

Grigoris Balakian: *Armenian Golgotha*. Translated by Peter Balakian with Aris Sevag. New York: Alfred Knopf, 2009. 560 pages. ISBN 978-0-307-26288-2. \$35.00. Reviewed by Yucel Guclu.

Armenian Golgotha is Grigoris Balakian's account of his relocation from Istanbul to inner Anatolia on 24 April 1915, along with 233 ringleaders of Armenian revolutionary committees and principal activists; of the persons he had known; and of the transactions or movements in which he had been concerned during the First World War. Balakian was a Gregorian Armenian priest who left Turkey in 1919 and wrote his memoir later in Britain. Originally published in Armenian in 1922, the book is now translated into English for the first time.

The work is the self-portrait by a senior clergyman of his role in the politics of his time. It is focused primarily on political participation and reflection. It records in prose and verse personal political engagement, mental and emotional experiences, and personal observations. The author passionately depicts his state of mind both during the war and as he wrote his memoir. The death and wounding of friends clearly had a very profound effect on him. Balakian's narrative, to a considerable extent, is a psychological record.

The autobiographical work of an ecclesiastical figure, treated by other Armenians as a leader throughout his wanderings, has a multiplicity of interest for students of Ottoman-Armenian history. As the author's narration of his political life, it can be an important source of information about the actor-author himself, including his background and experiences, his milieu, and, more broadly, the period during which he lived. However, like most political memoirs, *Armenian Golgotha* is, in the main, self-justificatory and self-praising. Balakian did not hesitate to damage the reputations of colleagues through critical evaluations or opinions of them, including that of Zaven Der Yeghiayan, who was the Armenian patriarch of Istanbul between 1913 and 1922. Although rich in personal detail and observation, the text tends to be a repetitive chronicle of social intercourse.

The dry and factual language of *Armenian Golgotha* hides its author's pre-1914 political and nationalist commitments, his ambitions, his anti-Semitism and social Darwinistic contempt for other peoples, his arrogance, and his toughness. But Balakian's latent anti-Jewish prejudice is rampant in several instances.

Evasions and omissions feature prominently in the work. Balakian does not describe his views on Ottoman entry into the First World War, on the empire's war aims, or on the reasons for the empire's defeat. Approximately 4 million Ottoman Muslims died during and after the First World War, by far the largest in both proportion and total numbers of

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any group in the war. These deaths were caused by military invasion, internal revolts, foreign blockades, and disruption of agriculture and trade, which led to massacres, famine, plague, and typhus and other diseases. The author rather disingenuously expresses little interest in the Turkish population losses of this era, however oversensitive he is to the human destruction; the question of Turks being slaughtered by Armenians, for instance, goes unexamined and unexplained. He is quite unconcerned by, and ignores, the suffering of Turks from the Russian-Armenian invasion of eastern Anatolia.

Emotionally charged, *Armenian Golgotha* presents at length a one-sided view of what took place. The oft-repeated narrations of suffering during the war years incline to extricate and isolate the Armenian experience from the complex circumstances of the day. One is given the impression that Armenians suffered alone. The author exhibits a picture of almost complete Armenian victimhood, of a people with no ability to attack or strike back, when in fact Armenians both attacked and struck back when they could.

There is no question that during relocations some of the Armenians were attacked by the local population or even by irregular troops. However, these events must be assessed in the light of communal feuds, social conflicts developing along ethnic lines, and the attacks of the Armenian bands and regular troops fighting under Russian command against the Muslim population of the Caucasus and eastern Anatolia. Balakian scarcely makes any mention of these problems in his descriptions and analyses.

What is also missing in the memoir are the endeavors of Jemal Pasha, commander of the Ottoman Fourth Army in Cilicia, Syria, and Palestine in 1914–17, in providing humanitarian protection and assistance to Armenians. He ordered an effective relief effort, as a result of which the vast majority of the exiles in his zone of command survived. There is much contemporary testimony that corroborates other Ottoman commanders' efforts. Among many eyewitnesses were George Young, American consular agent at Damascus in 1915; Colonel Friedrich Freiherr Kress von Kressenstein, chief of staff of the Ottoman Fourth Army in 1915–6; Colonel Ali Fuad Bey, von Kressenstein's successor in 1916–7; Halidé Edib Hanım, who engaged in educational activities in Syria in 1916–8; Aaron Aaronsohn, British intelligence operative in Palestine during the First World War; James Barton and Elizabeth Webb, American Protestant missionaries in the Ottoman Empire; and Hagop Sarkissian, who had been relocated with his family from Kilis to Aleppo in 1915.

Last and most important, Balakian does not support with documents his accusation that the Ottoman government conducted intentional mass extermination of Armenians. Not one shred of documentary, archival evidence is cited in *Armenian Golgotha* to indicate that the sublime porte attempted to destroy the country's Armenian population. To the contrary, records suggest that relocation, and not extermination, was seen as the solution. The primary intent of the relocation order was not to eradicate an entire people but to deny support to the Armenian bands collaborating with the invading Russian

armies and attacking Muslims and to remove the Armenians from war zones and other strategic locations. No discussions of any plan to wipe the Armenians off the face of the earth appear in the minutes of the meetings of the Ottoman cabinet during the First World War.

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