



Press Release (24/02/2014)

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EXHIBITION: BITLIS ARMENIANS

Tatvan Kültür Sarayı, Kültür Mah. Bitlis Yolu, Tatvan, TURKEY

(1-2 March, 2014)

Armenians trace their presence in Bitlis from antiquity. Bitlis was one of the Armenian principalities of the ancient world and continued to be a major Armenian centre until recent times. On the eve of World War I, it was a thriving part of the Ottoman Empire with a significant Armenian population with its many schools, churches and monasteries.

Bitlis was sometimes a troublesome area but people generally got on well together. Armenians were tradesmen, artisans, as well as peasants, who lived alongside other communities, especially Kurds. Most Armenians spoke Kurdish, Armenian or a local dialect. Nevertheless, over the years many Armenians emigrated for better lives elsewhere, while some became revolutionaries against the Ottoman state. The majority were, however, just busy earning their living and getting on with their lives.

During World War I the Committee of Union and Progress organised a policy of genocide against Armenians. Throughout the Ottoman Empire, Armenians were subjected to policies of dispossession, deportation and mass murder. The persecution of Armenians continued in the Turkish Republic. Today, the history of Armenians - like the history of Kurds - is denied, disparaged or minimised in official histories of the Turkish republic. This can be seen in textbooks, museums, and the websites of Turkish state institutions.

In recent years, with the Kurdish opening, it has become possible to talk about Armenians again. The Turkish state has even made a somewhat cynical gesture in the east by renovating the ancient church of Sourp Khach on the island of Aghtamar and turning it into a museum - while hundreds of comparable sites have continued to be neglected and destroyed.





However, Kurdish politicians have been more honest and forthright. They have condemned the persecution of Armenians, apologised for the role played by Kurds in those persecutions, and sought reconciliation by speaking the truth. In Diyarbakir, the local authorities have supported the renovation of the church of Surp Giragos, returned it to Armenians as their place of worship, and offered their hand of friendship.

It is against such a background that the Gomidas Institute and its friends in Turkey have organised a public exhibition about the Armenians of Bitlis before 1915. This exhibition, displaying original maps and photographs of the Armenian presence in the region, will take place in Tatvan, on the shores of Lake Van, on 1-2 March and travel to different communities in the Armenian Diaspora. The Gomidas Institute and its friends hope to promote a meaningful dialogue between Armenians, Kurds and Turks and rebuild human relations that were destroyed in places like Bitlis during the Armenian Genocide of 1915 and its aftermath.

The Committee Against Racism and Discrimination of the Istanbul Branch of Human Rights Association (Turkey) has worked for many years to put an end to denialism and supports the idea for such a project in Bitlis, encouraging the Gomidas Institute to move forward. A number of Committee members from Istanbul will attend the opening of the exhibition in Tatvan.

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