

REVIEW ESSAY

Ethnic Cleansing or Genocide?

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The Armenian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey: A Disputed Genocide

Guenter Lewy

Salt Lake City: University of Florida Press, 2005

Guenter Lewy's *The Armenian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey: A Disputed Genocide* has unleashed debate in the United States as well as in different countries such as Canada, France, Germany, and Turkey. In the United States, Lewy's articles expressing skepticism about historiographies constructed by both Armenian and Turkish historians about the Armenian genocide appeared in *Middle East Quarterly* and *Commentary*; in subsequent issues, these journals published several letters to the editors from readers, mostly Armenians, who objected to Lewy's thesis.¹ Among the letters in *Commentary*, perhaps the most antagonistic criticism was presented by Peter Balakian, a poet, professor of English, and author of *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America's Response*. Subsequently, Balakian asked *Chronicle of Higher Education* to investigate the process of publishing Lewy's book, as well as the forthcoming book of prominent Ottoman historian Justin McCarthy.² *Chronicle* reporter Jennifer Howard's investigation provides an insight into the ways ideology can be used to try to discredit scholarship.

According to McCarthy, Howard telephoned him on 7 September 2006 and asked the following three questions: Did you send your manuscript to Oxford and other presses before you sent it to the University of Utah Press (UUP)?; did you receive money from the

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¹ Guenter Lewy, 'Revisiting the Armenian Genocide,' *Middle East Quarterly* 12, 4 (2005), pp. 3–12; and idem. 'The First Genocide of the 20th Century?,' *Commentary*, 120, 5 (2005), pp. 47–52. Letters to the editors (including Lewy's rebuttals) are presented in *Middle East Quarterly* 13, 1 (2006), pp. 1–5; and *Commentary* 121, 2 (2006), pp. 3–9. Also, Lewy's book is discussed in 'Was It Genocide?', *Wilson Quarterly* 30, 1 (Winter 2006), pp. 87–88.

² Justin McCarthy *et al.* (2006) *The Armenian Rebellion at Van* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press).

Turkish government to write this book?; and why did the editor of UUP resign?³ McCarthy said he responded: ‘No, I did not send my manuscript to any publisher. I know Hakan [Yavuz], who is the series editor [at UUP], and he asked me whether I had any manuscripts. I sent it [the manuscript for *The Armenian Rebellion at Van*] to him, and three months later I received two referee reports along with comments from the editor whether I would address some of the issues raised in those two letters. One of them was positive and the second one suggested a number of changes. I wrote back and said I would make some changes in response to the second referee’s report. A month later I received a contract from the UUP.’ As for Howard’s second question, whether McCarthy had received any funds from the Turkish government, he said he told her, ‘none,’ adding that ‘whoever makes these charges must prove it. I am a tenured professor and do not need money.’ With regard to the resignation of the editor of the UUP, McCarthy said he told Howard that, as far as he knew, it occurred for totally personal reasons and had nothing to do with the Press. The reporter informed Professor McCarthy that it was Balakian who had called the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and informed it about these accusations.⁴

Several months earlier, following the publication of Lewy’s book, Richard Hovannasian, a leading Armenian scholar, had visited the University of Utah campus (23 March 2006) and delivered a harsh speech against it.⁵ In fact, no book has created such a controversy at the UUP as this one by Lewy. For this reason, it is important to examine Lewy’s argument in order to understand the reasons for Armenian scholastic anger against the book. The attacks on the book demonstrate how an inquiry into the tragic events of the First World War can be removed from historical context and elevated to mythological level, a process that, in turn, prevents any rational exchange between the two sides.

Scholastic Exercise

Lewy’s purpose is to evaluate the consistency and validity of the ongoing debate over the evidence for the Armenian massacres in Ottoman Turkey. The literature that pertains to the fate of the Armenian population during the First World War involves two narratives. On the one hand, Armenian scholars present this tragedy as the first genocidal event of the twentieth century. They argue that the Armenian massacre was a product of the Ottoman government’s *special intent* to deport and exterminate the entire Armenian population in the empire. On the other hand, Turks contend that this event was an outcome of Armenian collaboration with the Russians, inter-communal warfare in eastern Turkey, and the harsh economic and social conditions of war (such as food shortages and the spread of diseases). Both sides produce and maintain their own readings, understandings, and selective historical memories, resulting in two highly polarized historical versions. Lewy traces how Armenian and Turkish historians as well as other experts on this subject have constructed their arguments and tried to assess to what extent their reasoning, presentation of historical events, and choices of evidence support the validity and reliability of their theses. For this goal, he provides careful corroboration of the main pillars of Armenian and Turkish

³ I wish to thank Justin McCarthy and M. Hakan Yavuz for making available the records of their conversations and e-mail conversations on this matter.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Jay Logan Rogers, ‘Scholar Questions Motives, Perpetrators of Armenian Genocide,’ *The Daily Utah Chronicle*, 27 March 2006.

historiographies by cross-examining their arguments, in particular, their ways of using quotations about ‘genocide,’ citing references to primary and secondary resources, and comparing these approaches with the work of other eyewitnesses and scholars.

This book tackles the question not of the scale of Armenian suffering but of ‘the premeditation thesis.’ Although there are wide discrepancies with regard to the total number of victims, at least both camps acknowledge that hundreds and thousands of Armenians lost their lives during the deportation. Thus, Lewy focuses on the dispute over the cause of Armenian massacres by inspecting the way in which Armenians and Turks have offered contradictory or competing accounts. By attempting ‘a historical reconstruction of the events in question—to show what can be known as established fact, what must be considered unknown as of today, and what will probably have to remain unknowable’ (p. x). He concludes that an Ottoman intent to organize the annihilation of Armenians cannot be determined with the evidence that so far has become available to scholars. Thus, he rejects the term ‘genocide’ to describe the mass killing of Armenians, while admitting the indirect responsibility of the Ottoman local government officials for the loss of life of a large number of Armenians.

Lewy divides his book into four parts. First, he introduces readers briefly to the history of the relationship between the Ottoman Empire and its Armenian subjects, the development of the Armenian revolutionary movement, the acceleration of tensions between Armenians and Turks that led to the Armenian massacres of 1894–96, and the impact of the Young Turks’ seizure of power from Sultan Abdulhamid in 1908. In this period, the deterioration of the socioeconomic environment in the Empire awakened the national consciousness of Armenians, most of whom were peasants and oppressed by their Kurdish neighbors, the latter of whom resisted control by the authorities. In addition, the infusion of Western and revolutionary ideas through European books, education, and missionaries accelerated the rise of Armenian identity. Furthermore, an economic prosperity gap in towns between Turks and the comparatively wealthier Armenians promoted feelings of enmity against the latter (although a large number of Armenian peasants were not better off than Turks in the countryside). For these reasons, the Ottoman authorities, who had perceived the Armenians as ‘the loyal community’ to the Empire began to suspect them as a people ‘in league with foreign enemies’ (p. 7), namely Russia. Among Armenians, a group of revolutionaries began to dream of the revival of historic Armenia; they created the image of Armenians as dedicated patriots while depicting Turks as the villainous ‘Other’, in order to mobilize the Armenian masses. These growing tensions culminated in the intercommunal explosion of 1895–96 in which a series of mass killings of Armenians took place. When the Young Turks came to power in 1908, the suspicion about Armenians had become more widespread in the government, owing to the successive loss of Ottoman territory in the Balkan Peninsula. Since then, what Lewy calls ‘a siege mentality’ was pervasive among the Ottoman authorities.

Part II includes the crucial chapters that scrutinize two differing views among the Armenians who argue for the genocide thesis and one Turkish version of historiographies. The first group of Armenians claims that the large number of Armenian victims does support the existence of a state organized plan of annihilation prepared by the Young Turks, who intended to achieve their ideological goal to homogenize Turkish society. In order to prove the premeditation thesis, Armenian historians offer several manifestations of Ottoman premeditation: a secret speech allegedly delivered by Talaat Pasha encouraging the use of the army to eliminate the Armenian population; the role of Ziya Gökalp, sociologist and ideologue of Turkish nationalism, in the planning for the eradication of the Armenian

population; the so-called ‘Ten Commandments of the Committee of Union and Progress’ indicating Turkish intent and planning of the deportation, extermination, and forced conversion of Christian Armenians to Islam; and the Young Turks secret February 1915 meeting at which the extermination plan is alleged to have been formulated.

The second group of Armenians believe that the claim of Turkish premeditation is substantiated by the following factors: *The Memoirs of Naim Bey*, a Turkish official whose account was published in Armenian, French, and English by Aram Andonian and others; the proceedings of special court-martials that the Turkish government convened in 1919–20 to try the Young Turks; and the vicious role and involvement of the *Teskilat-i Mahsusa* (Special Organization) in the Armenian massacres. Authors such as Vahakn N. Dadrian, a sociologist who is known as the theoretician of the Armenian genocide thesis, generally regard these cases as sufficient evidence for the premeditation thesis.⁶ However, Lewy is skeptical about the reliability of this evidence and tests its consistency by referring to governmental documents of European countries as well as other historians’ accounts, including those of Armenian scholars. Also, he criticizes the manner in which Armenian authors rely on the consequences of the Armenian deportation to prove that the Young Turk leaders had prior plans for total destruction of the Armenian population. He argues that ‘objective results are not the same as subjective intent’ (p. 53). Furthermore, Lewy claims that the Armenian side ignores the multiplicity of cases in the tragedy by playing down the roles of starvation and disease, which afflicted not only the Armenian deportees but also Muslim Turks.

Lewy also finds problems in the Turkish version of the stories. Turkish historians maintain, first of all, that the Ottoman government needed to implement the relocation of the Armenians because of the seditious movements among the Armenian revolutionaries and their collaboration with the invading Russian troops. Turks contend that the initial impulse for this affair came about as a result of activities by the Armenian revolutionaries, especially the Hunchaks, which committed murders of Muslims in order to force the Ottoman government to suppress the Armenians so as to restore social order. The intent of these Armenian revolutionaries was to provoke excessive measures by the government, and these in turn would prompt the intervention of European countries to save the Armenians. This ‘provocation thesis’ constitutes the main pillar of Turkish historiography on the massacres (pp. 16–17). In effect, the Turkish historians deny that the Ottoman government had any a priori intent of destroying the Armenian communities. Rather, the military measures and the relocation of the Armenians were necessitated by the Armenian threat to the integrity and security of the Empire. This provocation thesis has been rejected by Armenian historians who claim that the Armenians were innocent victims of atrocities committed by the Turks. A second argument of Turkish historians is that the government tried to prevent the excessive measures of local officials that resulted in the killing of Armenians. Third, Turkish historians claim that it was not only the Armenians but also many Muslims who lost their lives in inter-communal wars. One of the main reasons for the Armenian relocation has been attributed to the rebellion in Van, which was a center of Armenian revolutionaries. The Turkish historians argue that this uprising was prepared in order to assist the Russian invasion, while the Armenians claim that this was necessary to protect the Armenian population from the deportation. What is striking to readers in this

⁶ See, for example, Dadrian’s long response to Lewy posted at Dhimmi Watch, ‘Vahakn Dadrian responds to Guenter Lewy,’ <http://www.jihadwatch.org/dhimmiwatch/archives/008594.php>

debate is that both sides provide one-sided arguments. As Lewy points out, ‘Both Turks and Armenians have accused each other of horrible crimes while at the same time denying or minimizing the misdeeds committed by their own forces’ (p. 116). The Turkish side tends to dodge the responsibility of atrocities against Armenians by shifting the blame from the Ottoman government to ‘the civil war cause.’ On the other hand, Armenian authors ignore the Armenian revolutionary movements’ relationship with Russia and the threat this relationship posed to the Ottoman government.

Part III of Lewy’s book aims to clarify the gap in our knowledge of the Armenian suffering. Lewy ‘reconstructs’ a history of this tragedy by strictly distinguishing the confirmed facts from the mere assertions of historians who fail to support their claims with substantive evidence. In this process he attempts to determine how the government decided on the deportation plan, how it was implemented in different regions and cities, who were responsible for the massacres, and how many people died. The chapters in this section reveal the diversity in the levels of Armenian suffering and the variation of the degree of implementing the deportation. This picture seems to imply that the deportation of the Armenian population was not carried out in a systematic or well-organized manner, which would be necessary for the purpose of total destruction of the Armenian community. Further, the responsibility for the mass killing of Armenians was confused and dispersed among several actors, including Kurds, wartime gendarmerie, local officials, and others. In terms of the number of victims, different authors have generated different estimations. It is also difficult to determine the precise death toll because we have neither an exact figure for the prewar Armenian population nor an accurate count for the number of survivors. It also is impossible to distinguish the number killed by Turks and Kurds and those who perished due to starvation and disease (p. 240).

After a critical examination of the Armenian and Turkish historiographies, Lewy proposes an alternative explanation (pp. 252–57). He argues that ‘it was possible for the country to suffer an incredibly high death toll without a premeditated plan of annihilation’ (p. 253) for several reasons. First, the Ottoman government, despite its willingness, failed to arrange an orderly process of relocation of Armenians because of its institutional ineptness. The systematic and organized relocation of tens of thousands of Armenians proved beyond the ability of the Ottoman government. Food shortages and epidemic diseases which the authorities could not prevent or control exacerbated the environment for Armenians during the course of the deportation. Additionally, the government could not provide adequate protective measures for the Armenian deportees from hostile Kurds, Circassians and others. According to Lewy, these severe conditions and the inability of the Ottoman government to provide protection resulted in the high death toll of the Armenians. Thus, while he concedes that the government bears responsibility to a certain extent for the outcome, he emphasizes that it is the government’s ineptness rather than a premeditated plan to exterminate the Armenians that caused the Armenian tragedy.

One of the contributions of Lewy’s work is that he clarifies what we have learned as confirmed facts from both the Armenian and Turkish historians. Without leaning to either side, he accepts evidence and arguments that are substantiated by other sources. His neutrality becomes obvious in Part IV, which discusses the politicization of the controversy over the Armenian massacres. He argues that the Armenian side’s argument of the premeditation thesis lacks authentic documentary evidence and suffers from a logical fallacy (p. 250). But he also criticizes the Turkish side for distorting the historical fact by translating the Armenian massacres into mere ‘excesses’ or ‘intercommunal warfare’ (p. 252).

Lewy's book also tells us how historiography can go beyond objective facts: It is constructed on the basis of what people want to remember and what information they recollect from the past. He points out that each side intentionally has forgotten historical settings that are not consistent with their theses. Such simplification of a complex historical reality and disregard of crucial evidence make it impossible to 'yield a more nuanced picture' (p. x). The personal memories of individual Turks and Armenians are not separable from the collective social memory of their communities because people can be confident about the accuracy of their remembrances only when their own memory is confirmed by others' remembrances.⁷ The politicization of the Armenian massacres, then, facilitates the transmission of collective memories from generation to generation; Armenian campaigns for the recognition of the genocide and the airing of the Turkish government's argument have functioned as mechanisms by which both Armenians and Turks are reminded of the past and their distinctive identities.⁸ The current rigid adherence of both sides to their historiographies thus is likely to lead to the deepening of the gap between them, not pave a way to closing this gap. For this reason, Lewy suggests that historians ought to keep the door of research open for further exploration of the Armenian massacres. Political confirmation of the Armenian massacres as historically established genocide, he argues, will deprive future historians of opportunities to start collaborative research for the advancement of common understanding grounded in historical facts rather than propaganda.

Lewy's study carefully disaggregates the series of historical events into regions and actors. Lewy knows that an attempt to put all the aspects of the Armenian massacres into a single picture as a whole ignores the variation of stories. In this tragedy, there is a diversity of experiences lived by each group of people. Therefore, Lewy adopts a method with which he constructs his own historiography by aggregating different local incidents and experiences. The Armenian and Turkish historians take the opposite approach. They look into the events from the pictures that they want to see. In this process, evidence and incidents that may disconfirm their theses are likely to be ignored in their analytic frameworks.

There is one point that I find unsatisfactory in Lewy's book: he refrains from making his definition of genocide explicit while claiming that 'the attempt to decide whether the Armenian massacres in Ottoman Turkey fit . . . definitions [of genocide] strikes me as of limited utility' (p. xii). I agree that what constitutes 'genocide' and to what extent we should restrict ourselves to the definition written into the Genocide Convention of the United Nations are controversial issues. For example, genocide for some scholars is equivalent only to the Holocaust while there is another argument that genocide includes a variety of ethnic cleansings. Also I concede that the debate whether the Armenian tragedy was genocide has caused unfruitful and never-ending exchanges of acrimony between Armenians and Turks. However, this debate still is of substantive importance because parliaments in several countries have proclaimed this tragedy to be an instance of genocide. For example, in the fall of 2006 the French parliament adopted a bill that criminalizes the denial of the Armenian genocide. What is relevant to Lewy's argument is that the politicians who vote on these resolutions are influenced exclusively by their ethnic

⁷ For the relationship between individual memory and collective memory, see Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1980).

⁸ Paul Connerton discusses how social memory is produced and transcends generational boundaries; see Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

Armenian constituents, and they rely only on an Armenian version of the history of 1915. The politicians are not without their own prejudices, and their determinations never can substitute for actual history. In the French parliament, Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin argued that it is ‘not a good thing to legislate on issues of history and of memory,’ but his caution was ignored.⁹ These resolutions spotlight politics, not the truth, and are therefore debatable. Furthermore, historians need to clarify the concept of genocide when they conduct comparative analysis of massacres in order to prevent conceptual proliferation. As Lewy notes, genocide is used as a term of moral opprobrium as well as a legal concept (p. 262). Thus, whether scholars find documentary evidence that proves or disproves the premeditation thesis in the future, the debate still will continue without any agreement between the two sides on the definition of the term genocide.

Despite my disagreement with Lewy on this point, *The Armenian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey* is an important accomplishment by a political scientist who has worked on comparative studies of genocidal issues. He not only spells out many inconsistencies, illogical reasoning, and presentation of unauthentic historical documents appearing in the Armenian and Turkish accounts but also identifies where researchers need to go for further enquiry.

The attack against Lewy’s book and the controversy created by Peter Balakian and others who share his views indicate the problem of academic freedom of speech with respect to events associated with the Turkish-Armenian conflicts. There are coordinated efforts by Armenian NGOs and scholars to silence and suppress different interpretations about the events of 1915. Simultaneously, free speech about the Armenian massacres also is denied in Turkey. For example, Orhan Pamuk, the Turkish novelist who won the 2006 Nobel Prize for Literature, has been charged with insulting ‘Turkishness’ on account of his critical comments about the way the Turkish government treats both Armenians (in the past) and Kurds (currently). In an interview with a Swiss newspaper, Pamuk stated that ‘30,000 Kurds and 1 million Armenians were killed in these lands [Ottoman Turkey and Republican Turkey] and almost nobody but me dares to talk about it.’ His comment triggered the fury of Turkish nationalists who accused him as insulting the Turkish national character. Subsequently, some Armenian groups, without paying close attention to what Pamuk said, presented his statement as an ‘acceptance of Armenian genocide.’ The Turkish media have portrayed Pamuk as facing criminal charges on suspicion of violating the Turkish penal code, which bans insulting the Republic, the Turkish Grand National Assembly, and other state institutions. His real intention behind the statement was misunderstood or misrepresented by both the Turkish and Armenian media. Pamuk never said that what Armenians experienced in Ottoman Turkey was genocide. Rather, he intended to raise the issue of freedom of speech in Turkey. He said to BBC that ‘What happened to the Ottoman Armenians in 1915 was a major thing that was hidden from the Turkish nation; it was a taboo. But we have to be able to talk about the past.’¹⁰ In the end, the case against Pamuk was dropped in January 2006, but public reaction against his quotation indicated that any reference to the Armenian issue may result in criminal charges in Turkey.

⁹ ‘French in Armenia “Genocide” row’ (2006) *BBC NEWS*, 12 October, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6042730.stm>

¹⁰ Sarah Rainsford, ‘Author’s Trial Set to Test Turkey,’ *BBC NEWS*, 14 December 2005, <http://bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4527318.stm>

In the final analysis, Lewy's book indeed has become like dynamite to both sides by pointing out the shortcomings of both Turkish and Armenian scholarship and revealing the difficulty of objective debate on the Armenian tragedy. It is very unproductive for diaspora Armenians to turn the Armenian genocide thesis into a source of identity.¹¹ The shift prevents contextualization of the events and turns them into mythological facts outside of any rational inquiry. Lewy tried to de-sacralize the Armenian thesis by subjecting it to rational inquiry. Lastly, it is also important to mention that Lewy's book has been relatively favored in Turkey despite his criticism of Turkish historiography on the Armenian massacres and the failure of Turkish historians to challenge the official view endorsed by the state. Since its publication, the Turkish media has presented Lewy's book as a new scholarly work that supports the Turkish explanation of the Armenian killings, but the media also has ignored Lewy's disapproval of the Turkish historiography.¹² It seems that the Turkish side is satisfied with Lewy's conclusion that the Armenian killing cannot be confirmed as a genocide 'as of now,' even though he criticizes Turkish historiography. In other words, Lewy's book once again has illuminated that both sides simply are concerned whether the Armenian massacre in 1915 was or was not a genocide, an issue which Lewy has problematized in his work.

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¹¹ Steven Eke reports that the genocide theme has provided a sense of national identity for dispersed Armenians and argues that it is the Armenian diaspora rather than Armenia the country that works for international recognition of the Armenian massacres as genocide; see Steven Eke 'Armenian Diaspora Bound by Killings,' BBC NEWS, 12 October 2006 at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6044682.stm>

¹² Many newspaper articles portrayed Lewy as if he helps the Turkish side on the Armenian issue while ignoring his critique of the Turkish version of historiography. See for example, 'ABD'li Profesör, Ermeni soykırımı iddialarını yalanladı,' *Zaman*, 28 August 2005; 'Lewy: Soykırım belgeleri kuşkulu,' *Radical*, 30 August 2005; and 'Lewy'ye göre soykırım kanıtı yok, kuşku var,' *Sabah*, 30 August 2005.