



## SILENCED VOICES: HRANT DINK

by Sara Whyatt

On Friday, January 19, Hrant Dink, editor of the Armenian-language magazine *Agos*, stepped out of his office into a busy Istanbul street, to be shot dead by a teenage nationalist. Dink's murder has left Turkey's vibrant literary and academic community in profound shock. As triumphant ultra-nationalists celebrate the murder, fears for the safety of other writers and intellectuals are acute, and many are now living under police guard.



*Hrant Dink*

The pavement upon which Dink died has now become a shrine where people come to stop for a moment, to leave flowers and messages, and to light candles. They come to honor a remarkable man, killed for his belief that there could be reconciliation between Turks and Armenians through coming to terms with the past.

In the days following, Dink's alleged killer had been arrested, along with four accomplices, and a hundred thousand mourners had taken to the streets. This was a show of mourning that would have been remarkable in any country, but especially so in Turkey, where Armenians are discriminated against, and where to write, as Dink had done, on the mass killings and deportation of his ancestors at the turn of the last century, is taboo. He did this despite constant death threats and being hauled before the courts on dozens of occasions to face charges of "insult to Turkishness" under the now infamous Article 301 of Turkey's Penal Code.

Elif Shafak, a novelist who herself was tried and then acquitted last year under Article 301 for her novel *The Bastards of Istanbul*, describes how important a figure Dink had been: "Hrant was a dreamer, and as relentlessly as he was misunderstood, mistreated, and downtrodden because of this dominant aspect of his personality, to the end he knew very well that dreams are contagious. He gave us hope and faith, but most of all, he passed on his dreams to us." ([www.opendemocracy.org](http://www.opendemocracy.org))

Article 301 is a new law; introduced in 2005, it penalizes "a person who explicitly insults being a Turk, the Republic or Turkish Grand National Assembly... the Government of the Republic of Turkey, the judicial bodies of the State, the military or security organization..." It carries with it a maximum three-year prison term. Its reach is broad.

Within two weeks of Article 301 coming into force in, Orhan Pamuk, one of Turkey's most well known writers, and later Nobel laureate, became its first victim. He was tried for an interview he gave to a Swiss newspaper in which he referred to "300,000 Kurds and a million Armenians" having been killed in Turkey in the last century. Dozens of other trials against writers and journalists followed. Among them was Elif Shafak, accused for comments made by characters in her novel. Publisher Ragıp Zarakolu is on trial for books by Armenian writers who wrote about the mass killings of the early 1900s. Hrant Dink was appealing a six-month suspended prison term to the European Court on Human Rights when he died. His crime was to write an article calling for reconciliation between Armenians and Turks. Two other trials were also under way against him for similar articles.

Pamuk's trial was closed on a technicality in February 2006. Elif Shafak was acquitted in September. Ragip Zarakolu's trials were dragging on in March 2007. Hrant Dink, the peacemaker, is dead.

In his final article, published the day he died, Dink wrote that since being charged with insult, death threats against him had intensified, and that his computer hard drive was full of messages of "rage and threats." He told of his fears for his family, and questioned whether he should stay in Turkey, concluding that he owed it to his friends and those campaigning for democracy to stay. Anyway, to leave was "not my style... I know myself. After three days abroad I'd miss my country. What would I do there?" He spoke of the "psychological torture" his unwanted fame had brought him, of passersby nudging themselves as he passed, saying, "Look, isn't it that Armenian?" He described himself as like a pigeon, constantly nervous: "My eyes dart everywhere, in front of me, behind, to the left, to the right." He pointed out that prison is not the only penalty, that his life of fear and nervousness was a prison in itself. "Just look at the price. This is the price."

Now that price is being paid by others, as threats against those who have raised the ire of the ultra-nationalists have escalated. Right-wing groups have reportedly issued "death lists" against writers, academics, and activists. Some are under twenty-four-hour police protection. Among them is the eminent journalist and academic Murat Belge, who was acquitted of "insult" under Article 301 last year, and who told the BBC in February, "Everyone is in danger. This is very savage... All around there are similar groups aching to murder someone for their country. This is shocking."

Dink's murder has exposed what some in Turkey refer to as the "deep state"—a seam of extreme nationalism that runs through all levels of authority, even, it is said, within the judiciary. Yet in the days following Dink's death, an estimated 100,000 mourners took to the streets, many bearing placards saying, "We are all Hrant Dink. We are all Armenians." Others proclaimed, "301: Murderer." Orhan Pamuk, in paying homage to Dink at the *Agos* office on the day of his death, spoke of a collective responsibility for the tragedy: "We have killed a man whose ideas we could not accept... We are responsible for his

death, but above all, those who still defend Article 301 and insist it should stay are guilty.”

The government has said it is open to suggestions on amendment to Article 301. Some in Turkey are suggesting that the term “insult” could be changed to “debase and deride,” and that the concept of “Turkishness” could be more clearly defined. Others, including the writers association, International PEN, are calling for its repeal believing that “insult” (and indeed the alternative suggested wording) is a term that is too amorphous, too vague to stand up to legal scrutiny. Article 301’s very existence in any form is a clear threat to the right of writers to question and to debate taboo topics without fear of imprisonment, harassment, or, as in the case of Hrant Dink, death.

Please write letters calling for abolition of Article 301 to:

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan  
Office of the Prime Minister  
Basbakanlik  
06573 Ankara  
Turkey

Or use this [sample letter](#) to fax or email the Turkish Ambassador here in the U.S.

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