

THE ARMENIAN 'RELOCATION': THE CASE FOR 'MILITARY NECESSITY'

(ERMENİ TEHCİRİ:
'ASKERİ MECBURİYET' GEREKÇESİ)

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Ottomans and Armenians. A Study in Counterinsurgency.

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

Abstract: *This article focuses on the questions of insurgency and 'military necessity' as a reason for moving the bulk of the Armenian population from the eastern provinces of the Ottoman Empire in the second half of 1915. It looks at precedent and parallel cases of 'relocations' in military history and follows the course of the war as it was fought by the Ottoman government from late 1914, on the battle front and behind the lines, until the Van uprising of April, 1915, precipitated the decision to 'relocate' the Armenian civilian population.*

Keywords: *Ottoman Empire, World War I, Committee for Union and Progress, Russia, Britain, Sarıkamış, Van, Caucasus, Syria, Armenians, Kurds, Assyrians, relocation, insurgency, Teşkilat i-Mahsusa, druzhiny, wartime trials.*

Özet: *Bu makale 1915'in ikinci yarısında Ermeni nüfusunun çoğunluğunun Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun doğu vilayetlerinden taşınmasına dayanak oluşturması açısından ayaklanma ve 'askeri mecburiyet' sorunlarını incelemektedir. Makale askeri tarihte emsal oluşturan ve paralellik taşıyan örnekleri irdelemekte ve hem cephe hem de cephe gerisinde Osmanlı hükümeti tarafından 1914'ün sonlarından 1915 Nisan ayında sivil Ermeni nüfusunun yer değiştirmesi kararının alınmasını hızlandıran Van ayaklanmasına kadar savaşın izlediği seyri incelemektedir.*

Anahtar kelimeler: *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu, Birinci Dünya Savaşı, İttihat ve Terakki, Rusya, İngiltere, Sarıkamış, Van, Kafkasya, Suriye, Ermeniler, Kürtler, Asuriler, Tehcir, Ayaklanma, Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa, druzhiny, savaş dönemi yargılamaları.*

No scholar outside Turkey has done as much work on the Ottoman military as Edward Erickson. His books on the Balkans War (1912-13) and the First World War are standard reference works. 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. His basic source material is the records of the Ottoman military. He is a seriously good scholar and thus when he writes on such a controversial issue as the fate of Armenians during the war, even those who are reflexively compelled to knock him down are going to have a hard time doing it. In this latest work, Dr Erickson presents a powerful case for military necessity being the only motive

behind the decision to ‘relocate’ the bulk of the Armenian population from the empire’s eastern provinces and eventually somewhat further afield, in 1915.

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‘Relocations’ are an ugly aspect of war. They often have disastrous consequences for the people being moved but they are not unique in the history of warfare. In modern history, Erickson refers to some examples: the Spanish

repression of a Cuban uprising in 1895-96 involving the emptying of rebellious provinces of between 400,000 and 600,000 people and their removal to camps under a program called *la recontraçia*; the relocation of civilians to US ‘zones of protection’ in the Philippines during the Spanish-American war of 1898; the removal of about 100,000 Boers and another 100,000 African civilians to concentration camps during the Boer War (1899-1902); the removal by the Russian government of up to half a million Germans from southern Russia and the Caucasus to Siberia in 1914; the removal of Japanese to US detention camps during the Second World War; the relocation of up to 500,000 ethnic Chinese to ‘new villages’ by the British during their postwar occupation of Malaya; the removal by the French of up to 800,000 Algerians to ‘regroupment centres’ in the 1950s; and the relocation by the US by force, persuasion and intimidation of more than 8.5 million civilians to ‘protected’ or ‘strategic’ hamlets’ during the Vietnam war in the 1960s. The chief adviser to the US military command for this operation was Robert Thomson, the architect of the forcible relocation of ethnic Chinese in post-war Malaya. The relocation of Vietnamese by the US military command followed the relocation by the French of some three million Vietnamese to ‘protected villages’ (*agrovilles*) during 1952-54.

In all of these cases the rationale was the same – the clearing away of a civilian population to deny insurgents any and all forms of support. The suffering of civilians during these shifts was also similar, varying only in intensity and

degree. Having reviewed some of the parallel cases, Dr Erickson looks at the detail in the Ottoman Empire as a Russian-backed Armenian insurgency took root in 1914 and swelled into a general movement across the eastern provinces in 1915. Both the British and the Russians wooed ethno-religious Ottoman groups – Armenians, Assyrians, Kurds and Arabs - as part of their war effort. Michael Reynolds has told some of the story from the Russian side.¹ Even before the Ottoman government joined the war, the Tsarist government approved the arming of Ottoman Armenians and the provocation of an uprising at an opportune moment. As early as August, 1914, General Yudenich, chief of staff of the Russian army in the Caucasus, advocated the establishment of an Armenian fifth column inside Ottoman lands and the smuggling of arms across the border.² The Tsar told the Armenian Catholicos, Kevork, to 'tell your flock, Holy Father, that a most brilliant future awaits the Armenians'.³

Both the Armenians and the Assyrians were used up by their erstwhile supporters. The Armenians had been through this before, in the late 19th century, when the British meddled in their affairs under the guise of humanitarian concern. Their real purpose was to establish a British presence in eastern Anatolia to block the machinations of the Russians. The British government's plan for 'reforms' – an 'ethnographical' reorganization of the eastern provinces based on the separation of Armenians from Kurds - foundered not just on the opposition of the sultan and his government but on the lack of competent officials to oversee this plan and the lack of money to pay for it. The British government was not prepared to foot the bill and the Ottoman government, bankrupt by 1876, forced to submit to foreign control of its revenues in 1881 and hostile to these 'reforms' anyway, could not. Blundering on, the British government antagonized the Kurds by referring to a region in which Muslims – predominantly Kurdish – were more than 80 per cent of the population as 'Armenia'. When the crisis broke in the 1890s, with the eastern provinces collapsing into large-scale violence, the British threw up their hands in horror, retreated, blamed someone else (the wicked sultan) and left the Armenians to fend for themselves as best as they could.

This was the template for the fate of Armenians and the Assyrians in 1914-18. Russia was out of the war by 1917 but the British treated the Armenians and Assyrians as an expendable raw material from beginning to end. They lured these vulnerable minorities into the war with assurances of support for

1 Michael A. Reynolds, *Shattering Empires. The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires 1908-1918* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

2 Erickson, p.144

3 Reynolds, p.143

autonomy or independence if they would only just join the entente cause. They then used their suffering for propaganda purposes and when the war was over - when they had no further use for them - they abandoned them. The Bolsheviks gave the Armenians their autonomous republic but the Assyrians ended up with nothing. They were urged by the British to keep fighting from northwestern Persia. Overwhelmed by Ottoman and Kurdish tribal forces they fled into Iraq. Their trek led them into refugee camps where they waited in vain for the British to redeem their promises of a homeland. Their ancestors in Iraq are now suffering the malign consequences for them and their churches of a more recent intervention in their lands, the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. The destruction

of Iraq as a unitary state and the deliberate creation of a weak central government against a strong government on the periphery (the Kurdish north) has paved the way for the rise of Islamic jihadist groups unknown in Saddam's time. Their concept of an Islamic emirate stretching across the central lands of the Middle East has involved the destruction and desecration of the ancient Christian churches of the east in both Iraq and Syria.

Again, because their prime concern is to bring down the government in Damascus, the US, French and British governments have turned a blind eye to the collateral damage being suffered by these eastern Christians.

By late 1914 the Russian and Ottoman government were already engaged in an 'undeclared but active' state of war in the Black Sea provinces of their empires⁴, with the Ottoman government using the Teşkilat i-Mahsusa (Special Organization), a propaganda and black operations body fighting the Russians and Armenian insurgents and carrying weapons to local Muslim people. Erickson dates the formation of this organization back to late November, 1913, and ascribes its origins to the need for a force to generate Muslim resistance to the victorious Christian powers in the Balkans.⁵ Stanford Shaw, on the other hand, regarded the organization as the outgrowth of Ottoman intelligence groups established during the 19th century, notably Sultan Abdulhamit's Yildiz Palace intelligence service (Yildiz Istihbarat Teşkilati).⁶

The key military event as 1914 turned into 1915 was the Ottoman assault on Sarıkamış, starting brilliantly but ending catastrophically, with frightful weather and dogged Russian leadership combining to turn the tables on the

4 Erickson, p.147

5 Erickson, p.112.

6 Stanford J.Shaw, *The Ottoman Empire in World War I* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2006), Vol 1, p.355. Erickson (p.111) rejects outright the claim that the Teşkilat i-Mahsusa was set up for the prime purpose of liquidating the Armenian civilian population.

Ottomans. Caught in a blizzard without winter clothing, many Ottoman soldiers simply froze to death. Erickson puts the Ottoman casualties at 33,000 dead and 10,000 wounded⁷, with a further 7000 men being taken captive. Writing of the consequences, Michael Reynolds concludes that 'not until 1918 and the disintegration of the Russian army would the Ottomans again be able to go on the strategic offensive on the Caucasian front.'⁸

By early 1915, Armenian uprisings in the east had crystallized into a general insurgency being launched across the region. That, at least, is how it appeared to the Ottoman military command. It was well aware of Armenian activities. From late 1914 into the first half of 1915, reports poured in of clashes with insurgents and the disruption of lines of supply and communication. These lines, supporting action against the Russians in the Caucasus and the British in Mesopotamia and Palestine 'ran directly through the rear areas of the Ottoman armies in eastern Anatolia that were heavily populated by Armenian communities and, by extension, by the heavily armed Armenian revolutionary committees'.⁹ None of the Ottoman armies on the Caucasian, Mesopotamian or Palestinian fronts were self-sufficient in food, fodder, stock animals, ammunition and medicine but had to rely on continuous supplies from the west.¹⁰ In the eastern Anatolian provinces, front line units could be 900 kilometers from the nearest railhead.¹¹ Over a vast area, most supplies had to be moved by wagon across long stretches of undefended dirt tracks. In isolated areas, with few men available as guards, these lines of communication were especially vulnerable to insurgent disruption.

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By the middle of 1915 thousands of Ottoman Armenians were fighting behind the lines, in addition to the thousands enlisted in the Russian Armenian volunteer units known as *druzhiny*, which were tasked with 'liberating' Ottoman provinces in which the Armenians were in a small minority and scattered across the region anyway. The hotspots were the regions around Van, Erzurum, Erzincan, Bitlis, Muş, Elazığ (Harput), Sivas and Malatya, with reports from the southeast around Dörtyol indicating that the British were

7 Erickson, p.155

8 Reynolds, p.125

9 Erickson, pp.161-62

10 Erickson, p.162

11 Erickson, p.174

contemplating the opening of a new front in the eastern Mediterranean with the support of local Armenians.

All of this has to be seen as Ottoman commanders would have seen it. By the middle of 1915, Ottoman armies were fighting on three fronts, Gallipoli, the Caucasus and Mesopotamia. Already severely weakened by the Balkans war, and the more immediate catastrophe of Sarıkamış, the Ottoman army was in no position to fight a multi-front war and, as well, fend off thousands of insurgents sabotaging the war effort from behind the lines. The military command had no plans to deal with such an insurgency and no strategic reserve in the interior to protect lines of communication. The manpower available consisted mainly of elderly reservists and jandarma. Under stress on several fronts, the military command was draining the interior of such soldiers as it did have there and sending them to the front. Cities, towns and villages as well as the lines of communication were vulnerable to attack. Many communities were basically on their own.

This deteriorating situation reached a peak with the Van uprising in April, 1915, launched as the British were about to land troops at Gallipoli and the Russians were about to engage with an Ottoman force around Dilman in northwestern Persia. Thousands of well-armed Armenians took part. The fighting continued into May, with tens of thousands of Muslims fleeing the region in what became known as the *büyük kaçgın* (great flight). The governor of Van finally fled on May 16, by which time much of the city had been destroyed and many of its Muslim inhabitants killed. The Armenians consolidated their victory with murderous attacks on Muslim villages around the nearby lake which today would be called ethnic cleansing. The village of Zeve, crowded with refugees from other regions, was, in particular, the site of terrible atrocities. Van was declared an Armenian republic before being incorporated into the Caucasian committee of the All Russian Union of Towns (Sogor), which appointed an Armenian as chief administrator. The main street was renamed Sogorskii Prospekt.¹²

With the exception of brief withdrawals as Ottoman forces approached in late July, 1915, and again in July, 1916, Russian and Armenian forces held Van until April, 1918. The contemporary debate over whether the Van uprising was defensive in nature, as Armenians would claim, or whether it was a well-planned offensive, is completely immaterial to the thinking of the Ottoman high command. All it saw was that an important regional city had fallen to Armenians and Russians, and that unless drastic measures were taken, other vulnerable cities were likely to follow. The extent to which the Van uprising

12 Halit Dunder Akarca, 'The Russian Administration of the Occupied Ottoman Territories During the First World War 1915-1917', MA thesis, Department of International Relations, Bilkent University, February, 2002.

may have been coordinated with the Russian and British military high commands remains an open question.

Unable to stem the spreading insurgency, the Ottoman government responded quickly after Van. On April 24, about a week after the launching of the uprising, it closed down the Armenian national/revolutionary committees in Istanbul and arrested hundreds of their members or Armenians believed to be sympathetic to their aims. Most were sent to Cankırı and Ayaş in the Anatolian interior around Ankara. Towards the end of May – on the recommendation of the military – the government ordered the 'relocation' of the bulk of the Armenian population in the war zones to Syria and Iraq. By early 1916, when the government ordered a stop to the 'relocations', about half a million Armenians had been wrenched from their homes and sent southwards. The 'relocations' were slowed down in tandem with the success of counter-insurgency operations in the second half of 1915. Orders went out to various cities in October to halt the 'relocation' and by January, 1916, it was officially ended although many Armenians were still on the move.¹³

Without the manpower available to crush the insurgents, Erickson believes that the decision to deprive them of their support base by removing the civilian population was a 'strategy of poverty'.¹⁴ Was such a measure justified on the grounds of military necessity, as cruel and as harsh as the consequences

were? Erickson answers the question thus: 'From the perspective of what the Ottoman government believed what was happening the answer is yes. In fact there was a direct threat by the insurgent revolutionary committees to the lines of communication upon which the logistics of the Ottoman armies on three fronts depended. The consequence of failing to supply adequately its armies in contact with the Russians, in particular, must have led to the defeat of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman high command could not take that chance'.¹⁵

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From the military perspective, did the removal of the Armenian civilian task achieve the objective of clearing the ground so that the insurgent threat could

13 Erickson, pp. 210-11

14 Erickson, p. 183

15 Erickson, pp.213-14

be finished off? Erickson believes that it did. 'The relocation of the Armenian population and the associated destruction of the Armenian revolutionary committees ended what the Ottoman government believed was an existential threat to the Ottoman state and the empire survived to fight on until late 1918.'¹⁶ The tactics used during counter-insurgency operation in the second half of 1915 included search and destroy missions in the countryside and the use of artillery against insurgents entrenched in towns. In the meantime, Armenians being moved southwards were attacked by Kurdish and Arab tribes out for plunder or revenge for the killing of Muslims (often Kurds) by Armenian bands.

The fate of the Armenians cannot be understood without following the military path to its logical conclusion, as Erickson does and as a host of writers in the Armenian information and propaganda network do not. There is consistency in the Erickson approach and complete inconsistency in the alternative. There is no evidence to back up Taner Akçam's claim that 'key decisions concerning the massacre' were 'very likely' to have been made within the CUP (Committee of Union and Progress) government in March, 1915. Within three pages these 'key decisions' slide into 'the decision for genocide'.¹⁷ Akçam's suppositions and conjecture amount to no more than a conspiracy theory and the praise for his work as 'brilliant and definitive' and 'meticulous' is ludicrous.¹⁸ The inability of peer and general reviewers to see the holes in his work and hold him to account and the referral by other historians to his conclusions as if they were fact¹⁹ underscores the whole shabby state of 'scholarship' on this issue in the 'western' cultural mainstream.

The actions taken by the Ottoman government in the spring of 1915 are consistent with the view that the sole intention in ordering the 'relocation' was to deprive the Armenian insurgents of civilian support. As reports flowed in of attacks on Armenian convoys, orders were sent out to provincial officials given the task organizing the 'relocation' to catch the perpetrators and provide the convoys with more effective protection. The government finally set up an investigative council involving the ministries of justice, interior and war, with the finance ministry instructed to fund its activities. Three commissions of inquiry were sent out across the eastern provinces with the authority to investigate the conduct of jandarma, police and civil servants, including senior administrators. Hearings were held across the eastern provinces, resulting in

16 Erickson, p.214

17 Taner Akçam, *A Shameful Act. The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility* (London: Constable, 2007), pp.162-164

18 See the praise on the front cover of the book by Orhan Pamuk and on the back by the late Christopher Hitchens.

19 See Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction. Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Professor Kramer's completely twisted version of events (pp.147-150) reaches its pinnacle with the repetition of Akçam's claim of a March meeting.

the court-martial of 1673 people for 'unlawful conduct' during the relocation. Of this number 528 were from the police, the military or the special intelligence organization (the Teşkilat) and 170 were public servants, including tax collectors, mayors and officials directly responsible for arranging the 'relocation'.

The remainder were ordinary people or members of bandit gangs which had taken part in acts of plunder and murder. Of the number put on trial, 67 were sentenced to death (with uncertainty as to whether the sentences were carried out) and 524 sentenced to prison terms of varying lengths of time. The charges against others were dismissed because they were minors.²⁰ These trials were far more important than the charges heard in the kangaroo court set up by the British during their occupation of Istanbul, to which Taner Akçam gives such importance. The suspect source material he utilizes includes what he says are handwritten copies of court proceedings held in the Armenian patriarchate in Jerusalem.²¹ There is no proof, however, that they are copies of the originals and no indication of who wrote them or when they were written.

The Armenians suffered terribly and great crimes were committed against them. There might be disagreement about numbers and detail but there is no dispute about the core accusation of criminality and mistreatment. The Ottoman government has to be held responsible for the consequences of the decision it took, even if it did not realize what those consequences would be. This, of course, is a key issue: it certainly must have known that it was going to be very difficult to move such a large number of people at a time of war, at such short notice, but did it realize just how difficult?

Here the factors leading up to catastrophe that must be taken into account include the lack of manpower to adequately protect the Armenians; logistical problems involved in shifting large numbers of people across a region hardly touched by modern development; the incompetence of provincial authorities even allowing for the enormity of the task they had been assigned; shortages of food and medicine because all resources were being channeled to the front; revenge by Kurdish and Arab tribes for the killing of Muslims by Armenian bands; the effects on civilian life of the British naval blockade of the east Mediterranean coast, with all Syrians suffering as well as the 'relocated' Armenians; and the locust plague of summer 1915 which devastated crops and worsened an increasingly desperate food situation. Even in towns and relatively well watered and fertile regions of Syria, civilians were dropping dead in the streets from starvation. It is doubtful whether the Ottoman government could have known or predicted all this in advance.

20 Yusuf Sarinay, 'The Relocations (Tehcir) of Armenians and the Trials of 1915-16', *Middle East Critique*, vol.20, no.3, Fall 2011: pp. 299-315.

21 Akçam, p.xiii

This seems to have been a zero sum game. There was going to be loss whatever the government decided, but in the view of the military, the bulk of the civilian Armenian population had to be moved if the insurgency was to be quashed. The failure to suppress the insurgents would threaten not just the war effort but the survival of the empire itself. That was the view of the military command. Hindsight is a wonderful thing but it was the judgment formed by military men in the heat of a fight to the death being waged on several fronts by armies and from behind the lines by thousands of insurgents.

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The other side of this coin is the terrible suffering of the Muslim population, especially during the Russian-Armenian occupation of northeastern Anatolia. About 500,000 Ottoman civilian Muslims were massacred during the course of the war. The atrocities committed by Armenians were recorded in Ottoman documents written not for propaganda purposes, like the 1916 'Blue Book' of James Bryce and Arnold Toynbee, but for the information of the central government when Ottoman armies were able to return to the occupied eastern provinces. The suffering of one group does not cancel out nor should it be allowed to minimize the suffering of another but the suffering of all surely has to be taken

into account if a balanced account of this terrible period of history is to be written. There were not perpetrators on one side and victims on the other in this conflict: there were perpetrators and victims on all sides. Somewhere between two and 2.5 million Ottoman Muslim civilians died in this war from exactly the same causes as Armenians, massacre, combat, disease, malnutrition and exposure. They are the invisible element in this history.

Edward Erickson has done a fine job in hacking a path through the jungle of propaganda in which the 'Armenian question' has been buried for the past century. Drawing on Ottoman military sources he makes a powerful case for the view that the 'relocation' of the Armenians was dictated by military necessity and nothing else.

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