

BOOK REVIEW

(KİTAP TAHLİLİ)

A LAWYER'S BLUNDERING FORAY INTO HISTORY

Review Essay

(BİR HUKUKÇUNUN TARİHE KARŞI KÖR EDİCİ SALDIRISI)

Jeremy SALT

Author: Geoffrey Robertson, QC, *An Inconvenient Genocide: Who Now Remembers the Armenians?* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2014), 293 pp.

The author of this book is well known, as an international human rights lawyer, as the author of other books and as a television panelist and former moderator of the BBC quiz program 'Hypotheticals.' His reputation alone will ensure sales and favorable reviews but this book cannot be regarded as a serious study of the Armenian question, let alone as the historical basis for a legal judgment of any kind.

Mr Robertson's problems begin with the front cover. 'Who now remembers the Armenians?' refers to a statement allegedly made by Hitler on the eve of the invasion of Poland, yet in three versions of the speech admitted as evidence at the Nuremberg tribunal there is no mention of the Armenians.¹ They appear in a version passed around by an American journalist, Louis P. Lochner, who claims to have been given it a week before the invasion of Poland by a confidant of one of Hitler's enemies

¹ The forensic work on this question has been done by Heath Lowry. See his article 'The US Congress and Adolf Hitler on the Armenians,' *Political Communication and Persuasion*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1985. www.ataa.org/reference/hitler-lowry.html

inside the military, Colonel Beck. The Lochner version first surfaced in the book he had published in 1942, *What About Germany?* In a second book published in 1956, *Always the Unexpected*, Lochner reveals how his version of the speech was passed on to him, headed as a protective measure ‘a piece of filthy propaganda’ (ein Stück gemeine Propaganda) in case the bearer was arrested. The number of insulting references to Hitler’s allies or erstwhile allies in the Lochner version of the speech indicate that it was certainly not the one he made and was in fact falsified to cause him embarrassment. The Japanese emperor is described as weak and cowardly; King Carol of Rumania is the corrupt slave of his sexual desires; the king of Italy is a nitwit and the crown prince a scoundrel; and the people of the Far East and Arabia are ‘lacquered apes’ who crave to be flogged.²

The two versions of the speech admitted as reliable by the Nuremberg tribunal are consistent with each other and with a diary account of the speech. They contain no mention of the Armenians. The first version was found in notes taken by Admiral Hermann Boehm, the Chief of the High Seas Fleet, who was present; the second was located in a memorandum retained in the files of the Chief of the High Command of the Armed Forces; the third came from the diary of General Halder, who was party to a plot to kill Hitler in 1939 and barely escaped execution in 1944 for his alleged role in other conspiracies.

In fact, Hitler made two speeches at Obersalzberg the same day (August 22, 1939). The prosecutor declined to table the Lochner version, purportedly based on the speech Hitler made to ‘Supreme Commanders and Commanding Generals’. Given the widespread use of the Hitler quote for propaganda purposes, the prosecutor’s remarks are worth repeating. He said that the document ‘came into our possession through the medium of an American newspaperman and purported to be the original minutes of the meeting at Obersalzberg, transmitted to this American newspaperman by some other person and we had no proof of the actual delivery to the intermediary by the person who took the notes. That document, therefore, merely served to alert our prosecutors to see if they could find something better’.³

The prosecutor concluded that the Lochner version was a ‘slightly garbled’ merger of the two speeches Hitler made. The Lochner account was accidentally leaked to the press, after which the president of the tribunal remarked that ‘the tribunal is trying the case in accordance with the evidence and not in accordance with what is in the press and the third document [the Lochner

2 ibid.

3 ibid.

version] is not in evidence before us'. The primary documents tabled as evidence at Nuremberg indicate that the Lochner version of the speech was more than 'slightly garbled' but was, rather, a somewhat crude attempt to embarrass Hitler at a time his opponents inside the military had already been thinking of assassinating him if necessary to prevent Germany from being plunged into war.⁴

Having begun his book by referring to a statement Hitler probably never made, Mr Robertson proceeds to examine Ottoman history as a prelude to what happened in 1915. He does not begin with a survey of conditions in eastern Anatolia on the eve of the war. This is the essential context for anyone who wants to get to the truth of what happened to the Armenians during the war (except for those who think they know the truth). Eastern Anatolia was the crucible of the 'Armenian question.' It was from the eastern provinces that the bulk of Armenians were 'relocated' and it was in the east that Ottoman armies fought the Russians. It was in the east also that Armenians fighting with the Russians launched insurgency operations from behind the Ottoman lines. Setting the scene for all of this means taking into account conditions on the ground. The notion of a central government controlling all things has to be scotched immediately. Outside the town and the governor's konak (mansion), real power and authority lay in the hands of tribal leaders, Kurdish and even Christian (Nestorian) in southeastern Anatolia and Arab further south. This was the arrangement put together by the Sultan Abdülhamit in the late 19th century: in return for tribal leaders upholding his sovereign right, he acknowledged their traditional prerogatives.

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Apart from these factors, the word 'backward' is scarcely sufficient to describe conditions on the ground. No sealed roads, only tracks leading from the interior to the coast; no railways except for a short line near the Black Sea coast and a line from Konya broken by the Taurus mountains; poor communications, a telegraph link from the middle of the century and an unreliable postal service;

4 *ibid.*

very few doctors, hospitals or pharmacies; military garrisons and police but not nearly sufficient to maintain or restore authority once it had broken down, especially in wild and remote areas cut off for months during the winter; on top of all this, a largely illiterate population easily stirred into outbursts of fanaticism. It was for all these reasons that the two most prominent Armenian militant groups, the Dashnaks and Hunchaks, chose eastern Anatolia rather than the Caucasus as the staging ground for their uprisings in the late 19th century. These conditions remained unchanged at the outbreak of the First World War and to repeat, the fate of the Armenians, indeed of the whole civilian population of eastern Anatolia, cannot be understood without taking them into account.

Unreliable ‘facts’

Mr Robertson’s general account of Ottoman history is inaccurate in almost every respect. His account of Muslim-Christian relations paraphrases attempts by propagandists to break down the truth of the ‘ancient symbiosis’ - the phrase of the Armenian historian Avedis Sanjian – between Muslims and Christians until the 19th century came along. Muslim society was segmented rather than segregated, creating a system in which Christians and Jews enjoyed far greater protection under Ottoman law over the centuries than Jews did even in western Europe. In eastern Anatolia venal administrators or brutal Kurdish tribal chiefs could treat Muslims just as cruelly as Christians. The difference was that missionaries and consuls took notice of Christian grievances but mostly ignored the suffering of Muslims. In Istanbul, Armenians were part of the court circle. They mingled with the Muslims on the basis of equality; they served the sultan as senior bureaucrats; they were the architects of his palaces and even the guardians of his arsenal. The lines of division were socio-economic rather than sectarian: the Armenians of the *amira* (aristocratic) class in Istanbul and their patrician Muslim counterparts had far more in common with each other than with their impoverished coreligionists in eastern Anatolia. As for Armenian ecclesiastics, they were far from passive, as Mr Robertson writes, but aggressive managers of the Gregorian Armenian millet, their grip in favor of lay control only being released under the pressure of a reformist Ottoman government.

The ‘ancient symbiosis’ began to disintegrate in the 19th century but rather than look for reasons peculiar to the time and circumstances, Mr Robertson presents the unraveling of Muslim-Christian relations as being part of an endless historical cycle of discrimination against the Armenians. His ‘facts’ are unreliable. Thus he can write that the Sultan Abdülhamit ‘oversaw the slaughter

of some 200,000 Armenians between 1894 and 1896.’⁵ Thousands of Armenians did die but the figure of 200,000 is a wild exaggeration, and in no way did the sultan oversee let alone prescribe massacres. No mention is made here of the role Britain played in provoking turmoil by demanding spurious ‘reforms’ favoring the Armenians which the sultan told them the Muslim population would not understand and could not accept and would only end in chaos for which he would be blamed (as he was).

Mr Robertson claims that the ‘Hamidean massacres’ began at Sasun in 1894 when ‘the provincial governor urged local Muslims to teach the insubordinate Armenians a lesson.’⁶ He provides no evidence of this and goes on to cast doubt on the reality of an uprising. In fact - in real fact as opposed to the propaganda facts strewn across these pages - Armenian militants had been stirring up trouble in the east in the hope of provoking an outrage so great that one or more of the European powers would intervene. The Sasun uprising was their handiwork. The Armenians murdered Kurdish Muslims and the Kurds retaliated before a force of 4000 troops was sent from the 4th Army headquarters at Erzurum. By the time they arrived they were facing an Armenian force of up to 3000 men, most armed only with muskets, swords and hatchets but some with modern weapons. The Armenians apparently planned to seize more weapons from barracks at the nearby town of Muş but were deterred by the advancing military force. Despatches were sent to the government on a daily basis giving the latest estimates of the number of Armenians involved in the insurgency and the number of soldiers that would be necessary to suppress it. This was a regular military operation involving a small number of Kurdish *hamidiye* cavalymen (about 300) and not the ‘regiments’ to which Mr Robertson refers.⁷ Civilians caught up in this conflict probably were among the dead but not in the thousands or tens of thousands claimed by the former British Prime Minister, William Gladstone, and other racist and religious bigots. An Ottoman commission of inquiry found that fewer than 300 Armenians had died: the British consul attending as an observer, H.S. Shipley, demurred but still put the figure at no higher than 900.⁸

Mr Robertson repeats the lurid stories told by British consuls of events at Sasun and Urfa, apparently unaware that they were not there at the time. Vice-Consul Hallward was prevented by the Ottoman authorities from travelling to the

5 Robertson, *An Inconvenient Genocide*, 37.

6 Ibid, 40.

7 For an account of the Sasun uprising from the Ottoman archives see Jeremy Salt ‘The narrative gap in Ottoman Armenian history,’ *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 39, No.1, January, 2003, 26-29.

8 Jeremy Salt, *Imperialism. Evangelism and the Ottoman Armenians 1878-1896* (London: Frank Cass, 1993), 75.

Sasun region. Vice-Consul Fitzmaurice, accompanying two Ottoman commissioners of inquiry, did not visit Urfa until months after the fire which destroyed the Armenian church (December, 1895) during mob attacks in which many Armenians died. Mr Robertson refers to the ‘stomach turning’ consular account of the events at Sasun but does not mention Ottoman accounts of the atrocities committed by Armenians in their attempt to set off a major conflagration that would bring in the European powers. The British consular reports were heavily based on material provided by missionaries and their Armenian protégés and have, furthermore, to be set in the context of a British government trying to blame others for the blundering and disastrous consequences of its own failed Armenian policy. It should be mentioned here that the victims of Armenian ‘revolutionary’ violence included many Armenian ‘traitors’ and ‘backsliders’ who refused to cooperate with them. Given the demographic imbalance between the overwhelming Muslim majority and the Armenian minority, the provocations by the militants would seem to have been suicidal but the death of their own people was part of their grim ‘revolutionary’ calculus: the more violent the explosions across the eastern provinces and the greater the number of Armenians who died in mob attacks, the more likely it was that the powers would be compelled to intervene.

‘Peaceful’ protests

Mr Robertson claims that after Sasun ‘ordinary Armenians’ attended a ‘peaceful protest’ in Istanbul ‘organized by the Hunchak Party’ to demand ‘civil rights’ (a phrase surely belonging to the 20th century), fair taxation and protection from the Kurds. He does not give the date but presumably is referring to the demonstration outside the government offices (Bab i-Ali) on September 30, 1895. Mr Robertson claims that the police opened fire, ‘charging the demonstrators with clubs, killing many of them.’⁹ In fact, according to the British ambassador, Sir Philip Currie, and the American Minister Plenipotentiary, Alexander Terrell, it seems to have been an Armenian who fired the first shots, triggering off an affray in which 15 gendarmes and about 60 Armenians were killed or wounded.¹⁰ Terrell believed the presence of a British fleet off Lemnos had encouraged an ‘aggressive feeling’ among the Armenians, while Currie thought the Hunchaks had arranged the demonstration in the hope of compelling the European powers to intervene.¹¹ Currie, it should be noted, was a forceful advocate of ‘reforms’ for the Armenians and the last person to make up stories about Armenians starting the shooting.

9 Robertson, 41.

10 *Imperialism, Evangelism and Ottoman Armenians*, op. cit.,

11 *ibid*, 92-93.

'Peaceful' demonstrations calling for the redress of grievances were simply the triggers Armenian militants pulled to cause chaos in Istanbul or other cities. In 1890 a Hunchak organizer had disrupted mass at the Armenian patriarchate cathedral in Istanbul by going to the altar to read out a list of grievances and then pulling a gun on Patriarch Ashikian, who fled the cathedral and took refuge in a chemist's shop until its windows were smashed by a mob worked into a fury by the Hunchaks. The patriarch was eventually saved by a contingent of soldiers and police. Shots were fired and a policeman and soldier killed: according to the British ambassador, Sir William White, it was the first time since the Ottoman conquest of the city in 1453 that Christians had dared to challenge government forces.¹² The arrest of 10 Armenians the same year for instigating uprisings is further evidence of the determination of the Hunchaks and Dashnaks to cause chaos in the hope of compelling the European powers to intervene and force the sultan to grant Armenian autonomy which eventually would become independence. Sasun in 1894 was their most serious attempt yet to attain this objective.

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Mr Robertson's sources are questionable throughout. He quotes unspecified 'church records' for an Armenian population 'in Anatolia' of 2.1 million.¹³ No figures are entirely reliable, but the Ottoman census figures are certainly more reliable than 'church records', i.e the estimates of Armenian patriarchs playing their own political game ever since the 'Armenian question' was created at the Congress of Berlin in 1878. The figures are important because of the way they have been used for propaganda purposes ever since the European diplomats met at Berlin: the greater number of Armenians that the world could be led to believe lived in the eastern provinces the stronger the case for Armenian autonomy or independence. According to the Ottoman census taken two years before the outbreak of war, there were 1.2 million Armenians in the empire (not just Anatolia). Making all allowances for census vagaries the Armenian population by 1915 could have been no more than about 1.5 or 1.6 million. The Armenians did not constitute 30 per cent of the population of the eastern Anatolian provinces as Mr Robertson claims but about 22 per cent. Only in one province (Van) did they amount to 30 per cent of the population.

¹² Ibid, 62.

¹³ Robertson, 13.

Bryce's broadsides

In dealing with the First World War, Mr Robertson's authorities include the British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, and his Foreign Secretary, Arthur James Balfour. As the senior figures in a government at war with Germany and the Ottoman Empire their statements cannot be regarded as anything other than propaganda designed to do maximum damage to the enemy. They were scarcely moral exemplars themselves: Lloyd George was a principal architect of the Greek invasion of Anatolia in 1919, described by Arnold Toynbee as a 'war of extermination' of the Turks.¹⁴ Balfour set in motion the establishment of a colonial settler state in Palestine: just as Lloyd George loved the Greeks and loathed the Turks, Balfour professed to love the Jews while showing nothing but contempt for Arabs.

Robertson also relies heavily on the parliamentary 'Blue Book' prepared by James Bryce and Arnold Toynbee. In 1878 Bryce had founded the Anglo-Armenian Association, whose campaign for reforms, remarked the author and diplomat Sir Charles Eliot, 'was hampered by their invincible ignorance of the spirit and methods of the east.'¹⁵ A key figure in the 'Armenian agitation' of the 1890s, Bryce's status as a former ambassador to the US was the packaging used by the government to give his tirades against the Ottoman government the veneer of respectability. In 1915 he published a propaganda broadside against Germany¹⁶ which was shown once the war was over (and it no longer mattered) to be full of gross exaggerations if not downright lies.¹⁷ In 1916 Bryce oversaw the compilation of accusations against the Ottoman government which has stood as a mainstay of Armenian propaganda until the present day.¹⁸ Toynbee was his right hand man and appears to have done most of the spade work. That Bryce might have had a propensity for exaggeration can be deduced from his claim that 15,000 Armenians had been killed at Sasun in 1894, not the 900 given as the maximum figure by Consul Shipley.¹⁹

The claim by Robertson that Toynbee was 'no propagandist' is absurd because that is precisely the role he and Bryce played during the war and the argument

14 Arnold Toynbee, *The Western Question in Greece and Turkey. A Study in the Contact of Civilisations* (London: Constable, 1922), 259.

15 *Imperialism, Evangelism and Ottoman Armenians*, op. cit., 114.

16 James Bryce, *Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages* (New York: Macmillan, 1915).

17 See Jameson Ryley, 'The Historian Who Sold Out: James Bryce and the Bryce Report,' *Iowa Historical Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (2008).
www.ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1011&context=iowa-historical-review

18 *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire 1915-16*. Documents presented to Viscount Grey of Fallodon by Viscount Bryce (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1916).

19 *Imperialism, Evangelism and Ottoman Armenians*, op. cit., 75.

that ‘denialists have failed to prove the fabrication of a single document’²⁰ is pure sophistry. The word ‘document’ implies an official or legal record, whereas the mass of material gathered in the Blue Book consists largely of accounts, frequently hearsay, often lurid and inflammatory, provided by missionaries or taken from Armenian newspapers or written by people far from the scene. Here is a representative sample of Bryce’s source material, from the province of Van:

1. The American missionary establishment at Van, letters printed privately in the US by Miss Grace Higley Knapp.
2. A letter from Mr Y.K. Rushdouni published in the *Manchester Guardian*
3. Narrative by Mr Y.K. Rushdouni published in the Armenian journal *Gotchnag*.
4. Letter from Herr Sporri of the German mission at Van
5. Narrative of Mr A. Safrastian published in the Armenian journal *Ararat*.
6. Interview with a refugee, Mrs Gazarian, published in the *Pioneer Press* Minnesota.

Complete fabrication as well as dissimulation and lurid exaggeration probably was involved in the compilation of the Armenian report: doubt has to exist, for example, whether there ever was a ‘Bedouin notable’ called Fa’iz al Ghusain who wrote the book Martyred Armenia.

These are not ‘documents’ but accusations launched against the Ottoman government by people who were driven by religious rancor and/or political fervor. Nevertheless, they were the primary source material for an extensive British government propaganda operation involving the services of a long list of eminent writers and thinkers and nominally independent publishing houses. Like Bryce, they all lent their reputations to the war being waged against the German and Ottoman governments. The records kept at the centre of their operations - Wellington House – could not be found after the war and it is fair to conclude that they were destroyed by the government because they were too incriminating. Only the fragments are left but they are still enough to gauge the scale of the campaign directed against the German and Ottoman governments, partly driven by the need to get the US into the war. Complete fabrication as well as dissimulation and lurid exaggeration probably was involved in the compilation of the Armenian report: doubt has to exist, for

²⁰ Robertson, 12.

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Morgenthau's stories

Robertson also relies heavily on the memoirs of Henry Morgenthau, the former New York real estate agent who serves as the US ambassador in Istanbul from December 1913 to February 1916. *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story*,²¹ his account of his time in the Ottoman Empire, was put together by a ghost writer, Burton J. Hendrick, with the assistance of Morgenthau's Armenian office staff. Morgenthau never visited eastern Anatolia, remaining heavily dependent on missionaries and his Armenian informants for what he passed on to others. He kept a diary throughout his time in Istanbul and maintained a stream of letters to friends and family back home. In these private sources there is no mention of the evil intentions he attributes in his book to the Ottoman Interior Minister, Talat Paşa, on the basis of conversations he claimed they had.

George Abel Schreiner, the American newspaper correspondent, who did visit the interior of Anatolia and believed that 'Turkish ineptness, more than intentional brutality, were responsible for the hardships the Armenians were subjected to,'²² wrote to Morgenthau accusing him of slandering the dead (former German ambassador Baron Wangenheim) and misrepresenting the character of the Ottoman Minister for War, Enver Paşa, 'after you had made so much of him Is it not a fact that Enver Pasha was an enlightened young leader as could be found', even if 'rather inexperienced and 'somewhat impulsive'? Furthermore, 'nor did you possess in Constantinople that omniscience and omnipotence you have arrogated unto yourself in the book. In the interest of truth I will also affirm that you saw little of the cruelty you fasten upon the Turks. Besides that, you have killed more Armenians than ever lived in the districts of the uprising. The fate of those people was sad enough without [it] having to be exaggerated as you have done.'²³

Schreiner almost certainly had Morgenthau in mind when he wrote in *The Craft Sinister*: 'It is to be hoped that the future historian will not give too much heed to the drivel one finds in the books of diplomatist-authors. I at least have found

21 Henry Morgenthau, *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1918).

22 George Abel Schreiner, *The Craft Sinister* (New York: G. Albert Geyer, 1920), 124-25.

23 Heath H. Lowry, *The Story Behind Ambassador Morgenthau's Story* (Istanbul: Isis Press, 1990), Chapter V, 'A Contemporary View of Ambassador Morgenthau's Story,' www.eraren.org/index.php?Lisan=en&page=Yayincerik&SayinNo=18#

these books remarkably unreliable on the part played by the author. It would seem that these literary productions are on a par with the ‘blue books’ published by governments for the edification of the public and their own amusement...²⁴

He goes on to refer to the ‘diplomats’ of the United States and of the countries defeated by the Allies who write memoirs that are personal and partial ‘but which for all that aspire to being accepted as ‘truth and nothing but the truth.’ Study of these books will lead to no other conclusion that they are at best a record of backstairs gossip perpetuated by the mighty master of the house – a rather ludicrous situation, to be sure. Yet it is from books of this sort that the public of the United States has taken the scant knowledge – or what it mistakes for knowledge – it has of the Great War.’²⁵

Of his other sources, Mr Robertson makes use of Peter Balakian, whose book, *The Burning Tigris*, the late Andrew Mango concluded in his review, was ‘not a work of historical research’ : some of his assertions, wrote Mango, ‘would make any serious Ottoman historian’s hair stand on end.’²⁶ Other sources include the Armenian historian-as- propagandist Vakahn Dadrian and his Turkish protégé, Taner Akçam. A full critique of Akçam’s tendentious writings is beyond the scope of a book review but enough has already been exposed to show that his ‘scholarship’ is more of a ship full of holes. Akçam’s claim that the Ottoman Committee of Union and Progress met early in 1915 and took a decision to wipe out the Armenians, is based entirely on conjecture and supposition. He has no names, places or dates or indeed anything that would lend credibility to such an infamous assertion.²⁷

Arrests and uprisings

Moving to specific events, Mr Robertson deals with the arrest of Armenians in Istanbul on April 24 1915. He writes that several hundred Armenians were

24 Schreiner, xxi

25 *ibid*, xxii.

26 Review of *The Burning Tigris*, The Times Literary Supplement, September 17, 2004.

27 Taner Akçam, *A Shameful Act. The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility* (London: Constable, 2007). See pages 162 for how Akçam’s claim that it was ‘very likely key decisions concerning the massacre’ were taken in March, 1915, slides into ‘the decision for genocide’ without a shred of proof of a decision being taken for either. If there is anything remarkable about this claim it is that it could run the gauntlet of editors and peer reviewers and pass into print without apparently being challenged. For a critical examination of Akçam’s works see Erman Şahin ‘A scrutiny of Akçam’s Version of History and the Armenian Genocide’, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 28, No. 2, August, 2008 and the same author’s review essay, ‘The Armenian Question Resolved: Policies Towards the Armenians in the War Years According to Ottoman Documents,’ *Middle East Policy*, Vol XVII No. 1, Spring 2010.

arrested on that night and ‘transported in ships to military prisons near Ankara’.²⁸ How this was possible when Ankara is hundreds of kilometers from the nearest coast, he does not say. What the Ottoman records show is that 155 Armenians were sent to the town of Çankiri (by train).²⁹ They were not kept in military prisons but were placed under house arrest. They had to report to the police station every 24 hours but otherwise were free to move around the town. They were held until August 31. Of these 155 individuals, 35 were found to be innocent and were allowed to return to Istanbul; 25 were convicted of offences against the state and imprisoned in Ankara or the nearby town of Ayaş; 57 were sent to Deir al Zor in Syria; of the seven foreign nationals among the arrested men, three were deported and four kept in custody; the remaining 31 men were pardoned. The 71 Armenians sent directly to Ayaş from Istanbul, all allegedly members of the higher committees of the Dashnak and Hunchak organizations, were detained for the duration of the war. One died before the war’s end: the rest were released either when the fighting stopped or after the wartime government collapsed and the victorious powers took control.³⁰

The detention of Armenians sent to Çankiri or Ayaş is a separate issue from the trial and conviction of Armenians found guilty of conspiracy against the state. Masses of weapons, bombs and ammunition were found in churches and houses after the decision was taken to close down the Armenian committees. The German ambassador wrote of an Armenian plot to bomb government buildings during celebrations to mark the anniversary of the sultan’s accession to the throne on April 27 while a French report spoke of alleged plans to assassinate Talat and Enver Paşas.³¹ In the event, 20 Armenians were tried before a military court on June 5 and sentenced to death for attempted assassination and other charges. On June 15, 18 of them were hanged: others were sentenced to imprisonment or internal exile.

The arrests in Istanbul were preceded by an Armenian uprising in the city of Van a week before. Mr Robertson argues that there was no revolt and that the Armenians simply ‘defended their quarter against aggression by troops under orders from the Turkish governor.’³² He admits to ‘heavy casualties on both sides’ but comes nowhere capturing the essence of what happened in and around Van, which had been a major centre of arms stockpiling and uprisings

28 Robertson, 48.

29 For a detailed study of the arrests see Yusuf Sarinay, ‘What Happened on April 24, 1915? The Circular of April 24, 1915, and the Arrest of Armenian Committee Members in Istanbul’, *International Journal of Turkish Studies*, Vol. 14, Nos. 1 and 2, Fall, 2008, 75-101.

30 *ibid.*

31 *ibid.*, 77-78.

32 Robertson, 74.

since the late 19th century. Either during the fighting or after it was over, the Armenians ransacked the Muslim quarter and massacred its inhabitants. The slaughter continued in the villages around the lake, which were crowded with refugees fleeing Russian advances further north. Either in the city of Van, in the nearby villages or amongst civilians taking flight many thousands of Muslims - tens of thousands according to official figures - were killed. Miss Knapp writes only of Russian-Armenian volunteers 'cleaning out' these villages. That the missionaries inside the city saw only the harm suffered by Armenians is testimony to their unreliability as balanced and objective witnesses.

Mr Robertson claims that the Ottoman army returned to Van 'with a vengeance' at the end of July. If that was the case, there was virtually no one left on whom they could take revenge. Once conquered the city was placed under Russian military command and administration but within six weeks an Ottoman force was advancing to retake it. 'On Friday the 30th of July', according to Miss Knapp, 'General Nicolaieff ordered all the Armenians of the Van province, also the Americans and other foreigners, to flee for their lives. By Saturday night the city was nearly emptied of Armenians and quite emptied of conveyances.' As the Armenians and foreign missionaries crossed into the Russian Caucasus, they were set upon by Kurdish tribesmen. In a tribal society one strong motive for these attacks would have been revenge for Armenian attacks on Kurds.

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With the Russian army advancing on Bitlis (as Miss Knapp admits) and threatening other cities, Van rather than the imminent allied landing at Gallipoli was the tipping point. Further archival research may yet show that the Van uprising was coordinated with the British and the Russians (about to engage with the Ottomans in northwestern Persia). Armenians and Greeks had already been shifted from regions where it was feared they would act as a fifth column and now the order went out for the bulk of the Armenian population to be 'relocated'.

Apart from Van, Mr Robertson argues, 'rebellion seems to have been low level or non existent.'³³ This is not the view taken by Edward Erickson, who has

³³ Ibid., 49.

actually done the research in the Ottoman military archives and argues that widespread sabotage of the war effort from behind the lines was the sole reason for the military command recommending that the bulk of the Armenian population be moved away from the war zone.³⁴ There is an abundance of documentary evidence in support of his findings. Moving civilian populations on the basis of military necessity was undertaken by the Spanish in Cuba in the 19th century, by the British in South Africa, by the Americans in the Philippines in the early 20th century, by the French in Algeria, by the British in Malaya and by the Americans in Vietnam. Suffering and death was always involved and if the ‘relocation’ of the Ottoman Armenians turned out so catastrophically the backward conditions on the ground outlined at the beginning of this article were certainly an important element.

Blockade and plague

Other factors one would have to take into account would included the British naval blockade of the eastern Mediterranean coast, which killed off cash economies and blocked the importation of machinery and spare parts needed for agricultural production. Another would be the locust plague of 1915, which devastated farmlands and orchards along the coastal plain. Starvation and destitution were soon widespread. Even in the streets of Beirut people were dropping dead or eating weeds in the attempt to stay alive. The war was catastrophic for the Syrian people but these conditions were widespread across Ottoman lands and indeed, wherever the war was fought, including northwest Persia and the Caucasus, affecting Muslims just as badly as Christians.

Mr Robertson tries to soften the significance of anti-government activities in the mountain town of Zeytun, which had also been a major centre of Armenian agitation since the 19th century. Even amongst the British sponsors of the Armenians, the Zeytunlis had the reputation of being a wild and warlike people. During an uprising in late 1895 they attacked nearby Muslim villages and slaughtered civilians: in the town itself, they overran government buildings and the military garrison, massacring an estimated 50 officers and 600 soldiers with knives, hatchets and pickaxes. The bodies of the soldiers were heaved into a river ravine where they froze: when a British consul examined the bodies six weeks later he found ‘some with their heads split open with axes, others with their arms or legs chopped off or covered with stabs or gun wounds on every conceivable part of their body.’³⁵ The siege of the town by an initial

34 Edward J. Erickson, *Ottomans and Armenians. A Study in Counterinsurgency* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

35 *Imperialism, Evangelism and Ottoman Armenians*, 105-6.

Ottoman force of 18,000 men³⁶ (against 10,000-12,000 Armenians, according to the estimate of a US consul³⁷) lasted for months before being settled through negotiations which gave the Hunchak instigators of the uprising a safe pass to the coast, and a sea passage to Marseilles paid for by the government in Istanbul.

In August, 1914, the Zeytunli Armenians defied government mobilization orders: according to Ottoman documents they attacked a military unit and killed and robbed Muslims. Further attacks followed in December.³⁸ Later in the year the British navy began patrolling the eastern Mediterranean and landing raiding parties and Armenian agents. In February, 1915, the Zeytunli Armenians assured Russia of their support if it initiated simultaneous military action in Cilicia (the eastern Mediterranean region) and around the northeastern city of Erzurum. Armenians in the coastal region were known to be well-armed and were already attacking soldiers and jandarma as well as postal services and recruitment offices.³⁹ In March, the Russian ambassador in London informed the British government that the Hunchaks had 3000 followers in Zeytun along with committees established at Adana, Hadjin, Sis, Furnuz, Maraş and Aleppo. The leading figures were the same men who had directed the uprising of 1895. The Zeytunlis were talking of being able to raise an armed force of 15,000 men.⁴⁰ Between March 18-24, hundreds of Zeytunlis who had based themselves in a monastery fought Ottoman forces sent to suppress them, killing a number of enlisted men and their commander, Süleyman Efendi⁴¹.

In this same period of time expatriate Armenian community leaders in Egypt and the US were assuring Britain that if it opened a new front in the eastern Mediterranean local Armenians would rise up in its support. Even if the British government ultimately decided not to go ahead, the opening of a new front in the eastern Mediterranean was seriously contemplated in 1915. In short, there was every reason for the Ottoman military command to fear the consequences of actual or potential links between the British and Armenians in the region. It was this perceived threat that lay behind the decision to ‘relocate’ the Cilician Armenians.

36 The numbers soon began to drop because of deaths in combat or from disease and desertion.

37 *Imperialism, Evangelism and the Ottoman Armenians*, op. cit., 102, Consul Poche, writing from Aleppo.

38 Salahi Sonyel, *The Great War and the Tragedy of Anatolia. Turks and Armenians in the Maelstrom of Major Powers*. (Ankara: Turkish Historical Society, 2001), 91.

39 Yücel Güçlü, *Armenians and the Allies in Cilicia 1914-1923* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2010), 70-77

40 Sonyel, op. cit., 109.

41 Kemal Çiçek, *The Great War and the Forced Migration of Armenians* (Belfast: Athol Books, 2012), 44. In honor of the dead commander, the town was subsequently renamed Süleymanli.

Mr Robertson argues that ‘up to’ two million Armenians were ‘deported’ and that about a million died. In fact, the Armenians were not ‘deported’ but moved within the borders of the Ottoman state. The figure of two million is a wild exaggeration if only because there were not two million Armenians in all the lands of the Ottoman Empire in the first place. Ottoman statistics show that close to half a million Armenians had been shifted into Syria by February, 1916, when the ‘relocations’ were officially declared at an end. Others were still on the move: the total number moved was probably close to 700,000. Many thousands of Armenians were massacred on the way south by marauding bands, sometimes with the active complicity of police, soldiers and officials or through their negligence. Many others died on the way from disease or malnutrition and many more were to die in Syria. While some Ottoman officials were guilty of neglect or criminal complicity, others did their best to alleviate the situation. Many Armenians had already left Ottoman lands, as we know from the flight of virtually all Armenians from the Van province in early August, 1915. Hundreds of thousands survived the war only to be caught up in the fighting which continued in the Caucasus and what was soon to become southeastern Turkey. The size of the Armenian population, the number of people ‘relocated’ and the number who died from all causes – massacre, disease, malnutrition, exposure and combat – remain the subject of bitter controversy and, as a century has already passed, will probably never be clarified to the point of any kind of consensus.

Manpower problems

Mr Robertson claims that the Ottoman government ‘decided’ not to protect the conveys adequately.⁴² He provides no proof for such an assertion and has no apparent comprehension of the scale of the crisis facing the Ottoman military in 1915, especially after the near annihilation of the Ottoman Third Army at Sarikamiş in January. Facing the British at Gallipoli and in Mesopotamia and the Russians in northeastern Anatolia and northwest Persia, the Ottoman military command was completely stretched for manpower. It had not recovered from the disasters of the Balkan war of 1912-13 and was caught short at all levels when pulled into the European war. Stricken by logistical problems, it is remarkable that until the very end the army fought as well as it did. By 1915 all young men of fighting age were off at the front. Many died of disease or exposure before they even got there; many died of the same causes soon after; many had to march hundreds of kilometers to the front because there was no transport and many were sent into battle poorly equipped and

42 Robertson, 130.

clothed, down to not even having shoes to wear. Soldiers were sent into battle in summer wearing winter clothing and sent into battle in winter wearing summer clothing. Epidemics - typhus, dysentery, spotted fever, cholera and other diseases - swept the ranks (and the civilian population) and shortages of food and proper medical care prevailed throughout the war. Battlefield demands meant that there were not enough soldiers, jandarma or police left to protect the civilian population from attacks by armed bands, whether they were Armenian insurgents or Ottoman army deserters. Was the Ottoman government also deliberately setting up the massacre of Muslim civilians as well as Christians by failing to provide them with adequate protection?

When reports came in of attacks on the Armenian convoys, the government sent dispatch after dispatch demanding that the officials put in charge of the 'relocation' punish the perpetrators and provide the Armenians with adequate protection. These instructions were sent in code and cannot plausibly be passed off as propaganda designed to pull the wool over the eyes of the enemy or the Ottoman Empire's German ally.

With the attacks on Armenians continuing, the government established three commissions of inquiry in the late summer of 1915. These resulted in the court martial of 1673 people; 528 police, army and intelligence officers; 170 civil servants, up to the level of provincial sub-governors; and 975 members of gangs or civilians who simply joined in the attacks and pillaging. The charges included murder, assault, theft, bribery, extortion and the forced marriage of Armenian women: by the middle of 1916, 916 individuals had been or were in the process of being prosecuted: of this number, 67 had been sentenced to death and another 524 sentenced to prison terms of varying length.⁴³ These trials were far more authentic than the trials set up after the war during the allied occupation of Istanbul. Research still has a long way to go, but on the basis of the evidence already available, an obvious question arises: if the Ottoman government was determined to kill the Armenians, why was it putting on trial people accused of doing just that? The orders sent out to protect the Armenians and the court-martials which followed are evidence that the government was not at all 'indifferent' to the death toll.⁴⁴

The importance of these trials is downplayed by all Armenian propagandists because they subvert the core of accusations made against the Ottoman government. Mr Robertson mentions them only to dismiss their significance.

43 For these and other details of the trials see Yusuf Sarıncı, 'The Relocation (Tehcir) of Armenians and the Trials of 1915-16,' *Middle East Critique*, Vol. 20, No. 3, Fall, 2011: 299-315.

44 Robertson, 135.

As for the killing of Muslims by Armenians, he writes that while ‘some atrocities’ were committed by ‘vengeful Armenians’ after 1917, it was the Russians, the British and the French and not the Armenians who were largely responsible for the killing of ‘Turks’. Where he gets this from he does not explain. In fact - real fact and not a Robertson fact - whatever individual atrocities they might have committed during the war, it was not Russian, British and French soldiers who were largely responsible for the massacre of Muslim civilians but Armenians. Furthermore, the dead were Muslims of varying ethnic backgrounds and not just ‘Turks’; furthermore, again, Armenians were killing Muslim civilians throughout the whole course of the war and not just after 1917. The military records are full of accounts of attacks on Muslim villages well before the ‘relocation.’ The massacre of nearly 70 men and women in the Van province villages of Mirkeho and Astoci in March 1915 is only one example.⁴⁵ Many of the women were raped before being murdered. The methods of killing were often sadistic in the extreme. Many of the victims of the attacks by Armenian gangs were Kurds, indicating again that revenge was a probable motive for later attacks on the Armenian convoys.

In fact - real fact and not a Robertson fact - whatever individual atrocities they might have committed during the war, it was not Russian, British and French soldiers who were largely responsible for the massacre of Muslim civilians but Armenians.

Depopulated provinces

Ottoman forces returning to depopulated eastern provinces in 1918 entered ruined towns still strewn with the bodies and body parts of the victims of Armenian gangs. The destruction was enormous. Survivors told stories of the most horrific cruelties by Armenians. These accounts came from across the region and are consistent in their descriptions of the vicious behavior of Armenian gangs. The atrocities were not Mr Robertson’s dismissive ‘some’ but large-scale, involving the murder of many thousands of people. If Mr Robertson wants evidence of truly ‘stomach turning’ crimes he will find it in Ottoman records detailing the utterly inhumane and sadistic methods by which Armenian gangs disposed of their Muslim victims, men, women and even infant children. To Russian officers it seemed that they were bent on exterminating the Muslim population, as well they might have been because an Armenian state could not be established in a region in which the Armenians formed a small minority.

⁴⁵ See *Armenian Activities in the Archive Documents 1914-18* (Ankara: Genel Kurmay Basim Evi, 2005), Vol. 1, 65-70.

Mr Robertson writes that ‘the idea of an Armenian nation – Russian Armenia together with the Ottoman provinces of Van, Bitlis and Erzuram [sic.]’ proved to be a pipe dream once ‘Kemal’s nationalist army advanced in 1920.’⁴⁶ In fact, while demographics changed according to whether the prevailing power was Muslim or Christian, ‘Russian Armenia’ was predominantly Muslim by the time Russia advanced through the Caucasus in the 19th century and drove the Muslims out. As for the eastern Anatolian provinces, the idea of an Armenian state being established there always was a pipe dream. The Armenians were scattered across the region and the only way to create an Armenian state – rather as Israel was created out of Palestine – would have been to drive the Muslims out. Until Russia withdrew from the war, and for some time afterwards, this might have seemed feasible to the Armenian gangs operating in the east. They certainly behaved as if it was.

The war was catastrophic for Armenians and other Christians but at the same time, no less catastrophic for Ottoman Muslims civilians. Probably about 2.5 million of them died during the war from the same range of causes as the Christians: massacre, disease, exposure, malnutrition and combat. The official estimate of those actually massacred – mostly by Armenians - is upwards of half a million. One does not have to believe this figure any more than one should take at face value the casualty figures circulated by Armenian propagandists but that an enormous number of Muslims was massacred by Armenians there is no doubt. Kurdish tribal chiefs put the number of Kurds killed by Armenians in the Van-Bitlis region alone at about 400,000 and the number of Armenians killed by Kurds about the same, but went on to say that now the war was over, both groups should put it behind them.⁴⁷ Even a century later, this is not the message the propagandists want to hear.

These killings followed the slaughter of Muslims in the Balkans in 1878 and again in 1912-13 and preceded the Greek invasion of western Anatolia in 1919 which Arnold Toynbee and the representative of the International Red Cross both called a ‘war of extermination’ against the Turks.⁴⁸ These wars declared in the name of religion would quickly seem to fulfil all the criteria of the UN genocide convention of 1948 yet somehow have eluded the attention of the soi-disant ‘genocide scholars.’ They may not be directly linked to the core of Mr Robertson’s accusations but they stand in a continuum involving massacre

46 Robertson, 28-29.

47 They were speaking to Captain C.L. Woolley, a British officer travelling through Kurdistan. See *The Arab Bulletin: Bulletin of the Arab Bureau in Cairo 1916-1919* (Oxford: Archive Editions, 1986). Vol. 4, No. 113, July 17, 1919, 122-23.

48 See Jeremy Salt, *The Unmaking of the Middle East. A History of Western Disorder in Arab Lands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 75-76.

and dispossession of and by Muslims and Christians, in which Muslims were by far the principal victims, running from the early 19th century until the treaties signed after the 1914-18 war.

There is much more in this book that shouts out to be challenged or rebutted apart from the occasional absurdities and/or mistakes that show Mr Robertson does not have the competence to write any kind of book on late Ottoman history but a bad one. He refers to the Young Turks' 'tame ayatollah'⁴⁹, a religious title referring only to Shia ulama, and the 'Union and Progressive Party'⁵⁰ (not the Committee of Union and Progress) on one page and the 'Congress of Union and Progress Party' somewhere else.⁵¹ His reference to prisoners being moved to Ankara by ship has already been noted. His favored sources are 'eminent' and 'respected' while those who don't share his views are 'denialists,' a word he archly claims is descriptive and not pejorative. The bishops and priests of the Star Chamber used exactly the same line of argument against heretics burnt at the stake for 'denying' the existence of God. Justin McCarthy is one of them. Here is someone who has spent his entire academic life studying Ottoman history being abused ('denialist') by a man who demonstrates time and again that he knows little of this history outside propaganda and historical clichés.

Mr Robertson was given a retainer by the Armenian lobby some years ago to put pressure on the British government. He does not say whether the retainer covered the writing of this book but if he did it for money, that at least makes sense. Otherwise, while vindicating the Armenians in their own minds, it will not persuade the Turks or indeed anyone with sufficient knowledge of the Ottoman past to change their views one way or the other. He adds nothing to reconciliation and everything to rancor and division.

Turks have a saying: a fool throws a stone into a well and it takes 40 wise men to pull it out. Mr Robertson is no fool but has still thrown yet another stone into a well already filled with them. He talks authoritatively of the 'existing evidence' and the 'facts' when the central fact in his collection of 'facts' is that he does not know the history well enough to pass judgment on it. But he is Geoffrey Robertson, QC, after all, and his reputation along with the general ignorance and gullibility of reviewers and readers will save him from the obloquy this book deserves.

49 Robertson, 112.

50 Ibid., 43.

51 Ibid., 23.

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