

# The background to the murder of Turkish journalist Hrant Dink

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On January 19 Hrant Dink, the well-known Turkish journalist of Armenian origin, was murdered in broad daylight on the streets of Istanbul by a right-wing assassin. Dink's murder is the tragic result of a wave of nationalism and chauvinism spearheaded by the Turkish military, supported by its "civilian partners," which has terrorized the country over the last few years.

Dink was assassinated outside the Istanbul offices of *Agos*, the bilingual Turkish-Armenian weekly newspaper he edited. He was shot in the head and neck three times, allegedly by 17-year-old Ögün Samast, an unemployed youth from the northeastern town of Trabzon, with links to fascist organizations.

Dink, who died at the age of 51 leaving behind a wife, two daughters and a son, was the most outspoken and courageous opponent of the official Turkish nationalist policy of denying the Armenian genocide, which took place in 1915 towards the end of the Ottoman Empire. At the same time, Dink was an outspoken advocate of mutual respect between Turkey's majority population and its Armenian minority.

His stance led to him becoming a hated figure among Turkish nationalists both of the "left" and right-wing variety. For their part, Armenian businessmen and the Armenian clerical leadership in Turkey tended to see him as a troublemaker. Dink also clashed with Armenian nationalists, whom he accused of not being really interested in the rights of Armenians, but instead of using the genocide to pursue nationalist identity-politics. He took a principled stand against imperialist maneuvers aimed at aggravating the difficult relationship between Turks and Armenians.

When the French National Assembly organized a reactionary provocation, with the active support of the Stalinist French Communist Party, and made denial of the Armenian genocide a punishable offence, Dink commented, "How can we in future argue against laws that forbid us to talk about a genocide if France, for its part, now does the same thing? That is completely irrational." He even threatened to go to France and, contrary to his own views, deny the genocide in defiance of the new law.

Dink was prosecuted several times under Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code, which criminalizes insulting the state, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (the first president of the Turkish republic), the judiciary, the military and "Turkishness." In 2005 he was sentenced to jail for six months for "insulting Turkishness." His sentence was subsequently suspended. In September 2006 he faced another court case under Article 301.

Dink answered the charge of "insulting Turkishness" as follows: "In my opinion to denigrate the people with whom one lives on ethnic or religious grounds is pure racism and there is no excuse for that.... If I am not cleared of these indictments I will leave my country because anyone condemned for such a crime does not deserve the right to live with the people he derides." On the basis of this statement he had to face a further criminal charge of "trying to influence the public."

Dink was regarded as a traitor undermining the Turkish state by fascists,

all sorts of far-right tendencies, as well as all variants of Kemalists (right and "left") and various other conservative circles. After his first court case Dink received numerous death threats and during the court hearings he was intimidated and attacked by fascists, as well as members of the Maoist-Kemalist Workers Party (Isci Partisi), outside and sometimes even in the courtroom.

All of the major political parties and media in Turkey have contributed to this chauvinist campaign against Hrant Dink, by labeling him an enemy of the Turks and marking him out as a target. The well-known journalist Mehmet Ali Birand wrote, "We are the real murderers of Hrant. We have brought up our murderers in an atmosphere and mentality created by Article 301."

His death also made clear that despite the fact that he had alerted the Turkish authorities about the threats to his life, his appeals for protection were never taken seriously.

In his last column in *Agos*, published on January 19, Dink explained that he was being "psychologically tortured" and wrote, "The fascists physically attacked me in the corridors of the courthouse and flung racist curses.... They bombarded me with insults. Hundreds of threats hailed down for months by phone, email and post—increasing all the time."

He continued, "Those who tried to single me out and weaken me have succeeded. With the false information they oozed into society, they were able to influence a significant section of the population who view Hrant Dink as someone who 'insults Turkishness.' ... How real are these threats? To be honest, it is impossible for me to know for sure."

In fact, the threats were very real and he was assassinated, apparently by a young fascist, before the ink had dried on his article.

Hrant Dink has not been the only target of escalating chauvinist violence and oppression. In recent years more than 100 writers, artists, journalists, translators, publishers, etc., have been put on trial for things they have said, written or created. All of these cases concerned comments on the genocide against the Armenians, the Kurdish conflict or the military's domination of Turkish society.

The prosecution writs for the numerous court cases stem largely from a group of ultra-right-wing lawyers (the so-called Unity of Jurists led by Kemal Kerincisiz) with close ties to Turkey's fascist "Grey Wolves" movement. There has been little difficulty persuading state prosecutors to accept such cases, under conditions where the Turkish judiciary is dominated by right-wingers, Islamists and ultra-nationalists.

Like Dink, many of those convicted have been systematically harassed and exposed to verbal and physical intimidation by the same circles.

Cases involving well-known intellectuals, such as the winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, Orhan Pamuk, or famed author and journalist Elif Safak, have received some coverage by the mainstream bourgeois media, but many more lesser-known cases go unnoticed.

Article 301 was introduced on June 1, 2005, and replaced Article 159 of the old penal code, with an amnesty introduced for past offences. The new paragraph was allegedly aimed at ensuring increased freedom of opinion

and was part of reforms adopted by the Turkish state as a condition for the country's future admission into the European Union. In fact, it soon became clear that previous repressive practices were merely being continued under the new statute.

The European Union (EU) has voiced some criticism of Article 301, but mainly in high-profile cases. In addition, conservative European media outlets and politicians are using the issue of human rights violations to mobilize resentment against Turkey and its attempt to join the EU. The US government has remained silent about the Article 301 trials.

The moderate Islamist AKP (Justice and Development Party) government has taken a hesitant stand, saying it may consider amending the article if the latter's implementation makes such a measure necessary. However, the government has refrained from taking any concrete steps due to the serious danger of an offensive by the military and its "civilian" supporters, who are seeking excuses to challenge the government on the grounds that the AKP is undermining national unity.

Last year Justice Minister Cemil Cicek expressed the AKP's concerns by saying, "If Article 301 is lifted, then we will be faced with a regime debate. There are proposals to take out 'Turkishness' from the law. But wouldn't some people then ask us if we are ashamed of being Turks?"

Deniz Baykal, leader of the secular "leftist" Republican People's Party (CHP), the biggest opposition faction in Turkish parliament, acting as a mouthpiece for the military against the AKP government, has played a despicable role and openly opposed changes to Article 301: "We are almost asked to apologize because we are Turks. We won't apologize, we are proud of this." Currently CHP leaders are trying to prove that there is no link between Dink's assassination and Article 301.

The conservative Motherland Party (ANAVATAN), True Path Party (DYP) and, needless to say, the fascist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) are against any revisions of Article 301. Just a few months ago ANAVATAN Erzurum deputy Ibrahim Ozdogan cynically claimed that insulting "Turkishness" had become the route to success for some people. He claimed it was the reason why the novelists Pamuk and Safak and journalist Dink had won recognition. He claimed that Dink was given an award in Denmark solely for this reason: "Whenever someone insults Turkishness, the whole world lines up to give them awards."

The columnist Dogu Ergil wrote: "The straw that broke the camel's back was an editorial published in *Agos* on Feb. 6, 2004. According to the editorial, the famed adopted (or god-) daughter of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder and hero of Turkey, Sabiha Gokcen, was originally an Armenian. Indeed Hrant had found and interviewed the relatives of the late Gokcen now living in Armenia. According to the information obtained, she was taken from an Armenian orphanage and raised by Atatürk to be an accomplished military bomber pilot. She was a national icon and symbol of modern Turkish women, besides being the daughter of Atatürk."

The news rocked official Turkey. The most virulent protest came from the military. The press release from the office of the Chief of General Staff stated: "Whatever the reason, opening up such a symbol to public debate is a crime against national unity and social peace."

Obviously the *Agos* editorial intended to show that Armenians could be the best and most loyal defenders of the Turkish state. But according to the Turkish military high command, even suggesting that a national icon might have been of Armenian descent was an insult of criminal proportions, bordering on treason.

It cannot be excluded that sections of the military are directly involved in Dink's death. His lawyer Erdal Dogan claimed that the journalist had received death threats from retired brigadier general Veli Küçük. Küçük was one of the main figures in the "Susurluk affair" of 1996, which brought to light the close links between security forces, mafia gangs and fascist death squads. His name was mentioned more recently in connection with the murder of the leading judge at the administrative

court last year. It was learned that Küçük had known the perpetrator, the lawyer Alparslan Aslan, who had links to the same milieu of mafia and fascist groups in Trabzon as Dink's alleged murderer, Ögün Samast.

During the ongoing wave of chauvinism, more than 20 murders or attempted murders of leftists and Kurdish nationalists have taken place in different parts of Turkey over the past two years. Every time the perpetrators have gone unpunished due to the lenience of governors, police chiefs and other local administrators. For example, on November 2, 2005, members of the left-wing Association for Inmates' Families' Solidarity (TAYAD) were stoned in Rize.

The response of local governor Enver Salihoglu was to excuse the perpetrators. "The citizens were provoked," he declared. Parliamentary deputy Abdulkadir Kart said the citizens of the region had been taught the necessary lesson. Mayor Halil Bakirci stated, "TAYAD members tried to unfurl banners. If I had known that it was them, I would have gone there and hit them myself."

In April 2005 the journalist Birand expressed his concerns in the face of the increasing rate of persecution and assassination attempts: "Incidents under the guise of nationalism are occurring right before your eyes, with lynch mobs prowling the streets, but officials are wasting time by saying things like 'Please don't interfere. Let it cool down, people are very angry.' It appears the brute force being used to try and silence all other opinions is being protected."

He expressed his disillusion with the political establishment, "As the government continues to be silent, the opposition doesn't say a thing. It was natural for us to expect the Republican People's Party (CHP) to come out and defend freedom of expression."

After the murder of Dink, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan held a press conference and declared, "The bullets fired at Dink were indeed fired at Turkey." His comment merely echoed the general hypocritical response of the major bourgeois parties to the assassination of Hrant Dink. In fact the bullets fired at Dink were aimed at a Turkish journalist of Armenian origin explicitly challenging Ankara's official view about the Armenian genocide.

Reading between the lines, the real meaning of Erdogan's statement can be summarized as follows: "This murder puts us in a very difficult situation. Our policy was to make life miserable for Dink and all others like him, in order to intimidate the whole population. His death, however, is a stupid move, which doesn't serve our interests."

The wave of nationalism and chauvinism in Turkey is the response by specific establishment political circles, in particular, to the implications of the Iraq war. As a result of the disastrous US-led war and occupation of the country, Iraq is on the verge of breaking apart and the Turkish elite is extremely worried about the possible consequences of such a development. Increasing independence for the Kurdish region in northern Iraq, combined with revenues from oil reserves flowing into Kurdish hands, have intensified fears in nationalist quarters of a resurgence of Kurdish nationalism inside Turkey itself.

The hysterical reaction by the establishment to any questioning of Turkish nationalism, including the official myth surrounding the "events" of 1915, which claims that a violent and treacherous separatist uprising by Armenians had to be put down, stems from the fact that under capitalism the unity of the Turkish state is incompatible with basic democratic rights.

The assessment made by National Intelligence Organization (MIT) Undersecretary Emre Taner on the 80th anniversary of the organization underscores these concerns. In his statement Taner maintained, "In this period we will see the process by which many nations lose the marathon of history." He continued: "All values, structures, relations, systems and social order, be it socioeconomic or political, religious or moral, are being reshaped and redefined. This process is representative of the period in which new key players, secondary players and the rules of the international system are being redefined and even reborn." Taner then

urged the government to take a much more aggressive stand.

The fact that Yasar Büyükanit, the man who was implicated in the “Semdinli affair” just two years ago (in which army forces committed terrorist attacks in southeast Turkey that were then blamed on the PKK—Kurdish Workers Party), is now the chief of general staff, shows that an influential faction of the state apparatus is prepared to take such an aggressive stand. Erdogan, who came to power advocating a political liberalization in line with EU reforms to break the power of the old Kemalist elites, has adapted increasingly to this right-wing faction. Now growing hostility to Turkish membership within the EU itself has also served to strengthen the hand of the Turkish nationalists.



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