



# Since the Centennial: New Departures in the Scholarship on the Armenian Genocide, 2015–2021

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After the explosion of writing on the Armenian Genocide in the centennial year, 2015, scholars have steadily produced new research and writing on the late Ottoman Empire that have deepened our understanding of the trajectories and tragedies of the events of 1915–1916. While a comprehensive review of everything published would require a small monograph, in this chapter I review a selection of those I consider the most important recent contributions. It is not too bold to claim that, by 2015, research on the Armenian Genocide, particularly from the preceding twenty to twenty-five years had essentially routed the denialist interpretation and established a firm foundation for understanding the ethnic cleansing, forced assimilation, property confiscations, and mass killing of Armenians and Assyrians as a genocide. The work of Raymond Kévorkian, Taner Akçam, Fatma Müge Göçek, Hilmar Kaiser, Hans-Lukas Kieser, Richard Hovannisian and his students, among them Stephan Astourian, as well as many Turkish, Kurdish, and Armenian colleagues in Turkey made invaluable empirical and conceptual contributions to the study of the Genocide. The meetings of the Workshop on Armenian-Turkish Scholarship (WATS) from 2000 to 2018 established the historical record for anyone who sincerely wanted to

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discover what happened to Armenians and Assyrians in the late Ottoman years. Explanations differed as to why the Young Turks adopted genocide as their solution to the “Armenian Question,” but the facts were clear. Nevertheless, political and polemical campaigns against truth and accurate and evidenced historical knowledge persisted in Turkey and elsewhere.

## UNDERSTANDING THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE BEFORE THE CENTENNIAL

My reading of what was accomplished by the centenary can be summarized in a number of major conclusions, though not all scholars subscribe to all of these propositions. One of the first major contributions of the new scholarship was the rejection and effective refutation of the “provocation thesis,” that is, blaming the victims for their fate because of rebellion and treachery, alliance with foreign powers, or deliberately instigating massacres to gain international recognition of the Armenians’ plight. Any notion that there was an Armenian insurrection or a Muslim-Armenian civil war in the late Ottoman Empire, a struggle for sovereignty or a serious, organized attempt on the part of Ottoman Armenians for separation from the empire has been shown to be a fabrication of denialists. Rather, armed clashes and resistance by Armenians and Assyrians occurred as a defense against initial attacks by state and paramilitary forces.

The contention that the Genocide was planned long in advance and realized a consistent Turkish policy of extermination harked back to the essential notion of “the terrible Turk,” an irredeemable enemy of Christians and European civilization, as well as to the debate in Holocaust scholarship between “intentionalists” and “structuralists.” Major Armenian scholars, like the prolific Vahakn N. Dadrian, had previously claimed that massacres of dissident minorities were a consistent Turkish practice, and that the Hamidian massacres of the 1890s and the killing of Armenians in Adana in 1909 were precursors of the Genocide.<sup>1</sup> A “culture of massacre” developed at the same time as a “culture of denial” that rationalized the necessity of state violence. Rather than distinguishing the motives of the conservative Sultan Abdul Hamid II, who used massacres in the 1890s to

<sup>1</sup>Vahakn N. Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide: Ethnic Conflict from the Balkans to Anatolia to the Caucasus* (Providence and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1995). What follows is in part taken from my review of that book in *Slavic Review*, LV, 3 (Autumn 1996), pp. 676–677.

restore a fragile repressive hierarchy in eastern Anatolia, from the revolutionary policy of the Young Turks in 1915, who sought to eliminate altogether the Armenians from the region, Dadrian collapses these distinct forms of state violence into a single genocidal program that persisted over many decades. Yet, more recently there have been efforts to disaggregate the various episodes of mass killing and to see the earlier massacres as discrete events different in kind from the Genocide of 1915. Rather than an organic continuum linking the Hamidian massacres with the pogrom in Adana in 1909 and the Genocide of 1915–1916, many but not all scholars have argued against the idea of a consistent and continuous policy of genocidal intent against Armenians from the 1870s or 1890s through the Great War.

Influential scholars, like Dadrian, also viewed the Genocide as a pre-meditated event planned before World War I. More recently, most scholars have concluded that there was no well-conceived “blueprint” for genocide, though there were long-standing hostilities, fears, and resentments both on the part of society and state officials, from Abdülhamid II to Talat and Enver, which contributed to the ultimate decision to launch the Genocide. Some scholars argue that the Genocide was a largely contingent event that occurred in a moment of radicalization following the catastrophic defeat of the Ottoman army by the Russians at Sarıkamış in the winter of 1914–1915. But even those who would disaggregate the episodes of Ottoman state violence against Armenians have agreed that the earlier massacres reflected a propensity for violent repression. Repeated official justifications based on security requirements, as well as inconsistent and ineffective responses by the European powers, served only to open the way for future episodes. It is undeniable that an anti-Armenian disposition existed among the Turkish elite long before the war, that some extremists contemplated radical solutions to the Armenian Question, particularly after the Balkan Wars, and that the world war presented an opportunity for carrying out the most revolutionary program against the Armenians. Nonetheless, the particular conjuncture that brought the Young Turk triumvirate to ethnic cleansing and genocide came together only after the outbreak of war as the leaders feared that their rule was in peril and that

the Armenians were particularly dangerous as the wedge that the Russians and other powers could use to pry apart their empire.<sup>2</sup>

Research has made it clear that the Young Turks planned and carried out systematic killings, deportations, and forced assimilation that amounted to a genocidal attempt to rid the empire of Armenians or at least to render them impotent as a political and cultural community and unable to reproduce themselves as a national, ethno-religious group. It can no longer be controversial that the 1915–1916 policies toward Armenians and Assyrians constituted a genocide.

In much of the scholarship produced over the last decade or so, an imperial frame replaced the nation-state frame. Looking at late Ottoman history, not so much as isolated histories of different peoples, but rather as an integrated history of a multinational empire with all its distinctions and conflicts, it has become clearer that Armenians were Ottomans, whose leaders were trying to find a *modus vivendi* to live within a constitutionalist, perhaps federated empire, certainly with some autonomy and protected status. A major objective of Ottoman Armenian politicians and clergy was to gain state support to prevent the predations of the Kurds of eastern Anatolia. Armenians, it appears, wanted reforms but did not want to extend such reforms and privileged status to the Kurds among whom they lived. Imperial distinctions and hierarchies were to be maintained, favoring some peoples over others. To the detriment of the Armenians, both Hamidian and the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) authorities ultimately bet on the Kurds rather than on reforms for the Armenians. While popular conceptions of the Armenians have portrayed them as simply innocent and passive victims of the dominant Muslims, it is more accurate to see Armenians as agents who attempted to negotiate with the Young Turks and to work with the Ottoman state to secure their well-being and some degree of autonomy and protection. Over time Armenian interests and demands were largely ignored as the Young Turks turned away from Ottomanism and ideas of egalitarianism among religious groups to more radical Turkic nationalist and exterminationist policies toward non-Muslim minorities. Ottoman Armenians were caught in an

<sup>2</sup>Ronald Grigor Suny, "Truth in Telling: Reconciling Realities in the Genocide of the Ottoman Armenians," *American Historical Review*, CXIV, 4 (October 2009), pp. 939–941. On recent research on the Hamidian massacres that disaggregates them from the Genocide, see the special issue of *Etudes arméniennes contemporaines*, no. 11 (2018), and my introductory essay, "The Hamidian Massacres, 1894–1897: Disinterring a Buried History," *ibid.*, pp. 125–134.

inequitable imbalance of agency in which their abilities to moderate the situation were thwarted by the state and its agents.

An extraordinarily fruitful line of inquiry has been carried out by scholars—among them, Stephan Astourian, Uğur Ümit Üngör, Mehmet Polatel, and Ümit Kurt—that has definitively demonstrated the importance of the land question in the empire's policies and practices toward the Armenians and the Kurds. In the complex social ecology of Eastern Anatolia, land was the key to one's livelihood and survival. In the second constitutional period after 1908, promises by the regime to<sup>3</sup> deal with the confiscations of land never materialized. Armenians were not interested in monetary compensation for lost lands; they wanted the lands back, for the land was the base of their communal existence. Their growing frustration stemmed from the CUP's failure to forge a consistent policy on this issue.

Scholars, like Fikret Adanır and others, have highlighted the Ottoman defeats in the Balkan Wars as a turning point that intensified anxieties about the fragility of the empire and reoriented the Young Turks' attachment from the earlier Ottoman "heartland" in the Balkans toward new interest in Anatolia.<sup>4</sup> The actual instigators of the Genocide were intimately connected to their Balkan origins, most notably Talaat Paşa and Enver Paşa, and their sense of loss and precarity contributed to the extraordinary choice to carry out mass killings of Ottoman subjects whom they conceived as an existential threat to the empire. Scholars have achieved a high degree of clarity, though not full consensus, about the motivations of the perpetrators. They did not arise from some essential and unchanging Islamic beliefs and practices, though religious constructions of us and them worked their insidious influences. While ideologies and perceptions were involved in how Ottoman authorities and ordinary people thought of Armenians and Assyrians, what drove the Young Turks to mass killing

<sup>3</sup>Stephan Astourian, "Testing World-System Theory, Cilicia (1830s-1890s): Armenian-Turkish Polarization and the Ideology of Modern Ottoman Historiography," PhD dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1996; Uğur Ümit Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913–1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Uğur Ümit Üngör, and Mehmet Polatel, *Confiscation and Destruction: The Young Turk Seizure of Armenian Property* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011); Ümit Kurt, *The Armenians of Aintab: The Economics of Genocide in an Ottoman Province* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021).

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, Fikret Adanır, "Armenian Deportations and Massacres in 1915," in Daniel Chirot and Martin E. P. Seligman (eds.), *Ethnopolitical Warfare: Causes, Consequences, and Possible Solutions* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001), pp. 71–81.

was not fundamentally a religious difference between Muslims and Christians. Rather, elite ambitions and anxieties intensified about how to reshape the empire into a more Muslim and even Turkic state and society and thus eliminate once and for all the “Armenian Question.” Scholars like Fuad Dundar made it clear that the Young Turks had far-reaching and radical ambitions to change the demography of Anatolia, rendering it more Muslim and less Christian.<sup>5</sup> Taner Akçam and others have correctly insisted on the central role that the reform imposed by European powers on the Ottomans in 1914 played in radicalizing the thinking of Young Turk leaders.<sup>6</sup>

My own foray into the debate can be summarized by the claim that “had there been no World War, there would have been no genocide.” Not only would there have been no war to cover up the events, but also “the radical sense of endangerment among Turks would not have been as acute. Without the war there would have been less motivation for a revolutionary solution and greater opportunities for political negotiation and compromise. On the eve of the Ottoman declaration of war on Russia, the government was engaged in negotiations with the leading Armenian political party, the Dashnaksutyun” [Armenian Revolutionary Federation], “to secure their support in subverting the Russian Empire from within using Russian Armenians. The Dashnaks sensibly refused,” but what is evident is that the Young Turks were considering a variety of political options short of genocide.<sup>7</sup> I summed up my understanding of the causes of the Genocide in my 2015 book.

When it came, the Armenian Genocide was the result of long-term, deep-seated elite and popular hatreds, resentments, and fears intensified by war and defeat – an affective disposition in which Armenians were perceived as irredeemable enemies of Muslims – that in turn shaped the Committee of

<sup>5</sup> Fuad Dünder, *Crime of Numbers: The Role of Statistics in the Armenian Question (1878–1918)* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> One of the most prolific writers on the Armenian Genocide, and a pioneer among citizens of Turkey to recognize the events of 1915 as a genocide, Taner Akçam’s most important books since the centennial of the Genocide are Taner Akçam, *Killing Orders: Talat Pasha’s Telegrams and the Armenian Genocide* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) and with Ümit Kurt, *The Spirit of the Laws: The Plunder of Wealth in the Armenian Genocide*, translated by Aram Arkun (New York and London: Berghahn Books, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, “They Can Live in the Desert But Nowhere Else:” *A History of the Armenian Genocide* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 359.

Union and Progress' strategic considerations as to the most effective ways to save the empire. In the absence of fully opened archives, the evidence at hand suggests that the decision to deport the Armenians was taken sometime early in 1915 and was related to the military disasters of that winter. The circumstances were now propitious for such an effort, for the parliament had been shut down, the state appeared to be at risk from the British navy and Russian armies, and the Armenians could be linked to the Russian advance as collaborators.<sup>8</sup>

What appears in the sources as Turkish panic and paranoia at an imagined danger from their Armenian subjects metastasized in the hands of apologists into justification for state-ordered murder.

The aftermath and legacy of the Genocide has led scholars to look at what might be called the afterlife of the Genocide. Scholars, most impressively Khatchig Mouradian, also "discovered" that there had been a "second phase" of the Genocide in 1916, a program of deliberate and malicious starvation as well as massacre of Armenian refugees who had reached the deserts of Syria.<sup>9</sup> Erik Jan Zürcher strongly proposed that there was a clear personal and ideological link between the Young Turks and their successors, the Kemalists, as well as a fundamental shift from thinking primarily about imperial renovation, within a framework of empire, to the later Kemalist framework of an ethnonational Turkish nation-state; continuities and changes mixed and melded with one another.<sup>10</sup>

I may have neglected some other breakthroughs that created a new, more sophisticated, archivally and theoretically based narrative and explanation of the Genocide, but what I have called the "WATS consensus" was basically in place by 2015. It has been amplified, elaborated, and supplemented, but in reviewing works written since the centennial it has so far stood the test of time and new scholarship.

<sup>8</sup> Suny, "They Can Live in the Desert But Nowhere Else," p. 360.

<sup>9</sup> Khatchig Mouradian, *The Resistance Network: The Armenian Genocide and Humanitarianism in Ottoman Syria, 1915–1918* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Erik Jan Zürcher, *The Unionist Factor: The Role of the Committee of Union and Progress in the Turkish Nationalist Movement, 1905–1926* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1984); and his *The Young Turk Legacy and Nation-Building: From the Ottoman Empire to Atatürk's Turkey* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2010).

## THE ARCHITECT OF THE GENOCIDE: TALAAT PAŞA

In a truly ground-breaking book, Hans-Lukas Kieser shows us a Talat Paşa who was the apostle of Ottoman imperial nationalism with its Islamist overtones. He carefully differentiates Young Turk preservation of empire from Kemalist secular ethnonationalism. Talat was at the center of European Great Power politics, “a revolutionist obsessed by empire and nation, the main reference of far right-wing thought in twentieth-century Europe.”<sup>11</sup> Talat was not only the architect of the Genocide but more importantly the founder of the first single-party state in modern times that established the rule of an empire by a committee of revolutionaries. He was a radical demographic engineer, who through the mass deportations and massacres of 1915–1916 laid the foundation for Kemal Atatürk's ethnonational Turkish Republic. After the war, international diplomacy implicitly sanctioned the Genocide and endorsed Talat's achievements by ratifying the Treaty of Lausanne.

Even though Armenians originally had faith in Talat and considered him on the left of the CUP, Kieser argues that the Minister of the Interior did not have the fortitude to carry through on promises to reverse land seizures in eastern Anatolia and harbored ideas of exterminating the Armenians. Armenian political leaders were dedicated to constitutional patriotism and rejected the accusations that they wanted to set up a separate “Armenian kingdom.” The CUP, however, remained a conspiratorial revolutionary group never capable of the necessary liberal reforms of decentralization and egalitarianism that might have saved the empire. As Kieser puts it, the CUP represented “a politicized generation obsessed with empire, at the expense of healthy domestic state building.”<sup>12</sup>

Fatally, abandoning his earlier Ottomanism and constitutionalism, Talat turned to the “messianist Turkism” of Ziya Gökalp, a bizarre and lethal combination of Turkish expansionism (the idea of Turan), étatism, Islamic superiority, and the purification of the nation. Ultimately, he showed a willingness to commit mass murder, to weed the garden in order to create a Turco-Islamic imperial nation-state. What I have called the “affective disposition” of the Young Turk leaders, Kieser explains as a combination of “an elusive imperial mythology that its perpetrators pursued in what

<sup>11</sup> Hans-Lukacs Kieser, *Talaat Pasha: Father of Modern Turkey, Architect of Genocide* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), p. xii.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 142.



they considered a Darwinian total war – jihad with the exterior *and* interior of their state and society. The largely resentful character of their violence stemmed from accumulated feelings of victimhood and compensating myths of ethnoreligious superiority. These myths were reembedded in Islamism and the new ‘Turkish’ (Turkish nationalism), including pan-Turkism, of the early twentieth century, which Gökalp spread most seminally.”<sup>13</sup> Talat’s political philosophy was not based on what Kieser calls “a modern consensual social contract,” or respect for law or rationality but rather on an imperial conception that viewed certain religious, ethnic, or social groups as inherently superior to others and therefore having the right to rule over them—in other words, the opposite of a democratic, egalitarian, homogeneous nation-state or democratic, egalitarian, heterogeneous multinational state.

Kieser reviews the intricate, nearly incomprehensible politics of the second constitutional period, 1908–1914, in which the CUP moved into and out of power. Talat and his comrades exploited the war fever in 1912 and rallied students to push for entry into the first Balkan War. They benefitted both from the passion for war and the predictable defeat by blaming it on the government, even on two Armenians: the CUP member Bedros Halajian and the foreign minister, Gabriel Noradunkian. In January 1913, Talat organized the coup d’état that brought him and Enver to power. A disgusted liberal commented, “A government that starts with murder can never be solid.”<sup>14</sup> Now the most radical CUP members—Talat, Nazim, Şakir—were in control of the empire, though, as Kieser shows, Talat was the real power, Enver a figurehead.

In early 1914, the Young Turks directed their first ethnic cleansing project against the Aegean Rum, the Greeks living along the western coast of Turkey.<sup>15</sup> Talat kept the operation secret, even from the sultan, and brazenly deceived those whom he felt did not need to know. The plight of Muslim refugees from the Balkans, the *mucabirler*, was used as a rationale

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>15</sup> The fundamental work on the removal of Greeks from the Aegean coast is Emre Erol, *The Ottoman Crisis in Western Anatolia: Turkey’s Belle Époque and the Transition to a Modern Nation State* (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2016). See also his “‘Macedonian Question’ in Western Anatolia: The Ousting of the Ottoman Greeks before the World War I” in Hans Lukas Kieser, Kerem Öktem, and Maurus Reinkowski (eds.), *World War I and the End of the Ottoman World: From the Balkan Wars to the Armenian Genocide* (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2015).

for emptying the villages near the coast. In the east the Special Organization (SO) under Şakir's command was intimately linked to Talat, and both men were interested in conducting a campaign deep into the Caucasus and Persia against the Russians. Kieser says that Edward Erickson's notion of "mutual armament and simultaneous guerilla warfare by the SO against Russian-sponsored Armenians, and vice versa, lacks decisive accuracy, and the tale of an SO countercampaign is simply wrong."<sup>16</sup>

As for explanation—why the Genocide?—Kieser emphasizes "the interconnection of the early choice of expansive war at the eastern front with considerations of demographic engineering," which affected first Assyrians and then Armenians.<sup>17</sup> In contrast to some historians like Michael Reynolds (he mentions specifically Erickson and Arslan Ozan), he takes "the vertiginous Turan project" seriously as part of the toxic disposition of the Young Turks that contributed to deportation and mass murder.<sup>18</sup> Considerations of state security (security for whom, one may ask?) and strategy were part of the mix, but ideology, in this case a brutal Social Darwinist understanding of ethnic and international relations, determined how interests and security were calculated. Personal psychology is also noted. Each of the major Young Turks is characterized. Enver was a second-rate mind; Nazim, vicious, a man who threatened Cavid with assassination when he resigned in protest over the deceitful provocation to war with Russia; the other "*eminence grise*," Şakir was wily and brutal; and all of them were deceitful, cold-blooded Machiavellians, ready to lie and betray the trust even of their comrades, or as Kieser notes of Talat "unconcerned by rules or ethics," but at the same time feverishly committed to the imperial designs of expansion and Turkic superiority and dominance.<sup>19</sup>

Given their predilections, the government was prepared to take the opportunity offered by a 1914 alliance with Germany to solve the empire's foreign and domestic problems through war. Even though Talat flirted with the British and the Russians before the outbreak of the war, Germany's embrace of Talat and his nationalism enabled the Ottomans both to fight a credible war for years and to carry out the Genocide without any serious restraint or admonition from Berlin. As Kieser puts it, "Besides overstrung

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 201. Erickson makes this argument in his book *Ottomans and Armenians: A Study in Counterinsurgency* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 146.

<sup>17</sup> Kieser, *Talaat Pasha*, p. 205.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 208.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 217.

neocolonial goals originating from a pan-ideology, world war at Germany's side offered the opportunity to abolish not only the reform plan but even the conditions on the ground for this plan."<sup>20</sup>

Summing up the decision made sometime in late March-early April 1915 to commit what would be known as genocide, Kieser writes: "Euphoria over victory against the Entente's navy merged with Şakir's and other political friends' vehemently anti-Armenian stance, the initiation of removal-resettlement schemes in Dörtyol and Zeitun, and demands by militaries and valis for removal in the east, which gave Talaat the final compulsion to act comprehensively."<sup>21</sup> "The Armenians had become the scapegoats of a failed war and of failed imperial expectations, and thus targets of blame in the competition for a future in Asia Minor."<sup>22</sup> Kieser's sympathies are with liberal Ottomanism and constitutionalism, and he believes that there were viable solutions to the internal problems of the empire, but Talat and the radical Young Turks rejected them, opting instead for Turkic nationalism and extermination. He ends his book by connecting Talat's evil legacy with modern dictatorships and the Kemalist and post-Kemalist regimes in Turkey.

## RELIGION AND GENOCIDE

In contrast to Kieser's refreshing, illuminating work, Benny Morris and Dror Ze'evi's *The Thirty-Year Genocide* is a throwback to an earlier historiography. The authors have written a synthetic study of the fate of three non-Muslim communities in the late Ottoman and early Republican periods that offers a revisionist account of the now-standard revisionist account of the Armenian Genocide—what I am calling the "WATS consensus." If the official Turkish denialist writers obfuscate the genocidal intentions and practices of the Young Turks and disaggregate them from earlier instances of massacre by Abdül Hamid and later mass killings by the Kemalist nationalists, Morris and Ze'evi argue instead—and this statement can be considered their central, organizing argument—"from the documentation now available, it is clear that treating the three periods separately, and viewing what happened to each of the victim communities – Armenians, Greeks, and Assyrians – in isolation, obfuscates the reality of what was

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 232–233.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 298.

intended by the Turks and what transpired. To be sure, there was an evolving process at work. What appeared to Abdulhamid and his entourage as a vague and disembodied idea in the 1890s transmogrified and crystallized under the Young Turks into a full-fledged genocidal program, with the last nails being hammered into the coffin during Atatürk's 'National Struggle.' Each of these regimes may have confronted a different cluster of dangers, acted under different constraints and imagined a different future. But, ultimately, all three engaged in a continuous, giant crime against humanity."<sup>23</sup> The second thrust of their revisionist revisionism is to include the killing and expulsion of Greeks into the story of the Armenian Genocide as a single combined genocidal process—the de-Christianization of Anatolia.

Although I disagree with the amalgamation of these massacres into a single story of genocidal intention and process, the reconstruction of events and the authors' argumentation provides a rounded picture of Ottoman society, the complex ethnic ecology of Anatolia and the Balkans, and the state's policies. In dealing with the Hamidian period the authors show the growing tensions between Armenians engaged in what they conceived as self-defense against Kurdish predations and the government, which increasingly conceived of Armenians as subversive revolutionaries. Responsibility for initiating the massacres, described in detail, using primarily Western diplomatic accounts, is clearly laid at the feet of the sultan, who encouraged killing Armenians. As the authors conclude, "not spontaneous outrage among townspeople and local officials but direct and indirect orders from the capital were behind the provincial massacres of October 1895–January 1896."<sup>24</sup> And later, "The massacre at Sason [*sic*] and the massacres of October 1895–January 1896 were all instigated by the authorities, almost all without Armenian provocation."<sup>25</sup> "But from the available evidence, and it is very substantial, it is clear that almost all the massacres of 1894–1896 were organized by the state – either directly by Constantinople or by local authorities executing what were, or were understood to be, the government's orders or intentions. While Ottoman archives have been largely purged of anything self-incriminating, the consular and missionary documentation from the provinces has left myriad

<sup>23</sup> Benny Morris and Dror Ze'evi, *The Thirty-Year Genocide: Turkey's Destruction of its Christian Minorities, 1894–1924* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

evidence of official Ottoman instigation and involvement.”<sup>26</sup> The massacres occurred because of exaggerated fears of Armenian subversion and potential rebellion. “The idea of an Armenian nation-state in eastern Anatolia, previously inconceivable, began to take shape in the Turkish imagination - and nightmares.”<sup>27</sup>

But, even though the massacres were not spontaneous and driven by rage, Morris and Ze’evi argue that among the many causes for Ottoman and Turkish mass killing, religion also “played a vital role in the massacres; it was the glue that bound them all together, much as it bound together the perpetrators, from Abdulhamid through the provincial organizers to the hands-on murderers.”<sup>28</sup> This is a central theme of their book: Muslim versus Christian communities and faiths. Yet while earlier investigators like Dadrian saw religion as key to his explanation of the Genocide, others are less convinced. Religion was certainly in the mix but it was not a primary motivator. It marked differences between communities and acted both to regulate social relations, maintain inequitable faith-based hierarchies, and keep peace (people of the book were to be protected by Muslims). On occasion, some agitators or government officials used religion instrumentally to promote violence. Without a deeper investigation into how religion functioned in the empire, the argument in this work borders on an essentialist analysis that deduces violence from religion.

Turning to the Genocide of 1915–1916, the authors give a detailed, compelling account of the various massacres, deportations, and forced conversions in the many locations of the country, from the Balkans (Thrace) to eastern Anatolia. They conclude, “There is no doubt that the deportation of the Armenians was planned and initiated from the political center. Hundreds of documents published by the Turkish government have definitively ended argument and controversy on this point and leave no doubt that this huge ethnic cleansing project was not the incidental result of wartime hardships and local clashes. The deportation was a pre-meditated, calculated and pedantically implemented operation.”<sup>29</sup> On the timing of the decision to carry out the annihilation of the Armenians, the authors argue: “Although no definite proof has emerged of a planning process that took place prior to the deportation decree (it is possible such

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 117.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 232.

proof will emerge if Turkey fully opens its archives), we believe that both the deportations and mass killings were discussed already in the early months of 1915. There are very strong indications that the subject was bandied about by a small circle of CUP activists in the wake of the December 1914—January 1915 debacle at Sarikamış and before or during the Allied naval attempts to break through the Dardanelles in February–March, weeks before the rebellions in Zeytun and Van and the landings in Gallipoli. They solidified into a set of guidelines for action when Bahaeddin Şakir arrived in Istanbul in March. A concrete plan began to take shape, which was consolidated in April.”

And, finally, while acknowledging the lack of definitive evidence, they speculate: “In sum, although, hitherto, researchers have found no hard evidence proving the existence of a genocidal plan, let alone a document detailing the plan, we believe that such a plan, at least in general guidelines, was formulated in early spring 1915. Its necessary preliminary components were in place weeks before the mass deportations began. In 1916, in the second stage of the genocide, the mass murder along the Euphrates was ordered and orchestrated by Istanbul. That murderous second bout, of course, may not have been included in the planning during spring 1915 (the organizers probably didn’t believe that substantial numbers would actually survive the marches and reach the Syrian deserts). But it certainly proves that genocide, not relocation, was in the minds of the CUP leaders and that genocide toward the Armenians was the policy of the government.”<sup>30</sup> However plausible some will find such conclusions, the usual protocols and conventions of professional historiography require more definitive evidence.

Morris and Ze’evi distinguish between what happened to the Armenians and the Ottoman Greeks. “Over all, during 1894–1924, the Turks probably murdered most of the empire’s Armenians while they expelled rather than murdered most of their Greeks.”<sup>31</sup> Thus, an important distinction is made between genocide and ethnic cleansing. They follow the position of Richard G. Hovannisian that there was a “continuum” of genocidal intent and a “continuum of ethnic cleansing,” aimed at the “de-Armenization of the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey,” stretching from 1894 to the 1920s, even if “it is unlikely that the sultan [Abdülhamid II in the

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 239.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 468.

1890s] thought” in terms of complete extermination.<sup>32</sup> The authors’ point, however, is that it was not so much “de-Armenization” as de-Christianization that the Ottoman and Nationalist Turks were after.”<sup>33</sup>

Throughout this book a central, driving theme obscures the complex motives and the distinctions between different actors in different times, and even among CUP leaders themselves. A deep Islamophobia underlies their narrative, as in this sentence: “the nationalism that drove the murderous campaigns of 1909 and 1914–1923 also had a religious undertone – as nationalism in most Muslim Middle Eastern countries in the Twentieth Century has always had. To put it another way, given the non-separation of church and state in the Muslim Middle East, the nationalist politics of the region have often been underwritten by an Islamic mindset and beliefs.”<sup>34</sup> Here we have moved beyond careful historical thinking toward grand claims based on essentialist views of Islam and an ideological construction of Muslims in general, which is most regrettable in what appears to be a scholarly work complete with the apparatus of footnotes.

The role of religion, so radically simplified in *The Thirty-Year Genocide*, is a subject that has not yet found a definitive conceptualization among scholars of the Genocide. Some see religion as a structural factor of domination, which later became ethnicized under Kemal. Some argue that Islam was a tool, not a conviction, for the Young Turks, while others like Kieser and Akçam are convinced that faith influenced the policies of the leading Young Turks. Religion was certainly a stimulus for ordinary people to participate in the Genocide, as community and state leaders urged neighbors to kill neighbors. Local antagonisms, like those between Kurds and Assyrians, led to killing along religious lines. The CUP had not included Assyrians in their plans for mass extermination, and yet the earliest massacres, along the Persian-Ottoman frontier, were carried out against Assyrians. Many Muslims did not distinguish between Assyrians and Armenians, placing them in a single category based on their religious affinities. Assyrians have been known to say, the Armenians were the onion, and we were the onionskin, and were eaten along with the onion.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Richard G. Hovannisian (ed.), *The Armenian Genocide: Cultural and Ethical Legacies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 2007), pp. 6–7.

<sup>33</sup> Morris and Ze’evi, *The Thirty-Year Genocide*, p. 470.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 472.

<sup>35</sup> On the genocide of the Assyrians (*Sayfō*), see David Gaunt, *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors: Muslim-Christian Relations in Eastern Anatolia During World War I*. (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006).

My own provisional resolution of this issue was given in “*They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else*.”

Difference need not lead to conflict, and conflict need not lead to killing, mass murder, or genocide. But markers of difference define the lines along which conflict or killing might take place. The lines are not given by nature but are constructed in culture and experience. Armenians developed over time ideas about Turks and Kurds and they about the Armenians, all against the background of the enforced and religiously sanctioned superiority of Muslims and the inferiority of the *gavur* (unbeliever).<sup>36</sup>

Abdülhamid II chose to end the *Tanzimat* and ally the state with the Kurds, to encourage and permit massacres of Armenians in the 1890s, and to spread rumors and myths about Armenian disloyalty that proved long-lived. Whatever his personal dedication to his faith, the sultan used Islam instrumentally as a weapon of governance, as a tool to keep his own idea of social peace in his empire. That peace was based on the exercise of violence and the maintenance of religious hierarchies privileging some and disadvantaging others, a strategy which the radicals in the CUP ultimately adopted as they weaponized religious differences and abandoned a more egalitarian Ottomanism. “The Young Turks’ sense of vulnerability – combined with resentment at what they took to be Armenians’ privileged status, Armenian dominance over Muslims in some spheres of life, and the preference of many Armenians for Christian Russia – fed a fantasy that the Armenians presented an existential threat to Turks.”<sup>37</sup> Religion was certainly not irrelevant in the contours of that emerging fantasy.

### DISPOSSESSION, ETHNIC CLEANSING, AND GENOCIDE

An effective antidote to the grand scheme of Morris and Ze’evi is a fine study of a single town during the Genocide by Ümit Kurt, a student of Taner Akçam.<sup>38</sup> The author of this stunning book was born and grew up in the eastern Turkish city of Gaziantep, originally known as Aintab. As a

<sup>36</sup> Suny, “*They Can Live in the Desert But Nowhere Else*,” p. 132.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 361.

<sup>38</sup> Ümit Kurt, *The Armenians of Aintab: The Economics of Genocide in an Ottoman Province* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021). Much of the account here of Kurt’s book is taken from my review published in *Turkish Studies*, published online, June 13, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2021.1936693>



young man, he accidentally learned that a beautiful neighborhood in his hometown had been built and lived in by wealthy Armenians, who had “left,” as a current houseowner remarked vaguely. Intrigued, Kurt set out on a scholarly investigation and discovered a largely unknown history of a thriving community that had been forcibly dispossessed of its property and had either indeed “left” or been massacred. His decision to concentrate on a single city during and after the Armenian Genocide of 1915 offers a powerful lens into the intricacies on the local level of how genocides are carried out, which at one and the same time illuminates motivations and effects of genocidal violence, and the role of ordinary people given permission by the state to carry out what would ordinarily be considered crimes against their neighbors. His chosen perspective focuses on “the economy of plunder,” as he calls it, and how this particularly vicious primitive accumulation of capital produced the Muslim bourgeoisie of present-day Turkey. “What was occurring was a legal operation of theft. The use of the legal system was both an attempt to deny and legitimate the Armenian genocide under the cover of legality. The law was used to provide a legitimization of what was an act of power and destruction.”<sup>39</sup>

Looking back from what we know happened, it is easy to spot the sources of ethnic and social conflict between the relatively affluent Armenians of Aintab, who made up the middle classes of the city and dominated trade, industry, and agriculture, and the local Muslims, many of them poorer, less well-educated, and feeling marginalized in their own empire. Armenians were a minority, discriminated against in many ways, and yet they appeared in the eyes of resentful Turks and Kurds to be socially superior. Armenians’ Christianity gave them a certain communal solidarity, connections to the outside world, and the patronage of American missionaries who set up schools for fellows of the faith—all of which fostered a sense of national identity and ambitions. With this toxic mix of ethnic and social distinctions, “Envy and resentment opened the door to a hate-mongering atmosphere,” as was clear to anyone reading the Ottoman press.<sup>40</sup> For four days in November 1895, Muslims attacked and killed some 300–400 Armenians in Aintab, ransacking shops and houses. When the violence stopped, Armenians were arrested. “No Muslims were punished in the wake of the massacres, and the authorities ‘systematically

<sup>39</sup> Kurt, *The Armenians of Aintab*, p. 25.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

portrayed Christians as ‘the aggressors,’ a perspective occasionally represented in Turkish historiography even today.”<sup>41</sup>

Compared to other towns and regions of the Ottoman Empire, relations between Muslims and Armenians were comparatively peaceful in Aintab. But the self-proclaimed constitutionalist revolution of the Committee of Union and Progress in 1908, and its promise of equality between Muslims and non-Muslims “further exacerbated feelings of resentment toward the Armenians of the city.”<sup>42</sup> Due to the efforts of local Young Turk leaders in the city, Aintab avoided the kind of pogrom that devastated Adana in April 1909, and deportations of Armenian Aintabtsis began late, only in August 1915, half a year after they had been launched in other places. For months local Armenians watched as convoys of destitute Armenian deportees from the north were driven through the city on their way to the deserts of Syria. Then the architect of the Genocide, Talaat, replaced the moderate governor of the city, and in late summer the deportations commenced.

Those marched under guard from their homes were robbed, many murdered, and whoever reached the desert faced starvation. The moveable goods of the deported Armenians were sold off, and their abandoned houses, shops, and schools were confiscated and distributed to Muslims, predominantly to refugees and immigrants. Churches were turned into stables or barracks. The profile of this once multicultural city was homogenized into a religiously Muslim, ethnically Turkish and Kurdish one.

In exhaustive detail, much of it taken from Armenian sources, Kurt records the losses of those sacrificed by the state. “The deportation and genocide of Aintab Armenians was not implemented by a rabble brought in from the countryside to carry out an act recognized as too despicable for respectable people, nor performed by Aintab’s more ordinary have-nots, but rather were brought about by the district’s notables, landowners, dignitaries, and the city’s elites.”<sup>43</sup> The orders had come from Istanbul, but locals eagerly carried out the physical elimination of the Armenian presence in Aintab. Narrowing motivation to economic self-interest, Kurt contends that rather than a shared ideology, local elites and ordinary Muslims acted “out of a base desire to plunder the assets and property of

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

the Armenian community.”<sup>44</sup> Yet much of his evidence and narrative suggests that interest was understood through affective constructions of who the Armenians were and what threats to Muslim well-being they presented. While calculations of economic self-interest were certainly present, people are not as simple as liberal ideas of *homo economicus* or political scientists’ notions of rational choice may lead us to believe. The property seizures were clearly a bonus of genocide, but they may have been more an effect than a cause and should not be isolated from emotional and cognitive constructions of identities, what was thought to be morally permissible, and understandings of what was in one’s interest.

With the defeat of the Ottomans in October 1918, and occupation of much of the country by the victorious Allied Powers, Aintab first fell into the hands of the British, and a year later was turned over to the French. Thousands of Armenians returned to Aintab, and the new Ottoman government ordered the restitution of their properties. But over time British attitudes toward the Muslims shifted from hostility to open friendship, and the fortunes of the Armenians, their future completely dependent on the occupation, deteriorated. The precarity of the Christians increased in the fall of 1919 once the British turned the region of Cilicia over to the French, who proved to be treacherous in the eyes of the Armenians. Armenian legionnaires accompanied the French, and Muslims, “faced with a terrifying threat,” gravitated toward the burgeoning nationalist movement led by Mustafa Kemal and worked with the underground remnants of the Young Turk committees.<sup>45</sup> War broke out between the Turks and French, and though the French defeated the insurrection, they soon left the region. “In the end, the French failed, not only to protect the Armenians, but also to allow them the means of protecting themselves.”<sup>46</sup> Once the Kemalists took over, they renamed the city Gaziantep, adding the prefix *Gazi* (veteran) to honor the struggle against the occupation. Rather than a heroic effort, writes Kurt, the resistance “seems to have been as much the organized struggle of a group of genocide profiteers seeking to hold onto their loot as it was a fight against an occupying force.”<sup>47</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 214.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 163.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

Armenians fled once more; their properties were again confiscated “legally,” that is, by the new Republic adopting laws sanctioning theft. Kurt shows repeatedly how Kemalism reproduced the practices of the disgraced Young Turks. The process reminds the reader how states—the United States, Australia, Israel, and others—use legislation and the courts to legitimize the transfer of property from the dispossessed to a new settler class. In this courageous book, the product of prodigious research, Kurt names names and details which houses and lands went to prominent Muslim families, the founding generation of the ethnonational bourgeoisie of the Turkish Republic. He notes that the Kemalist state “pronounced all Armenians, without exception, to be ‘harmful people’ and did not permit them to enter the country.”<sup>48</sup> In their misguided efforts to modernize by deploying mass violence, the Young Turks and their Kemalist successors in many ways turned time backward and stunted the progress their peoples might have made.

#### THE PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION OF CAPITAL AND GENOCIDE

A much more unconventional treatment of the Genocide is by Harry Harootunian, a prominent historian of Japan.<sup>49</sup> In his highly personal account, *The Unspoken Heritage: The Armenian Genocide and its Unaccounted Lives*, Harootunian turned to this life writing from an initial “voluntary indifference to anything related to Armenian life.” Harootunian explains his ambivalence about his ancestry as the effects of “the force of the Americanizing process to which he was subjected in the schools and in daily life, the effort to make us all look like Americans or some version of WASP American but not quite.”<sup>50</sup> Harootunian deliberately decided not to recycle the history of the Armenian Genocide but instead to unearth archaeologically what his immigrant parents “sought to repress through silence [but which] probably refused to go away.”<sup>51</sup> That search into a void without documents and a meager archive of photographs was a

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 193.

<sup>49</sup> Harry Harootunian, *The Unspoken Heritage: The Armenian Genocide and its Unaccounted Lives* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019). This section is taken from my review in *New Perspectives on Turkey*, LXIV (May 2021), pp. 196–202.

<sup>50</sup> Harootunian, *The Unspoken Heritage*, pp. 2–3.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

construction rather than a reconstruction of their traumatic experiences and simultaneously a search for himself and his two sisters, Sena and Victoria, to whom he dedicates the book. He juxtaposes two modes of cognition, history versus experience and memory, the first dealing with narrative and events, the other with everydayness and uneventfulness. A lasting heritage of genocide was the elimination of the everyday ordinary ties of family life and the loss of affect and warmth that Harootunian sees in his own parenting. The “affective division of labor” among family and relatives was absent; closeness with aunts, uncles, and cousins, so much a part of village life, was unavailable in Depression-era Detroit where his parents ended up and raised their son. Genocide began the process of removal and alienation from others. Capitalism, with its competitive, instrumental utilization of people, along with American assimilation, with its erasure of “everybody’s past” and its orientation “to a permanent present” dedicated to endless progress, completed it.<sup>52</sup> Blood might be thicker than water but not when your cousin cheats you in a business deal.

An ungenerous way to read this book would be as the author’s personal therapy, and there certainly is much rummaging around in an empty trunk of memory searching for the sources of his own affective profile. But the careful and sensitive handling of the little evidence he finds repeatedly unravels layered insights into a past that can only be surmised and suggested through imagination. “This loss or absence of affection among survivors of genocide must be calculated as one of its greatest consequences, resembling an emotional emptying out and, perhaps, the principal condition of surviving its inhuman excess that demands unyielding silence. For those, like us, who came after, this inheritance became an inexpressible rage.”<sup>53</sup> His parents deployed strategic silencing to deal with grief, as well—I would add—an acquired courage.

His mother Vehanush had left village life, abandoned by her mother in a German Protestant mission school in Maraş, and once she emigrated to the United States, she evidenced no interest in returning to Armenia and the past. His father, Ohannes, born in a village near Harput (current day Elazığ, Turkey), moved to America before the First World War and the Genocide and returned as a fighter for the Armenian Revolutionary Federation to his abandoned village only to find absence: “Even the fruit trees had died.” This event reminded me of a trip along the shore of Lake

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

Van in eastern Turkey a few years ago. A Kurdish friend driving me and my daughter pointed out an empty field and mourned that once there had been orchards there but now that his own people, Kurds, had taken over, there was emptiness. The effects of genocide had scarred victims and perpetrators alike.

Adding to what Kurt shows in disturbing detail in Aintab, Harootunian brilliantly elaborates the dispossession of Armenian property theoretically, using Marx's idea of the primitive and ongoing accumulation of capital as his key explanation of genocide. He claims that making a nation-state and capital accumulation work together: "neither could exist without the other just as in time the nation came to serve as the placeholder for capital and capitalism, which in turn was seen as the basis of the nation's 'natural political economy.'" <sup>54</sup> He rejects as a sufficient explanation organic nationalism, which he sees as "merely the political means to achieve primitive accumulation and is not incompatible with the promotion of economic interests." <sup>55</sup> In the Ottoman case, "Augmenting a process of capital accumulation necessitated the active dispossession and expropriations of the wealth of minority ethnicities and deprivation of their forms of production and subsistence." <sup>56</sup> The exercise of coercion—mass murder, deportation, and forced assimilation by conversion to Islam—created the base for ethnic, religious, and social cohesion among Turks by the excision of Armenians, Assyrians, and eventually Greeks, who were "seen as pollutants and contaminants of the national body, corrupting their history and fouling the idea of racial purity and religious homogeneity." <sup>57</sup>

For his father Ohannes, escaping from Anatolia to America required an adjustment from the precapitalist "natural economy" of village, household, and kin to the possessive individualism of modern capitalism. <sup>58</sup> "If Anatolia promised certain death, the U.S. signified permanent uncertainty." <sup>59</sup> Ironically, the middle-class Armenians—merchants and independent professionals (pharmacists, photographers, dentists, architects, etc.)—along with Greeks and Jews had been the harbingers of capitalism in the Ottoman lands. "Eliminating minorities like the Armenians and Greeks in Anatolia by murder and mutilation," writes Harootunian,

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

“was actually unnecessary since the quest for capitalist modernization would have been more easily carried out with their involvement and cooperation.”<sup>60</sup> But in the program of the Young Turks, capital accumulation was accompanied by an ambition to Turkify the empire. Plunder accomplished both aims.

The Armenian Genocide was the most primitive accumulation of capital: mass killing accompanied by mass dispossession. “The whole campaign for Turkification, as it was called, was a thinly veiled explanation for theft and murder, primitive accumulation, that would transform the Turks overnight into a bourgeoisie, the CUP into a bourgeois rulership, and Armenians into the forgotten rubble of everyday Ani.”<sup>61</sup> Ani, of course, is the remains in northeastern Turkey of the once flourishing metropolis of a medieval Armenian kingdom. Along with the other authors discussed in this chapter, Harootunian sees the Genocide as the foundational crime of the Turkish nation-state, the Kemalist republic founded some eight years later.

In my work, I have proposed that the aim of the Committee of Union and Progress was not to create a homogeneous ethnonational state like the Kemalist Republic but to preserve the empire. In their imaginary future Turks would be the *Herrenvolk* in a more Islamic and Turkic but still multiethnic empire, which would continue to extend into Arab lands and perhaps even into the Caucasus. Harootunian suggests intriguingly that “the modern Turkish state was probably a mistake or an accident of history. It originated in the extermination of the Armenians with the unintended or ‘collateral’ effect of dismembering the empire the murders and theft were supposed to rescue.”<sup>62</sup> Born in the killing fields, the Turkish state has presided through the last century over a process of modernizing from the top down, bereft of the Christian originators of its civil society and market economy, and by the use of violence and militarization of society as recurring patterns of governance. In the aftermath of wanton and unrestrained murder, Harootunian argues, “some form of criminality became the basis of modern Turkish leadership.”<sup>63</sup> The criminality continues, as successive governments in Ankara and enabling “intellectuals” have not only averted their eyes but actively, cynically denied that a genocide ever occurred.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

While the actual launching of the Genocide was determined by a myriad of *longue durée* factors—among them, conflicts over land intensified by Muslim migration from the Caucasus and the Balkans; Armenian resistance movements; resentment toward the social advantages enjoyed by Christians; international support for reforms favoring Armenians; and the growth of Turkic nationalism with its racist overtones—as well as eventful contingencies—among them, the seizure of power by the most radical Young Turks in January 1913; the imposition by the Great Powers of the 1914 reform program; and the outbreak of the Great War—the deep structuring of imperial rule allowed the shift from everyday oppression to pogrom or massacre to genocide to proceed with few obstacles. Ruling elites with few ties or little identification with their subjects have minimal tolerance for resistance or requests from subordinated populations when demands from below challenge the traditional order and elite property and privilege. In an authoritarian order, despotic rulers unchecked by institutional or traditional restraints use violence to keep those they rule in their place or if existentially threatened to eliminate them altogether. Not accidentally as Harootunian, Kieser, and others have argued, such excessive coercion extending to genocide has characterized regimes from European overseas colonial powers to European empires—and, I would add, to present-day nationalizing states. Post-colonial scholars in particular have shown that imperial regimes based on inequality and discrimination, coercion more than persuasion, as well as nationalizing states that employ assimilation or ethnic cleansing, engage in practices that depend on violence rather than democratic consultation. Nation-states, like present-day Turkey or Israel, that occupy lands and control stateless peoples like Kurds and Palestinians are caught in an irresolvable dilemma that threatens their claims to democracy.

As I have argued, Armenian Genocide scholars argue over continuity and contingency in their assessment of the causes of the mass killings of 1915. Was there a plan for genocide before the war? Can it be denied that the series of massacres—1894–1896, 1909—that preceded the Genocide were merely an incomplete prelude to what was to come? Or are the series of mass killings to be disaggregated—the Hamidian massacres of 1894–1896 as state-sanctioned, perhaps even initiated, certainly encouraged, brutalities aimed at repression of a rebellious population (as seen by the state), exemplary repression to keep Armenians in their customary place; the 1909 pogrom in Adana as a relatively spontaneous local event of fearful Muslims expecting Armenians to threaten the prevailing



order—both fundamentally different in cause and scale and degree of state organization from the Genocide of 1915? Are Turks and Kurds fundamentally killers of Armenians once stirred up by religious and secular concerns? Is the “Terrible Turk,” who is always spoken of in the singular, essentially a savage, a barbarian, the antithesis to European Christians, into whose fold Armenians are embraced? Harootunian, like Hovannisian and Morris and Ze’evi, appears to fall on the continuity side of the debate. “While the genocide’s program of dispossession – theft – and expropriation began earlier,” he tells us,

it became policy by 1915 and continued in different forms after the massacres and deportations and well into modern Turkey’s history.... If the earlier massacres in the nineteenth century under Abdülhamid II aimed to reduce agitation from minority populations, the later genocide was a technique harnessed to the modernizing makeover of the Young Turks. In both instances, the purpose amounted to primitive accumulation, and the only difference between the two episodes is that the earlier massacres were unsystematic. The deportations of the Armenians in 1915 into the Syrian Desert were clearly devised to eliminate a whole population and suggest an interesting analogue to the later Nazi death camps and their reliance on more advanced technology to accelerate the killing of a whole population.<sup>64</sup>

### FORGETTING AND REMEMBERING

Nations promiscuously, deliberately forget the human horrors of their origins in a way that is similar to the erasure of the memory of the costs to ordinary people of the original accumulation of capital. Turks, Kurds, and Armenians are all defined in different ways defined by the Genocide, some as perpetrators, others as victims, still others as bystanders. Harootunian notes that given the fact of genocide “there is an unwanted symmetry between the Armenian obsession to never forget and the Turkish endeavor to never remember.”<sup>65</sup> Armenians cannot forget that they were nearly obliterated. Think of Czech writer Milan Kundera’s words: “a small nation can disappear, and it knows it.” Turks, even though they are part of a powerful nation, are also remarkably fearful. They remember the Treaty of Sèvres of a century ago when they were to be eliminated by the Great Powers, Greeks, and Armenians, and how they fought a *Kurtuluş Savaşı*

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., pp. 128–129.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 141.

(War of Liberation, 1918–1923) to preserve their last “homeland,” Anatolia. And on much of that land live the Kurds, who peer into a nationless future and lament to the Armenians that the Turks “had you for breakfast and will have us for dinner.” All three peoples see themselves as victims, and none recognize that they too have committed crimes against humanity, albeit at different scales. Reflecting on the ongoing tragedies that have fashioned these three peoples, Harootunian’s parents could not help but recall “what they and we had lost,” and of their experience far from their birthplaces, he concludes, “America is an environment that banished memory and, in its own way, was as harsh and relentlessly uncertain and insecure (in an economic and social sense) as what they had faced in Anatolia.”<sup>66</sup>

Where did they go, these Armenians? When I visited the Museum of the Erzurum Congress and Turkish War of National Independence a few years ago, I was intrigued as a historian how our guide would tell the story of 1915. I asked what this impressive building had been before it was the place of the Kemalist congress, even though I knew it had been the prominent *Sanasaryan varzharan* [Sanasarian College] where my grandfather, Grikor Mirzoyan Suni, had taught music before World War I. The pleasant, accommodating guide unhesitatingly answered,

There was a very old Armenian college here. In 1863 a Russian Armenian, Mkrtych Sanasaryan, built it. But this was a propaganda school here [*bir propaganda okulu*]. The first Armenian revolts [*işyanlar*] began in the school’s garden. And some time after, the leaders of the gangs raised in this school carried out massacres [*Ve daha sonra Doğu Anadolu da katliam yapan çetelerinin reisleri bu okulda yetişmişler*]. But it was a very good school. There were classes in piano, skating, and philosophy. It was a school like Robert College in Istanbul.

“Were there many Armenians in Erzurum at the time?” I went on. “Not many,” she replied, “one in four in the population.” Mentioning what happened to the Armenians before the Congress, her answer deployed a wonderful tense in Turkish that we do not have in English, the *-miş* tense. “*Ama tabi o sırada Ermeniler gitmiş*,” she said flatly, which can be translated: “Before that time, the Armenians apparently left,” or “It is said, the Armenians left.”

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

In contrast to the Erzurum guide's dismissal of an inconvenient historical past, a few days later I met some Kurds in a café in Bitlis and asked them if there had been Armenians in that beautiful, rundown, and yet unrestored city. One of the men answered, "Yes, there had been." "What happened to them?" I enquired. "*Soykırım*," he said with a sly smile. "Genocide." That was our shared secret. We high-fived, and I departed.

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