apology deliberation regarding the terms of the apology. The organizers did not strive for inclusiveness and the involvement of as many people as possible in the process itself – unlike the very horizontal experience of *Sorry Books* in Australia where many took part in an apology campaign personally by writing their own apologies (or refusals) in empty notebooks.

Regarding Jacobinism towards Armenians, which is worse, comparatively speaking, the organizers made no effort to get in touch with *representative* bodies of the Armenians to gain an insight into what they really want or need from an apology, or whether they need an apology from individual Turkish citizens at all. Instead, by mandating the term, hence normalizing the discourse at a lower equilibrium point than what genocide entails, by pre-emptively authoring a *public* apology on whose terms the offended and the “offender” did not agree, the campaign organizers created a de facto setting wherein if the offended party (Armenians) rejected the “apology”, they would be cast in a negative light and end up being portrayed as the hostile and aggressive party, despite the fact that preemption of this kind is a symbolically violent endeavor to begin with – this was the case in Yavuz Baydar piece cited earlier. Symbolic violence stems from the fact that the public negotiationist character of the text itself lacks the kind of humility that is expected from any apology, let alone an apology for gross human rights violations. In short, the campaign commands an enormous amount of preemptive power over the offended party: this is its most politically, to say nothing of ethically, problematic aspect. The Armenians not only disappeared from the land but they also disappeared from a process that is supposedly intended to bring them “healing” or “closure”; instead, they were treated as bit-players in someone else’s drama instead of being a party whose century-old quest for political justice and equality before international law is treated with respect.

The pre-apology process, then, was not transparent; and during the post-apology process, the domestic backlash, hence politics, hijacked the discus-

sion and an apology for Armenians became a public terrain of fighting among the political spectrum of Turkey.

## CONCLUSION

The Turkish intellectuals' "apology" initiative promised to start a debate on the Armenian Genocide and according to the campaign organizers strived to remain within the domain of individual citizens' conscience. However, it is obvious from the kind of reaction it provoked among citizens that it could never stay outside of the domain of politics since the calamity itself is the immediate result of a political decision with constitutive political and economic results. As we have seen, the attempt to compartmentalize the issue of genocide recognition into public and private spheres is an evasive tactic that is far from establishing the kind of trust that any conciliation process would require. So despite the fact that the campaign informed the general public that there is something to be apologized for, it failed to go beyond the discursive mechanisms that are remnants of denialist politics. Far from opening up the debate to substantial arguments regarding the legitimacy of genocide recognition, the apology campaign gave way to a rather odd discursive space in Turkish civil society in which citizens are encouraged to empathize with the "pain" of Armenians, sometimes called Anatolian pain. Accordingly, the events of 1915 should be understood through emotions without necessarily calling a spade a spade. Individual citizens are given decision-making agency over how to qualify the events of 1915 while not being properly educated on the events or the legal framework that emerged out of the international debates following the events of 1915. A vague language of common pain is substituted instead of demanding common post-genocidal institutional norms on which both Turkish and Armenian citizens and societies can base their future both as individuals and as neighbours.

In this sense the campaign does not constitute any meaningful challenge to the official Turkish stance and is also far from a novel move away from the perspective of the societal discourse about 1915 in Turkey. To be clear on this: it is not the refusal or lack of courage to call the forced deportation and massacres a genocide that has been central to my take. Instead I mainly critiqued the balancing act of the organizers trying to appeal to a wide

range of internal and external audiences. It is this strategy that tries hard not to alienate any group involved in the Turkish-Armenian conflict over the history that makes the text and the endeavor a patchwork rather than a critical assessment of the discourse in Turkey on coming to terms with 1915. Last but not least, the total omission of much earlier attempts at apology by Kurdish politicians and citizens both in exile and in Turkey by the campaign organizers is also indicative of the limits of the apology endeavor that claimed to remember the distant past while conveniently forgetting the recent past itself.

Armenians and Turkish citizens need a more substantial, horizontal and deliberative dialogical process where the historically disadvantaged party is not further forced into pre-emptive public negotiations on whose terms it has absolutely no power.