

Award-winning writer shot by assassin in Istanbul street

by Robert Fisk

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Hrant Dink became the 1,500,001st victim of the Armenian genocide yesterday. An educated and generous journalist and academic - editor of the weekly Turkish-Armenian newspaper Agos - he tried to create a dialogue between the two nations to reach a common narrative of the 20th century's first holocaust. And he paid the price: two bullets shot into his head and two into his body by an assassin in the streets of Istanbul yesterday afternoon.

It was not only a frightful blow to Turkey's surviving Armenian community but a shattering reversal to Turkey's hope of joining the European Union, a visionary proposal already endangered by the country's broken relations with Cyprus and its refusal to acknowledge the genocide for what it was: the deliberate mass killing of an entire race of Christian people - 1,500,000 in all - by the country's Ottoman Turkish government in 1915. Winston Churchill was among the first to call it a holocaust but to this day, the Turkish authorities deny such a definition, ignoring documents which Turkey's own historians have unearthed to prove the government's genocidal intent.

The 53-year-old journalist, who had two children, was murdered at the door of his newspaper. Just over a year ago, he was convicted under Turkey's notorious law 301 of "anti-Turkishness", a charge he strenuously denied even after he received a six-month suspended sentence from an Istanbul court.

The EU has demanded that Turkey repeal the law under which the country also tried to imprison Nobel Prize-winning novelist Orhan Pamuk. At the time of his trial, Dink appeared on Turkish television in tears. "I'm living together with Turks in this country," he said then. "And I'm in complete solidarity with them. I don't think I could live with an identity of having insulted them in this country."

It is a stunning irony that Dink had accused his fellow Armenians in an article of allowing their enmity towards the Turks for the genocide to have a "poisoning effect on your blood" - and that the court took the article out of context and claimed he was referring to Turkish blood as poisonous.

Dink told news agency reporters in 2005 that his case had arisen from a question on what he felt when, at primary school, he had to take a traditional Turkish oath: "I am a Turk, I am honest, I am hard-working." In his defence, Dink said: "I said that I was a

Turkish citizen but an Armenian and that even though I was honest and hard-working, I was not a Turk, I was an Armenian." He did not like a line in the Turkish national anthem that refers to "my heroic race". He did not like singing that line, he said, "because I was against using the word 'race', which leads to discrimination".

Pamuk had earlier faced a court for talking about the 1915 genocide in a Swiss magazine. Leading Turkish publishers say that there is now an incendiary atmosphere in Turkey towards all writers who want to tell the truth about the genocide, when vast areas of Turkish Armenia were dispossessed of their Christian populations. Tens of thousands of men were massacred by Turkish gendarmerie - and by Kurds - while many Armenian women and children were raped and butchered in the northern Syrian deserts. The few survivors still alive have described the burning of living Armenian children on bonfires.

In fact, a book published in Turkey and in the United States by Turkish scholar Tamer Akcam gives documentary details of the orders passed down from the Ottoman government in what was then Constantinople for the deliberate and industrialised killing of the Armenians. Thousands were also suffocated in underground caves in what were the world's first gas chambers. Adolf Hitler asked his generals in 1939: "Who remembers the Armenians?" And he went on to begin the Holocaust of the Jews of Poland. Whether the police discover that Dink's murderer is a Turkish nationalist - or even, though it might seem inconceivable, an Armenian nationalist outraged by his earlier remarks - will be an important proof of the country's willingness to confront its past.

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