

BOOK REVIEW / KİTAP İNCELEMESİ

To cite this book review: Ertekin, Berfin Mahide. “A Flag for Us All.” *Review of Armenian Studies*, no. 40 (2019): 133-137

Received: 26.12.2019

Accepted: 27.12.2019

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A FLAG FOR US ALL**

(HEPİMİZE BİR BAYRAK)

Author: Torkom Istepanyan

Title: Hepimize Bir Bayrak

Published: İstanbul, Tarla Yayınları, May 1967

Language: Turkish

Number of Pages: 140

“Under the rays of a sun named Atatürk that arose from the horizons of Samsun on the morning of 19 May 1919, the young Mehments, Ayşes, Nubars, Maris, Yanis, Elisos, Kohens, and Klaras of today who have found their selfness, you will one day assume your duties together in many fields on the path towards this sacred country’s forthwith development, hug each other so tight in advance that no foreign provocation and influence can ever pluck yourselves away from one another. As this plucking has always involved losses for both sides that cannot be atoned for. As such, I wish that the Almighty God does not show this separation to the beloved Turkish People ever again.” (p. 82)

Torkom Istepanyan, May 1967

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** This is the English translation by Ahmet Can Öktem of a book review by Berfin Mahide Ertekin titled “Hepimize Bir Bayrak” that was originally published in the *Ermeni Araştırmaları* journal. To view the original book review: Berfin Mahide Ertekin, “Hepimize Bir Bayrak,” *Ermeni Araştırmaları*, Sayı 64 (2019): 83-87.

Torkom Istepanyan, who was a citizen of the Republic of Turkey of Armenian origin from Adapazarı, published his Turkish-language book titled *Hepimize Bir Bayrak* (EN: *A Flag For Us All*) on May 1967 following a decision he made after publishing an article in the *Cumhuriyet* newspaper. It is understood from these articles of Istepanyan, who published many articles on Turkish Armenians in the *Cumhuriyet* newspaper, that he took pride in being a citizen of the Republic of Turkey. In a reader's letter he wrote in the *Cumhuriyet* on 1978 titled "Ermeni Kurtuluş Ordusu" ("The Armenian Liberation Army"), he mentions the freedom enjoyed by Armenians living in Turkey and that entities such as the Armenian Liberation Army attributed to all Armenians are utilized by other (foreign) powers in order to increase inter-communal tension.¹ The author also has another book titled *Atatürk'ün Doğumunun 100. Yılında Türk-Ermeni İlişkileri* (*Turkish-Armenian Relations in the 100. Year of Atatürk's Birth*) published on 1984.

Istepanyan's *Hepimize Bir Bayrak* published on 1967 is a book written in the format of memoirs-analysis and mostly contains Istepanyan's memories and recollections. The book is formed of two parts; the first part comprises various memories and recollections that take place during the periods of the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey including Istepanyan's childhood years. The second part comprises biographies of Armenian, Jewish, and Greek non-Muslim citizens and excerpts of how these citizens served the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey.

In his book, Istepanyan indicates the reason for the outbreak of tensions between the Muslims and Turks and the non-Muslims, the World War I events and the enactment of the Relocation and Resettlement Law was due to *domestic and foreign enemies*, and aims to display the message that despite this, after the relocation, the Muslim community and the Turkish Army had a tolerant and welcoming attitude towards the non-Muslims. Istepanyan conveys these messages to the reader through expressing his memories and recollections. Moreover, in the second part of the book, while presenting examples of Turkish citizens of Armenian, Jewish, and Greek origin serving the country, the author stated that the non-Muslim minority embraced the Ottoman Empire and Republic of Turkey as their homeland as much as the Turks and Muslims and worked in areas such as state sector, trade, art, and academia for the advancement of the country. In this regard, Istepanyan asserts that, during World War I and the period in which the Relocation and Resettlement Law was implemented, as well as the period of the Republic's establishment and the subsequent periods, the Muslim and non-Muslim communities lived *fraternally*

1 Torkom Istepanyan, "Ermeni Kurtuluş Ordusu," *Cumhuriyet*, November 19, 1978, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/38321227.pdf>

and behave as *one* community in the same country. However, in his book, the author unfortunately names the Relocation and Resettlement Law as *tehcir* (exile), a common and mistaken way to refer to the Relocation and Resettlement Law, and uses this term throughout his book to explain the aforementioned law.

Additionally, the author states that he has dedicated his book to the Turkish Army, whom he describes as being “heroic and honorable”. The reason for this is that Istepanyan had witnessed the Turkish Soldiers’ embracing and protective attitude towards the Armenians in the places where they were transferred due to the Relocation as well as Cemal Pasha’s support for the Armenians arrived in Damascus due to the Relocation and Resettlement (p. 72). Within this scope, it is clearly seen in the book that Istepanyan bears admiration and gratitude towards the Turkish Army and Atatürk.

The author Istepanyan, who arrived in Simav district of Kütahya together with an Armenian group that included his family due to the Relocation and Resettlement Law and stayed there for more than 6 months, witnessed the Armenian group being embraced and protected by the local community in Simav (p. 19). Istepanyan describes in detail this period of his childhood within the framework of the Muslim citizens’ attitudes towards the Armenian group and their social interactions. The people of Simav looking after the Armenian group as people who need safekeeping and opening their doors, working together with them in the fields and providing them earnings is described by Istepanyan as “Turkish Nobility”. In this regard, it is seen that Istepanyan had feelings of gratitude for the Muslim Turkish people and held them in high esteem.

Istepanyan’s mother, Marizaruhi Istepanyan, was a Turkish citizen of Armenian origin served under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk both in Adapazarı and Ankara after the Relocation and Resettlement Law. The book also has a memoir straight from the mouth of Istepanyan’s mother regarding Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. It is understood from the memories and recollections of Istepanyan that his underlining of unity and solidarity also came from his mother instilling Istepanyan with patriotism and a sense of Muslim-non-Muslim brotherhood during his childhood – including the years when the Relocation and Resettlement Law was implemented.

Istepanyan’s childhood was spent close to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk for some time and Atatürk had contributed to his education (p. 55). For this reason, it is possible to see many of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s teachings in Istepanyan’s memories and recollections. Among these teachings, the aspect that Istepanyan emphasizes the most, together with the importance of education and the Turkish Muslims and non-Muslims cooperating and working together for the country,

is the importance of Atatürk's principles and reforms. According to Istepanyan, the Muslims and non-Muslims should come together and work fraternally for the country's interests in line with Atatürk's principles *in order to not fall into the trap set by foreign powers again*. Istepanyan, who stated that he was in the palace during Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's funeral ceremony, described the ambiance with detail and indicated a spirit of complete unity.

Istepanyan, who also narrates Gülbenkian taking the citizenship of the Republic of Turkey, states that kinship should be of secondary importance and that the *country* should be of primary importance. He indicates that if the Republic of Turkey was to enter a state of war and engage in battle, the Muslims and non-Muslims would fight together again and gives the example of the Battle of Gallipoli (Dardanelles) (p. 42). Other than embracing and appropriating the Republic of Turkey as homeland, it is made obvious many times in his sentences that he Istepanyan felt great pride and happiness in being a citizen of the Republic of Turkey. In this context, Istepanyan took various individual initiatives towards subjects such as children's education in order to, in his own words, pay his "debt of gratitude" to the Turkish people, the Turkish Army, and Atatürk.

In the second part of the book, Istepanyan gives space to non-Muslim Turkish citizens, their activities and photos encompassing the period of the Ottoman Empire and as well as the Republic of Turkey. He summarizes their education, which positions they served in, and how their services benefitted the country. It is stated that the Republic of Turkey would develop more with the efforts of the non-Muslims. He underlines that the Jews, being successful in commerce, and Armenians, being successful in arts, would benefit the Republic of Turkey (p. 80). A striking case in Istepanyan explaining the non-Muslim individuals with their biographies is that, although most of the non-Muslim individuals had received their education abroad, they returned to their homeland after completing their education and worked for the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey. As such, Istepanyan approaches the emphasis on *unity and solidarity* differently in the second part and attempts to send the message of the non-Muslims embracing the both Ottoman Empire and later the Republic of Turkey as their homeland.

Within this context, by presenting his memories and recollections to the reader, Torkom Istepanyan aims to create awareness regarding the phenomenon of non-Muslim and Muslim fraternity. Therefore, with this book, in addition to providing evidence and sample documents regarding the unity and solidarity between the Muslim Turks and non-Muslim minorities, it is reminded that the Armenians were the "Loyal People" (*"Millet-i Sadıka"*). This book being based on Istepanyan's testimony and comprising memoirs from his childhood serves as evidence against the extremist views that highlight on every occasion the

lies regarding the Turkish soldiers and people of the period being oppressive. This book, written from the mouth of a non-Muslim Armenian who was proud to be a citizen of the Republic of Turkey and was loyal to his homeland and comprising pictures of real people and events, provides a response against the arguments of groups that are trying to create “Turcophobia” by using the minorities of the Republic of Turkey.

The relevant book has been written in a literary, elegant language and, due to its contents, is both instructive enough for academic works and is accessible enough for the general consumption of the public.