

# Mislabeled Genocide?

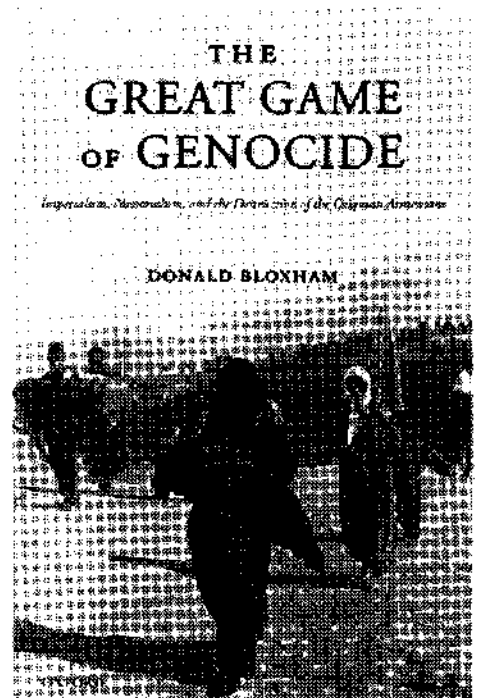
by Yücel Güçlü

**The Great Game of Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism, and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians.** By Donald Bloxham. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. 329 pp. \$35.

Bloxham's *Great Game of Genocide* is both broader and narrower than the title might suggest. The work divides into three thematic parts—mass murder in an international system; international response and responsibility in the genocide era; and from response to recognition. The parts are broader in dealing not only with Armenians but also with Greeks, Kurds, and Assyrians. They are narrower in focusing mainly on the years 1915-23, thereby treating only superficially the period before World War I.

Therefore, the study falls short in its argument of some issues. For example, the Zeytun revolt of 1895 and Adana incidents of 1909 get short shrift despite their central importance in Ottoman-Armenian relations. Bloxham is silent about the expectation of Armenian revolutionary committees in attracting Western intervention at the nearby Mediterranean ports of İskenderun and Mersin. Warships of seven countries—Britain, France, Germany, Austro-Hungary, Italy, Russia, and the United States—did in fact anchor in the Mersin roadstead in April 1909 but refrained from landing men. The events of 1895 and 1909 were crucial in preparing the psychological climate of 1915.

Bloxham relies primarily on Western archival materials supplemented by the pertinent published sources. He has done no research work in the Ottoman archives nor utilized the contemporary Ottoman press. This reduces the validity of his conclusions, for the Ottoman archives are much more informative on relations



between the Ottoman state and its subjects than any other source. These documents, which are open to the scrutiny of scholars, answer many questions regarding the Armenian issue. Indeed, not much can be known about Armenians in Anatolia without reference to them, and no historical conclusions can be reached without them.

Too much reliance on secondary sources, at the expense of essential Ottoman primary material, inevitably leads to unfounded claims. For instance, Bloxham quotes Armenian writers' inflated figures of the number of Armenians killed by the Ottomans during World War I, alleging that "one million Armenians died, half of the pre-war population and two-thirds of those deported." In fact, 1,295,000 Armenians lived in the Ottoman Empire in 1914; 702,900 of these were subject to relocations in 1915-16, and very large

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numbers of the displaced persons survived according to documents of the Directorate for Public Security and the Directorate for the Settlement of Tribes and Immigrants of the Ottoman Ministry of the Interior. Meanwhile, everywhere in the text, the term "deportation" is applied to the Armenian displacements, which is erroneous, for the Armenians were moved within the same country, not expelled to another country.

Another weakness: the work presents a one-sided story of Armenian accusations without looking at the overall context of what took place and ignoring the Ottoman experience. Bloxham is thus wrong to assess the Ottoman government's treatment of its Armenian subjects from autumn 1914 to summer 1915 as genocide. The relocations were matters of national security and military necessity under wartime circumstances. The author touches lightly on the vital point that "genocide" is a clearly defined crime in international law. Article 2 of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of 1948 states that it involves the "intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, as such." Ottoman archives in Istanbul are full of government decrees and regulations proving the contrary.

The book has other problems. The writing and organization is frustrating with many confusing statements and a great deal of repetition. One would have liked to read more about the Ottoman personalities and Turkish nationalist figures the author so briefly mentions. Bloxham is also highly selective in his coverage: he neglects the Armenian rejection of the International Court of Justice serving as the forum for legal resolution of claims of genocide and underplays the massacre of Turks by Armenian armed bands during the French occupation of Cilicia.

Misinterpretations mar the book: Bloxham writes that "Turkish nationalists were only too happy to see tens of thousands of Armenians departing from Cilicia" in 1921, which is not true. The author repeats the fantastic story that the Ottoman statesman Cemal Pasha—minister of the navy, commander of the Fourth Army and governor-general of Syria and western Arabia in 1914-17—through an Armenian intermediary,

contacted Russia and "in return for marching on Istanbul with military support from the Allies, asked for the leadership of a future independent Anatolian Turkey, including the autonomous provinces of Armenia, Kurdistan, Cilicia, Syria, and Mesopotamia; Istanbul and the control of the straits would be given up." No credible evidence substantiates these claims.

Spelling and typographical mistakes dot the book, such as Arnavutköj for Arnavutköy, Radjun for Radju, Gourard for Gouraud, Akullioğlu for Akıllıoğlu, Dörtyöl for Dörtyol, and Aloannis for İoannis. Factual errors are also a problem. In Cilicia, the region that corresponded to the Ottoman province of Adana and *sanjak* of Maraş, Armenians did not comprise 20-25 percent of the population but only about 10 percent. Turcomans are not just a "small Islamic population" in Anatolia; Turks and Turcomans come from common descent and are one and the same thing. In mid-March 1915, director of the Ottoman Special Organization was not Bahaettin Şakir but Hüsamettin (Ertürk); nor was Şakir the general director of police of Halil Pasha's (Kut) army in 1918; the only public position Şakir held was membership on the central committee of the Committee of Union and Progress in 1912-18. Enver Pasha never served as an irregular soldier in counterinsurgency operations in Macedonia. The Osmaniye-İslahiye-Radju military supply line was a railway, not a road; Greek troops disembarked at İzmir on May 15, 1919, not on May 16; the Turkish city of Adalia (Antalya) was never occupied by Greece. The final illustration between pages 146 and 147 must be a fake, as no Ottoman administrative official of the World War I era would wear a fashionable Western-style tie and go bareheaded.

While this bold enterprise comprises certain valuable inquiry, its core thesis is no more than an assertion, and its overall argument is not convincing. Still, Bloxham's book might stimulate further research on the Armenian issue, in particular, and on genocide analysis in general—a welcome development, as there is dire need for objective and rational analyses of these difficult subjects.

