

Sammelrez: Relocation, banishment and migration in Armenia

Halaçoğlu, Yusuf: *Facts on the relocation of Armenians 1914-1918 [Ermeni tehirci ve gerçekler (1914-1918)]*. Ankara: Atatürk Kültür Dil ve Tarih Yük. Kur. - Turkish Historical Society 2002. ISBN: 975-16-1554-2; IX, 137 p., 42 p. Facsimiles

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Dialogue on history, responsibility, and truth is probably not possible with members of state-sponsored denial campaigns, because for these protagonists, national or state interests prevail over scholarly ethics – and these alone can and must be the ground for a dialogue. But, regarding the Armenian genocide in 1915-1916, the problem is that such denialist historiography is (partly) believed. For this reason alone, it needs to be scrutinized and, where necessary, contradicted and refuted. A large number of „banal“, not extreme, nationalists in Turkey, and of migrants in Europe, are still under the strong influence of nationalist agencies, whether state-sponsored or not. It is important to say that, as a fundamental recent change, some sustained, critical, „post-nationalist“ voices can now be heard in the Turkish media for the first time. The first free academic conference on the Armenian issue, however, which should have taken place on 25-27 May 2005 at the Bogaziçi University in Istanbul, has been „postponed“ in the last minute under massive threats by the Minister of Justice.

The two new books presented here attempt to establish the master narrative of an up-to-date national historiography on „what happened with the Armenians in 1915“.¹ They are exemplary of a much larger recent output from within and beyond state universities, and of many recent debates on state tele-

vision in Turkey. This is at the same time an occasion for scrutinizing some primary Turkish arguments that continue to block, in my eyes, a sincere perspective on the own history. Both books are written by or with the participation of Yusuf Halaçoğlu, the president of the Turkish Historical Society, and both are published by the Turkish Historical Society (TTK) in Ankara, in 2001 and 2004 respectively. The second book repeatedly refers to the first one. Both are regularly and martially presented as definitive weapons in a national campaign against the „propagandists“ of an Armenian genocide, a campaign that has been running at full power in recent months.

The first book is *Ermeni tehirci ve gerçekler (1914-1918)* [The deportation of the Armenians and the real facts]. An English version has been published in 2002 under the title *Facts on the relocation of Armenians 1914-1918*. My remarks refer to the Turkish original. It has a little more than a hundred pages, plus 42 pages with facsimiles of Ottoman state documents. There is no transcription or translation of these sources (in modern Turkish or English), only some references to them in the book. The book's main piece is Part II (pp. 47-84) which presents several Ottoman documents as „convincing proofs“ in the question about the realities of the *tehcir* (deportation). Halaçoğlu introduces them after having explained in the introduction (pp. 1-10) and Part I (pp. 11-46) how he understands Turco-Armenian history since the Middle Ages, and particularly during the late Ottoman period.

The first pages of the book tend to idealize the early Turco-Armenian relationship under „Turkish“ (Seljuk and Turkmen) rule. By contrast, Armenian behaviour in the 19th century is characterized as „fall“. The revealing expression „as we know“ (p. 11) is used to make the reply to the vital historical question – which is how to understand the Eastern Ques-

¹For scholarly narratives in German see Akçam, Taner, *Armenien und der Völkermord: die Istanbul Prozesse und die türkische Nationalbewegung*, Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1996, reprint 2004; and the introduction in the volumes Kieser, Hans-Lukas, and Schaller, Dominik (eds.), *Der Völkermord an den Armeniern und die Shoah / The Armenian Genocide and the Shoah*, Zürich: Chronos, 2002; Gust, Wolfgang (ed.), *Der Völkermord an den Armeniern 1915/16: Dokumente aus dem Politischen Archiv des deutschen Auswärtigen Amts*, Springe: Zu Klampen, 2005.

tion, and within it the Armenian Question – correspond with the well-known nationalist answer: the Eastern Question consisted of the problems caused by the systematic subversion of the Ottoman minorities through an unchanging imperialist European policy in order to divide the Ottoman state. The social evolution, the forces of change and the particular dynamics within the Empire and the Eastern provinces are not considered, the social earthquake of the anti-Armenian massacres in 1894–96 completely neglected. Those pogrom-like killings cost the lives of about 100'000 people, mostly men and boys; social envy, fear of an Armenian autonomy and, for the first time, an organized militant Islamism played an important role; the impunity of those mass crimes threw a deep shadow on the political culture in the 20th century.²

The Young Turks after 1908, and up to WWI, are shown as honest brokers, believing in Ottomanism and a multinational modern state. The strong völkisch Turkist movement after 1911, sponsored by the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), is not mentioned at all. The problems on the ground, among them the chronic insecurity of life and property, and particularly the unresolved agrarian question (Armenian land robbed during the pogroms of the 1890s or seized otherwise) are not touched upon. Emphasis is on Armenian „wickedness“: general disloyalty, the terrorism of the revolutionary groups (their Armenian victims are not mentioned), and the Armenian appeal to Europe, in 1913, to finally obtain the fulfilment of the security that article 61 of the 1878 Berlin Treaty had promised (e.g. in the province of Bitlis, Armenians were being murdered at the rate of twenty-seven per month, missionaries on the spot wrote in 1913). For Halaçoğlu, the international reform plan for the Eastern provinces, signed under pressure by the Ottoman government on 8 February, was nothing more than a Russian plot to the end of the annexation of Eastern Anatolia (pp. 24–31). Russia's partial invasion of that region in 1915 is seen as proof of this; Enver Pasha's, the minister of war's, previous crucial decision, in autumn 1914, to attack Russia, disappears from the picture.

In the summary of WWI and the *tehcir* (deportation) itself, I am again struck by what

is omitted: there is nothing on the decision makers in the CUP's Central Committee; no word on the Special Organisation linked to them; no critical assessment of Enver's completely failed winter campaign against Russia and the pan-Turkist dreams behind it; no consideration of how, after this, the war on the Eastern front (Eastern Anatolia and Northern Iran) was brutalized; no indication of the systematic Turkish Muslim „nationalization“ in Anatolia in terms of economy, state, and demography (resettlement policy) since 1913. Instead of all this, there is again only „Armenian wickedness“: i.e. treason (sympathy and cooperation with the Allies, particularly Russia); desertion (the equally high number of Muslim deserters in Eastern Anatolia is not taken into account; pp. 33–35); and „rebellion“ (no consideration of the desperate situation of an Ottoman Armenian community massively targeted by its own state since spring 1915). There is, in short, the reiteration of the Young Turkish myth of the Armenian stab in the back of an otherwise victorious Ottoman war effort.

Against this background, Halaçoğlu touches on some Ottoman documents in Part II. The main *Leitmotiv* of his juxtaposition of sources seems to be the concern to defend the Ottoman decision makers, not the desire to work for a coherent, broad and convincing historical picture. Marginalizing the crucial difficulty of how to integrate accounts of witnesses on the ground (foreign teachers, doctors, consuls, engineers), there is only a categorically pejorative judgement on them (p. 66). The state being irreproachable, Kurds are responsible for the massacres of deportees. The author cites the example of an attack by Dersim Kurds on deportees, as mentioned in a document of the ministry of the interior (p. 60). True or not in this case, the readers are given the impression that the Dersim Kurds were the main perpetrators; they do not learn of Dersim's outstanding and unique role as an asylum for Armenians within Anatolia.

² See Verheij, Jelle, „Die armenischen Massaker von 1894–1896. Anatomie und Hintergründe einer Krise“, in Kieser, Hans-Lukas (ed.), *Die armenische Frage und die Schweiz (1896–1923) / La question arménienne et la Suisse (1896–1923)*, Zürich: Chronos, 1999, pp. 69–129.

The Ottoman state documents, as selected by the author, are not critically scrutinized and contextualized. One example: a telegram by Talat dated 29 August 1915 is presented as proof undermining the accusation that the Ottoman government attempted the extermination of the Armenians by means of *tehcir* (pp. 55–56, facsimile 4 in the annex). Certainly, this telegram to the governors of the Eastern and other provinces seems to literal believers of the text evidence of the ministry of the interior's responsible and sensible behaviour. It expresses concern about the security of the deportees, and of the government's intention to punish acts of violence, and its generosity in excluding from *tehcir* the families of soldiers, some artisans, and the Catholic and Protestant Armenians. Several arguments however make clear that this telegram's first, and probably only aim was propagandistic: a) In those provinces the „job“ was mostly done, Protestants and Catholics included, and, in Mamüretülaziz alone, more than 10,000 women and children had by that time been killed; Talat himself said at the end of August to German ambassador Hohenlohe that „la question arménienne n'existe plus“; b) Talat gave a German translation of the telegram to Hohenlohe on 2 September for publication in the European press. Hohenlohe, however, in his letter of 4 September to Reich Chancellor von Bethmann-Hollweg, advised against publication: the telegram's propagandistic purpose was too evident, its contradiction to uncensored news from the ground too flagrant.³ Halaçoğlu's readers do not find any critical contextualization of this kind.

Given the overwhelming Ottoman documentation, the author does not insist, of course, on the old argument that the deportation was made only in the regions on the frontline. He still mentions this argument, however, saying that the *tehcir* order was ultimately implemented in the other provinces of Anatolia too: why? Because the Armenians there cooperated with the enemy (p. 53). The author is not ready to see and accept the simple fact that being Armenian was the sole reason for being sent away. This also explains his confusion regarding the Catholic and Protestant Armenians: their exclusion from deportation would provide in his eyes

a good argument against „genocide“; in fact, however, most of them were also deported. Thus again the author's stereotypical argument: they worked against Ottoman security and were accordingly also included; if they were innocent, they would not have been deported (pp. 54 and 62–63). He uses the same argument to explain why Armenians converted to Islam were finally also deported (p. 64).

This book leaves the impression of an author, and probably many people with him, who are still willing to believe in the innocent goodwill of a state and its rulers they seemingly identify with, even if it was the pre-Republican Young Turkish regime of 90 years ago. Logically, reports of witnesses on the spot cannot really be taken into account in such a narrow narrative. If they are used at all, it is done very selectively. To mention only the example of the strong documentation by the American consul in Mamüretülaziz, Leslie Davis, on the mass murder of Armenian deportees in his province.⁴ Only a single passage of his reports is cited, and it is used as proof of acts of revenge by Armenians (p. 59).

Loyal submission to state and state propaganda sometimes leads to tragicomical statements in this book: the ministry of the interior's tax exemption of 4 August 1915 for the deportees is praised as a particularly humane measure instituted by a state that heroically had to bear the heavy financial burden of the *tehcir* itself (p. 67). In such a view, there is, of course, no consideration at all of the huge economic transfer, facilitated by the *tehcir*, of Armenian property to Muslims. The author even maintains that the *tehcir* was a provisional measure, that no property was stolen, and that on the contrary commissions duly cared for Armenian property left behind (p. 53). These are fictions, upheld against all evidence, even that to be found in the Ottoman state archive (e.g. in a telegram by Talat after his inspection of central and eastern Anatolia in December 1916, where he tells the Sherif of Mecca, Ali Haydar Pasha in Medina, of his

³ All these German documents are now on www.armenocide.de.

⁴ Davis, Leslie A., *The Slaughterhouse Province. An American Diplomat's Report on the Armenian Genocide, 1915-1917*, ed. Susan K. Blair, New Rochelle: Aris-tide D. Caratzas, 1989.

satisfaction with the economic transfer and the settlement of Muslims in the stead of the Armenians).⁵ The author, however, goes so far as to take pride in what he calls „perhaps the century's most systematic organisation of relocation“ (p. 86).

The second book *Ermeniler: Sürgün ve Göç* [The Armenians: Expulsion and Migration], written by Hikmet Özdemir, Kemal Çiçek, Ömer Turan, Ramazan Çalik, and Yusuf Halaçoğlu differs in one important respect from the first: it includes many references to foreign archives and international literature. It focuses even more than does the first book on statistical material; its explicit aim is to approach the topic „in its mathematical, i.e. demographical dimension“.

The consideration of a multiplicity of sources and literature could, in principle, have the potential for new insights. In the discussion, for instance, of the international reform plan of February 1914, an important passage is cited (p. 55), in which the American historian Roderic Davison evaluates the final plan as an appropriate and fair compromise.⁶ We continue to read and realize with some surprise that Davison's argument is not at all taken into account, and not commented upon. Worse, the authors write on the next page (p. 56, cf. p. 60) that WWI was the occasion Armenians were waiting for because it made possible the Russian invasion of Eastern Anatolia. This is a misrepresentation on various levels: what the Armenians on the ground longed for in 1914 was the implementation of the reform plan, and not war. War was what the CUP decided for in August 1914, because it believed it to be an occasion to achieve several goals, the suspension of the reform plan among them.

The main problem of the book remains the same as that of Halaçoğlu 2001: the incapacity, or unwillingness, to bring together facts and context, singular details and the whole picture. The main statement and message of a witness is completely dismissed; just one element is taken from a whole body of evidence and used as illustration for the book's own argument. The reason for the problem is again the outspoken premise, and promise to the public, to refute once and for all, with documents at hand, the vision of the *tehcir*

as a mass murder, not to say genocide. The authors see themselves confronted with „totalitarian propaganda techniques“ (p. 49): an abusive expression that indicates a problem of the authors.

Under the meaningful title „Anatomy of a Crime: The Turkish Historical Society's Manipulation of Archival Documents,“ the Turkish scholar in exile Taner Akçam has written a detailed critical review of Halaçoğlu 2004.⁷ I refer to this review and want to mention here just two additional observations on what I consider an inadmissible use of sources. The examples deal with the use of foreign sources that, were they taken integrally, actually form strong arguments counter to the authors' design.

A first example of distortion concerns the British historian A. J. Toynbee and his contemporary work on the crime against the Armenians. The authors cite a second hand source saying that Toynbee, during an interview in 1957, „blushingly“ admitted that all these early works [he wrote] were war propaganda and that he deeply repented this“. This is taken in the next sentence as an argument against all historical writing based on „biased“ contemporary witness reports. To the reader this may seem convincing, and an argument for the authors objective, „mathematical“ approach, as they emphasize it (pp. 175–176). But again the reader is given a completely false idea of the whole picture, i.e. of Toynbee's ongoing work and reflection on the Armenian genocide until his death. It is true that after WWI he made a big effort better to understand Turks and Turkey, by learning Turkish, travelling to Turkey, and even dining with Mustafa Kemal. But all this never made him change his principal, original view of the crime, as he put it on several occasions. As an old man, for example, he wrote (in the 1960s) that the „Ottoman Armenian deportees were

⁵ BOA (Ottoman Archive in Istanbul) DH._FR 70/180.

⁶ Davison, Roderic H., *Essays in Ottoman and Turkish history, 1774–1923: the impact of the West*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990, p. 196.

⁷ *Birikim* n° 191, Istanbul, March 2005, pp. 89–104 (in Turkish). Akçam's review has now been published in English as well: „Anatomy of a Crime: the Turkish Historical Society's Manipulation of Archival Documents,“ in: *Journal of Genocide Research* 7-2 (2005), S. 255–277.

not only robbed; the deportations were deliberately conducted with a brutality that was calculated to take the maximum toll of lives en route. This was the CUP's crime; and my study of it left an impression on my mind that was not effaced by the still more cold-blooded genocide, on a far larger scale, that was committed during the Second World War by the Nazi[s]."⁸

In a deliberation on numbers, an important German report writer, consul Walter Rössler in Aleppo, is cited (p. 106). He is taken as support for the authors' assertion that about 200'000 Armenians died „in the events taking place during WWI“. This is what the reader understands. In his letter of 20 December 1915 however, Rössler alerts Reich Chancellor von Bethmann Hollweg that the number of 800'000 Armenian dead, put forward by the British enemy, was a possible realistic number, and advised against publishing counterpropaganda on this topic. He drew the Chancellor's attention to the fact that the commissioner of the Ministry of the interior sent to Aleppo had openly declared that „we desire an Armenia without Armenians“. According to Rössler, up to 75 % of the people died during the deportation, as far as the Eastern provinces were concerned. He strongly invites his superior to consider the problems of German co-responsibility, and of long term political damage, if propaganda lies continued to be spread in the German press. The number and the message Rössler gives in his report therefore is diametrically opposed to the authors' design. Their distortion is this: they cut out one of Rössler's numerical deliberations – up to a maximum of half a million of Asia Minor's Armenians were not deported, and up to a maximum of half a million arrived alive in Syria –, without saying that Rössler started from an estimated (high) number of 2.5 million Armenians in Asia Minor. They distract 1 million (2 times 0.5 million) from the 1.5 million (which they take as the number of Asia Minor's Armenians), distract 4–500,000 Armenians more as supposedly being abroad, and thus conclude on a very low number of deaths.

An important point of the ongoing discussion presented in both books and not only them, is the underlying notion of genocide,

and with it the understanding of the Shoah, the Jewish genocide. The „Turkish notion“ of genocide (soykirim) is indeed not that of Raphael Lemkin, the author of the term of genocide, nor that of the UN convention of 1948, initiated by him. Against the background of a vulgarized vision of the Holocaust, genocide is taken as the murder of a whole ethnic group; genocide does not know exceptions (unless they be a few lucky survivors); and it takes place in a society that fed a deep hatred against the targeted group for centuries. Two years ago, I was surprised to read such an ahistorical description of the place of the Jews in German history in an article by the renowned Turkish historian İlber Ortaylı (recently made a director of the prestigious Topkapı Museum),⁹ and since then I have read it in other texts by Turkish authors, trying to exculpate the nationalist founders and members of the CUP. In such a vision genocide took only place once in history: during World War II against the Jews. Ortaylı took the supposed situation of the Jews in German history as a necessary precondition for genocide. By contrast, the situation of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire having been completely different, it was a priori absurd to speak of an Armenian genocide. Yet, in many respects the Germano-Jewish symbiosis was a history of success from the late 18th century until the Weimar Republic in the 1920s.

Historians can renounce the term genocide and describe its content by other linguistic means. An important reason though to use this neologism as a historical (not first juridical) term is its precise meaning in the con-

⁸Toynbee, Arnold J., *Acquaintances*, London: Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 242. In another text: „[...] in our times we have had to coin a new word, 'genocide', to describe a new kind of massacre. [...] I am old enough to remember the horror at the massacre of Armenian Ottoman subjects in the Ottoman empire in 1896 at the instigation of the infamous Sultan 'Abd-al-Hamid II. But this act of genocide was amateur and ineffective compared with the largely successful attempt to exterminate the Ottoman Armenians that was made during the First World War, in 1915, by the post-Hamidian régime of 'The Committee of Union and Progress', in which the principal criminals were Tala't and Enver.“ Toynbee, Arnold J., *Experiences*, London: Oxford University Press, 1969, p. 241–42.

⁹Ortaylı, İlber, „'Soykirim' iddialarının arkasındaki gerçek“, *Popüler Tarih* n° 35, July 2003, pp. 58–62.

text of contemporary history: it stands for the intended total or partial destruction of an ethnic group, be it by killing or other violent measures. Beyond the evidence that the case accords with the definition in the UN Convention, there is another strong argument for using the term genocide for the Armenian experience: the simple fact that the pioneers of genocide studies, first of all Raphael Lemkin himself, started out from this experience. Lemkin wrote in his autobiography: „In Turkey, more than 1,200,000 Armenians were put to death [...]. Then one day [in 1922], I read in the newspapers that all Turkish war criminals were to be released. I was shocked. [...] Why is the killing of a million a lesser crime than the killing of a single individual? I didn't know all the answers, but I felt that a law against this type of racial or religious murder must be adopted by the world.“¹⁰

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¹⁰ „Totally Unofficial Man: The Autobiography of Raphael Lemkin“, in Totten, Samuel, and Jacobs, Steven Leonhard (eds.), *Pioneers of Genocide Studies*, New Brunswick: Transaction Pub., 2002, pp. 365–99, here 371.