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Monument to Humanity in Kars

Executive Summary

The Monument to Humanity was a 30-metre statue that played a prominent role in the skyline of the city of Kars. In the wake of the 2011 Turkish General Election, the then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan paid a visit to the city of Kars and during a campaign stop, declared that the monument was a 'monstrosity' and pointed out the aesthetic displeasure he received from looking at the monument. Many suspected that the Prime Minister's comments had little to do with the aesthetics of the monument and that there may have been ulterior motives other than aesthetics at play. This case study explores the fallout of the Prime Minister's comments and the destruction process that followed and inspects a variety of different interconnected contestations that arose as a result of the Prime Minister's statement and the salience of these contestations to the present day.

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Monument to Humanity in Kars

Turkey

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Abstract

The Monument to Humanity was a 30-metre statue that played a prominent role in the skyline of the city of Kars. In the wake of the 2011 Turkish General Election, the then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan paid a visit to the city of Kars and, during a campaign stop, declared that the monument was a 'monstrosity' and pointed out the aesthetic displeasure he received from looking at the monument. Many suspected that the Prime Minister's comments had little to do with the aesthetics of the monument and that there may have been ulterior motives other than aesthetics at play. This case study explores the fallout of the Prime Minister's comments and the destruction process that followed and inspects a variety of different interconnected contestations that arose as a result of the Prime Minister's statement and the salience of these contestations to the present day.

Introduction

In 2006, the mayor of the Turkish border town of Kars, Mr. Naif Alibeyoğlu, commissioned the renowned sculptor Mehmet Aksoy to build a monument that would stand against all forms of violence and conflict. Mr. Aksoy came up with the 'Monument to Humanity,' a thirty-metre concrete statue that depicted two halves of one individual, separated by a wide chasm. One side of the individual had its hands outstretched ready to embrace the other side. Yet, the other side was depicted as being significantly more reticent, unwilling to accept the embrace of its warmer half. In the words of the sculptor, the unification of the two sides would make the individual a whole self, and once all humans became 'whole,' humanity would ultimately be able to stand against all sorts of violence and conflict.[1]

The meaning of the statue notwithstanding, a visit to Kars by the then-Prime Minister of Turkey, Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, completely derailed Mr. Alibeyoğlu and Mr. Aksoy's plans. Whilst campaigning for the 2011 Turkish General Election, Mr. Erdoğan told a group of around 5,000 supporters in Kars that the Monument to Humanity was a 'monstrosity' and Mr. Erdoğan went on to promise the monument's swift demolition.[2] Mr. Erdoğan's comments proved to be controversial in the Turkish political sphere and opened up a furious debate that forced decision-makers and citizens alike to confront the question of Turkey's relationship with Armenia. Although the question of the Armenian genocide lurked uncomfortably in the background of the debates surrounding the Monument to Humanity, the domestic discourses consciously avoided any introspection about Ottoman involvement in the Armenian genocide and instead focused on the local and international implications of the monument. A few months after his statement, Mr. Erdoğan fulfilled his promise to demolish the monument. Nonetheless, the significance of the monument has not been lost. In the words of Mr. Aksoy, the Monument to Humanity stands as one of the only monuments in the world that preserves its meaning and symbolism due to its physical absence, and that the message of peace and unity that the statue conveys still stands strong despite its destruction.

Background

While Mr. Aksoy and Mr. Alibeyoğlu have both vociferously denied any connection between the Monument to Humanity and the Armenian genocide, the location of the monument in Kars and the current tensions between the Turkish Republic and the Republic of Armenia surrounding the mass killings of Armenians by Turks in 1915 has inevitably brought discussions of the Armenian genocide and the Turkish denial of the Armenian genocide to the forefront of discourse surrounding the Monument to Humanity. Without a proper

[1] Mehmet Aksoy, Interview by Ju Young Han, University of Oxford, June 24, 2021.
[2] Alexandra Hudson, "Erdoğan Threat to Turkish-Armenia Statue Starts Row," *Reuters*, January 12, 2011.

contextualisation of the events that transpired in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century, it would be difficult to understand the nature of the contestation today.

Ottoman-Armenian Relations

Prior to the Tanzimat reforms of the mid-nineteenth century, ethnic and religious divisions within the Ottoman Empire served to create a tiered society that curtailed the rights of the empire's non-Muslim subjects.[3] Non-Muslim subjects (often referred to as '*gâvur*') were viewed with suspicion and were perceived by both the ruling Muslim elite and the Muslim subjects of the empire as 'domestic foes'.[4] Up until the mid-nineteenth century, the non-Muslim subjects of the Ottoman Empire were subject to unequal forms of taxation, restricted representation in court, and were victims to occasional outbursts of religious violence.[5] The self-proclaimed Christian European states declared guardianship over the religious minorities of the Ottoman Empire and used these occasional outbursts of anti-Christian or anti-Jewish violence in order to meddle with the internal affairs of the Ottoman Empire; with their superior military technology, these European empires were able to encroach upon the territories of the Ottoman Empire and meddle in the internal affairs of the Ottoman Empire, especially affairs that pertained to the religious minorities of the empire and their rights.[6] In the face of these threats and in an effort to modernise the Empire and allay concerns of falling behind their European rivals, Sultan Abdülmecid I and his vizier Mustafa Reşid Pasha initiated the Tanzimat reforms. These reforms were meant to assuage these divisions and enshrine the principle of universal (male) equality within the Ottoman constitution. Yet, the Ottoman state's unwillingness and inability to effectively execute these reforms meant that much like before, perceptions surrounding the inferiority of non-Muslims remained unchanged.[7] It is within this context we are able to situate the Armenians of eastern Anatolia and the events of the early-twentieth-century that followed.

The Armenian *millet,* or nation, occupied a variety of different social and geographical spaces within the Ottoman Empire, with varying degrees of wealth and influence.[8] Although the Armenians had been looked upon favourably by the Ottoman state for centuries, a variety of different factors led to the Armenians falling out of favour with the Ottoman state. Increased awareness of an Armenian national identity among the Armenian intelligentsia (also known

[3] Ronald Grigor Suny, *"They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else": a History of the Armenian Genocide* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 5.
[4] Raymond Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide : A Complete History* (London: I. B. Tauris & Company, Limited, 2011), 10.
[5] Ronald Grigor Suny, *"They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else": a History of the Armenian Genocide* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 19.
[6] Peimani Hooman, *Conflict and Security in Central Asia and the Caucasus* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2009), 236.
[7] Norman M. Naimark, "The Armenian Genocide of 1915: Lineaments of a Comparative History," in *Empire and Belonging in the Eurasian Borderlands* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 56-57.
[8] Raymond Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide : A Complete History* (London: I. B. Tauris & Company, Limited, 2011), 279.

as the 'Armenian national awakening') and agitation for the creation of an autonomous 'Armenian' region in eastern Anatolia coincided with increasing Muslim migration into eastern Anatolia.[9] Intellectual movements within the Armenian community alongside fierce competition for agricultural land between the Armenians of eastern Anatolia and the newly-arrived Muslim migrants precipitated disaster for the Armenian millet.[10] The accession of Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1842-1909) was immediately followed by the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878, a war that ended in a disastrous loss for the Ottoman Empire. In part due to the loss of the Ottoman Empire to the Russians and also in part due to the continuous haemorrhaging of the 'Christian' territories of the Empire, Christians, especially the Armenians, were viewed with increased suspicion as potential allies of the Christian Russian Empire.[11] Due to the rather precarious placement of the Armenian millet across the Turkish and the Russian border, Sultan Abdul Hamid II saw the Armenian millet as a liability and wanted to see the influence of the Christian Armenians decrease in Eastern Anatolia. In the midst of fierce competition for agricultural land, hundreds upon thousands of Armenians were massacred by Ottoman-trained para-military chieftains, and their lands were summarily confiscated and redistributed to the Sultan's Muslim subjects.[12] Estimates for the number of deaths incurred during the Hamidian massacres range from around 100,000 to 300,000.[13]

The Young Turks, a new Turkish political movement that advocated for a constitutional government, seized the Ottoman government in 1913 from the increasingly authoritarian Abdul Hamid II and formed the CUP (Committee for Union and Progress) as a committee with which to rule the Ottoman Empire. With their specific brand of Turanic and Turkish nationalism, much like Abdul Hamid II, the Young Turks saw the Armenian populations of eastern Anatolia as a liability against a potential Russian threat. In the words of the historian Ronald Suny:

> By eliminating one factor, namely the Armenians, in the four-way power struggle in the region, the Young Turks could with one blow end Western and Russian interference in Ottoman affairs, achieve the long-desired goal of Turkish nationalists to create an undisputed homeland for the Turkish people, and even work toward the Pan-Turanian utopia of a Turkic empire stretching from Istanbul to Central Asia.[14]

[9] Ronald Grigor Suny, *Looking Toward Ararat: Armenia in Modern History* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 97-98.
[10] Ibid., 101.
[11] Ronald Grigor Suny, *"They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else": a History of the Armenian Genocide* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 48.
[12] Ibid., 129-130.
[13] Taner Akçam, *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006), 42.
[14] Ronald Grigor Suny, *Looking Toward Ararat: Armenia in Modern History* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 106.

The Armenians stood in the way of ethnic homogeneity and the long-stated goals of the Pan-Turkic, Pan-Turanian empire[15] that many Turkish nationalists in the CUP had been dreaming of, and a variety of different plans to deal with the 'treacherous Armenians' was discussed in the early days of the CUP's leadership of the Ottoman Empire.[16] Following the onset of the First World War, the problem of potentially disloyal subjects gained a new layer of urgency. The Ottoman Empire joined the Triple Alliance alongside Germany and Austria-Hungary and found itself fighting the Russians on its northeastern border. The Ottoman loss at the Battle of Sarikamish against the Russians and evidence of Ottoman Armenians deserting to Russia confirmed the suspicions of the CUP and the Young Turks, and at this point, the Armenians began to be perceived not as a theoretical but a genuine threat against the territorial unity of the Ottoman Empire.[17] In an act of desperation, the Ottoman state ordered that all Armenian soldiers be demobilized[18] from the Ottoman army and that all Armenians in Anatolia were to be deported to the deserts of Syria.[19] The deportations began with the rounding up of prominent Armenian intellectuals in the city of Constantinople on 24 April 1915, and from the years 1915 to 1917, around 600,000 to 1.5 million Armenians were killed as they were forcibly marched through the deserts of Syria and subject to dehydration and starvation.[20] Many Armenians were placed in concentration camps and summarily killed by the military or were killed by local militias while being relocated. Hundreds upon thousands of women and children were forced to convert to Islam [21] and were separated from their families and relocated into Turkish families.[22]

The question of whether these atrocities fulfil the legal definition of 'genocide' has been a point of contention in Turkey and the wider Turkic-speaking world. The Turkish government and historians aligned with the Turkish government have consistently insisted that the Ottoman state did not engage in genocidal actions between the years 1915 to 1917 but was rather engaged in a justified relocation programme in order to protect its war interests. These same historians also insist that the atrocities conducted during the relocation itself were justifiable, and Ozbek notes quite incisively that 'the crux of the conflict is whether these acts were justifiable or not.'[23] The Turkish narrative, in other words, denies the contention that the events of 1915 to 1917 meet the legal standard for the crime of genocide and maintain that

[15] Ronald Grigor Suny, *"They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else": a History of the Armenian Genocide* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 147.
[16] Ibid., 243.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid., 244.
[19] Ibid., 274.
[20]Jakub Bijak and Sarah Lubman, "The Disputed Numbers: In Search of the Demographic Basis for Studies of Armenian Population Losses, 1915–1923" in *The Armenian Genocide Legacy*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 26-43.
[21] Ronald Grigor Suny, *"They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else": a History of the Armenian Genocide* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 300, 317.
[22] Ibid., 279.
[23]Egemen Özbek, "The Destruction of the Monument to Humanity: Historical Conflict and Monumentalization" *International Public History* 1, no. 2 (2018).

what happened to the Armenians was justifiable under the conditions of war.

Turkish-Armenian Relations

Confronting the legacy of the Armenian genocide has stood as a significant stumbling block for the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations, as ardent nationalists from both sides make bombastic, sensational, and oftentimes outright racist statements about one another. Turkey's persistent denial of the Armenian genocide, alongside Armenian nationalists' irredentist territorial claims for the eastern territories of Turkey, continue to overshadow any effort to normalize ties to this very day.

Prior to the Republic of Armenia's independence from the USSR in 1991, the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA), an Armenian Marxist nationalist organization, conducted a wide variety of terrorist attacks against Turkish diplomats and high profile Turkish figures throughout the seventies, eighties, and nineties in order to pressure the Turkish government to acknowledge the Armenian genocide, pay reparations, and ultimately, cede the eastern territories of the Republic of Turkey to Armenia.[24] The attacks on the Turkish consulate in Paris in 1981[25] and the attack on Ankara Esenboga Airport in 1982 drew widespread condemnation from a variety of different Armenian groups, yet these attacks served to entrench the Turkish nationalists' position on the Armenian genocide and exacerbated feelings of resentment against the Armenians.[26]

Following the declaration of independence of the Republic of Armenia, The Turkish Republic was one of the first states to recognize the Republic of Armenia, yet it did not officially establish diplomatic relations with the nascent Armenian state. The Republic of Turkey set two conditions for the establishment of diplomatic relations, firstly the recognition of the Turkish-Armenian border and secondly the end of the Armenian campaign for the recognition of the Armenian genocide in legislative bodies worldwide.[27] The eruption of the Nagorno-Karabakh War (1988-1994) just months after the independence of Armenia and Azerbaijan served to complicate Turkish-Armenian relations even further. The Nagorno-Karabakh region was a diverse region occupied by both Azerbaijanis and Armenians, although it was internationally recognized as Azerbaijani. Armenia disputed this international designation, and soon after, Armenian troops marched into the Nagorno-Karabakh region and claimed victory over the Azerbaijanis.[28] Turkey's close

[24] U.S. Department of State, "Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA)," *Naval Postgraduate School,* Archived from the original on 3 July 2008.
[25] Frank J Prial, "60 HELD 15 HOURS IN A SIEGE IN PARIS," *New York Times,* September 25, 1981.
[26] New York Times, "6 Killed in Attack in Ankara Airport," *New York Times*, August 8, 1982.
[27] Tatul Hakobyan, "Armenia-Turkey: 100 Years of Diplomatic Relations; Standpoint of Armenia," *Aniarc ANI Armenian Research Center*, November 2, 2017.
[28] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Armenia," Refworld, Minority Rights Group International, May 2018.

friendship with Azerbaijan, with which it shares cultural and linguistic ties, meant that the Turkish government joined the Azerbaijani blockade against Armenia in retaliation against the loss of Azeri land to the Armenians and closed its borders.

Nonetheless, there were efforts on both sides to reconcile their differences and normalize their strained relations. Throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, various efforts at rapprochement were made by a variety of different parties. Discussions to kickstart a Turkish-Armenian reconciliation commission was successful, and in 2001, a commission tasked with the vague goal of bringing the two nations together was officially inaugurated.[29] The election of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi,* or AKP) and the accession of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to the Prime Ministership of the Republic of Turkey were interpreted by contemporaries as a positive signal that would lead to the improvement of Turkish-Armenian relations. Efforts at normalizing ties culminated in the signing of the Zurich Protocols, an initiative that hoped to see the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations, yet this trend towards rapprochement started to go awry.[30] Following the signing of the Zurich Protocols, both states failed to ratify the deal in their respective legislative assemblies.[31] Adverse reactions from the MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) in Turkey and Armenian nationalists stalled the ratification of the Zurich protocols, and efforts at rapprochement began to lose momentum. In 2013, the Armenian Prosecutor-General Aghvan Hovsepyan made his opinion that 'Armenia should have its lost territories returned' known to the world.[32] As a member of the Armenian government, the Turkish government perceived this statement as the official position of the Republic of Armenia, and this war of words served to bring the efforts at rapprochement to a complete halt.

The failure of rapprochement was followed by increasing hostility on both sides, and efforts by Turkey and Azerbaijan to isolate Armenia intensified. Turkey-Azerbaijan gas exploration talks and plans for a new pipeline that transferred Azerbaijani natural gas to Turkey via Georgia, thereby side-stepping Armenia, further strengthened ties between Turkey and Azerbaijan and once again, served to isolate Armenia further from its neighbours and weaken Armenia strategically.[33] In line with this policy of isolating Armenia, the border between Turkey and Armenia remains closed.[34] While the Azerbaijani victory in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the Armenian acceptance of territorial losses in the Nagorno-Karabakh have soured relations between the three nations, this new development has, quite ironically, opened up a new path for deeper cooperation between the states of the Caucuses due to the resolution of persisting territorial. Nonetheless, Turkey's full tactical

[29] Yordanka Nedyalkova, "Commission Formed to Improve Turkish-Armenian Relations," *Eurasianet*, July 20, 2001.
[30] Clive Leviev-Sawyer, "Turkey, Armenia sign deal on normalizing relations," *Sofia Echo*, October 10, 2009.
[31] Al Jazeera, "Turkey-Armenia ink historic accord," *Al Jazeera,* October 11, 2009.
[32] Asbarez, "Prosecutor General: Armenia Should Have Its Territories Back," *Asbarez*, 8 July 2013.
[33] Lada Yevgrashina, "Turkey hopes to sign Azeri gas deal in Q2 2011," *Reuters,* April 19, 2011.
[34] Economist, "The Ties That Divide," *Economist*, June 15, 2006.

support for the Azerbaijani invasion in the Nagorno-Karabakh region alongside persistent irredentist claims for Eastern territory within the Armenian political sphere have set up seemingly permanent barriers to Turkish-Armenian normalization.

Addressing the Past? The creation of the Monument to Humanity

As aforementioned, the election of the AKP in Turkey signalled a potential thawing of relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and in the midst of a shifting political climate, the then-AKP mayor of Kars, Naif Alibeyoğlu, decided that he wanted to create a monument in order to commemorate the thawing of relations and the prospect of a new kind of relationship between Turkey and Armenia. Indeed, the Monument to Humanity was the brainchild of Mr. Alibeyoğlu himself, and in response to the question of what inspired him to build the Monument to Humanity, Mr. Alibeyoğlu responded by speaking at great length about the 'painful past' of the Caucuses.[35] He began by speaking of the destruction and violence caused by the likes of Gengis Khan, the Ottomans, the Russians, and the 'unfortunate events that befell the Armenians', and made sure to emphasize the bloodshed and the violence that seemed to have been endemic to Kars and surrounding area. Keeping in mind the 'painful past' of the region, Mr. Alibeyoğlu thought a Monument to Humanity would be appropriate for Kars. The monument would feature the aforementioned statues and would also be accompanied by a giant eye with a stream of tears, in honour of all the victims of war, and the area surrounding the Monument to Humanity would be a public space that would serve to condemn all types of wars.[36] Through the recommendation of some German EU representatives in Kars, Mr. Alibeyoğlu got in touch with Mr. Aksoy, a renowned Turkish sculptor who had completed his master's degree in Germany, and decided to work with him to build this monument.[37]

Mr. Aksoy came up with a thirty-metre high concrete statue that depicted two halves of one individual, separated by a vast chasm. One side of the individual would have its hands outstretched, symbolizing friendship, unity and peace, while the other side of the individual looked significantly more reticent and unwilling to unite with his more 'positive' side.

The monument would occupy a prominent space in the Kars skyline, along with the Castle of Kars. Mr. Aksoy noted that he wanted to juxtapose the statue with the castle, as the castle also represented war and destruction.[38] Once an individual approached the statue, Mr. Aksoy envisioned that the individual would be filled with an overwhelming feeling of peace and a desire for peace. At night, two laser beams were to be placed near the statues, and these

[35] Naif Alibeyoğlu, Interview by Ju Young Han, University of Oxford, June 24, 2021.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Mehmet Aksoy, Interview by Ju Young Han, University of Oxford, June 24, 2021.

beams would meet in one place, signifying the unity of the Caucuses and would serve as a reflection of the universal human desire to put an end to war. It would be visible from Georgia and Armenia, heightening the significance of the statue.[39]

In articulating his vision for the monument, Mr. Alibeyoğlu and Mr. Aksoy both noted the antitheses of the monument that they were envisioning: the Armenian Genocide Memorial Complex in Yerevan and the Igdir Genocide Memorial and Museum. Mr. Alibeyoğlu explained that these memorials 'sow sectarian division and hatred' and 'inspire Turkish children to hate Armenians and Armenian children to hate Turks.' The Monument to Humanity, on the other hand, would be a 'message of peace for the world.'[40]

Mr. Alibeyoğlu's idea was well-received by the political parties in the Kars local assembly, and the approval and funding motions for the monument passed the assembly unanimously at the sound of great applause.[41] Construction for the monument commenced in 2006 under the supervision of Mr. Alibeyoğlu and Mr. Aksoy.

History of the Contestation

The Local Dimension: Domestic Politics and Aesthetics

In November of 2005, the MHP delegation to the Kars Assembly voted in favour (along with all other parties in the Kars Assembly) of the motion to erect and fund the Monument to Humanity, yet grassroots opposition to the statue in the local chapters of the MHP continued to simmer for quite some time. Eventually, the head of the Kars chapter of the MHP, Mr. Oktay Aktas, expressed his deepest objections to the erection of the statue in a speculative analysis of the symbolism of the Monument to Humanity. He stated:

> What is the meaning of the hand that reaches out in the monument? The one who reaches out is an Armenian and the other is an embarrassed Turk. The Armenian is like a victorious general who has won the war. He offers his hand but cannot get a response. [...] What is the meaning of naming it the Monument of Humanity? Two people crying while hugging each other. One cries from happiness or from sadness. Why is one crying? Are they an Armenian and a Turk hugging each other? Or is the Armenian embracing the land that he has been longing for? Or is this an embrace between Eastern and Western Armenia?[42]

By using phrases such as 'Eastern and Western Armenia', Mr. Aktas's analysis casts the Monument to Humanity as a wholly unnecessary concession to the Armenians and iterates

[39] Ibid.
[40] Naif Alibeyoğlu, Interview by Ju Young Han, University of Oxford, June 24, 2021.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Egemen Özbek, "The Destruction of the Monument to Humanity: Historical Conflict and Monumentalization," *International Public History* 1, no. 2 (2018).

the position that this statue denigrates the position of the Turks.[43] This analysis is generally in line with many Turkish nationalists who saw the statue as a symbol of capitulation to the Armenians and a tacit acknowledgement of Turkish complicity in the Armenian genocide.[44] Yet, Mr. Alibeyoğlu notes that Mr. Aktas himself knew the true meaning of the monument as a monument for friendship and peace, but twisted the symbolism and the meaning of the statue for personal gain and political purposes.[45] Although Mr. Aktas was able to make a number of successful legal manoeuvres in order to temporarily halt the construction of the statue, the question of the statue took on a national scale with the arrival of Mr. Erdoğan in 2011. In the run-up to the 2011 Turkish General Elections, Mr. Erdoğan spoke in front of thousands of adoring supporters in Kars, noting that,

> They have put a monstrosity next to the tomb of Hasan Harakani, they have planted something very strange[…] It is unthinkable that such a thing could happen […] On this topic, our mayor will do his duty as soon as possible. We expect this to happen quickly.[46]

The proximity of the monument to the tomb of Hasan Harakani, a holy figure in Sufi Islam and the speculation that the statue would cast a literal shadow upon the tomb was the first point of objection presented by Mr. Erdoğan. The second contestation surrounded the alleged ugliness of the statue. Yet, the Prime Minister's usage of the word 'monstrosity' sparked a furious debate about whether such a statement was appropriate and whether it constituted defamation. Mr. Aksoy brought a civil suit against the Prime Minister, charging him with defamation, but while the lawsuit was making its way through the Turkish legal system, the Kars Assembly voted in favour of demolishing the monument on the grounds that it was built on protected land and that its building plan was rejected by the Historical and Natural Heritage Board.[47] In response to the allegation that his statements may have been construed as political, Mr. Erdoğan clarified that his objections were not necessarily political but were purely aesthetic. Commenting that:

> I don't need to have finished a fine arts academy in order to comment on these works[…] Concerning pieces of art, when the media goes up to citizens, they do not first ask 'what fine arts academy did you graduate from?' they ask citizens ''did you like it?' I am saying that if you are going to build a work, it must be compatible with its environment. Where there is a historical artefact nearby, you cannot build there. You must build from a certain distance[…] As a person in a position of responsibility, I cannot allow this statue to be planted[48]

The debate over whether the contestation over the monument was political or aesthetic

[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Naif Alibeyoğlu, Interview by Ju Young Han, University of Oxford, June 24, 2021.
[46] Mynet, "Başbakan İnsanlık Anıtına Ucube Dedi," *Mynet*, January 10, 2011.
[47] Dinçer Aktemur, "'İnsanlık Anıtı' artık yok," *Milliyet*, June 14, 2011.
[48] T24, "Erdoğandan Karsiyaka Belediyesine Cagri," *T24*, January 14, 2011.

became a contestation itself, with President Erdoğan adamantly denying any political intent. Nonetheless, many suspected that the objection to the 'monstrosity' and the 'aesthetics' of the monument was a thinly-veiled effort to pander to the nationalist electorate in the run-up to the election, who perceived the statue as a symbol of admission to the Armenian genocide.[49]

True to his word, he did not allow the statue to stay in its place. On April 26, demolition teams arrived at the site of the monument and began to demolish the monument.[50] In an interview with Mr. Aksoy, Mr. Aksoy suggested that the date of the demolition was deliberate and was indicative of the agenda of Mr. Erdoğan and the AKP government. Stating:

> They [Mr. Erdoğan and his allies] chose 23 April to do the demolition, this is the day of the foundation of the Turkish Republic and Children's Day. This is a holy day for us in the history of the Republic. You know, they want to abolish the values of the Republic.[51]

For Mr. Aksoy, the contestation surrounding the Monument to Humanity concerned the survival of Kemalist, secular values and the 'values of the Republic' against the Islamist and reactionary values of Mr. Erdoğan and the AKP. Mr. Aksoy compared the demolition to the Taliban's destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan[52] and sorrowfully noted that the Monument to Humanity was also being destroyed due to lies propagated by cynical political actors.

However, Mr. Aksoy and Mr. Alibeyoğlu both noted that these cynical political actors were working at the behest of other foreign powers who were uncomfortable with the Monument to Humanity and that beyond the domestic political dimension, there lay a bigger and more sinister international dimension.

The International Dimension?

The makers of the Monument to Humanity intended to send a literal and a metaphorical message of peace and unity to Turkey and the world with the construction of one of the highest twin monuments on the planet. Indeed, upon completion, the Monument to Humanity was meant to be seen from Armenia, a state that Turkey has had quite fraught relations with. Yet the international dimension of the contestation surrounding this statue likely to have been unintended and according to many observers, including Mr. Aksoy and Mr. Alibeyoğlu, it was the international dimension of the contestation that led to the ultimate

[49] Erdem Selvin, "Legal Judgment of Aesthetics: The Case of 'The Statute of Humanity' in Turkey," *ResearchGate*, April 2016.
[50] Akşam, "'İnsanlık'ın Başı Koptu," *Akşam*, April 27, 2011.
[51] Mehmet Aksoy, Interview by Ju Young Han, University of Oxford, June 24, 2021.
[52] Aydın Engin, "Taliban ve Tayyiban," *T24*, February 2, 2011.

destruction of the Monument to Humanity. Mr. Aksoy stated that Mr. Erdoğan did not order the destruction of the Monument to Humanity but that the destruction of the monument was actually ordered by the President of Azerbaijan, Mr. Ilham Aliyev.[53] Mr. Aksoy and Mr. Alibeyoğlu both have alleged that the Monument to Humanity made the President of Azerbaijan uncomfortable because he believed that it undermined his position relative to Armenia, and that the 'gods wanted a sacrifice' and that for the sake of appeasing the Azerbaijani president, the monument was chosen as a sacrificial lamb.[54]

Mr. Aksoy put it a bit more bluntly and pointed to a quite specific aspect of Turkish-Azerbaijani relations in his assessment of why the Monument to Humanity was destroyed. Mr. Aksoy stated that the statue became a part of the 'gas deal' and that when Mr. Erdoğan returned from Azerbaijan, he deliberately chose the words 'freak' or 'monstrosity' in order to describe the Monument to Humanity in order to indirectly pressure the mayor of Kars in 2011 and fulfil his promise to Mr. Aliyev. The discourse surrounding the proximity of the monument to the Hasan Harakani Tomb was, according to Mr. Alibeyoğlu, simply a ruse to fulfil Mr. Aliyev's wish of removing the statue. Mr. Aksoy noted that this is a very 'heartbreaking story' and that:

> They [Mr. Erdoğan] did not explain it [The Monument to Humanity] to Mr. Aliyev. If you do not have a statue culture, then you will not be able to understand statues. We have no statue culture in this country [...] and because our politicians have never seen or studied statues, they don't understand statues and art. If you don't try and understand, you won't understand.[55]

Although delving further into the Trans-Turkic lack of a 'statue culture' may prove to be an interesting contestation, it is important to note that all of the aforementioned contestations simply ignored or consciously side-stepped the issue of actually confronting the Armenian genocide. Ozbek notes that the debates and discussions surrounding the statue failed to incorporate an Armenian point of view and that the relevant parties were simply unwilling and uninterested in countering the official historical narrative.[56] Indeed, Mr. Aksoy, the sculptor himself, noted that 'there was no genocide' and that the events that transpired between 1915 and 1917 were simply 'relocation.'[57] The domestic contestations surrounding the statue failed to incorporate the wider, international contestations and hence, the discourses surrounding the demolition of the Monument to Humanity ultimately failed to touch upon important and lingering debates about the Armenian genocide.

[53]İhsan Yılmaz, "İnsanllk anıtı'nın yıkımı onun ricası mı?," *Hürriyet*, March 23, 2011.
[54] Mehmet Aksoy, Interview by Ju Young Han, University of Oxford, June 24, 2021.
[55] Ibid.
[56]Egemen Özbek. "The Destruction of the Monument to Humanity: Historical Conflict and Monumentalization" *International Public History* 1, no. 2 (2018).
[57] Mehmet Aksoy, Interview by Ju Young Han, University of Oxford, June 24, 2021.

Decision-Making Processes

In November 2005, the Kars Assembly unanimously agreed to approve the building of the Monument to Humanity and to pay out a sum of 120,000 Turkish Lira to Mr. Aksoy for the construction of the monument.[58] Construction began in June of 2006, yet soon enough, upon the discovery of weapons and bullets on the hill on which the monument was to be constructed, Mr. Aktas, the aforementioned leader of the local MHP chapter, filed a motion with the Erzurum Regional Board of Conservation of Cultural and Natural Heritage (Erzurum Board) to designate the area that the monument was found on as 'an area of cultural significance.'[59] Mr. Alibeyoğlu alleges that the members of the Erzurum Board were ideologically aligned with Mr. Aktas and his nationalist views, and made the political decision to designate the hill as 'an area of cultural significance' and hence retroactively withdrew permission for the construction of the monument. The municipality of Kars objected to this decision, and the Erzurum Board granted permission to the municipality of Kars to continue building the monument in 2007.[60] Yet, upon further litigation by Mr. Aktas and several other interested individuals within the MHP, in 2008, the hill upon which the monument was constructed was designated as an asset of the Ministry of Finance, and the structures built upon this land were deemed illegal and damaging to the historical assets found upon this hill.[61] This decision by the Erzurum board obligated Mr. Alibeyoğlu, as the mayor of Kars, to demolish the monument-- a task that he did not set out to complete. He went on to lose his campaign for re-election in 2009 to the AKP candidate (This is as Mr. Alibeyoğlu had resigned from the AKP, joined the CHP, and ran as a CHP candidate) Nevzat Bozkus.[62]

Upon the aforementioned 'monstrosity' comment by the Prime Minister, Mr. Aksoy was successfully able to win 10,000 Turkish Lira (approximately 3,800 US Dollars) in compensation in his lawsuit against Mr. Erdoğan for damage to his reputation.[63] Many observers could not hide their surprise and noted that this was a 'refreshing move by the judiciary'[64] and Mr. Aksoy himself claims to be the only man in Turkey to go to court against Mr. Erdoğan and win.[65] In an ad-hoc interview with reporters following this decision, however, Mr. Aksoy noted that the money he received from the lawsuit was 'haram' (unclean) and 'monstrous' money, and that he would hold a 'monstrous' party with his friends at his home with the 10,000 Turkish Lira.[66] The Council of State overturned this

[58] Kars Assembly Decision November 7, 2011. Decision Number 153.
[59] Erzurum Cultural Heritage Board Decision, November 2, 2006. Decision Number 421.
[60] Erzurum Cultural Heritage Board Decision, February 8, 2007. Decision Number 523.
[61] Erzurum Cultural Heritage Board Decision, September 10, 2008. Decision Number 1021 and 1022.
[62] Politikars, "Kars'ta Nevzat Bozkuş Kazandı," *Politikars*, March 29, 2009.
[63] Kashmira Gander, "Turkish President Erdogan Fined 10,000 Lira for Calling Statue Symbolizing Peace a 'Monstrosity'," *Independent*, March 5, 2015.
[64] Sibel Hurtas, "Erdogan fined $3,800 for insulting peace monument," *Al-Monitor*, March 10, 2015.
[65] Mehmet Aksoy, Interview by Ju Young Han, University of Oxford, June 24, 2021.
[66]Ceren Çıplak, "Aksoy'a bu kez haram davası," *Cumhuriyet*, April 12, 2015.

decision, and Mr. Aksoy ended up spending his own money on the 'monstrous' party with his friends. Mr. Erdoğan's lawyers initiated a defamation lawsuit against Mr. Aksoy in response to his comments about the 'haram' money--a lawsuit that Mr. Aksoy ended up winning as well.[67] In 2019, the Constitutional Court of Turkey took upon the defamation case from the Council of State and ultimately ruled that the demolition of the statue was a violation of Mr. Aksoy's rights to free speech and his right to artistic expression, and Mr. Erdoğan was ordered to pay 20,000 Turkish Lira to Mr. Aksoy in damages.[68] Mr. Aksoy regretfully noted that his case had forced four or five judges from their positions and that, ultimately, the verdicts of the justice system do not matter. He quipped that rather, 'who is in power is what matters.' Although he was willing to take a break from litigation, Mr. Aksoy stated his willingness to re-litigate this issue and sue the city of Kars and re-erect the statue when 'the time is right'. In the eyes of Mr. Aksoy, the fight is 'far from over.'[69]

Unlike Mr. Aksoy, however, Mr. Alibeyoğlu was subjected to much harsher treatment from the Turkish legal system for his involvement with the Monument to Humanity. After Mr. Alibeyoğlu lost his re-election campaign in 2009, partly because of his defection from the ruling AKP and partly due to the tensions that had accumulated between himself and Mr. Erdoğan for a variety of different local reasons, Mr. Aktas filed a criminal complaint against Mr. Alibeyoğlu for illegally building on protected property. Mr. Alibeyoğlu was subsequently found guilty of these charges and was convicted to 1.5 years in prison, a sentence that was converted to an 18,000 Turkish Lira fine.[70]

By the end of June, despite attempts to file injunctions in order to prevent the destruction of the monument on the part of Mr. Aksoy and Mr. Alibeyoğlu, the Kars Regional Assembly gathered to vote on the destruction of the Monument to Humanity.[71] The monument was decapitated first and cut up into over a dozen pieces before being fully demolished.[72] The outstretched hand was never attached to the monument, and the pieces of the monument currently lay scattered near a road in Kars.

[67] Haberler, "Heykeltıraş Aksoy 'Haram Para' Davasında Beraat Etti," *Haberler*, February 16, 2016.
[68] Gazete Duvar, "Devlete 20 bin TL'lik 'ucube' cezası," *Gazete Duvar*, November 25, 2019.
[69] Mehmet Aksoy, Interview by Ju Young Han, University of Oxford, June 24, 2021.
[70]Zeynep Aktüre, "Minareye Kılıf: İnsanlık Anıtı Nasıl Yıkıldı?" *MİMARLIK* 409 (October 2019): 57–62.
[71] Memorandum from Erzurum Cultural Heritage Board April 21, 2011 and Document B.16.0.KVM.4.25.00.02/36.00.231 published on February 8, 2011
[72] Aksam, "'İnsanlık'ın Başı Koptu," *Akşam*, April 27, 2011.

Figure 1: "The Destruction of the Monument to Humanity" Image by Evgeni Zotov CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

The legal and administrative processes concerning the demolition of the Monument to Humanity dealt with the technicalities of the hill on which the monument was built, alongside questions of aesthetics and the monument's 'suitability' with the city. Two important observations can be made from the demolition process. The first observation one can make is that the destruction of the Monument to Humanity was quite revealing of how 'cultural property' protection legislation can be weaponized in order to bury or destroy versions of culture that the state does not approve of.[73] Because of the proximity of the monument to the Hasan Harakani Tomb and the discovery of weapons and bullets on the hill on which the monument was to be built, these historical artefacts and the cultural legacies of these artefacts took precedence over the messages that the Monument to Humanity attempted to convey. The second observation is the extraordinary importance of the statements of powerful figures such as Mr. Erdoğan and what this may say about the health of democracy and due process in Turkey. Mr. Erdoğan's statement that the new mayor of Kars 'will do his duties' , he did not phrase his statement as a suggestion but rather an

[73] Zeynep Aktüre, "Minareye Kılıf: İnsanlık Anıtı Nasıl Yıkıldı?" *MİMARLIK* 409 (October 2019): 61.

executive order. The extraordinarily expedited process for the demolition of the statue, in the eyes of Mr. Aksoy and Mr. Alibeyoğlu, put the legitimacy of the aforementioned legal processes into question and alleged that 'there is no democracy, whatever Mr. Erdoğan says is the law.'[74]

Summary and Conclusions

For the greater part of its history, the city of Kars found itself at the crossroads of multiple kingdoms and empires and served as the border between competing nations, religions, and ideologies. As a frontier city, Kars has been witness to all sorts of unspeakable violence, bloodshed, and destruction, and the destruction of the Monument to Humanity was by no means a new development for the city of Kars. Nonetheless, the Monument to Humanity and the process of its destruction highlighted a variety of unique and interconnected contestations that forced locals and lawmakers alike to confront these uncomfortable contestations head-on. These contestations ranged from those concerning historical memory to ideology to local and international politics. However, the domestic and international debates surrounding the statue itself sidestepped an actual reckoning of Turkey's involvement with the genocide itself. Nonetheless, the unspoken and uncomfortable pressure that the monument posed upon the Turkish political sphere and the collective historical memory of the Turkish public ultimately played an extraordinarily important role in the monument's destruction.

Today, the remains of the Monument to Humanity are scattered across the hill it was once built on, and with the enduring political power of those who engineered the monument's destruction, it is difficult to envision it ever being rebuilt. The contestations that surfaced with the erection and subsequent destruction of the Monument to Humanity, however, continue to remain salient to this very day. Although Mr. Aksoy has not given up on this monument and the message that the monument attempted to portray, the discourses that the monument itself unleashed have unquestionably become bigger and more consequential than the monument itself.

About the Author

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[74] Mehmet Aksoy, Interview by Ju Young Han, University of Oxford, June 24, 2021.

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Figures

Evgeni Zotov. “6959708822_a179eb6723_o.jpg” Flickr, May 11, 2011, https://www.flickr.com/photos/23609393@N03/6959708822/ (Figure 1)

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In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter- ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

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