

## Concerning the Identity of the Generations of Islamized Hamshen Armenians<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

The article considers the consequences of the policy of forced Islamization-Turkification in the Ottoman Empire, particularly, the problem of the present-day Hamshenians' self-identification. The policy of Islamization conducted by the Ottoman government is characterized as a variety of genocide.

**Key words:** Hamshen, identity, assimilation policy, language assimilation, Islamized, Hamshen Armenians, Ottoman Empire, Turkey, manifestations of genocide.

### Introduction

Media and some researchers have recently been focusing on the identity issues of the Hamshenians, living on the territory of the present Turkey. Various comments have been made without due attention to the historical circumstances of Islamization and Turkification policies and ensuing the consequences of the policy. No clear-cut distinction is made between the concepts of *identity* and *origin*.<sup>1</sup>

The generations of the Hamshen Armenians, who back in the 18<sup>th</sup> century were forced to convert to Islam, today live in Chamlihemshin (formerly called Lower Viche>Vizhe), Hemshin (formerly called Hamshen), Pazar (formerly called Atina), Fyndyqly (formerly called Viche > Vizhe), Ardashen (formerly called Artashen), Chayli (formerly called Mapavri), Ikizdere (formerly called Kuray-i Seba) districts of the Rize Province in Turkey, part of which comprises the historical Armenian Hamshen district. In the course of time part of the Hamshenians moved to the Hopa and Borchka – districts of the Ardvin Province. There are villages of Hamshenians in Erzurum, Sakarya and the Düzje Provinces as well. One can come across Hamshenians in different small and large cities of Turkey. Due to resistance some parts of them managed to preserve their national image and Christian religion as well and spread in the southeast coastal areas of the Black Sea. Later, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, most of the Hamshen Armenians, who had survived the Genocide, settled in the northeast (Russian) seaside areas of the Black Sea, as well as in Armenia. They have preserved their language, religion and national customs.

### Methods and Consequences of Islamization

The assimilation policy of the Ottoman Empire and later that of the Republican Turkey proceeded in several stages, with violence and various systematized methods, as well as through language assimilation<sup>2</sup>. Not content with a religious conversion and understanding the role of ethnic differentiation of language, the authorities of the Ottoman and the Republican Turkey found it very important to complete the assimilation

process by Turkifying the peoples who were subjugated. The generations of the Hamshen Armenians, Islamized within this political context, in the Ottoman-Turkish environment gradually lost important components of the Armenian identity such as the language and religion (exceptions can be found only in the districts of Hopa and Borchka and a few villages of the Sakarya Province). Thus, being cut off from the Armenian culture, they were completely assimilated into the Turkish society, preserving only their local ethnic identity – their Hamshenian identity, as they call it.<sup>3</sup>

It is an established fact that language is one of the means of ethnic resistance and self-defense, for it has the power of expressing and maintaining peculiar national features. National identity and different peculiarities of culture typical of the given ethnos are enshrined in the mentality, word-stock and folklore. It is the language that passes national culture and traditions from generation to generation, thus playing an important role in ethnic differentiation. Language and national self-consciousness are always very closely related as it is language that has proved to be decisive in the formation of national self-consciousness and identity.<sup>4</sup> The ruling circles of the multinational Ottoman Empire and Republican Turkey have always been well aware of this. They knew quite well that the assimilation of other nationalities would be a complicated process, particularly that there was an “ethnic incompatibility” (in terms of modern ethnology)<sup>5</sup> between the dominant nation and the others. Language could always keep alive the national self-consciousness of the peoples under their subjugation. Hence the policy of assimilation of the other nationalities and their destruction, adopted by the Ottoman Empire as well as by the Republic of Turkey.

As a result of such pressures, among the Hamshenians, the Turkish language was reinforced at the expense of the Armenian one, and although the Hamshen Armenians settled in Turkey had initially only pretended to accept Islam, the environment, the consistent Turkish policy of assimilation and the atmosphere of fear and various other repressions, unfortunately, helped the Turks to reach their goal in the subsequent period.<sup>6</sup> Today, the Armenian identity of some of them is expressed merely through the memory of their genetic origin and preservation of some cultural layers.

The German historian M. Hübner writes: “One cannot possess identity, it comes up automatically, but when it is acquired, still it cannot be considered secure. There is always a need and necessity to protect the identity from the foreigner.”<sup>7</sup>

The assimilation policy of other subject nationalities in the Republican Turkey is legally stipulated in Article 88 of the first Constitution dated 1924 (in the version of 1982 it was transferred to Article 66) – “Everyone bound to the Turkish state through the bond of citizenship is a Turk.”<sup>8</sup>

On October 2005 the Turkish government considered and approved of the “National Security Document” submitted by the Security Council. The document once again emphasizes the fundamental principle of the Republic of Turkey: “One state, one nation, one flag, one language.” The document stipulates the principle of considering every citizen of Turkey a “Turk by nationality.” Though Prime Minister of Turkey R. Erdoğan admits in his announcement made on November 2005, that there are approximately 30 ethnic groups in the country with “their internal identities,” however, he immediately

reminds that they possess an “upper identity,” that is, the citizenship of the Republic of Turkey.<sup>9</sup>

Today, in the identity document (Kimlik), meant to be used within the borders of the country, for the Christian Armenians living in Turkey, the word “Christian” is mentioned in front of the religious affiliation, whereas in their passports the word “Turk” stands for their nationality. The Armenians also have a code, numbered 31, which prompts the relevant instances about their national belonging.

Active actions are taken to tangle the identity of the Islamized Hamshenians up to this day. Misleading scientific books are published (authored by Hamshenians, too), aiming to reject both their Armenian origin and the overall Armenian traces in Hamshen.<sup>10</sup>

It should be noted that the Hamshenians of the Hopa and Borchka districts of the Ardvin Province managed to preserve their Armenian local language (the Hamshen dialect) in the vast Turkish ocean and still use it in their everyday speech. As our studies show, today the number of Hamshenians in the Hopa and Borchka districts is about 25-30,000.<sup>11</sup> However, the younger generation is already forgetting their dialect, as they do not use it and mostly focus on the Turkish language. At the same time they do not know Armenian letters, except for a few intellectuals, who learn Mesrobian letters for scientific-cognitive purposes. Due to the preservation of the Hamshen dialect, some Hamshenians of these districts acknowledge their Armenian origin. Irrespective of the Turkish propaganda, they understand quite well that their spoken language is not Turkish.

Generally speaking, Marxist and consequently atheistic ideas are spread all over the districts of Hopa and Borchka. These, in fact, play a psychologically important self-defensive role in maintaining their own type and ethnographic description in the Islamic-Turkish environment. However, there are Hamshenians who either refrain from speaking about their origin or consider themselves Turks or just Hamshenians (the Homshetsi) at the best. Some Hamshenians living in Hopa underscore their Armenian origin, they say they know, that once they were part of the Armenian nation, and were the bearers of the Armenian culture, but in the course of time they lost their ties and now they consider themselves neither Armenians nor Turks, but rather Hamshenians.<sup>12</sup> We believe that such a perception of identity is also a model of maintaining their cultural ethnicity in the Turkish reality and adapting to that difficult environment.

Unable to definitely uproot the Armenian language from the Hamshenians living in the Ardvin Province, the Turkish authorities muddle up and falsify the history of Hamshen, the origin of the Hamshenians through official historiography and declare that their Armenian speech is a Turkic dialect.<sup>13</sup>

The Turkification has taken much deeper roots among the Hamshenians of the Rize Province: the latter have completely forgotten their mother tongue – Armenian, and speak Turkish. Though some admit their Armenian origin, they immediately add that they have already been Turkified. Some are of the opinion that they come from the Turkic tribes. In one of his articles Ugur Biryol – a Chamlehemshin journalist and a specialist in the local history, writes: “Today most Hamshenians deny the fact of being Armenian. In fact, traces of local Armenian can be found in the place names used in this district and

the names of the objects still maintained in their everyday life.”<sup>14</sup> However, there are also other people in this province, who do not consider themselves Turks but simply state that their ancestors were Armenians. In a number of districts of Rize the radical Islam keeps on bolstering its position. One can meet fanatic Muslims here who make a substantially important influence on the identity of the Hamshenians. Some of them are bearers of Marxist ideas and some are active leftists. Turkish nationalist ideas are rooted in the Senoz district of the Province of Çayeli. The triple-crescent (üç hilal) flag of the most extremist Turkish nationalists can be seen hanging from the windows of the Hamshenians’ houses. The word “Armenian” (Ermeni) has a negative and offensive meaning in their environment. The Senoz district has given birth to prominent political and military figures, lawyers, doctors and teachers. Ex-prime minister of Turkey Mesut Yılmaz from the Vasap family (it is the corrupted version of the Armenian name Vasak) comes from the village of Khakhonj (present-day Çataldere) of the same district. According to the non-official data, the number of the Hamshenians living in Rize, together with the ones settled in other towns, makes about 60 thousand.<sup>15</sup>

The Turkish historiography and one of the famous falsifiers of history M. Sakaoğlu declare that the Hamshenians have known no other language except Turkish, and the Turkish language they speak is a dialect of ancient Oğuz or Saka tribes.<sup>16</sup> Admitting that the language of the Hamshenians living in Hopa is an Armenian dialect, M. Kırzioğlu – another Turkish falsifier, concocts theories about the origin of the carriers of the very language.<sup>17</sup> M. Kırzioğlu’s concoctions have unfortunately become an integral part of the identity of Hamshenians many of whom have been drawn so far from their Armenian roots, that, curiously enough, they consider themselves to be descendents of either Oğuz, Balkar or Akada tribes, or from Central Asia and Khorasan.

And even if the Hamshenians of Rize know about their Armenian origin (they cannot but know, for they use numerous everyday Armenian words, place and plant names in their spoken Turkish language), they prefer to remain silent or just reject the reality.

Thus, this is the current state of the generations of Armenians, who were forced to convert to Islam in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and later. Viewed in its proper perspective, the policy of Islamization must be interpreted as one of the forms of the Genocide manifestations, which this part of Armenians was subjected to being forcibly drawn far from their roots, their national origin, and culture.

Raphael Lemkin’s definition of genocide, as specified in his book “*Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*,”<sup>18</sup> includes points which identify the psychological effects of genocide: “Generally speaking, genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation, except when accomplished by mass killings of all members of a nation. It is intended rather to signify a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves. The objectives of such a plan would be disintegration of the political and social institutions, of culture, language, national feelings, religion, and the economic existence of national groups, and the destruction of the personal security, liberty, health, dignity, and even the lives of the individuals belonging to such groups. Genocide is directed against the national group as an entity, and the actions involved are

directed against individuals, not in their individual capacity, but as members of the national group.”<sup>19</sup>

According to R. Lemkin, genocide is defined as a two-phase process: “destruction of the national pattern of the oppressed group” and “the imposition of the national pattern of the oppressor” which may be forced upon the oppressed population that is allowed to remain on the colonized territories.

Article 1 of the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide dated 1948 says that Genocide is a crime irrespective of the fact whether it is implemented during a peace or war-time period, and that the signatory parties are obliged to prevent it and punish those who implement genocide. Article 2 of the Convention states that Genocide is a crime of national destruction of a nation, ethnic, racial and religious group, in whole or in part.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, as a result of this systematic assimilation policy, the Hamshenians, who were forced to convert to Islam, lost their true Armenian national identity, retaining only the local ethnographic description through recollections about their Armenian origin.

#### Notes and References:

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**Բռնի իսլամացված համշենահայերի սերունդների  
ինքնության ընկալումը**

Հոդվածի շրջանակում ներկայացվում են Օսմանյան կայսրությունում իրականացված բռնի իսլամացման-թուրքացման քաղաքականությունն ու դրա հետևանքները, մասնավորապես համշենցիների ինքնության ներկա ընկալումները: Իսլամացման քաղաքականությունը բնորոշվում է որպես ցեղասպանության իրականացման ձև:

**Национальная идентичность потомков  
насильственно исламизированных амшенских армян**

Статья посвящена изучению вопроса о насильственной исламизации и туркизации амшенских армян как в годы геноцида, так и после него в Западной Армении. Рассмотрев причины и последствия этого процесса, автор делает вывод, что настойчивое и последовательное осуществление насильственной исламизации и туркизации амшенцев привело к полной или частичной потере их армянской национальной идентичности, и подобную политику турецких властей в разные периоды их истории следует оценивать как своеобразное проявление осуществленного ими геноцида армян.