

Ottomans and Armenians: A Study in Counterinsurgency

EDWARD J. ERICKSON, 2013

New York: Palgrave Macmillan

xiii + 299 pp., 10 maps, 2 figures, 1 table, appendix, bibliography, index, US \$95.00 (hb), ISBN 9781137362209

Erickson has become a one-man cottage industry in the field of Ottoman defense and security studies. Three years after his perceptive *Gallipoli: The Ottoman Campaign*,¹ he has produced a valuable work, *Ottomans and Armenians: A Study in Counterinsurgency*. In 229 pages of text, complemented with maps, figures, and a table, Erickson, author of nine previous books on twentieth-century Ottoman army and the Euphrates-Tigris Basin, provides a sweeping and challenging military history of insurrection and counterinsurgency in the Ottoman Empire from 1878 to 1915. This succinct book is an ambitious and highly readable study. Acclaimed by senior scholars in the field, and deservedly so, it is well written, immensely learned, convincing in argument, and innovative in approach.

After a brief introduction, the book is divided into 10 chapters followed by Appendix A: The Relocation Antitheses. Chapters discuss chronologically: “Insurgency by Committee”, “Counterinsurgency in the Empire’s Core”, “Counterinsurgency in the Periphery”, “A Template for Destruction”, “Invisible Armies”, “Readiness for War”, “Irregular War in Caucasia and the Levant”, “Enemies Within”, “A New Course of Action” and “Aftermath”. The discussion centers on the treatment of the Armenian insurrection of 1915 and the Ottoman counterinsurgency response as a military event rather than as a political, social, or ideological event, and that the relocation was necessary for reasons of Ottoman national security in the First World War. This is the core argument of *Ottomans and Armenians: A Study in Counterinsurgency*, developed and expanded in each chapter.

The main thesis of the book is that “the Ottoman government developed an evolving 35-year, empire-wide array of counterinsurgency practices that varied in scope and execution depending on the strategic importance of the affected provinces” (p. 1). Its theme and objective is “to inform and understand more completely Ottoman counterinsurgency practices as these affected the empire’s Armenian citizens” (p. 4). Erickson also takes measure of the major contemporary narratives of these events in his appendix, which presents five alternative explanations of the relocations, as well as reminding readers that the expulsion of the Acadians in 1755 was the first modern use of relocation as a counterinsurgency strategy.

Erickson believes that “there was cumulative radicalization in the Ottoman policies, from regional to national level, particularly with regard to military counterinsurgency policies” (p. 226). He maintains that “the relocations themselves were the outcome of a rapidly escalating and deliberately tailored regional counterinsurgency campaign” (pp. 226–227). He is convinced that “there were no a priori decisions to commit the mass extermination of Armenians” (p. 227). He suggests that “Cemal Pasha went to substantial lengths to safeguard the lives and property of displaced Armenians, thereby casting doubt on the entire concept of premeditated state-sponsored extermination, during or after the fact of relocations” (p. 227). He goes further and rightly says “there are no authentic documents anywhere today that establish either an order to exterminate the Armenians or an order to relocate them for ideological or political reasons” (p. 227). The author, consequently, concludes his volume with a challenge to his readers to ask themselves the broad question, “If the Armenian relocations of 1915 were not genocidal ... then ... what were they?” (p. 229).

One may take issue with the inquiry on two points. First, contrary to Erickson's opinion, Armenian participation in the Sarıkamış campaign in December 1914–January 1915 was “a significant factor in the Ottoman defeat” (p. 155). It should be remembered that after Russia declared war against the Ottoman Empire, on 2 November 1914, a large number of Armenians deserted the Ottoman army and took up arms as rebels. Many of them fled to Russia, often joining with the Czarist army and providing it with information about the best routes for invasion. Intimately familiar with the rugged, mountainous terrain, they acted primarily as scouts, guides, and advance guards. Among the thousands who crossed the border to assist the Russian campaign were some prominent figures, including Karakin Pasdermadjian, who represented Erzurum in the Ottoman Chamber of Deputies. He went over to the Russians with almost all the Armenian soldiers in the Ottoman Third Army and returned at their head—burning villages and killing the Muslim peasants who fell into his hands.

Second, again in contradistinction to Erickson's contention, a modern label associated with the Musa Dağ operations of July–September 1915 would not be “ethnic cleansing” (p. 207). It is to be recalled that when the relocation order reached Musa Dağ in July 1915, Armenian opinion had been divided. Some said they should defy; others believed the order was, after all, only for relocation. About 60 families complied with it, but the rest took the mountain. About two-thirds of the inhabitants of six Armenian villages withdrew to that part of Musa Dağ called Damlacık, there to be joined by a number of Armenian deserters from the Ottoman army. By September, epidemics and starvation had decimated the ranks of the insurgents, and internal discord raged. On request, the French Rear Admiral Pierre Darrieus, commanding the Third French Naval Squadron blockading the Levantine coast, had supplied them with munitions and provisions, but the insurgents asked to be evacuated. A few weeks later, a good number of Musa Dağ insurgents were recruited by the French military agent in Egypt, Lieutenant Doynel de Saint-Quentin, for service at Gallipoli. Most of Musa Dağ Armenians from Syria and Egypt had returned to their homes in safety with the specific permission of the Ottoman government following the First World War.

The study relies primarily on Ottoman and British archival materials supplemented by information from published Turkish and Armenian memoirs and the relevant secondary literature. No use is made of the contemporary Ottoman, Armenian, and Western press.

The book is full of meticulously researched details and is particularly brilliant when it comes to Ottoman military practitioners. In a work such as this one, a few factual lapses are probably unavoidable [e.g. Lieutenant Colonel and later Colonel Refet (Bele) did not command the 23rd but the 22nd Infantry Division in Palestine in the First World War (p. 195); Colonel Ali Fuad (Erden) was not only a Fourth Army staff officer at Damascus, but also served as chief of staff of the Fourth Army in 1915–1917 (p. 261 fn110)].

Save for minor quibbles, *Ottomans and Armenians: A Study in Counterinsurgency* represents a welcome contribution to the field and a timely addition to the present debate. It offers a fresh perspective both in terms of topic and analytical approach, and is argued without any particular political bias being apparent. The tome stands out as a piece of research-based work providing nuanced and penetrating insights into a subject matter increasingly dominated by a discourse riddled with diatribes. Palgrave Macmillan deserves special credit for bringing this important study to publication. It is hoped that a paperback version will soon follow, for the book deserves a wide readership.

NOTE

1. See, Edward J. Erickson, *Gallipoli: The Ottoman Campaign*, Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2010.

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Contesting Kurdish Identities in Sweden: Quest for Belonging among Middle-Eastern Youth

BARZOO ELIASSI, 2013

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This book examines how young Kurdish immigrants have fared in Sweden, a state long justifiably known for its outreach and succor toward the disadvantaged. Indeed,

Kurds have benefited immensely from the political freedom and democratic arrangements in Sweden, which has functioned as a surrogate for an extended Kurdistan in regard to Kurdish cultural and linguistic activities and rights that Kurdish movements have been struggling to obtain in the Middle East. (p. 9)

Nevertheless, “formal Swedish citizenship conceals a hierarchy wherein white western Europeans constitute the most privileged group. ... It is no surprise that they [Kurdish immigrants] also experience economic and political inequality in the wider Swedish society” (p. 176). Thus, “using violence, nonviolence, and silence; changing and modifying their names to Swedish ones; strengthening differences between the self and the other; and ignoring racism are some of the strategies used by Kurdish youth to deal with ethnic discrimination” (p. 177).

Barzoo Eliassi, a post-doctoral researcher at The Centre for Middle-Eastern Studies at Lund University in Sweden, has adapted his doctoral dissertation into a sophisticated book that analyzes how young Kurdish men and women “form, contest, affirm, reject and negotiate their identities ... in Swedish society” (p. 15). The author draws his empirical data from interviews with 26 young men and 24 young women of Kurdish ethnicities, many of whom have lived in Sweden for most of their lives and are Swedish citizens. The result captures “the variety of experiences among Kurdish youth involved in different social settings, such as university student organizations, political organizations, Swedish political organizations, restaurants, high schools, upper secondary schools, and university education” (p. 15).

The study employs a narrative approach to analyze the data, breaking the findings down into seven chapters. A detailed introductory chapter introduces the Kurdish diaspora—which elsewhere the author terms heuristically “long-distance nationalism” (p. 178)—and the retreat of multiculturalism in Western Europe. Chapter 2 reviews the well-known Kurdish historical situation in the Middle East. The following chapter surveys the relevance of citizenship and homeland in relation to immigration, statelessness, globalization, nationalism, post-nationalism, and cosmopolitan experiences. Also investigated here are the resistance and accommodation to practices of discrimination and exclusion. In so doing, the author focuses on how power reproduces social inequalities.