A DECEITFUL ATTEMPT TO TARNISH ATATÜRK'S LEGACY AT PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

AVİM

In a recent article published in *The Daily Princetonian*, Greg Arzoomanian has levelled several accusations against Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of the modern Turkish Republic and called for the termination of the Atatürk Chair at Princeton University.[1] The main point of Arzoomanians accusation is based on a quote that is misrepresented and taken entirely out of its context. As a source for his slanted assessment, Arzoomanian refers to Taner Akçam, who is notorious for his deliberate mistranslations, quotes out of context, and manipulation of texts in support of his contentions. Akçams repeated and serious violations of scholarly ethics has been listed and documented in numerous studies.

One can clearly see Akçams deceptive scholarship at work in the present case as well. Before proceeding to the quote, it should be noted that the quote in question is taken from a speech delivered at a tea party hosted by the Adana Tradesmen Association on 16 March 1923. Atatürks talk was delivered after an initial speech by Ahmet Remzi Yüregir, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Adana Tradesmen Association.

According to Arzoomanian, Atatürk used the following words in his speech, and this reflected anti-Armenian racism:

> **The Armenians occupied our craft guilds (sanat ocaklari) and adopted an attitude of [being] the owners of this country.** ... The Armenians have no rights whatsoever in this prosperous country. Your country belongs to you, to the Turks ... The Armenians and others have no rights here whatsoever.

The first sentence presented before the ellipsis (highlighted in bold) does not belong to Atatürk. Rather, that statement was made by Ahmet Remzi Yüregir who spoke beforehand. In other words, Atatürk did not make this statement but rather quoted Yüregirs statement and commented on it in his own speech. Moreover, Akçam and Arzoomanian cut Yüregirs statement in half so as to render it out of its proper context. The omitted part of the statement mentions the occupation of Adana by Armenian-French forces, which commenced on 21 December 1918 and lasted for almost 3 years until 5 January 1922. In his speech, Atatürk used the following expression:

> Our fellow [Ahmet Remzi Yüregir] noted in his statement that the Armenians, **among others who invaded Adana**, occupied craft guilds and adopted an attitude of [being] the owners of this country. [boldface added for emphasis]

Thus, the statement was made by Yüregir and the subject of his statement was what the Armenian nationalist forces did during the occupation of Anatolia during the three-year Armenian-French occupation. The Armenian nationalists hoped to use the French occupation to establish a national state in the Cilicia region, a state from which the Turks, the majority population of Adana, would be excluded.

To put the speech in its proper historical context, it must be remembered that it was made in March 1923, just about a month after disagreements between the representatives of the Allied Powers and the Turkish delegation led to an adjournment of the negotiations in the Lausanne Peace Conference on 4 February 1923. Among the demands the Allies presented to the Turkish delegation before the adjournment was the foundation of an Armenian state in Cilicia. As the Turkish delegation rejected this and other demands, the Lausanne Conference came to a halt. On 2 February 1923, the head of the Armenian delegation to the Lausanne made the following statement, pressing the Allies for the formation of an Armenian state:

> I would like to remind you of the promises made by the Great Powers to liberate the Armenians in Turkey, not only for political and humanitarian reasons, but also for the numerous services rendered by Armenians for the Allied Powers during World War I. At the Allied Powers' invitation, Armenian volunteers flocked to the service of these powers and formed the core of the Eastern Army fighting in Palestine and Cilicia for the promised independence.

At this point, it would be useful to remind the readers the demographic picture in the Cilicia region, as even before the war the Armenians constituted a small minority in this region. In 1914, the Muslim population of Cilicia amounted to 1,590,795 people, whereas the Armenian population was merely 198,059, that is, about 10 percent of the Cilician population.

Therefore, when in March 1923, Ahmet Remzi Yüregir and Atatürk talked about the Armenian occupation of Adana, their primary concern was the Allied and Armenian efforts to establish an Armenian state in the Cilicia region, the most important city of which was Adana, and what would have happened to Muslim Turks in the region in such an eventuality. Even supposing that Armenian nationalists did not evict or murder the Turks in this region (a rather doubtful supposition considering their notoriety for perpetrating atrocities against Muslim and Turkish populations), a minority rule overseen by such violent and supremacist elements over a large majority could only be described as an apartheid regime.

Therefore, when Atatürk, further in his speech, noted that the Armenians have no rights whatsoever in this prosperous country, he did not have in mind the rights of Armenian citizens in Türkiye but rather the right of Armenians to establish a state in Cilicia or anywhere else inside Türkiyes borders.

Atatürks record in this regard is quite clear; after the proclamation of the Republic of Türkiye, Atatürk issued a two-year general amnesty for Armenians in order to give those wishing an opportunity to return. Similarly, with the adoption of Swiss civil codes and a

new penal code, all the previous religious differences in law were eradicated and full equality before the law was granted to the Armenians like all the citizens of the new republic. Under Atatürk, Berç Keresteciyan, an Istanbul Armenian, was elected a deputy to the parliament for several terms from Atatürks Republican Peoples Party. Similarly, Agop Martayan Dilaçar, an Armenian intellectual, was appointed the chief expert at the Turkish Language Institution founded by Atatürk. He also lectured as a professor at Ankara University, which was founded by Atatürk after the proclamation of the Republic. Finally, when Atatürk passed away in 1938, the vast majority of the members of the Istanbul Chamber of Commerce still consisted of non-Muslims (principally Greeks and Armenians), despite being a demographic minority in the city. This would not have been possible in a state actively engaged in discrimination.

Similarly, Arzoomanians efforts to establish a connection and a parallel between Atatürk and the fascist dictatorships of Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler are a gross distortion of the historical record.

Under Atatürk, Türkiye became a member of the League of Nations in July 1932 and supported the idea of collective security to prevent aggression. Earlier, in 1929, Türkiyes Grand National Assembly had ratified the Franco-American Briand □□□□□□□ Pact, which renounced war as a tool of national policy. However, Atatürks commitment to collective security was more than just verbal. When the League imposed sanctions on Italy for its aggression in Ethiopia, Ankara agreed to halt trade with Rome, despite Italy being a significant trading partner during the difficult economic times of the 1930s.

Atatürk was also critical of the Western powers policy of appeasing dictators like Hitler and Mussolini. During the Spanish Civil War, he supported the anti-Franco Republicans, and, by default, opposed Mussolini and Hitler who supported Franco. In September 1937, the Mediterranean countries held the Nyon Conference and condemned what they called Italian piracy. Following Atatürks direct instructions, the Turkish delegation allowed British and French naval vessels to use Turkish bases to counter Italian aggression in the Mediterranean.

Atatürk consistently opposed the aggressive actions of fascist dictators. The Kemalist press strongly criticized the Munich Agreement of September 1938, in which the United Kingdom and France agreed to abandon Czechoslovakia to Hitler. Prominent Kemalist commentators encouraged the Czechs to resist the Nazi invasion. Drawing from their own national experience, journalists of Atatürks Türkiye expressed regret at the Czechs failure to resist, arguing that they might have preserved their dignity, if not their independence, had they fought against German aggression.

Atatürks stance against appeasement and fascism was so uncommon during the 1930s that renowned British writer George Orwell noted: In the years 1935 □□□ when almost any ally against Fascism seemed acceptable, **left-wingers found themselves praising Mustafa Kemal** [emphasis added]. It is baffling how Arzoomanian managed to equate this principled stance with fascism and put forth an argument that is so disconnected from reality.

In conclusion, it must be underscored that Greg Arzoomanians accusations against Mustafa Kemal Atatürk are simply unfounded. His main argument is based upon a quote that is entirely taken out of its context and rendered in a distorted manner to confuse his target audience. Importantly, one of the statements quoted was made by someone else, and the quoted sentence is cut in half and the part relating to the Armenian-French occupation of Adana is omitted. Atatürks refusal to allow Anatolia to be partitioned and the Turkish majority of Cilicia to be expelled or subjected to an apartheid rule is similarly misconstrued to mean as if he was advocating the denial of the Armenians citizens civil rights. Finally, in a gross distortion of the historical record, Arzoomanian attempts to associate Atatürk with the fascist dictatorships of Mussolini and Hitler while ignoring Atatürks persistent efforts to oppose these regimes both in word and deed.

[1] Greg Arzoomanian, Princeton must retire the Atatürk Professorship, *The Daily Princetonian*, September 4, 2025, https://www.dailyprincetonian.com/article/2025/09/princeton-opinion-opguest-ataturk-professorship-turkey-armenian-genocide

About the Author :

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Süleyman Nazif Sok. No: 12/B Daire 3-4 06550 Çankaya-ANKARA / TÜRKİYE
Tel: +90 (312) 438 50 23-24 • **Fax**: +90 (312) 438 50 26
@avimorgtr
https://www.facebook.com/avrasyaincelemelerimerkezi
E-Mail: info@avim.org.tr
http://avim.org.tr

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