

HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

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Beginning in April 1915 the Ottoman Empire set out on a mission to completely eliminate the Armenian population under their rule. This was done in ways of mass deportation and murder. The entirety of Anatolia Turkey was basically free of Armenians by 1923. From 1915 to 1918 an estimated one and a half million Armenians were murdered, this is roughly three quarters of the original Armenian population in Anatolia Turkey. The remaining Armenian population was left homeless and stateless. Mehmed Talaat Pasha (Grand Vizier) is known as part of the Three Pashas who planned, instigated, and eventually executed the Armenian Genocide. Talaat, with the help of the other Pashas, Ismail Enver Pasha (Minister of War) and Ahmed Djemal Pasha (Minister of the Navy), created a hate for Armenians that ran through the veins of all Turks. The Three Pashas were leaders of the political party that lead the Ottoman Empire, the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), also known as the Young Turks. Using all of their resources and manipulating their citizens opinions and perceptions of the Armenian population, the Young Turks devastatingly destroyed whole cities and villages of their Armenian subjects.

After the first World War, hundreds of members of the Committee of Union and Progress were found guilty of crimes ranging from conduct of war aggression to mass murder. Many were found guilty. The Three Pashas fled and evaded conviction for their crimes. However, eventually in 1923, Turkey declared itself as a republic and all questions and remaining matters of resettlement and restitution were forgotten. This gave time for people to change and twist the story. Some historians truly believe that this was Turkey's only choice. They argue that the Armenians were rebellious and uncontrollable subjects that were rising up against their Empire. This is a bold opinion that many disagree with. Other historians, and the majority of humans,

believe that this was a genocide that was not deserved or necessary. The reasoning behind the Armenian Genocide for this side of the debate vary. Historians believe in a variety of causes from religion to nationalism to the desperation of a falling empire. The one thing that every historian believes is that Armenians were murdered in mass killings that wiped out over half of their population in Anatolia Turkey.

Selected Historians

Ronald Grigor Suny is the Charles Tilly Collegiate Professor of History at the University of Michigan, a retired Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, and a senior researcher at the National Research University, Higher School of Economics in St. Petersburg. Suny is known for his research on the Soviet Union, Post-Soviet Russia, and he founded the Armenian Studies Program at the University of Michigan. Suny has written many papers on Armenian history and has written two books on Armenians and how their experiences of the Armenian Genocide has shaped who they are as a nation, community, and culture. His book *They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else*, outlines the entire genocide. Suny systematically begins with causes leading to the genocide, explores the genocide itself, and the outcomes of the event. Suny is well aware of the repercussions of the Armenian Genocide and how it can be used as a tool to teach a very important lesson. His views have been known as the most unbiased and reasonable in regard to the Armenian Genocide topic. In this book, Suny explains that although people are quick to jump from guilty or innocent, cases like the Armenian Genocide could never be so simple. In fact, this is a complex situation that deserves to be explored thoroughly in order for humans to come to a balanced decision about the Armenian

Genocide. After reading, *They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else*, it would be hard for anyone to deny the genocide of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire.

Taner Akçam is the leading international authority on the Armenian Genocide. The Turkish-German historian, was one of the first academics in Turkey to recognize and discuss openly the Armenian Genocide. He graduated from the Middle East Technical University with a degree in economics, and received his PhD with his dissertation on the Armenian Genocide from the University of Hanover. He is currently the chair in Armenian Genocide Studies at Clark University. He has been arrested for his political views and protests, most notable his 1976 arrest for his role as editor-in-chief of a student political journal in Turkey. He has not only done thorough work on the Armenian Genocide, but he has constantly fought for justice. Akçam has written many works on the Armenian Genocide and has stated his opinion many times that both sides of the genocide must be explored in order to come to an educated conclusion on the event. His honest opinions have won him recognition as the leading international authority on the subject.

Lerna Ekmekcioglu is an Associate Professor of History and Womens' Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She received her bachelor's degree from Bogazici University and her PhD from New York University. She is a historian that specializes in Turkish and Armenian land in the late twentieth century. She has written several papers addressing the Armenian Genocide and most recently has written the book *Recovering Armenia: The Limits of Belonging in Post-Genocide Turkey*. Her article, *A Climate for Abduction, a Climate for Redemption: The Politics of Inclusion during and after the Armenian Genocide*, dives deep into the fate of women and children of the Armenians and explores the different treatment they

received during the genocide. Ekmekcioglu strongly expresses her perplexity at not only the treatment of women and children by the Turkish people, but the acceptance of children of Muslim descent in the post-genocide Armenian society.

Differences in Historian's Views on the Armenian Genocide

Young Turks' Continuity or Contingency

The most heavily contested issue related to the Armenian Genocide is whether or not the Young Turks organized the genocide. Some historians believe that the Young Turk regime orchestrated the entire event. Other historians argue that the genocide was more of a contingency, because the Ottoman Empire was falling apart and this was their last ditch effort to rebuild and expand their empire.¹ The issue of continuity verses contingency has been a long standing debate between historians. There are significant reasons for this debate; lack of documentation, falsified documents, and fluctuating opinions on civil war and religion all create a mistrust between the facts and historians. For these reasons, historians have debated the start of the genocide constantly.

Lerna Ekmekcioglu's article, *A Climate for Abduction, a Climate for Redemption: The Politics of Inclusion during and after the Armenian Genocide*, does not specifically address the matter of contingency verses continuity, but it does allude to continuity in the author's opinion. Ekmekcioglu explores the systematic cleansing of the Ottoman Empire's population, and while explaining her views, she makes it clear that the plan to annihilate the Armenian population in the Ottoman Empire was well thought out, and premeditated. This is especially clear when she references, "A memorandum that Interior Minister Talat Pasha sent to various provinces and

¹ Akçam, Taner. *The Young Turks' crime against Humanity: the Armenian Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in the Ottoman Empire*. Princeton University Press, 2012. p. 127

copied to the Minister of War Enver Pasha.”² In the memorandum, the Interior Minister orders Muslim families to adopt and bring in women of the Armenian race, this reveals how much thought and preparation went into the Armenian Genocide and more importantly shows how Ekmekcioglu feels in regard to the theory of continuity on behalf of the premeditated Young Turks’ actions.

Professor Taner Akçam, in his book *The Young Turks’ Crimes Against Humanity: The Armenian Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in the Ottoman Empire*, explains the most notable issue for anything related to the Armenian Genocide is, of course, limited resources.³ Akçam utilizes every resource available to show the cause of the genocide and explain his view on the Young Turks’ actions as a mixture of contingency and continuity. “The intolerable burden of the 1914 Armenian Reform Agreement lent urgency to the Ottomans’ decision to enter the war.”⁴ He also recognizes that the Armenians were blamed for the cause of the empire being torn apart. By involving the Great Powers and creating an alliance with countries that were attempting to make Armenians into an autonomous state, Armenians had, in the Unionists’ opinion, sealed the fate of the Ottoman Empire. Unionists even stated to Armenian leaders, that the Armenian race would be destroyed and wiped out completely.⁵ Akçam uses various resources to prove that instead of arguing over contingency and continuity, historians should be labeling the beginning of the Armenian Genocide as contingency based off of continuity.

² Ekmekcioglu, Lerna. "A climate for abduction, a climate for redemption: The politics of inclusion during and after the Armenian genocide." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 55, no. 03 (2013): 522-553. p. 527

³ Akçam, *The Young Turks' Crime*, p.127-128

⁴ Akçam, *The Young Turks' Crime*, p. 131

⁵ Akçam, *The Young Turks' Crime*, p. 131-132

The preliminary events of the genocide fall somewhere in between, this is the argument which Akçam shows through various documents including official notes from the Ottoman Interior Ministry, telegrams between the Interior Ministry and smaller local officials, and cables between many government officials and the eastern provinces. Another imperative fact that many have yet to fully explore, and even Akçam feels it is too complicated to fully explore, is the alliances between certain Turkish groups and Armenians; for example, the coalition between the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF). These alliances make it hard to specifically label the actions of the Young Turks as continuity.⁶ His final explanation of the actions of the Young Turks is simple. The thought of the annihilation of the Armenian people was definitely an option throughout, however, the contingency of the situation that arose out of Armenians' ties to Russia and the Great Powers involvement ultimately led to the Armenian Genocide.

In his book, *They Can Live in the Dessert but Nowhere Else: A History of the Armenian Genocide*, Ronald Grigor Suny explains his opinion of the Young Turks' beginning stages of genocide being a matter of contingency. Suny uses facts of government changes and the growing power of the Young Turks combined with the imaginary threat⁷ of the Europeans ready to break apart the Ottoman Empire to explain how the choice to move forward with the Armenian Genocide was a contingent choice based on the Young Turks belief of an internal revolution brewing. Mainly, Suny focuses on the paranoia that settled in the Young Turks mind. This could

⁶ Akçam, *The Young Turks' Crime*, p. 138-139

⁷ Suny, Ronald Grigor. "They Can Live in the Desert But Nowhere Else": A History of the Armenian Genocide. Princeton University Press, 2015. p.194

be because the Young Turks were devious when they came in control of the government, specifically when the CUP betrayed the Armenians multiple times.

It seems even more important still that the question of religion is always looming over the Young Turks and the Armenians. More specifically the Armenians constantly felt like they were less than human in the eyes of the Muslim government. When the Kurds murdered Armenians, it was not seen as a serious crime, even the British Ambassador recognized this.⁸ Lack of punishment for people who harmed Armenians was not the only sign that religion played a large role in the Armenian Genocide. The situation in the Balkans helped show that the issues between the Muslims and Christians were far from forgotten, and Suny in fact states that the Armenians, “Became hostages in the Muslims’ hands.” Suny explains the religious issues as a hope to explore the paranoia the Young Turks felt was due to their own actions against the Armenian population. When the Young Turks came to power and their fear of Armenian rebellion became clear, they made the decision to annihilate the Armenian population based on what they felt was a contingent decision made to preserve what they could of their empire.

The Role of Women and Children in the Armenian Genocide

Ekmekcioglu’s article focuses heavily on the role of women and children in the genocide. Her explanation of the experiences of Armenian women and children goes into great depth and understanding. Though many historians say that there were no bias in victims during the genocide, Ekmekcioglu explains that, “Depending on their geographical location as well as their luck. More massacres were wholesale toward the eastern border, in what Armenians considered to be their “historical homeland” and where they had been concentrated before the war. Toward

⁸ Suny, *They Can Live in the Dessert*, p. 194

the West and the South, the genocidal policy was usually more gendered and age-selective.”⁹ She believes that there is a systematic way that the Interior Ministry had thought about this particular action. In her opinion, it was not Armenians that the government was trying to eliminate, rather it was the “Armenianness” that the Young Turks’ were trying to eliminate. This meant that anyone who could pass on Armenianness, i.e. men, should be murdered. Women and children were believed not to be able to pass on the Armenianness. This was why, instead of getting murdered, they were supposed to be taken in by Muslim families, Muslim orphanages, and the likes.

It was also believed that women and children were easily manipulated, “Ottoman history is replete with examples that demonstrate how women and young children were regarded as re-programmable therefore valuable.”¹⁰ This led to women and children having a completely different experience than males. After the men were murdered, women and children together with the old and sick were put into caravans. This was the beginning of what is now called the death march. The old and the young usually died first, and then the remaining women and children were left vulnerable. The soldiers that were in charge of them would then help different Muslim groups, like the Kurds, attack these caravans or the camps they were resting at, and the women and children would be kidnapped. Their fate was most likely signed when the Minister of the Interior, Talaat Pasha, sent out the memorandum stating that it was encouraged for Muslim families to take in Armenian women and children. It was also made quite clear, in Ekmekcioglu’s opinion and many other historians’ opinions, that Armenians and all of their possessions now belonged to the Turkish people. They were no longer human beings, just property. Ekmekcioglu makes her opinion clear, although women and children were not murdered, they were kidnapped

⁹ Ekmekcioglu, *A Climate for Abduction*, p. 527

¹⁰ Ekmekcioglu, *A Climate for Abduction*, p. 531

and forced to erase any part of their Armenian culture or background. This took any claim of humanitarianism off of the table for the Turkish people and Muslims.

Taner Akçam focuses heavily on children's conversion and assimilation in his book. "Religious conversion and the assimilation of Armenian children into Muslim households were two of the most significant structural components of the Armenian Genocide."¹¹ Akçam believes that if possible, the Ittihadists would try to convert as many Armenians as possible. This was a necessity for them in order to complete their mission to spread their religion and eliminate the opposing religion. This is even more clear with Akçam's discovery of three telegrams all discussing assimilation and all accompanied by orders to destroy the telegraph.¹² The most important factor of Taner Akçam's argument is that assimilation was planned from the beginning. This is important because it is a realization that children and women were targeted from the first stages of planning the Armenian Genocide. "Ottoman documents clearly show that the government of the Committee of Union and Progress systematically.... aimed to dissolve Armenian youth within the Muslim majority.... the older girls were married off by force to Muslim men."¹³ Akçam uses primary sources like the telegrams to prove his theory that this was always the plan, to take the women and children into the society and mold them into what the CUP wanted of their subjects. "In an 18 August 1915 cable to the provincial district of Niğde, Talaat stated that, 'those Armenian girls who have converted to Islam may be married off to Muslims on the condition that absolutely no abuse [of the conversion policy] is allowed.' "¹⁴ It is clear from discoveries like this, Akçam knows that the Young Turks were trying to spread their

¹¹ Akçam, *The Young Turks' Crime*, p.266

¹² Akçam, *The Young Turks' Crime*, p. 267

¹³ Akçam, *The Young Turks' Crime*, p. 279

¹⁴ Akçam, *The Young Turks' Crime*, p.270

religion and eliminate other religions from the beginning. This is a factor that separates Akçam from other historians who have not stated this opinion so strongly and who have not encountered such strong primary sources.

Suny, in his book, *They Can Live in the Dessert but Nowhere Else*, explains the horrors that Armenian women and children faced during the genocide. Suny looks at the issues of women and children differently. Although he agrees that they had a fate better than men, he also explores the terror that they faced, especially the Armenian women. Not only did they have their children taken away, because children under five years old were usually taken and given to Muslim families, but he explains that they also had to deal with rape, loss, and forcibly being converted to Islam. The most important thing that Suny describes is the rape that women had to face after having their husbands murdered in front of them. “Men and women were hacked to pieces or burned alive; boys circumcised, then shot; children killed before their parents’ eyes; women violated as their men were dying.”¹⁵ If they were not raped immediately after the men in their lives were murdered, they were sent off to the same fate in a different place. It was systematic which is something else that Suny explains, “All the Armenians were uprooted and sent toward Mosul. Overweight people and the elderly who could not keep up remained by the wayside; mothers abandoned their infants; children up to the age of ten or eleven, as well as the beautiful women and teenage girls, were handed over to Muslims.”¹⁶ After all of this took place, Suny recognizes, as did Ekmekcioglu, that once sent on these death marches, women would

¹⁵ Suny, *They Can Live in the Dessert*, p. 169

¹⁶ Suny, *They Can Live in the Dessert*, p. 287

eventually reach the same fate. Rape was a real and universal part of the Armenian Genocide.

“Women and girls were raped; the sick were left behind to die.”¹⁷

Religion and Its Role in the Armenian Genocide

Ekmekcioglu touches heavily upon religion in her article. The relationship between the treatment of women and children with religion is undeniable. The way that the Turkish Muslims looked at life and reproduction is the key to why women and children were taken into households and abducted versus being slaughtered with the Armenian men. In her research she has found several patterns in the Ottoman’s Muslim community. This all stems from the fact that Muslims, like Christians of this time, believed that women did not pass any religion down through child birth. On the contrary, they believed women only contributed to physiological characteristics of the child. “The womb is reduced to an empty vessel (or a field) that takes the shape and form of whatever fluid fills it (i.e., the seed).”¹⁸ That means that through her research, Ekmekcioglu has concluded that Muslim men are believed to be the only one that shapes what religion the child will be. This is why, according to Turkish documentation, women and children were to be adopted and taken in by Muslim families. This helped eliminate Armenianness and spread the Muslim religion and increase its population. Religion was the driving force, in her opinion, behind the genocide. It was to decrease the growing Christian community, more specifically the Armenians.

In *The Young Turks’ Crime against Humanity*, Akçam feels strongly that from the beginning, the main goal of the Committee of Union and Progress was to spread Islam and to eliminate Christianity. This not only proves that the Armenian Genocide was indeed a genocide,

¹⁷ Suny, *They Can Live in the Dessert*, p. 313

¹⁸ Ekmekcioglu, *A Climate for Abduction*, p. 531

but that assimilation was planned from the beginning, as was the plan to annihilate the Christian population. It was even evident to others that this was the plan of the Young Turks, “German and American documents show that religious conversions began prior to this order and were carried out intensively. As early as 2 June 1915, German consul Scheubner-Richter reported from Erzurum that ‘the Armenians who are converting are not being removed from their places.’ ” These are all factors that lead to Akçam to label the Armenian Genocide as a cultural genocide. This is such a strong way for Akçam to describe this. He also discusses the hold that the CUP put on religious conversion as a savior for the Armenian victims. Once the government realized that so many Armenians were willing to convert, they rescinded on their prior order to save converted Armenians. They also issued orders stating that Armenians were no longer going to be saved if converting. Later they implemented the conversion order again, allowing Armenians to be able to convert to save themselves. This time, the order was more selective. “Deportees who for various reasons were delayed en route did not qualify. Only those whose deportation had been postponed by ministerial order were able to take advantage of this right.”¹⁹ After the last of the deportations, the CUP started the conversion and assimilation of the remaining Armenian citizens in the Empire. Akçam’s strong opinions on the religious motivations behind the Young Turks’ actions are well supported with many official documents and telegrams; this is what makes his argument so compelling.

Suny discusses religion throughout his entire book. There are moments when the Young Turks made it clear that religion was a driving factor in this genocide. The author also relates the Armenian Genocide to an ethnocide. This is mainly because religion was a classifier for victims. Throughout the Armenian Genocide other groups were deported or murdered, for example the

¹⁹ Akçam, *The Young Turks' Crime*, p. 272

Greeks, this was because of their religion. “Over time the Young Turks came to believe that Muslims, particularly Turks, were the appropriate people to rule the empire, that Muslims, particularly Turks, were the most trustworthy supporters of the Ottoman state,”²⁰ The Armenians, being Christians, were perceived as a threat to the Empire. Suny explores many different pathways regarding religion, most notably his strong opinions on the paranoia around Christians. “Their own project of modernizing and securing the empire was undercut by their ambition to make Anatolia safe from Christians.”²¹ He states multiple times throughout his book that the CUP, mainly Talaat Pasha, was adamant on the elimination of Christians in the Empire. Suny even explains a scenario where Talaat Pasha was told that the elimination of Christians was against Islam, and his reaction was to ignore this advice even though it had stopped previous sultans from committing the same crimes. It is clear after reading Suny’s work that he has ample evidence to support his opinion that in fact, religion played an enormous role in the Armenian Genocide.

Evidence and Documentation, a Summary of the Historians.

Ekmekcioglu has explored many documents to gather the information she has on the Armenian Genocide. Out of the historians that have been explored, she is the historian that relies the least on memoirs. Although she references personal accounts, she proves herself through many official documents. Most importantly, she has been able to discover and share with the reader these documents. “My research is grounded in institutional reports, Ottoman state and Armenian Patriarchate archives, writings in the Armenian and Turkish press, unpublished private papers of intellectuals, and memoirs.”²² It is clear that she has done extensive research on the

²⁰ Suny, *They Can Live in the Dessert*, p. xv

²¹ Suny, *They Can Live in the Dessert*, p. 281

²² Ekmekcioglu, *A Climate for Abduction*, p.523

Armenian Genocide, and it makes her work and opinions concrete to readers and historians alike. Akçam, like Ekmekcioglu, has a variety of different resources at his fingertips. Mostly referenced are telegrams, however, he also uses court documents, written correspondence, and memoirs. He quotes memoirs often, and in this way he is the historian that appeals to the humanity of the reader. His work is extremely well written and he supports all of his opinions extremely well. Suny used many sources as well, and both he and Akçam discuss how hard it is to find primary sources from the time of the Armenian Genocide. This is a true statement but Suny has plenty of official documents, memoirs, and correspondence to defend his opinions and help the reader dive more deeply into the subject.

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