
The First Genocide of the 20th Century?

Guenter Lewy

THE TERM “genocide,” coined in 1944 by the Polish-Jewish émigré lawyer Raphael Lemkin, was meant to describe Hitler’s then-on-going campaign to exterminate the Jews of Europe. But Lemkin’s interest in this most heinous of crimes—what he and others would define as the planned effort to destroy an entire people or ethnic group—long predated the rise of the Nazis. The atrocities that first drew him to the issue emerged from a different world war and a different context. They were the vicious actions not of Germans against Jews in the early 1940’s but of Ottoman Turks against Turkey’s Armenian minority in 1915-16.

Today, however, the Armenian case remains controversial in a way that the Holocaust, outside the fevered confines of the Arab world, does not. Like every one of its predecessors since the rise of modern Turkey, the current government in Ankara vehemently rejects the charge of genocide, and has exerted strong diplomatic pressure against any attempt by outsiders to place the events of World War I in a class with Hitler’s Final Solution. In this, the Turks have been seconded not just by pro-Turkish apologists but by a number of respected

GUENTER LEWY is the author of, among other works, *The Catholic Church & Nazi Germany*, *Religion & Revolution*, *America in Vietnam*, and *The Cause that Failed: Communism in American Political Life*. His new book, *The Armenian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey: A Disputed Genocide*, is forthcoming from the University of Utah Press.

historians, including, most notably, Bernard Lewis, the dean of American Orientalists and an expert on Turkey.

Against this view is the great tide of world opinion, from the official proclamations of various governments and religious bodies to the declared consensus of the International Association of Genocide Scholars. Indeed, so strong is sentiment on this question that even now, nearly a century after the fact, the issue continues to color Turkey’s dealings with other nations. On September 29, the European parliament in Strasbourg adopted a resolution demanding that, as a condition of admission to the European Union, Turkey acknowledge the mass killing of its Armenians during World War I as an instance of genocide. And even beyond the issue of what happened in 1915-16 and its relevance to Turkey’s political situation today, the Armenian case continues to occupy a place of precedence in the litany of all subsequent instances of mass murder and “ethnic cleansing,” including most recently the killings in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Rwanda in the 1990’s and those in Sudan today.

No one, it should be stressed, disputes the extent of Armenian suffering at the hands of the Turks. With little or no notice, the Ottoman government forced Armenian men, women, and children to leave their historic communities; during the subsequent harrowing trek over mountains and through deserts, large numbers of them died of starvation and disease, or were murdered. Although the ab-

sence of good statistics on the size of the pre-war Armenian population in Turkey makes it impossible to establish the true extent of the loss of life, reliable estimates put the number of deaths at more than 650,000, or around 40 percent of a total Armenian population of 1.75 million.

The historical question at issue is premeditation—that is, whether the Turkish regime intentionally organized the annihilation of its Armenian minority. According to the Genocide Convention of 1948, such an intent to destroy a group is a necessary condition of genocide; most other definitions of this crime of crimes similarly insist upon the centrality of malicious intent. Hence the crucial problem to be addressed is not the huge loss of life in and of itself but rather whether the Turkish government deliberately sought the deaths that we know to have occurred.

THE ARMENIANS have lived in the southern Caucasus, between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, since ancient times. In the early 4th century C.E., they were the first nation to adopt Christianity as a state religion. Much of their long history, however, has been spent under foreign rule. The last independent Armenian state (before the present-day, post-Soviet Republic of Armenia) fell in 1375, and by the early 16th century most Armenians were subjects of the Ottoman Empire. Under the *millet* system instituted by Sultan Mohammed II (1451-1481), they enjoyed religious, cultural, and social autonomy as a “loyal community,” a status that lasted well into the 19th century.

Though large numbers of Armenians settled in Constantinople and in other Ottoman towns, where they prospered as merchants, bankers, and artisans, the majority continued to live as peasants in eastern Anatolia. During the autocratic rule of Abdul Hamid II (1876-1909), the lot of the Armenians deteriorated, and nationalistic sentiment began to emerge. In June 1890, Armenian students in the Russian-controlled area of the Caucasus organized the Armenian Revolutionary Federation. Demanding the political and economic emancipation of Turkish Armenia, the Dashnaks (as they were known) waged guerrilla warfare against Turkish army units, gendarmerie posts, and Kurdish villages involved in attacks on Armenians. They operated from bases in the Caucasus and Persia and took advantage of eastern Anatolia’s mountainous terrain.

When, in 1908, the nationalist, modernizing movement known as the Young Turks seized power in Constantinople in a bloodless coup, the Dash-

naks declared an end to their fighting. But the truce did not last. With Turkey’s entry into World War I on the side of Germany and against Russia, the Armenians’ traditional ally, the Dashnaks resumed their armed resistance. By April 1915, Armenian guerrilla activities had picked up momentum. Roads and communication lines were cut. Henry Morgenthau, the American ambassador in Constantinople, reported to Washington on May 25 that nobody put the Armenian guerrillas “at less than 10,000, and 25,000 is probably closer to the truth.”

Meanwhile, the Russian branch of the Dashnaks was organizing volunteers to fight the Turks on the Caucasus front. Most of these volunteers—numbering 15,000, according to one Armenian source—were themselves Russian subjects, exempt from military service, but some of them were Turkish Armenians who had crossed the border to join the volunteer units. Offers of help also poured in from the Armenian diaspora, from as far away as Western Europe and the U.S.

In March 1915, the Dashnak organization in Sofia, Bulgaria, proposed to land 20,000 volunteers on the Turkish coast in the Armenian stronghold of Cilicia. That same month, the Boston-based Armenian National Defense Committee of America informed the British foreign secretary that it was making “preparations for the purpose of sending volunteers to Cilicia, where a large section of the Armenian population will unfurl the banner of insurrection against Turkish rule.” It was hoped that the British and French governments would supply them with ammunition and artillery.

Turkish fears of an internal revolt were exacerbated the following month by an uprising that took place in the city of Van. Close to the Russian border and in the heartland of historic Armenia, Van had long been a center of nationalist agitation. On April 24, 1915, the Turkish governor reported that 4,000 Armenian fighters had opened fire on the police stations, burned down Muslim houses, and barricaded themselves in the Armenian quarter. About 15,000 refugees from the countryside eventually joined the now-besieged rebels. Less than a month later, the insurgents were saved by the advancing Russian army, forcing the Turkish garrison to retreat. Whether the Van uprising was a rebellion designed and timed to facilitate the advance of the Russians or a defensive action aimed at preventing the already planned deportation of the Armenian community remains one of the points of fierce contention in the historiography of the time.

WHEN NOT tying down Turkish army units, the Dashnaks were of significant help to the Russian army itself (leaving aside the 150,000 Armenian subjects of the czar who served in its ranks). Deeply familiar with the rugged mountains of eastern Anatolia, the Armenian volunteers were invaluable scouts and guides. In one famous episode, the legendary Armenian military leader Andranik Ozanian met with General Mishlayevsky, commander of the czar's forces in the Caucasus, late in the summer of 1914, pointing out the routes through which the Russian army could advance on Turkey.

Thus, as the Turks saw it, the Armenian people the world over had thrown in their lot with the Allied cause and were arrayed against them in a fateful struggle. Having come to consider the Armenians a fifth column, the Ottoman regime decided to take decisive measures to put an end to their treasonable actions. As Morgenthau reported to Washington in July 1915: "[B]ecause Armenian volunteers, many of them Russian subjects, have joined the Russian army in the Caucasus and because some have been implicated in armed revolutionary movements and others have been helpful to Russians in their invasion of the Van district, terrible vengeance is being taken."

In the eyes of the Young Turks, however, the issue was not so much vengeance as national survival in a situation of extreme danger caused by serious military setbacks. The British had taken Basra in Mesopotamia and were moving toward Baghdad. The Allies had launched their assaults on the Dardanelles. Fearing the fall of the capital, the Turks were making preparations to evacuate the sultan and the treasury from Constantinople. Meanwhile, Russian troops were advancing into eastern Anatolia, and Armenian guerrillas were active in the rear of the Turkish army, threatening the very lifelines of the empire. Even if only a limited number of Armenians had actually taken up arms, the authorities in Constantinople understood themselves to be dealing with a population of traitors.

Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the war and at the Paris peace conference in 1919, the Armenians would make no bones about their contribution to the Allied victory. To the contrary: Boghos Nubar, the head of the Armenian delegation, asserted in late October 1918 that his people had in fact been belligerents, fighting alongside the Allies on all fronts; in particular, he wrote to the French foreign minister, 150,000 Armenians had fought in the Russian army and had held the front

in the Caucasus after the Russians dropped out of the war in 1917. As Nubar would tell the peace conference on March 8, 1919, the Turks had devastated the Armenians "in retaliation for our unflagging devotion to the cause of the Allies."

By means of such rhetoric Nubar was obviously hoping to win the support of the peace conference for an independent Armenia. But, the essential facts were correct as he stated them: the Armenians had indeed supported the Allies in a variety of ways. Ignoring warnings from many quarters, large numbers of them had fought the Turks, and the government, with its back to the wall, reacted resolutely and viciously. Although none of this can serve to justify what the Turks did to them, it provides indispensable historical context for the human catastrophe that ensued.

THERE IS no denying the dimensions of that catastrophe. The harsher methods employed by the Young Turks included the killing of Armenian notables in Constantinople and the eastern provinces. As for Armenian civilians, perhaps as many as 1 million were turned out of their homes. On a journey through the most inhospitable terrain, they routinely lacked shelter and food and were often subjected to the murderous violence of their government-provided escorts and the Kurdish tribesmen who occupied the route southward to Ottoman-controlled Syria. Massive numbers died along the way.

Can we account for this tragedy without the hypothesis of a genocidal plan on the part of the Young Turks? Most authors supporting the Armenian cause answer in the negative. They cite foreign diplomats on the scene who, in the face of the large number of deaths, concluded that so terrible a loss of life could only be an intended outcome of the deportations. And yet such a conclusion once again ignores the immediate backdrop against which this horrific episode must be seen.

If one of the main causes of the Armenian disaster was starvation, the Armenians were hardly alone in experiencing such deprivation. Severe food shortages were endemic to Turkey at the time. The military mobilization of large numbers of peasants in 1914, as well as the reckless requisitioning of their horses, oxen, and carriages, had made it impossible to bring in the harvest and left many fields untilled for the following year's crop. In the spring of 1915, Ambassador Morgenthau told Washington that the empire's whole domestic situation was "deplorable," with "thousands of the populace . . . daily dying of starvation." In the late

spring and summer of 1915, the Ottoman provinces of Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria were devastated by a plague of locusts, creating famine conditions. To exacerbate matters, Allied warships had blockaded the coast of Syria and Lebanon, thus preventing the import of food from Egypt.

Moreover, the food that was available in Turkey often could not be distributed. The country's few existing one-track railroads were overburdened, and shortages of coal and wood frequently rendered locomotives unusable. A crucial tunnel on the line toward Syria—the famous Baghdad railway—remained unfinished until late in the war. The resulting scarcities afflicted even the Turkish army, whose troops, as one German officer reported, received a maximum of one third of their allotted rations. In circumstances where soldiers in the Turkish army were dying of undernourishment, it is not so surprising that little if any food was made available to the deported Armenians.

Indeed, the mistreatment of common Turkish soldiers, the subject of many comments by contemporaries, makes an instructive comparison with the wretched lot of the Armenians. Although “provisions and clothing had been confiscated to supply the army,” wrote an American missionary in Van, “the soldiers profited very little by this. They were poorly fed and poorly clothed when fed or clothed at all.” The Danish missionary Maria Jacobsen noted in her diary on February 7, 1915: “The officers are filling their pockets, while the soldiers die of starvation, lack of hygiene, and illness.” Many had neither boots nor socks, and were dressed in rags.

The treatment of Turkish soldiers who were wounded or sick was especially appalling. Those who managed to reach hospitals—many never did—perished in large numbers because of unsanitary conditions and a lack of basic supplies. Patients shared beds or simply lay next to each other on the floor in facilities that often lacked running water and electricity. Typhus, cholera, dysentery, and other infectious diseases spread rapidly. As Maria Jacobsen noted on May 24, 1916, a cholera outbreak in the city of Malatia was killing 100 soldiers a day. “The army there,” she wrote, “will soon be wiped out without a war.”

The Turks experienced some 244,000 combat deaths during World War I. As against this, some 68,000 soldiers died of their wounds and almost a *half-million* of disease—a ratio of non-combat to combat deaths almost certainly unmatched by any of the other warring nations. This terrible toll obviously does not excuse the treatment of the Arme-

nians, but neither can it be simply ignored in any assessment of the general conditions against which they met their fate. Many of the Turkish deaths could have been prevented by better sanitary conditions and medical care. A government so callous about the suffering of its own soldiers was hardly about to show concern for the terrible human misery that would result from deporting a minority population rightly or wrongly suspected of treason.

ONE OF the problems bedeviling the Armenian side in this controversy is that no authentic documentary evidence exists to prove the culpability of the central government of Turkey for the massacre of 1915-16. In the face of this lack, Armenians have relied upon materials of questionable authenticity like *The Memoirs of Naim Bey* by Aram Andonian. The English edition of this book, first published in 1920, offers in evidence 30 alleged telegrams by Talaat Pasha, Turkey's minister of the interior, some of which order the killing of all Armenians irrespective of sex or age. But the book is considered a forgery not only by Turkish historians but by practically every Western student of Ottoman history.

Similarly unreliable are the verdicts of Turkish military tribunals that in 1919-20 found the top leadership of the Young Turk regime, together with a special-forces outfit called *Teskilat-i Mahsusa*, responsible for the massacres of the Armenians. These trials suffered from serious deficiencies of due process; more importantly, all of the original trial documents are lost, leaving nothing but copies of some documents that were printed in the government gazette and the press.

It is true that no written record of Hitler's order for the Final Solution of the “Jewish question” has been found, either. But the major elements of the decision-making process leading up to the annihilation of the Jews of Europe can be reconstructed from events, court testimony, and a rich store of authentic documents. It is doubtful that the Nuremberg trials would ever have achieved their tremendous significance in authenticating the crimes of the Nazi regime if they had had to rely on a few copies instead of on the thousands of original documents preserved in archives. Barring the unlikely discovery of sensational new documents in the Turkish archives, it is safe to say that no similar evidence exists for the tragic events of 1915-16.

At the same time, a number of facts about the deportations argue against the thesis that they constituted a premeditated program for exterminating the Armenians of Turkey. For one thing, the large

Armenian communities of Constantinople, Smyrna, and Aleppo were spared deportation and, apart from tribulations that also afflicted the Muslim populations of these cities, survived the war largely intact. This would be analogous to Hitler's failing to include the Jews of Berlin, Cologne, and Munich in the Final Solution.

Moreover, the trek on foot that took so many lives was imposed only on the Armenians of eastern and central Anatolia, a part of the country that had no railroads. Elsewhere, and despite the fact that the one-spur Baghdad line was overburdened with the transport of troops and supplies, Armenian deportees were allowed to purchase rail tickets and were thus spared at least some of the trials of the deportation process. If, as is often alleged, the intent was to subject the exiles to a forced march until they died of exhaustion, why was this punishment not imposed on all?

Similar variation can be found in the fortunes of other parts of the Armenian population. While many of the exiles were left to fend for themselves and often died of starvation, others were given food here and there. Some gendarmes accompanying the convoys sold their charges to Kurds who pillaged and murdered them, but other gendarmes were protective. In some places all Armenians, irrespective of creed, were sent away, while in others Protestant and Catholic (as opposed to Gregorian) Armenians were exempted. Many of the deportees succumbed to the harsh conditions in their places of resettlement, but others were able to survive by making themselves useful as artisans or traders. In some locations, not even conversion to Islam could purchase exemption from deportation; in others, large numbers of Armenians were allowed, or forced, to convert and were saved.

ALL OF these differences, of both treatment and outcome, are difficult to reconcile with a premeditated program of total annihilation. How, then, to explain the events of 1915-16? What accounts for the enormous loss of life?

The documentary evidence suggests that the Ottoman government wanted to arrange an orderly process of deportation—even a relatively humane one, to gauge by the many decrees commanding protection and compassionate treatment of the deportees. But, leaving aside the justice of the expulsion order itself, the deportation and resettlement of the Armenians took place, as we have seen, at a time of great insecurity and dislocation throughout the country and in conditions of widespread suffering and deprivation among Turkish civilians and

military personnel. The job of relocating several hundred thousand people in a short span of time and over a highly primitive system of transportation was simply beyond the ability of the Turkish bureaucracy.

Many observers on the scene, indeed, saw the tragedy in this light, constantly citing the incompetence and inefficiency of the Ottoman bureaucracy. "The lack of proper transportation facilities," wrote the American consul in Mersina in September 1915, "is the most important factor in causing the misery." The German consul in Aleppo told his ambassador around the same time that the majority of Armenian exiles were starving to death because the Turks were "incapable of solving the organizational task of mass feeding." A lengthy memorandum on the Armenian question drawn up in 1916 by Alexander von Hoesch, an official in the German embassy, pointed to a basic lack of accountability: some local officials had sought to alleviate the hardships of the exiles, but others were extremely hostile to the Armenians and, in defiance of Constantinople, had abandoned them to the violence of Kurds or Circassians.

Today, the stakes in this historical controversy remain high, and both sides continue to use heavy-handed tactics to advance their views. The Turkish government regularly threatens retaliation against anyone calling into question its own version of events, a threat made good most recently by its cancellation of an order for a \$149-million French spy satellite after the French national assembly declared in 2001 that the killing of the Armenians during World War I was a case of genocide. For their part, the Armenians have also played hardball. When Bernard Lewis, in a 1994 letter to *Le Monde*, questioned on scholarly grounds the existence of a plan of extermination on the part of the Ottoman government, a French-Armenian organization brought suit and a French court convicted Lewis of causing "grievous prejudice to truthful memory."

But there are also more hopeful signs, at least on the academic front. In the last several years, a number of conferences have brought together Turkish and Armenian scholars willing to discuss the events of 1915-16 without a political agenda. Turkish historical scholarship has shown signs of a post-nationalist phase, while some scholars on the Armenian side, too, now engage in research free of propagandistic rhetoric. Needless to say, such efforts have brought down accusations of betrayal, even treason, upon the heads of the offending historians; it would be foolish to expect genuine reconciliation any time soon.

ALL OF which raises deeply troubling questions, not least about the role played by the notion of genocide itself in perpetuating the almost century-old impasse between Turks and Armenians. For, once this charge is on the table, any sort of mutually acceptable resolution becomes extremely difficult if not impossible to achieve. As the Turkish historian Selim Deringil has written, both sides need to “step back from the was-it-genocide-or-not dialogue of the deaf” and instead seek a “common project of knowledge.”

If, then, we were to follow this advice, how best should we judge the Armenian tragedy? The primary intent of the deportation order was undoubtedly not to eradicate an entire people but to deny support to the Armenian guerrilla bands and to remove the Armenians from war zones and other strategic locations. For the Ottomans, painful experience with other Christian minorities during the Balkan wars (1912-13) had created extreme sensitivity to rebellion and territorial loss. Talaat Pasha, the minister of the interior, is supposed to have told the cabinet in 1915, “We have to create a Turkish bloc, free of foreign elements, which in the future will never again give the Europeans the opportunity to interfere in the internal affairs of Turkey.” Ambassador Morgenthau reported being told on several occasions by Enver

Pasha, the Turkish minister of war, that the government had to act forcefully against any community, however small, that was bent upon independence and was acting directly against the interests of the empire.

For the human disaster subsequently endured by its Armenian population, the Ottoman regime certainly bears its due measure of responsibility, just as it does for general corruption, bungling misrule, and indifference to the suffering of its own population during World War I. And one can go further: with the benefit of hindsight, it is also possible to question whether the severity of the threat posed by Armenian revolutionaries justified the drastic remedy of even partial deportation. The Canadian researcher Gwynne Dyer may have put the case most appropriately in writing that, although Turkish allegations of wholesale disloyalty, treason, and revolt on the part of the Ottoman Armenians were “wholly true as far as Armenian sentiment went,” they were “only partly true in terms of overt acts, and totally insufficient as a justification for what was done” to the Armenians.

If both Armenians and Turks could accept this appraisal, even as a starting point for further discussion, they would reach an important milestone toward settling one of modern history’s most bitter and longstanding conflicts.