

Book Reviews

The Armenian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey: A Disputed Genocide

GUENTER LEWY, 2005

Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press

370 pp., \$24.95 (hardback), ISBN 0-8748-0849-9

The fate of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during the First World War and its immediate aftermath has produced voluminous scholarly literature. The most recent that incorporates and synthesizes the pertinent findings of many earlier studies, argued within a judicious and cogent perspective, is that of Guenter Lewy's *The Armenian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey: A Disputed Genocide*. It is a sophisticated and comprehensive investigation of the Armenian question since 1878. The author, who for many years taught political science at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst, has a distinguished record of publications on genocide cases. The book has contemporary political relevance.

The appearance of Lewy's study is all the more timely. The book comes out at a time when the Armenian episode of 1915–1916 is universally debated. The subject has very clear political implications. On 10 April 2005 Turkey extended an invitation to Armenia to establish a joint commission consisting of historians and other experts from the two countries to study the developments and events of 1915–1916 not only in the archives of Turkey and Armenia but also in the archives of all concerned third countries and to share their findings with the international public. It was expected that such an initiative would shed light on a disputed period of history and also constitute a step towards contributing to the normalization of relations between the two countries. This invitation won strong praise from European Union governments. Eighty members of the European Parliament at Strasbourg signed a declaration calling on Armenia to accept the Turkish proposal. The United States applauded Turkey's initiative as a move to promote a spirit of tolerance and hoped that this would mark the beginning of a new and fruitful dialogue. The Armenian government has so far failed to accept the invitation.

The book is divided into four parts and a brief epilogue arranged in a chronological fashion. The first four chapters (Part One) give the necessary historical, political, and sociological background to the pre-1915 conflicts. Parts Two, Three and Four are the most valuable sections of the inquiry. They provide a highly intricate and detailed discussion of the Armenian genocide allegations. The author is careful and prudent in narrating, analyzing, and interpreting developments. Whereas many scholars have concentrated mainly on the extent of Armenian suffering, Lewy's study focuses on the key question of premeditation. Did the Ottoman government organize, with premeditated intent, the killings that took place in 1915–1916?

Lewy points out that most of those who maintain that Armenian deaths are premeditated and so constitute genocide base their argument on three pillars: the actions of Ottoman courts-martial of 1919–1920, which convicted officials of the government of the Committee of Union and Progress (the party that controlled power between 1908 and 1918) of organizing massacres of Armenians, the role of the Special Organization accused of carrying out the massacres, and Aram Andonian's *Memoirs of Naim Bey* which contain alleged telegrams of Interior Minister Talat Pasha conveying

the orders for the extermination of the Armenians. The author subjects to rigorous examination these events and sources describing them and finds that they do not provide any foundation from which to claim, let alone conclude, that the deaths of Armenians were premeditated. He adds that other alleged evidence for a centrally planned annihilation fares no better.

By all accounts, the majority reason for convening military tribunals was pressure from the Allied powers, which insisted on retributions for the Armenian killings. The Ottoman government of the day also hoped that by foisting blame on a few members of the Committee of Union and Progress, they might receive more lenient treatment at the Paris peace conference. The procedures of the trials were inadequate and the reliability of their findings were questionable. The tribunals lacked the basic requirements of due process. The right of cross-examination was not acknowledged. The judge weighed the probative value of all evidence submitted during the preparatory phase and during the trial, and he questioned the accused. At the 1919–1920 trials, the presiding officer acted more like a prosecutor than an impartial judge. Defense counsel was barred access to pretrial investigatory files and from accompanying their clients to pretrial interrogations. When the British government considered holding trials of alleged Ottoman war criminals in Malta, it declined to use any evidence developed by the Ottoman courts-martial of 1919–1920.

The Special Organization, established in November 1913, was used for special military operations in the Caucasus, Egypt, and Mesopotamia. It was also employed in dealing with Arab separatism in Syria. The Special Organization played no role in the Armenian relocations. While the indictment of the 1919 court-martial linked the Special Organization to the Armenian killings, neither the trial's proceedings nor its verdict support the claim. Rather, defendants described the Special Organization's role in covert operations behind Russian lines. Therefore, a relationship between the Special Organization and the Armenian killings is nothing more than uncorroborated assertion.

The documents reproduced in the *Memoirs of Naim Bey* are the most damning evidence put forward to support the claim of genocide. Particularly incriminating are the telegrams of Talat Pasha. If authentic, they provide proof that Talat Pasha gave explicit orders to kill all Ottoman Armenians. One telegram dated 16 September 1915 notes that the Committee of Union and Progress had decided to destroy completely all Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire. Two Turkish authors, Şinasi Orel and Süreyya Yuca, who undertook a detailed examination of the authenticity of the documents in the *Andonian* book, proved beyond any doubt that they were crude forgeries. Turkish scholars are not alone in their assessment that the *Andonian* documents are fakes. British historian Andrew Mango and Dutch historian Eric Zürcher dismiss them as forgeries also. Moreover, while telegrams from *Andonian* book were included in the files of the Malta detainees, the British government never made use of them. They were apparently regarded as counterfeit.

Lewy's research is based on broad and extensive primary and secondary sources in several languages. What is most impressive is his use of the primary sources to elucidate his views, ranging from Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during the nineteenth century to the future of Turkish–Armenian relations. The author's treatment of the Armenian question is admirably balanced and free of partiality. He makes it very clear that the Armenian revolutionary committees had an agenda that was patterned on “the Bulgarian model”—that is, regional autonomy leading to eventual independence, a situation that the Ottoman government could not accept (pp. 7, 18, 21 and 35). He also indicates that the Armenian revolutionaries did not shrink from committing acts that they knew

would result in the killing of innocent people on both sides (pp. 17–18). He is at his best when offering a perceptive and courageous analysis of the Armenian assertions. The author is certainly correct to remark that it is impossible to substantiate the charge that the Ottoman government initiated a program of genocide in 1915–1916 (p. 256).

This volume is characterized by breadth of vision, thoroughness of research, and a strictly objective approach to highly contentious matters. Lewy's reasoned discussion, with a tone that is neither condemnatory nor apologetic, is of great import for those who want to grasp the post-1878 Ottoman-Armenian conflicts. *Armenian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey: A Disputed Genocide* is a solid contribution to the growing literature on the Armenian affairs.

One may take issue with this inquiry on two points. First, despite claims to the contrary, Ottoman archival materials on Armenians are open to the scrutiny of scholars (pp. 131–133). As the classification process is completed, more documents are becoming available to researchers. Access to the Ottoman archives through the Internet is possible. Ottomanists, both Turkish and foreign, using the rich holdings of the archival documentation now in hand, make major and much-needed additions to our knowledge of the Armenian saga. They unearth notable evidence and raise consequential questions. Second, the author rather appears not to pay due attention to the fact that many Armenians served as fifth column for Britain and France in their espionage activities along the Cilician coastal areas during the First World War (pp. 183–187). Armenians who spied for the British and French navies provided military intelligence, concentrating on troop movements; condition of railways and roads, numbers and types of aircraft; stocks of fuel, arrivals and departures of senior officers, Ottoman and German. British Admiralty documents are replete with accounts of Armenian espionage against the Ottoman army. These records in the National Archives in Kew, London are open for public inspection.

Nonetheless, these shortcomings by no means detract from Lewy's overall achievement. Years of hard and discerning examination of the sources have gone into this work, and they show. The book is well written and covers most of the past and recent literature on the topic. It is essential reading for anyone interested in the late Ottoman-Armenian history and the future of Turkish-Armenian relations.

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