
Notes On A Century

Reflections of
A Middle East
Historian

Bernard Lewis

and BUNTZIE ELLIS CHURCHILL

After 9/11, people who had never given much thought to the politics of the Middle East found themselves wondering why there was such rage brewing in the region. Many of them turned to Bernard Lewis for an explanation. The world's pre-eminent historian of the Middle East, Lewis was among the first to identify the phenomenon of Islamic fundamentalism.

In this exceptional memoir, he looks back over his long career – taking us from his discovery of the Crusades as a young boy in London and his service in British intelligence during the Second World War through to the Iraq wars, the crisis with Iran, and the great upheavals of the Arab Spring.

Over the course of his distinguished career, he has at times been as much a player in political events as well as a scholar. He has advised monarchs, presidents, prime ministers and dissidents in the Middle East and elsewhere. Now 95 and still sharper than most college students, he writes with barbed wit about the people he has known and events he has witnessed and participated in. No subject is more fraught in the Middle East than history – and so Bernard Lewis has found himself unexpectedly part of the story that he tells in this extraordinary memoir of a life that spans the 20th century, and has already had a great impact on the 21st.



Bernard Lewis is the Cleveland E. Dodge Professor of Near Eastern Studies Emeritus at Princeton University, and the author of two bestsellers, *Crisis of Islam* and *What Went Wrong?* A winner of the George Polk Award among many other distinctions, he is internationally recognised as the greatest historian of the Middle East.

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Judgment in Paris

In my book *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, first published in 1961, I referred to the massacres of Armenians by the Turks in 1915 using the word "holocaust" to describe them. This did not prevent the book from being acclaimed in Turkey and translated into Turkish. In the third edition, published in 1962, I replaced the word "holocaust" with "slaughter"—not to question or minimize what happened, but to avoid a comparison with the destruction of six million Jews in Nazi-ruled Europe, for which "holocaust" had by then become almost a technical term. I gave the number as "a million and a half," the commonly accepted estimate.

When Turkey became a member of NATO in 1952, the Russians, not surprisingly, saw this as a major strategic threat to the Soviet Union. Indeed, the presence of a Turkish Muslim republic as a NATO member in the region of the Black Sea and the Caucasus could raise problems for them both at home and abroad. The Soviets therefore responded in their usual way by making trouble for the Turks. They did this in two ways, first domestically and then internationally. They resorted to the familiar method of mobilizing and encouraging internal opposition. In Turkey, this meant the left-wing elements among the Turks and the Kurdish ethnic minority. The Soviets also tried to make problems for the Turks abroad and more particularly in the United States. There too they sought to mobilize anti-Turkish forces and turned in the first instance to the significant Armenian community in the United States.

The Armenian massacres of 1915 left very bitter memories in that community. In the post-World War I period friendly relations developed between some Turks and some Armenians in the United States as elsewhere. The revival of the Armenian issue proved a powerful and effective weapon, mobilizing not only Armenians, a significant community in many American states, but also other groups who sympathized with them.

In 1985, a campaign began to persuade the United States Congress to recognize the Armenian massacres as a genocide. There were a number of different groups who objected to this—first of course, the Turks, but then others who felt that it was not the business of the U.S. Congress or indeed of any legislative body to write or rewrite history and that such a resolution could do no good and might do considerable harm. At the time I was asked to sign a letter of protest against this bill and agreed, as did many others in the academic profession.

In November 1993, I spent a few days in Paris where, coincidentally, two of my books were being published in French translation by two different publishing houses. At their request I gave a number of interviews to the media including one in *Le Monde*. One of the questions put to me concerned the proposed resolution before Congress and more generally the nature of the Armenian massacres. My answers gave rise to further discussion in the paper in which I participated.

My point was that while the Armenians suffered appalling losses, the comparison with the Holocaust was misleading. The one arose from an armed rebellion, from what we would nowadays call a national liberation struggle. The Armenians, seizing the opportunity presented by World War I, rose in rebellion against their Turkish overlords in alliance with Britain and Russia, the two powers with which Turkey was at war. The rebellions of the Armenians in the east and in Cilicia achieved some initial successes but were eventually sup-

pressed, and the surviving Armenians from Cilicia were ordered to be exiled. During the struggle and the subsequent deportation, great numbers of Armenians were killed.

The slaughter of the Jews, first in Germany and then in German-occupied Europe, was a different matter. There was no rebellion, armed or otherwise. On the contrary, the German Jews were intensely loyal to their country. The attack on them was defined wholly and solely by their alleged racial identity and included converted Jews and people of partly Jewish descent. It was not local or regional, but was extended to all the Jews under German rule or occupation, and its purpose was to achieve their total annihilation.

When the survivors of the Armenian deportation arrived at their destinations in Ottoman-ruled Iraq and Palestine they were welcomed and helped by the local Armenian communities. The German Jews deported to Poland by the Nazis received no such help, but joined their Polish coreligionists in a common fate.

The first difference was thus that some of the Armenians were involved in an armed rebellion; the Jews were not, but were attacked solely because of their identity. A second difference was that the persecution of Armenians was mostly confined to endangered areas, while the Armenian populations in other parts of the Ottoman Empire, notably in big cities, were left more or less unharmed. I say "more or less" because there were some attacks on individual Armenians accused of anti-Ottoman acts, but the Armenian populations in general were not persecuted.

It was these statements and explanations that led to four lawsuits, two criminal and two civil, arising from my interview and the subsequent discussion. Three actions were against *Le Monde* and me; the remaining civil action was against me alone. The common theme of all of them was an accusation of an offense tantamount to "Holocaust denial," a crime in French law. Judgment was pronounced on November 18, 1994. *The Armenian Report International* of October 20 noted,

"It is unlikely that punishment will be meted out to *Le Monde* and/or Professor Lewis, even if the court upholds that the Armenian genocide is fact; the reason is that the French law adopted in 1990 called Gaysod [sic] prohibiting the publication of any literature that questions the veracity of genocide pertains only to the Jewish holocaust of World War II. The pursuance of this case by the Armenian National Committee of France was ultimately aimed at having a similar law adopted in France which would apply to the Armenian genocide." My interview, and I, were used to serve this purpose.

The courts dismissed the three actions against both *Le Monde* and me and gave partial acceptance only to the civil action directed against me alone. My French friends were for the most part of the opinion that the whole interview and its subsequent development were a deliberate entrapment. The ensuing course of events lends considerable plausibility to this explanation. The court explicitly disclaimed any intention to "arbitrate and decide" historical polemics and controversies and ruled that "it is not for the court to evaluate and say whether the massacres committed from 1915 to 1917 against the Armenians do or do not constitute the crime of genocide as defined by law." According to the judges I was required to do so even in the narrow compass of a newspaper interview. My opponents, on the other hand, even in books and articles, with ample space at their disposal, were free to ignore such argument or evidence and even to demand its suppression and the punishment of those who adduced it. Specifically they remain free to maintain their total disregard of the mass of published documents, as well as the many studies and monographs published by scholars of many nationalities and of different allegiances or none, unless they totally accept and reaffirm the view which the genocide proponents have maintained, unchanged for three-quarters of a century. Even to name this "the Armenian version," as I did, and thus injure the feelings of those who uphold it is, in French law, a tort, the commission of which can give rise to an

order for damages. There is no limitation on hurting Turkish feelings, whether by naming and condemning the "Turkish version," by accusations of genocide directed not only against the alleged perpetrators but against the whole nation, past and present, or by either denying or approving the massacres of Turkish, Kurdish and other Muslim villagers by Armenian guerrillas. Some of the arguments and imputations of the prosecution—on the one hand alleging a continuity of Turkish genocide from the Armenians in 1915 to the Kurds at the present day, and on the other concerning the inadmissibility of Turkish scholars and of evidence adduced by them—suggest the kind of prejudice that the Forum of Armenian Associations' junior partner, the Ligue Internationale Contre le Racisme et l'Antisémitisme (LICRA), is pledged to oppose.

The court held that "while it was in no way established that I had pursued any purpose foreign to my mission as a historian" I was at fault in "hiding (*occultant*) elements contrary to [my] thesis . . . and had thus been lacking in [my] duty of objectivity and prudence, in expressing [myself] without nuance on so delicate a subject; that [my] remarks, likely to revive unjustly the pain of the Armenian community, are at fault and justify indemnity." My "failure" in my "*devoir d'objectivité et de prudence*" provoked some reflection, notably that those who were of a different view were under no such obligation to refrain from "hiding" elements contrary to their thesis, nor to maintain even a pretense of "objectivity and prudence."

I was ordered to pay 1 franc each in damages to the Forum of Armenian Associations and to LICRA, and to pay for excerpts from this judgment to be published in *Le Monde*, to the amount of 20,000 francs, and to pay costs in the amount of 10,000 francs for the Armenian Forum and 4,000 francs for LICRA. In the unsuccessful cases brought by the Armenian Medical Association and AGRIF each was ordered to pay me 8,000 francs, leaving me slightly ahead in the absurd arithmetic of these proceedings.

In all these lawsuits, the plaintiffs proceeded on certain assumptions:

1. In history, as in mathematics, there is one right answer to a problem, all others being wrong.
2. This answer is fixed and unchanging and cannot be in any way affected by such ephemeral phenomena as the discovery of new evidence, the questioning of old evidence or the development of new lines and methods of inquiry.
3. The proper place to determine which is the right answer is a court of law.
4. The right answer having been determined, all other answers must be suppressed and those who advance them punished.

To these assumptions the lawyers conducting the case for the plaintiffs added a fifth, that the proper way to disprove a historical view is to launch an all-out attack, unconstrained by any concern for truth, not to speak of decency, on the professional, personal and financial integrity of the historian who advances that view.

One example, among many, of the dangers of press falsification is an article in *L'Express* which stated that I "benefited from three scholarships accorded by Turkey." This is totally false. In fact, I have never accepted any grant or subvention from the Turkish nor for that matter from any other foreign government. Although in the vast majority of cases such grants and subventions are without political strings, I have preferred, because of the sensitivities of the field in which I work, to avoid such complications. During the lawsuit in Paris the Turkish Embassy in France offered to pay all my legal bills. I refused that offer and thus incurred a considerable expenditure. When I refused the offer of the Turkish Embassy my French lawyer expressed his relief and gratification. The court only awarded the

plaintiffs 1 franc in damages, but there was still the matter of the lawyers' bills and other costs.

The ethical question arose again some years later when I was awarded the Atatürk Prize by the Turkish Academy of Sciences. The prize was \$50,000. I accepted the honor but not the monetary portion which I asked be given to three Turkish nonprofit organizations. My hosts insisted on giving me two gold coins as a personal souvenir of the event. These I gave to Buntzie, who had them made into earrings.

There remains the plaintiffs' general implication that by receiving a "bourse" a scholar becomes at least suspect of being a servant of a foreign state. Great numbers of scholars young and old in France and elsewhere benefit every year from scholarships and fellowships sponsored directly or indirectly by foreign governments. Do they thereby all lay themselves open to the suspicion of becoming agents of those governments? The attack on me personally misfires, since it is based on a lie. The imputation against the academic profession remains.

The Armenians appealed, both against the unfavorable verdicts and the payments to *Le Monde* and myself. The appeals from both parties were rejected, with costs. After the verdict against me the question arose whether I should appeal. I had ample grounds. I refrained for a very simple and cogent reason: a lack of faith in a judicial system that could perpetrate, and might therefore uphold, such absurdities.

Throughout this case I refused requests for press interviews. My reason for refusing French requests is obvious. It would be foolhardy, even foolish, to accord an interview in a country where a historian who is bold enough to answer questions put by an interviewer about history may thereby make himself liable to extensive and expensive litigation, possibly leading to criminal penalties and/or civil damages. My reasons for refusing interviews in the English language press in Britain and in the United States were different. Those who asked for

interviews were clearly more sympathetic to my cause than to that of the prosecution which some of them regarded with disapproval or even derision. But I had no wish to participate in deriding French freedom and French justice.

I had one other reason for refusing interviews all around. I was born and brought up in a country where there is a rule of law, strictly enforced, against the public discussion of matters that are still sub judice. There is no such rule in either France or the United States, but my experience in the one and my observations in the other have convinced me of the wisdom and value of such a rule.

The press coverage was, in fact, minimal—for which I suppose I should be grateful, given the quality and accuracy of that coverage.

The plaintiffs showed great skill in their handling of the press. Their Paris press conference, of which I received a detailed report from a friend, was efficiently conducted. The folders of press cuttings, documents and other material which they distributed on that and subsequent occasions were misleading but plausible, and indeed, persuasive. The results can be seen in the reporting of the four lawsuits that were brought against me. The hearings and judgments in the three cases where the court found in my favor were not reported at all, nor were they mentioned in the handouts that I saw, as far as I am aware. They might have caused embarrassment to the plaintiffs, and were therefore passed over in silence.

The fourth, and in many ways the most important, case provides perhaps the best illustration of their skilled press management. On the main accusation, that of "negationism," the court refused to pronounce and instead found for the plaintiffs on a relatively minor issue. For those who had transformed the cautiously noncommittal "take note" of a subcommission into a ringing endorsement of their point of view by the United Nations, it was child's play to magnify this verdict into a "condemnation of negationism," and to manipulate the press accordingly.

This transformation was effected overnight and appeared in the reports of the judgment in the three main Paris papers, all of which, it would seem, took their versions of the judgment not from the judges but from the plaintiffs. The three newspapers, *Le Monde*, *Liberation* and *Figaro*, with striking unanimity, reported inaccurately that the court had "condemned" me for "negationism," which the judges had made great efforts not to do. *Liberation* and *Figaro* followed their inaccurate reports with interviews with the two principal propagandists for the Forum of Armenian Associations. *Le Monde* needed no such adventitious aid and managed to cap a fairly accurate account of the judgment with a highly inaccurate headline.

On the advice of my lawyer, I sent a letter drafted by him to all three papers in which I protested, not of course the judgment, but their misreporting of the judgment. They refused to print my letter until obliged to do so by a court order. *Le Monde's* unwillingness to print my letter concerning their misreporting of the judgment until compelled to do so by court order might be ascribed to discourtesy rather than disloyalty, and perhaps to prudence more than discourtesy. Their refusal to print a letter signed by a number of distinguished French Turcologists rebutting the slurs leveled by the plaintiffs against their entire profession may be similarly explained. It is reasonable to assume that this refusal was motivated by fear of further costly and troublesome legal proceedings. In the circumstances, one must recognize that this was a wise precaution.

Some inaccuracies live forever. A good example of the misreporting of the trial is provided by Norman G. Finkelstein in his 2008 book *Beyond Chutzpah* (University of California Press) where he says that I was "indicted and convicted by a French court for denying the Armenian holocaust." It would appear the author lives up to the title of his book.

The coverage in the foreign press was limited and dealt predominantly with the issue of freedom of speech. The London *Eve-*

ning Standard of May 23, 1995, under the headline "Sued over a History Lesson," speaks of "one of the strangest trials to take place for some years" and concludes that "the professor's real mistake was to suppose that he was addressing the descendants of Voltaire." Christopher Hitchens, writing in *The Nation*, made it clear that he had no sympathy whatever either with Turkey or with me, but did not miss the opportunity for a sneer at what he called "the magnificent hypocrisy of French law and the French intellectual climate." The London *Jewish Chronicle* concluded, "Lewis was right, but even if he had been wrong he should still have been at liberty to utter his views. Being manifestly in error is, for a historian, a serious reflection on his professional competence but not an act of wanton criminality.

"The Gayssot law is a serious impediment to free speech but it was passed because the French, with good cause, have a conscience about the events of the war years, and there is, for obvious reasons, a similar law in Germany. There is none in America because it would be contrary to the American constitution and happily, there is none in Britain because it would be contrary to common sense."

An article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of June 26, 1995, examined the entire proceedings and condemned it as an offense at once against academic independence, freedom of expression and civilized discourse.

Perhaps the Armenians' most remarkable success in media management was in what did not appear. References to the lawsuits in British, American and German and perhaps other newspapers drew attention to the basic issue of freedom of expression that, one way or another, was involved. I saw only one reference to this issue in the French press coverage and it was clearly a minority view. I still find it strange that the main point that was of relevance to Frenchmen at the time, not the events of 1915 but the lawsuit of 1995, should have evoked so little concern among French journalists and intellectuals.

With astonishingly few exceptions the attitude of the French academic and literary communities to these proceedings ranged from approval through acquiescence to indifference. Of those whom I regarded as friends and colleagues in France, some were silent even when invited to speak. This saddened me. Others sent letters of sympathy and volunteered public support. I shall not endanger them by naming them, but they will recognize themselves if ever these words are published in France.

The same disparity of resources and effort displayed in public relations can also be seen in the pleadings where five plaintiffs in four lawsuits had a battery of lawyers against my single, valiant defender. Against such odds, I had about as much chance as the Polish cavalry confronting the German tanks in 1939.

A dramatic response came from the Institut de France, the most distinguished academic body in the country, which elected me a Corresponding Fellow of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, one of its major branches. This would have been an honor at any time but it was particularly dramatic that they chose that moment. What was at issue was not the correctness of my opinion but my right to express it, or, more specifically, to express it in France. And since I am neither a citizen nor a resident of France, nor, since this incident, a visitor, that is not, in the last analysis, my problem.

I abstained from any discussion of the main issue at the time for practical and personal reasons. I prefer not to discuss history in a place where historical opinion is subject to judicial review, where judicial verdicts can be rewritten, revised and even reversed by journalists and their mentors and, most important of all, where the rules of debate are not the same for all participants.

In sum, as far as I was concerned, two lessons emerged clearly from these proceedings: first, a court of law is not the best place to debate, still less to resolve, a historical problem, and second, that the press is not the best platform to discuss or contest a lawsuit.

I understand the anguish of the survivors and descendants of the Armenian deportees and their insistence that the term "genocide," first commonly used to designate the destruction of the Jews in Nazi-ruled Europe, should also be applied in their case, and their anger when it is refused—the more so in our day when this same word "genocide" is used widely and loosely for all kinds of situations in various parts of the world, where the destruction and the loss of life are no greater than that suffered by the Armenians and sometimes significantly less. If the term denotes large-scale suffering and death, much though not all of it deliberate, then it can hardly be withheld. But if, as the plaintiffs clearly intend, the word "genocide" is to be used in its original and legal meaning—the deliberate, planned extermination or attempted extermination of a people, such as was conducted and in large measure completed in Nazi Europe, then the appropriateness of this term to the Armenian massacres of 1915 remains unproven. However, language changes, and looking at this again twenty years later it is clear that the word "genocide" has developed a broader and less precise meaning today.

For the victims, their families, their compatriots and their descendants who are still seared by the memory of these terrible events, this lexical distinction makes little difference. But for the historian, these things matter; and not only for the historian, but also for those who look to the future and who cherish a hope for better relations and better understanding between two peoples who can only be still further divided by the reiteration of old grievances and the rekindling of old hatreds.