

Despite Late Challenge, Scholars Finally Hold Meeting in Turkey on Armenian Genocide

The Chronicle of Higher Education

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Monday, September 26, 2005

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An academic conference on Turkey's controversial "Armenian question" took place over the weekend in Istanbul, despite legal maneuvering by Turkish nationalists that had threatened to prevent it. The conference was originally to have taken place in May, but was postponed at the last minute under pressure from government officials.

The meeting was rescheduled for this past weekend at Bogaziçi, University, also known in English as Bosphorus University, but was once again postponed on the eve of its opening, this time because of a legal challenge that questioned its scientific validity and the qualifications of its participants. The challengers also said it was inappropriate for Bogaziçi, a public university, to be the venue for such a gathering, which they said contravened its mission.

Academics from Bilgi University, Bogaziçi, and Sabanci University, three of Turkey's leading higher-education institutions, organized the meeting, which they described as the first conference on the Armenian issue in Turkey not organized by state authorities or government-affiliated historians. Bilgi and Sabanci are private.

Armenians have long contended that the killings of up to 1.5 million Armenians in 1915 and subsequent years, during the waning days of the Ottoman Empire, constituted genocide by Ottoman Turkish forces. Turkey officially rejects that view. Turkish historians and other academics have become increasingly outspoken in challenging the nationalist line on the issue, however, and growing international attention has also focused on the matter. Talks on Turkey's bid to join the European Union are set to begin this week, and the government's inflexibility on the Armenian question remains a sticking point.

The conference, titled "Ottoman Armenians During the Demise of the Empire: Issues of Democracy and Scientific Responsibility," was postponed in May after its organizers decided they could not guarantee participants' safety (The Chronicle, May 10).

Last week, participants had arrived in Istanbul and the rescheduled meeting looked set to begin on time when the fresh legal challenge against it came to light. A three-judge panel of an administrative court had ruled, 2 to 1, that a legal investigation of the conference's validity should take place, even though its organizers were notified of the decision only the day before the

conference was to begin. With that inquiry pending, Bogaziçi could no longer play host to the conference without being held in contempt of the court's ruling. Organizers hastily shifted the venue to Bilgi so the conference could proceed.

The official response to the threat to the rescheduled conference differed starkly from the government's approach in May, when the justice minister took to the floor of Parliament to brand the meeting "treason" and a "dagger in the back of the Turkish people." This time, in comments broadcast on television, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan said he was saddened by the new threat to the conference. He characterized the legal challenge as an "anti-democratic development" to which he was opposed.

Aybar Ertepinar, vice president of the Council of Higher Education, a government-financed organization that oversees all Turkish universities, said on Sunday that although his group had not been invited to take part, the conference should have been allowed to proceed at Bogaziçi. "Our Constitution grants academic and scientific freedom to universities," he said. Taking up the opponents' challenge "was an unfortunate decision of the court that went beyond the borders of its responsibility," he said.

With the more than 350 participants once again assembled in Istanbul, the conference's organizers decided that "we can either do this now or we cannot do it all again," said Fatma Müge Göçek, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor who was on the meeting's advisory committee.

Organizers had selected Bogaziçi as the venue for the meeting precisely because it is a public institution, but they decided they had no choice but to relocate to Bilgi. The rectors of all three sponsoring universities welcomed the participants, who met in marathon sessions to condense into two days a program that was to have been spread over three.

Because the conference had received so much attention in the Turkish news media, participants did not even need to be notified of the change, said Ms. Göçek. Opponents were also aware of the new location, and about 100 protesters showed up on Saturday to heckle participants and pelt them with eggs and tomatoes, she said.

As the conference concluded, Ms. Göçek said she felt a real "paradigm shift" had occurred. "We had lots of Turkish journalists there who said they are not going to use the word 'alleged' from now on, in terms of talking about the genocide. They may refer to 'genocide claims,' but they will no longer talk of an 'alleged genocide,'" she said.

Papers from the conference will be published immediately in Turkish, which was

the working language of the gathering, and as soon as possible in English, Ms. Göçek said.