

## **Ottomans and Armenians: A Study in Counterinsurgency**

Author: Edward J. Erickson, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 299 pages.

### **About the Author**

Edward J. Erickson is a Professor of Military History at the Command and Staff College, Marine Corps University in United States. He is also on the board of governors of the Institute of Turkish Studies at Georgetown University. Furthermore, he has experience in the region as a retired US army officer; he served in NATO assignments in Izmir as a foreign area officer specializing in Turkey and the Middle East. Erickson is a distinguished scholar on the Ottoman military history for the First World War period. His work includes *Ordered to Die: A History of the Ottoman Army in the First World War* (2000), *Mustafa Kemal Atatürk* (2013) and *A Military History of the Ottomans: From Osman to Atatürk* (2009), *Ottoman Army Effectiveness in World War I: A Comparative Study* (2014).

### **Book Review**

The book titled “Ottomans and Armenians: A Study in Counterinsurgency” was published in November 2013 by Palgrave Macmillan. While emphasizing that the book is not intended to provide a social and political history of the grievances of oppressed peoples, Erickson provides the reader with an overview of the parallel cases of relocations in history, and Ottoman counterinsurgency practices between 1878 and 1915, particularly with regard to the activities of the Armenian revolutionary groups, and presents the rationale behind the Ottoman Empire’s counterinsurgency campaign.

Erickson’s main argument in his book is that relocation policies toward the Ottoman Armenians in the eastern provinces of the empire was merely a military necessity for the Ottomans; the sole motive behind the policy was the existential threat the armed hostile Armenian groups posed to the empire. Furthermore, by presenting numbers as to how many Ottoman Armenians died

during relocation, and how many of them actually stayed home and were not relocated, he contributes to the discussions on the Armenian claims of genocide. His research on the Ottoman state's selective policy of relocation addressing those Armenians in the warzones, the measures taken by the government to ensure that the relocation went smoothly, and the trials of those who were suspected of abuse are good evidence for arguing that the events of 1915 did not constitute genocide.

Erickson's book is noteworthy in the sense that it provides a critical historical analysis of events while providing the reader with a military-strategic viewpoint. The author's references to "insurgency", "counterinsurgency" and irregular warfare for the period under consideration are significant because these terms were not commonly used in early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as the author acknowledges it himself in the introduction of the book. Moreover, the lack of literature on how the Ottoman Empire reacted to insurgency in these years makes the book a valuable scholarly analysis on the events. As Jeremy Salt rightly puts it, "for the first time a scholar was turning his attention to these wars from the perspective of the Ottoman military command rather than the viewpoint of countries attacking the Ottoman Empire."<sup>1</sup> In doing so, Erickson delves into the Ottoman state archives and finds authentic documents, including messages between ministries and memoirs by important statesmen of the time.

Discussing the counterinsurgency policies of the western powers, namely the policies of Spain in Cuba, the US in the Philippines and Britain in South Africa, Erickson draws the conclusion that these significantly similar and highly effective practices which were based on the removal and relocation of civilian populations set a template for the future. Thus, he asks, why wouldn't it be understandable for the Ottoman government to execute this counterinsurgency policy towards the Armenian insurrection, which could be operationalized using minimal military resources?<sup>2</sup>

Erickson indicates that the power vacuum in eastern Anatolia during the war encouraged Armenians to raise rebellions in the region. Citing historical documents, Erickson emphasizes that Russians, as well as the French and the British, the wartime enemies of the Ottoman Empire, actively supported the Armenian insurrection. Moreover, the author stresses that Armenians who revolted in eastern Anatolia were in support of a Russian offensive, which is

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1 Jeremy Salt, The Armenian 'Relocation': The Case for 'Military Necessity', *Review of Armenian Studies*, No. 29, 8 May 2014, p. 66.

2 Erickson, p. 213.

not often mentioned in the literature. Making it worse, Erickson writes - based on Ottoman intelligence reports – that armed hostile Armenian committees executed terrorist attacks, bombings and assassination of civilians.

Acknowledging that all of these had to be seen as the Ottoman government had seen it, Erickson characterizes the “existential threat”<sup>3</sup> the Armenian insurgents posed to the national security. This stemmed from the fact that the Armenian insurgents constantly attacked and cut the lines of communications which supported the Ottomans on the Caucasian, Mesopotamian and the Palestinian fronts against the allies. These lines of communications ran through areas in eastern Anatolia populated heavily by Armenians and the heavily armed Armenian revolutionary committees. Being weak in the Empire’s core areas as the army was mostly concentrated on the frontiers, the Ottoman government, Erickson writes, was in a “strategic dilemma”<sup>4</sup>, not expecting to combat an Armenian insurgency.

Erickson’s book is a valuable contribution to the literature in the sense that his research is based on authentic military documents in the Ottoman archives. For example, discussing whether a cohesive and coordinated Armenian master plan was executed for revolution, he notes that there is no scholarly work to prove the existence of such a plan. Thus, Erickson examines the message traffic between the Ministry of War and the Ministry of Interior and reaches the conclusion that that Ottomans believed that such a plan existed. Discussing the Ottoman Empire’s policy in reaction to this, the author states that the Empire, having no significant combat forces or a central strategic reserve, executed a “strategy of poverty”; employing relocation, a strategy “borne of weakness rather than of strength”<sup>5</sup>. Thus, the Ottoman government’s policy toward the Armenian insurgency moved from a localized response of relocation to a general counterinsurgency campaign based on relocation.

Delving into the conditions during the relocation, Erickson stresses in his book that the Armenians who were relocated faced malnutrition, inadequate medical care, and lack of shelter. Making it worse, it was reported that some faced atrocities and abuses. The author stresses that the Ottoman government took some measures on the ground to make sure the relocation went smoothly. The establishment of a commission that was tasked to investigate reports of atrocities and abuses against the Armenians constitutes an example of these measures. Citing internal messages of the government, Erickson also points

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3 Erickson, p. 161.

4 Erickson, p. 183.

5 Erickson, p. 213.

out that Talat Pasha cautioned the governor of Ankara to ensure that the transfer of Armenians “be carried out in an orderly and practical manner, should henceforth never be left to individuals having fanatical feelings of enmity and that...Armenians will be definitely protected.”<sup>6</sup> What is more, the author points out to the fact that the Ottoman state sent hundreds of individuals who were suspected of these crimes to trial. Thus, Erickson provides evidence that the Ottoman state in 1915 did not have the intent to destroy the Ottoman Armenians.

As for the number of Armenians who died during the relocation, while indicating that there is no agreement among scholars on this issue, Erickson states that “exact numbers simply do not exist”<sup>7</sup> on this matter. He adds that advocates of the Armenian position, in fact, tend to report higher numbers. For example, stresses that the numbers reported by Raymond Kévorkian, who made the most comprehensive study on this issue, sometimes exceeds the known numbers of the local Armenian populations.

Most importantly, Erickson makes a great contribution to the literature delving into the issue of the number of Ottoman Armenians who were not relocated, which remains in dispute as well. Drawing on historical records, he argues that the relocation policy of the Ottoman Empire was a tailored policy toward specific eastern provinces directly threatening the national security. In fact, the majority of Armenian residents of the capital, and its surroundings were not relocated. Using Ottoman documents, the author notes that the estimates of the number of those Ottoman Armenians who were not relocated is between 350,000 and 500,000. Erickson rightfully asks, “If the goal was extermination, why weren’t the western Armenians relocated as well? Moreover, why were the relocations halted at all, especially after the spring of 1916, when, arguably the Ottomans were winning their war?”<sup>8</sup> Besides, Erickson gives an answer to those who draw a parallel between the Holocaust and the events of 1915. Siding with the well-known scholar Guenter Lewy, he states that unlike what happened during the Holocaust, there is no evidence proving the actuality of an intentional extermination of the Armenians sponsored by the state.<sup>9</sup> Lastly, the author states that the Ottoman government did not identify all Ottoman Armenians as “enemies within”, and that it rather referred to them as loyal citizens of the empire.<sup>10</sup> By presenting these facts, the author makes a great

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6 Erickson, p. 210.

7 Erickson, p. 214.

8 Erickson, p. 228

9 Erickson, p. 229.

10 Erickson, p. 219.

contribution to the literature. These facts, solely, can serve as direct challenges to the Armenian claims of genocide.

To conclude, Edward Erickson presents a powerful case for the argument that the policy of relocation by the Ottoman Empire was dictated solely by the military necessity; the sole motive behind that policy was the direct threat posed by Armenian insurgent groups to the war efforts of the empire. The lack of literature on how the Ottoman Empire reacted to insurgency in these years makes the book a valuable scholarly analysis on the events, and Erickson stands out as the first scholar who treated the Armenian issue from the perspective of the Ottoman military. Delving into Ottoman state archives and authentic documents, including messages between ministries and memoirs by critical statesmen of the time, Erickson makes a powerful case for presenting the Ottoman point of view of the events.