

Ottoman Cataclysm: Total War, Genocide and Distant Futures in the Middle East (1915–1917)

Veranstalter: Project Cluster „Ottoman Cataclysm“, 2012-2023; Hans-Lukas Kieser, University of Zurich / University of Newcastle; Kerem Öktem, University of Graz; Maurus Reinkowski, University of Basel

Datum, Ort: 28.10.2015–31.10.2015, Zurich

Bericht von: Thomas Schmutz, Newcastle; Seyhan Bayraktar, San Francisco

The symposium was held in Zurich and consisted of seven panels and three roundtables including the screening of a documentary. A group of internationally renowned historians discussed the demise of the Ottoman Empire which is a breaking moment in the history of the Middle East and Europe taking its ethnic, religious and social fabric in the 1910s into consideration. The breakdown of the Ottoman Empire is also a period of massive destruction, human suffering, and squandered opportunities for peace. The conference discussed current debates on World War I in the Ottoman world and possible impacts of the revisionist historiography on the history-writing of wider Europe and the Middle East.

In his keynote lecture DONALD BLOXHAM (Edinburgh) put the Armenian genocide in the broader context of geopolitical conflict and mass murder in what he called a „greater Europe“ or „western Eurasia“. Bloxham referred from the „eastern crisis“ of 1875-78 to the present. This period is linked across time and space in terms of extreme violence in states established in the wake of Ottoman collapse. He focused on the ethno-religious violence, considering in turn the violent expulsion of Muslims from the Balkans, the murder of Christians in the Ottoman Empire, and then the murder of Jews across Christian Europe under Nazi influence. The final part of his lecture was devoted to considering American-led intervention in post-Ottoman spaces.

The first panel focused on historiographical issues on the Ottoman World War I. MUSTAFA AKSAKAL (Georgetown) argued that some of the key topics that are in the center of research for decades now were already raised in the first accounts of contemporary

writers. Aksakal concluded that this awareness was in striking contrast to the silence with regard to the Armenian fate. NAZAN MAKSUDYAN (Istanbul) presented new approaches in social history. The interest in the non-military and non-lethal aspects of First World War has led to an opening of new research fields. One important emerging area of analysis for Maksudyan are surviving children as primary witnesses of the war. ELISABETH THOMPSON (Columbia) talked about the new scholarship on Arab historiography and revealed a shift in the scholarly approaches from the level of the political elites to the level „of those who experienced“ it. Thompson also criticized the widespread notion of Arab history as a shift away from Ottoman loyalty to Arab Nationalism and argued that Arab political articulation of the period was decidedly inclusive as the debates surrounding the Damascus Conference of 1920 would show.

EROL KÖROĞLU (Istanbul) talked about the role of the triumph of Gallipoli in Turkey's nationalist history writing and how popular literature developed to a vehicle of nationalist propaganda. In contrast to the underrepresentation of WWI in Turkish collective memory of modern Turkey, the Gallipoli War has played an exceptionally important role as the harbinger of the Turkish Independence War. DANIEL SEGESSER (Bern) added a transnational perception of the commemoration of Gallipoli. By analyzing monuments, places and streets names, he pointed to the crucial role of this narrative in Australia and New Zealand. In contrast, India, France and Britain have no similar use of this narrative in their collective memory.

PETER HOLQUIST (Philadelphia) explained the impact of Russian strategy and policies on the Caucasus front. He stressed that there is also a Russian „cataclysm“. Holquist argued that Russia did not orchestrate a unique master plan for the conduct of war in the Caucasus but practiced rather „ad hoc“ policies when occupying Eastern Anatolia. Russian military officials were sensitive to the ethnic problems in the occupied regions, but had to adapt to the social reality of the war. RAYMOND KÉVORKIAN (Paris) focused on the geographical aspects

of the deportation of the Armenians. He emphasized the role of statistical information and data about the deportations. Although there are many micro-historical analyses, historians fear to oversimplify the events by summarizing the data. We should combine this data to the big picture in order to see new patterns. One example for this is the history of Ottoman resistance towards genocidal policy. MEHMET POLATEL's (Istanbul) key issue was the murdering of Armenians and seizure of their properties in the case of Bitlis region during the genocide. In this region, where most of the Christian inhabitants were killed on site, the Ottoman government collaborated with local actors including tribe leaders and sheiks due to its lack of capacity in the region. Local actors had a relative autonomy in committing the genocidal policy of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP). This observation was shared by HILMAR KAISER (Phnom Penh) with his case study of the Angora province. There, resistance against the extermination of Armenians in summer 1915 was comparably broad based. Top civil and military officials worked for the survival of Armenians as did urban notables and Muslim clerics in a rural area. Although they adhered to divergent political, legal, and religious concepts, they agreed that the CUP was acting outside of the law.

NAMIK KEMAL DİNÇ (Istanbul) who has conducted a major oral history project in Diyarbakir, talked about how vividly the Armenian genocide is remembered and that it has been transmitted through four generations. Dinc stressed that this living memory stands in striking contrast to the fact that 1915 genocide has been silenced and sidelined in Kurdish historiography and politics. He argued that an actor-centered approach would not only reveal actual perpetratorship and responsibility but also continuities in terms of dominance and suppression of the local Kurdish population after 1915 themselves. TALİN SUCİYAN (Munich) also touched on the issue of silence and asked whether survivors can speak at all when they are not heard. She pointed to the existence of post-genocide Armenian sources that were written by survivors between the 1920s and 1940s and the negligence of historians of Ottoman his-

tory to take these accounts into consideration. Suciyan named the various efforts of Armenians to deal with the aftermath of the genocide in a denying society and to survive culturally.

Roundtable 1 focused on new debates in the research of the Armenian genocide. The discussants stressed that the Armenian genocide has undergone a process of normalization in the intellectual debate. It can be discussed independently from real-political sensitiveness and power struggles. This led to new research questions such as the connections and differences between the Armenian genocide and the Shoah – as MARGARET LAVINIA ANDERSON (Berkeley) stressed – as well as the continuities in terms of German officers involved in both acts of mass crimes. STEFAN IHRIG (Jerusalem) argued that the new Turkish state and Atatürk were highly respected and perceived as a role-model along „völkisch“ lines by high ranking Nazi actors.

Daniel Segesser opened the legal perspective. He elaborated the fact that the crimes committed in the Ottoman Empire during the First World War were not in the focus of Western jurists, since cases in France and Belgium were much closer to the horizon of their experience and included victims of Western armies. After the war, it was Germany that concerned the important war trials. Segesser explained the special treatment of the Ottoman Empire with the unique history of international law and unequal treaties.

VALENTINA CALZOLARI (Geneva) talked about the literary responses to the Armenian genocide. Calzolari stressed that the act of writing was a means of resilience. The immediate literary responses did not pose the question of why the genocide happened, but the fact *that* it happened and *how* it happened. Staying alive meant the burden to bear witness to the event and the duty to disclose it.

YUVAL BEN BASSAT (Haifa) talked about enciphered telegrams. They allow us to examine some of the most controversial issues in the national historiographies of the Levant, in particular the Jewish and Arab narratives. Ben Bassat analyzed the relationship between Cemal Pasha and the Jewish community. As a case study, the cities of Jaffa and Gaza show the internal communication of the Ot-

toman army and the crisis management of Cemal facing the British advancement. DOTAN HALEVY (New York) underlined Ben Bassats statement that Cemal remains controversial. Zionist correspondences regarding the evacuation of the two cities were constantly checkered with the fear from an „Armenian Fate“. Despite the fact that Cemal became more sensitive in March 1917, his treatment of the Ottoman Jews was guided by military and not political reasoning.

Panel 6 dealt with high ranking perpetrators of the Armenian genocide. OZAN OZAVCI (Paris) analysed how Djavid Pasha referred to the annihilation politics in his diaries. Although he condemned the murder of the Armenians, he remained silent and inactive. UĞUR ÜNGÖR (Amsterdam) talked about Şükrü Kaya and his role in the Turkish Republic's state-building process. He argued that Kaya's involvement in the Armenian genocide and his later role in the suppression of Kurds in the Republican era show how violence was used as a source of statecraft. HANS-LUKAS KIESER (Zurich) concentrated on Talat Pasha, the top architect of the genocide. Kieser's approach to Talat Pasha considered both his interaction with the imperial Komitajis and Germany. JAN ERIK ZÜRCHER (Leiden) revisited the question of continuity at the leadership level between the Unionists and the Kemalist Republic by analyzing the biographies and the intricate professional and personal relationship of key perpetrators such as Şükrü Kaya, Abdulhalik Renda, Kazım Özalp and Tahsin Uzer.

Roundtable 2 consisted of a book discussion about « World War I and the end of the Ottomans » (I.B. Tauris, 2015). The actors, the focus on the years of « cataclysm » and the contextualization of this book within the series of publications of the centenary lay in the center of the interest. The aim of the book is not only to focus on a short period of radicalization that changed the Middle East but also on the often forgotten dimension of mass murder and genocide within the Great War.

The Dersim genocide of 1938 and the commemorations of the commemorations during the centenary of the Armenian genocide in April 2015 in Turkey were the last two topics of the conference. NEZAHAT GÜN-

DOĞAN and KAZIM GÜNDOĞA's (both Istanbul) documentary „Children of the Monastery“ deals with the genocide of the Alevis and Armenians of Dersim in 1938 and the experience of the surviving children. The documentary showed how Armenian children grew up in Turkish or Kurdish families, converting to Islam or to Alevism without their later families knowing anything about it.

The conference ended with a debate on the contested remembrance in Turkey – particularly with regard to the commemorations on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the genocide in April 2015. SEYHAN BAYRAKTAR (San Francisco) critically addressed this memory boom that – although having considerably increased since the early 2000s – has not challenged the state's denial politics. She argued that the civil societal engagement in memory discourse has overshadowed the need for a formal acknowledgement and has not lead to a paradigmatic revision of the denial politics, either. AYSEGUL ALTINAY (Istanbul) in contrast stressed the diversification of voices and the growing political activism within Turkey with regard to the Armenian genocide over the last 15 years. Altinay gave a vivid account of various commemoration efforts in Istanbul as well as in Eastern Turkey. SOSSIE KASPARIAN (Lancaster) asked how the centenary has challenged and altered the concept of the genocide and its continuing legacies. For her, 100th anniversary indicated a process of normalization where the genocide has finally shifted from being constructed as something controversial and contested to a key case study for intersecting fields of research.

In the context of the centenary, this conference showed the blindspots still prevailing in much of the academic debate about the First World War, Gallipoli and subtopics of military and political history concerning the years 1914–1918. The Ottoman cataclysm plays a marginal role in a history writing that is eurocentric and neglects the role, weight and the legacy of the Ottoman Empire on the Middle East. A critical account is needed that addresses the traditional narrative on the First World War.

Conference Overview:

Introduction by Andreas Jucker, Dean of the Faculty of Arts (University of Zurich)

Keynote speech (public lecture) by Donald Bloxham (Edinburgh): Geopolitics, ethnopolitics, mass murder: The Ottoman Cataclysm and western Eurasia's long twentieth century of violence

Panel 1: The Ottoman World War I and its historiography

Chair: Margaret Anderson (Berkeley)

Discussant: Erik J. Zürcher (Leiden)

Mustafa Aksakal (Washington D.C.): New scholarship, new directions

Nazan Maksudyan (Istanbul): New approaches of social history

Elizabeth Thompson (Charlottesville VA): Arab historiography

Panel 2: Çanakkale 1915. Foundations myths of Young Turks, Kemalists, Australians and neo-Ottomanists

Chair: Philip Dwyer (Newcastle NSW)

Discussant: Elizabeth Thompson (Charlottesville VA)

Erol Köroğlu (Istanbul): The triumph of Gallipoli, 1915. Uses and misuses in Turkey

Daniel Marc Segesser (Bern): Short input on myths and memories of the Gallipoli War in transnational perspective

Panel 3: The Armenian genocide, the Kurds and post-genocide Turkey

Chair: Maurus Reinkowski (Basel)

Panel 3a: The Caucasian front and the Armenian relocations

Peter Holquist (Philadelphia): The impact of Russian strategy and Russian policies on the Caucasus Front

Raymond Kévorkian (Paris): La planification des deportations. Nouvelles conclusions

Discussant: Uğur Ü. Üngör (Utrecht)

Panel 3b: The anti-Armenian policy in the eastern and central provinces

Mehmet Polatel (Istanbul): Robbing and murdering Christians. Local actors, jihad and the

state in the eastern provinces

Hilmar Kaiser (Phnom Penh): Between massacre and resistance: Officers, bureaucrats and Muslim notables in Angora province during the extermination of Armenians

Discussant: Yuval Ben-Bassat (Haifa)

Panel 3c: From genocide to „post-genocide“

Namık Kemal Dinç (Istanbul) (in Turkish, paper transl. in English): Sözlü tarihe göre Diyarbakır'da soykırımın toplumsal örgütlenmesinde aktörler/ Kurdish responsibility and oral history

Talin Suciyan (Munich): Another historiography for Turkey: Can the survivor speak?

Discussant: Kerem Öktem (Graz)

Roundtable 1, Public Debate: The Armenian genocide: New debates on Turkey, Germany, the Shoah, and the post-Ottoman Middle East

Chair: Dominik J. Schaller (Zurich)

With Hülya Adak (Istanbul); Margaret Anderson (Berkeley); Donald Bloxham (Edinburgh); Stefan Ihrig (Jerusalem); Hans-Lukas Kieser (Zurich)

Panel 4: How to deal with crimes against humanity?

Chair: Peter Holquist (Philadelphia)

Discussants: Donald Bloxham (Edinburgh), Raymond Kévorkian (Paris)

Daniel Marc Segesser (Bern): „Delendum est Imperium Ottomanorum“: War Crimes, Crimes against Humanity and the end of the Ottoman Empire

Hülya Adak (Istanbul): Denial as a contemporary reaction to the Great Crime

Valentina Calzolari (Geneva): Armenian literary responses to Metz Yeghern

Panel 5: Famine in Greater Syria, precarity in Palestine, „Israel's first foundation“

Chair: Mustafa Aksakal (Washington D.C.)

Discussant: Maurus Reinkowski (Basel)

Yuval Ben Bassat (Haifa): Enciphered Ottoman wartime correspondence on Palestine: A challenge to the common national narratives?

Dotan Halevy (New York): A tale of two (evacuated) cities: Gaza and Jaffa in March 1917

Panel 6: Engaged in a rightist revolution? Political biographies and visions of the future among members of the Committee Union and Progress

Chair: Kerem Öktem (Graz)

Discussant: Mustafa Aksakal (Washington D.C.)

Ozan Ozavcı (Paris): Mehmet Djavid Bey: A Liberal Unionist?

Uğur Ü. Üngör (Amsterdam): Şükrü Kaya

Hans-Lukas Kieser (Zürich): Talat Pasha and Germany

Erik J. Zürcher (Leiden): The parallel lives of Kazım Özalp, Şükrü Kaya and Abdulhalik Renda

Roundtable 2, Public Debate: World War I and the end of the Ottomans. Book discussion

Chair: Nada Boškowska (Zürich)

With Margaret L. Anderson (Berkeley); Erik J. Zürcher (Leiden); Mustafa Aksakal (Washington D.C.); Kerem Öktem (Graz, editor), Maurus Reinkowski (Basel, editor)

Panel 7: An island of resistance? Dersim between the Armenian genocide and the Tertele of 1937–38

Chair and discussant: Uğur Ü. Üngör (Amsterdam)

Kazım and Nezahat Gündoğan (Istanbul): Screening of the documentary film *Manastırın Çocukları / Children of the Monastery* (75 min.)

Roundtable 3, Public Debate: Turkey in the shadow of 1915: A year of contested remembering

Chair: Kerem Öktem (Graz)

With Ayşe Gül Altınay (Istanbul); Seyhan Bayraktar (San Francisco); Sossie Kasbarian (Lancaster)

Tagungsbericht *Ottoman Cataclysm: Total War, Genocide and Distant Futures in the Middle East (1915–1917)*. 28.10.2015–31.10.2015, Zurich, in: H-Soz-Kult 14.03.2016.