

Armenian History and the Question of Genocide

Author: Michael M. Gunter (New York-London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011) XI + 195 pages.

Prof. Michael M. Gunter's book is the first one that is specifically devoted to criticize the "Armenian genocide" label, published by a mainstream, Western publishing house and written by a non-Turkish scholar. For example, *The Armenian File* was the work of Kâmuran Gürün, and Gunter Lewy's *The Armenian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey* was published by the University of Utah Press—after the Oxford University Press capitulated in front of the pressure exerted by Peter Balakian. The late Stanford Jay Shaw was a victim of harassment and even of an attempt of assassination, as recalls Prof. Gunter (p. 54). As a result, the publication of such a book is a great victory of freedom of expression against intellectual terrorism.

This study is an honest synthesis of the historiography existing around 2010 and an analysis of the conflict since 1970s. It is divided in six chapters. The first one is an overview of the Armenian issue from 1878 to 1918, with a focus on classical Armenian and Turkish positions, finishing by an attempt of synthesis. The second one develops the reflection, deepening the issue of what is genocide (and what is not) and exposing some new developments of the historiography during the 2000s, particularly the book of Gunter Lewy. The third chapter analyses the aspect the most studied since 1980s by Prof. Gunter: Armenian terrorism in 20th century. The next one is, in a certain sense, the chronological continuation of the previous one, presenting the contemporary Armenian lobbying in the West. The fifth chapter answers the accusations of "Turkish counter-terror and harassment" and the sixth one, correspondingly, presents the attempts of rapprochement since mid-1980s. In spite of some evitable inaccuracies, this concise book is recommended.

Presenting the historical dimension of the conflict, Michael M. Gunter must be praised for several courageous demonstrations. In particular, he provides a concise rebuttal of the simplifications on the alleged "Ottoman night": In fact, the Ottoman Christians, particularly the Armenians, experienced an economic rise in 19th century, and possessed advantages that the Muslims never

possessed, such as Western diplomatic intervention). The author also mentions the terrorist activities of the Armenian nationalists during the late Ottoman period then the national security problem faced by the Ottoman Empire in 1915, as a result of the Armenian insurgencies (pp. 5-8, 37-46 and 61-62). Crucial as well is the reference to the works of Justin McCarthy, proving that the Armenians were in minority in all the provinces claimed at the beginning of 20th century (and until today) as “Western Armenia” (pp. 17 and 22).

One of the most courageous remarks is the one presenting the devastating analysis, by Erman Şahin, of books written by German sociologist Taner Akçam (p. 37). Quite interesting as well is his presentation of Guenter Lewy’s book (particularly when he cites the comments of Prof. Lewy on the manipulations of sources by Vahakn N. Dadrian) and his rebuttal of the critiques formulated by Joseph A. Kechichian and Keith David Watenpaugh against himself and Prof. Lewy (pp. 46-54). In short, explains Prof. Gunter, “the application of the term ‘genocide’ to these tragic events is inappropriate because the Turkish actions were neither unilateral nor premeditated” (p. 54) and also because “Armenian communities in such large western cities as Constantinople and Smyrna were spared of deportation probably because they were not in a position to aid the invading Russians” (p. 55). The existence of sufferings and important losses is not in itself a proof of genocide—if so, there would be a Turkish genocide as well, since at least 2.5 millions Anatolian Muslims died between 1914 and 1922. Some parts are more approximate, for example when he fails to mention in detail the powerful criticism of *Ambassador Morgenthau’s Story* by Sidney Bradshaw Fay and Heath Lowry.¹ Heath Lowry’s study is briefly mentioned (p. 142, n. 49) and the one of Fay is not cited at all. Correspondingly, the book should have been much more critical as far as Richard G. Hovannisian is concerned.²

On Armenian terrorism, one of the most interesting aspects of Michael M. Gunter’s contribution is the data on the warm support for terrorists from the main structures of the Armenian diaspora, particularly the Armenian

1 Sidney Bradshaw Fay, *The Origins of the World War*, New York-Toronto-London: Macmillan, 1928, volume II, pp. 167-182; Heath W. Lowry, *The Story Behind Ambassador Morgenthau’s Story*, İstanbul: The Isis Press, 1990. Also see Guenter Lewy, *The Armenian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey*, Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005, pp. 140-142.

2 Guenter Lewy, *The Armenian Massacres...*, pp. 17-19, 52-53, 78-82 and passim; Heath W. Lowry, “Richard G. Hovannisian on Lieutenant Robert Steed Dunn — A Review Note,” *The Journal of Ottoman Studies*, V, 1985, pp. 209-252, http://english.isam.org.tr/documents/_dosyalar/_pdfler/osmanli_arastirmalari_derGISI/osmanli%C4%B1sy5/1986_5_LOWRYHW.pdf; Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War*, Cambridge (Massachusetts)-London: Harvard University Press, 2011, pp. 272-273, n. 3; Jeremy Salt, *Imperialism, Evangelism and the Ottoman Armenians (1878-1896)*, London-Portland: Frank Cass, 1993, pp. 2-3.

Revolutionary Federation. Indeed, as explains Prof. Gunter, the ARF, which was established in 1890 and widely practiced terrorism during the Ottoman period, turned back to terrorism in the 1970s, creating a specific organization, the Justice Commandos for Armenian Genocide (JCAG, later called Armenian Revolutionary Army) and the legal branch of the party constantly explained how great was the assassination of Turks, only guilty by birth.

As this study recalls, the majority of the Turkish diplomats assassinated by Armenian terrorists were not victims of the Armenian Secret Army for Liberation of Armenia, but of the JCAG: Out of thirty, twenty were killed by Dashnak terrorists, eight by the ASALA and two by Gourgen Yanikian, the inspiration of the ASALA. The description of racket by the ASALA and of drug smuggling by both ASALA and JCAG members is also more than welcome. In the current context, the readers should correspondingly read and re-read the evidence exposed by Prof. Gunter about the cooperation between the ASALA and Palestinian terrorist groups. It would help to understand the contemporary anti-Turkish crusade of some warm supporters of Arab causes, such as Amal Alamuddin-Clooney, Robert Fisk and Geoffrey Robertson.

However, the analysis of Armenian terrorism by Prof. Gunter has two significant flaws. Firstly, he affirms (p. 57): “Also unique was how Armenian terrorism manifested two periods of activity separated by almost half a century,” the assassination of Turkish, Azeri former officials and Armenian “traitors” by the Dashnak network Nemesis and the attacks of 1970s and 1980s. In fact, the ARF continued terrorist activities during the interwar, not only by practicing terror against Ramkavar, Hunchak leaders and Dashnak dissidents (as explained in the book of Kapriel Seropé Papazian, rightfully quoted by Michael M. Gunter) but also by several attempts of assassination against Kemal Atatürk from 1924 to 1927.³ Inter-Armenian violence (Dashnaks vs. non-Dashnaks) also killed forty persons in Lebanon during the small civil war of 1958.⁴ Secondly, Michael M. Gunter repeats the classical analysis of the 1980s, affirming that the ASALA emerged in January 1975, and that the CJGA were created some months later by the ARF, because the young activists were attracted by the ASALA. This interpretation, already contradicted by the preeminence of the JCAG from 1975 to 1979, is refused since 2002, when a published version of Gaïdz Minassian’s doctoral dissertation was published. Having exceptionally worked in the ARF archives, Dr. Minassian concluded

3 Bilâl N. Şimşir, *Şehit Diplomatlarımız (1973-1994)*, Ankara-İstanbul: Bilgi Yayınevi, 2000, volume I, pp. 61-73.

4 Khachig Toloyan, “Terrorism in Modern Armenian Political Culture,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, IV-2, 1992, p. 19.

that the ASALA emerged in 1971 and that the ARF congress of Vienna (December 1972) decided to create the JCAG.⁵

The description of the contemporary developments, since the end of the USSR (conflict between Armenian and Azerbaijan, anti-Turkic Armenian lobbying in Western countries), contains several interesting remarks. The best one is probably about the occupation of the Nagorno-Karabakh (an Azerbaijani province with a majority of ethnic Armenians since the massacres and expulsions that took place between 1905 and 1920) and seven predominantly Azeri districts by Armenian forces (p. 81): “These supporters [of the self-proclaimed Republic of Karabakh, or Artsakh] are seemingly oblivious to the hypocritical fact that seizing Turkic lands on the basis that they contained an Armenian majority was analogous to what Armenian Turkey has done to what Armenians claim are their historic land in eastern Turkey.” The distinction (pp. 90-94) between the Dashnak Armenian National Committee of American, the predominantly Ramkavar Armenian Assembly of America and the independent U.S.-Armenia Public Affairs Committee (arguable the less extremist of the three ones) are also useful.

The description of the Lewis affair in 1993-95 (pp. 77-79) is, however, more approximate. In addition the criminal case lost by the Dashnaks in 1994 and mentioned by Prof. Gunter, there was also at least one civil case lost by two other Armenian organizations against Bernard Lewis.⁶ More important, in 2005, the *Cour de cassation* ruled that the article 1382 of the civil code (saying that every damage must be repaired and used against Bernard Lewis in the only case he lost) cannot be used to limit the freedom of speech between individuals.⁷

The last chapter (“Rapprochement?” pp. 119-138) is the closest to us in 2015 but also the one deserving the most revisions. Most of the hopes mentioned in these pages were proved false. The Workshop for Armenian/Turkish Scholarship (WATS, evoked p. 127) turned to a new tool of Armenian propaganda.⁸ It was actually predictable since the Armenian side was represented, especially, by Gerard J. Libaridian, a former activist of the ARF who does not regret any of his past activities (including his testimony in Aix-

5 Gaïdz Minassian, *Guerre et terrorisme arméniens*, Paris : Presses universitaires de France, 2002, pp. 22-23, 28 and 32-34.

6 Bernard Lewis, *Notes on a Century*, London : Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2012, pp. 286-297.

7 Cour de cassation, chambre civile, 27 septembre 2005, n° 03-13622, <http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichJuriJudi.do?idTexte=JURITEXT000007051612&dateTexte=>

8 See Jeremy Salt, “History as Theology,” *International Journal of Turkish Studies*, Vol. 17 Issue 1/2, Fall 2011, p. 159 (critique of the result of the work of the WATS).

en-Provence for Max Hrair Kilndjian in 1982, to support terrorism) and does not want to enter any debate on the genocide label.⁹ The dominant view in the organizations of the Armenian diaspora is indeed summarized by Dashnak leader and prolific columnist Harut Sassounian: “I am not the one who needs fact-finding... I don’t need to find out what happened. I know what happened” (statement to *The Los Angeles Times*, April 24, 2008, cited p. 123). Even more importantly, the Protocols of Zurich failed, and Michael M. Gunter himself provides a beginning of explanation, mentioning the disappointing decision of the Constitutional Court of Armenian (pp. 132-137).

The author compares the situation to the settlement of the conflict between Egypt and Israel in 1979, adding that “only time will tell whether the present rapprochement will lead cordial peace” such as the Israeli-Egyptian one. In fact, the peace was signed in Camp David first of all because Sadat gave the priority to Egyptian national interests, against the dream of Nasser to build a pan-Arab state based on the annihilation of Israel. Such an intellectual revolution is merely unthinkable in Armenia for the moment. In this regard, the main weakness of the last chapter is its complete underestimation of the role played in the current blockade by the ideology of the Republican Party, in power in Armenia since 1998. What peace can be expected from a government claiming the ideological heritage of a Nazi war criminal (G. Nejdeh) and preferring irredentism to the welfare of his own population?

9 This reviewer public got last year first-hand evidence from Mr. Libaridian himself, having asked him a question on these points, having obtained a non-response and later having heard Mr. Libaridian’s answer (if I can say) to another person of the audience on 1915.

