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Tarih, Gazetecilik ve Propaganda: Robert Fisk ve "Ermeni Sorunu"

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**HISTORY, JOURNALISM AND PROPAGANDA:
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Prof. Dr. Jeremy SALT

Öz

Kasım 2020 tarihinde hayatını kaybeden İngiliz gazeteci Robert Fisk, I. Dünya Savaşı yıllarında Ermenilerin akıbetine odaklanan Ermeni Ulusal Merkezi'nin tutkulu bir savunucusuydu. Kendi zamanının en iyi ve en etkili savaş muhabirlerinden biri olarak görülen Fisk, akademik bir yazarın ulaşabileceğinden çok daha geniş kitleler için yazılar kaleme almaktaydı. Mesleğindeki dürüstlük konusundaki itibarı, yazdıklarına gerçeğin damgasını vurmuştu. Fakat bu makalenin de ortaya koyduğu üzere, hırslı bir savunucu, bir gazeteci gibi tarafsızlık, denge ve hikayeyi doğrulama gibi işinin temellerini oluşturan unsurlara kendisini adayarak eş zamanlı bir şekilde yazamaz. Fisk'in durumunda, Ermeni Sorunu üzerine ortaya koyduğu kitap bölümleri ve gazete yazıları incelendiğinde bir gazeteci olduğu ortaya çıkmakta. Yazar, savaş zamanı propagandasına ve sorgulanabilir belgelere oldukça güvenmekte, doğruluklarını denetlememekte ve en korkunç iddiaları bile gerçek olarak sunmaktadır. Fisk sahip olduğu görüşler ile bu unvanı hak etti fakat 1914-18 yılları arasındaki Osmanlı tebaasının yaşadığı felaket ve takip eden ikincil savaşlar hakkında güvenilir açıklamalar için okuyucularının başka bir yere bakması gerekmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Osmanlı Tarihi, Ermeni Sorunu, Gazetecilik, Tarih, Propaganda

Abstract

The British journalist Robert Fisk, who died in November, 2020, was for many decades a passionate advocate of the Armenian national centre, centring on the fate of Ottoman Armenians during the First World War. Regarded as one of the finest war correspondents of his time, and one of the most influential, Fisk wrote for a global audience far wider than could be reached by the author of an academic article. His reputation for integrity in reporting put the stamp of truth on whatever he wrote. However, as this article demonstrates, the impassioned advocate cannot simultaneously write as a journalist committed to the fundamentals of his craft (objectivity, balance and fact-checking to get the story straight). One or the other has to give way, and in Fisk's case, as an examination of his newspaper articles and his book chapter on the Armenian issue reveal, it was the journalist. Fact-checking is almost wholly absent; the most lurid claims are presented as fact; and the author relies heavily on wartime propaganda and questionable 'documents.' Fisk was entitled to the views he held, but for reliable accounts of the disaster that overwhelmed all Ottoman subjects in 1914-18 and during the secondary wars that followed, his readers should look elsewhere.

Keywords: Ottoman history, Armenian question, journalism, history, propaganda

* I would like to thank Dr. Erman Şahin for reading through this article and making a number of helpful suggestions.

Introduction

Robert Fisk, the influential Middle East correspondent for the British newspaper, the *Independent*, was an icon for many of his readers, the gold standard of brave, exemplary reporting. Others, no doubt a small minority compared to his global audience of admirers, clearly distrusted his hybridized writing style, which blends reportage with his own often strongly-expressed opinions. On occasion, he also stands accused of misrepresentation, which, of course, is no more than standard fare for any journalist.

Coming to the Middle East for *The Times* in 1976, Fisk moved to the *Independent* in 1989. He reported the Lebanese civil war (1976-1989), Israel's attack on Lebanon in 1978, its invasion of 1982, the massacres of Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee districts and the bombing in Beirut of the US and French military barracks in 1983 that killed more than 300 marines. In Syria, he reported on the 1982 war between the Syrian military and the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama that left thousands dead and much of the city flattened. Beyond the Middle East and North Africa, he reported on war from Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Fisk's writing is often described as passionate and angry, both of which it frequently is, and no more so than when he is writing of an issue close to his heart, the fate of the Ottoman Armenians during the First World War.

It was apparently in Beirut that Fisk discovered the 'Armenian question'. This was bound to happen sooner or later, as in the aftermath of the First World War, many Armenians 'relocated' to Syria by the Ottoman government in 1915/16 stayed there, usually moving to one of the major cities. Beirut, by the sea, open to the outside world, multi-ethnic and multi-religious, was the most attractive choice. Over the decades many of the Armenians who came to Beirut prospered, some in the commercial world and others in politics. It was from elderly Armenians that Fisk heard stories of what they and their families endured during the First World War at the hands of 'the Turks.'

Fisk began writing about the Armenians in 1993 and soon became one of their most impassioned advocates, promoting their version of history in numerous articles and his 2005 book, *The Great War for Civilisation: The Conquest of the Middle East*, as well as the talks he gave overseas at Armenian genocide-themed conferences. It was, of course, not 'their version of history' to Robert Fisk. For Fisk, the 'genocide,' without the quotes, was the truth of what happened.

1. Genocide Rulings

The 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide defines genocide as:

any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;

(e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

The key phrase here is “intent to destroy.” Clearly, anyone who deliberately kills has the “intent to destroy” and “serious bodily or mental harm” is always suffered by the survivors, but did the Ottoman government, rather than the individuals or tribal groups who massacred them, intend to destroy the Armenians as an ethno-religious group in 1915, and not just remove them from the war zone?

The Armenian government and Armenians, by and large, say it did; the Turkish government, and Turks, by and large, say that it did not, and therefore stand accused of ‘denying’ what seems to be an incontrovertible truth to the Armenians and those who support their view of history.

The wording of the genocide convention raises other issues. How significant do killings have to be to constitute “part”? If a “large number of the members of the group” in the wording of a 1999 finding of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), how large would it have to be?

That the Nazis intended to end Jewish life in Germany and the territories which fell under their control could never be doubted. Hitler had made his intentions plain as far back as the 1920s and the war created the circumstances in which Jewish populations could be systematically annihilated. Rwanda involved such a clear determination of one ethnic group (the Hutus) to entirely destroy another group, the Tutsis, simply because they were Tutsis, that the crime of genocide could be proven against the 62 individuals found guilty by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda.

In November, 2018, the Extraordinary Chamber in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), a tribunal composed of Cambodian and international war crimes authorities, found two senior figures in the Khmer Rouge movement guilty of genocide in the 1970s. However, the accusations centred not on the Khmer Rouge mass murder of the Khmer majority, but the killing of Vietnamese, former officials in the Khmer republican government and the Muslim Cham minority. The fact that senior Cambodian government figures had served in the Khmer Rouge regime before defecting was one of many political issues affecting the prosecutions and course of the trials over the decades since the genocide.

These are clear-cut cases but generally speaking, lawyers tend to agree that genocide can be difficult to prove in a court setting. In 2007 the International Court of Justice found the Serbian government not guilty of genocide, even though it ruled that one act of genocide had been committed, the massacre by Serbs of about 8000 Bosnian Muslims at Srebrenica in 1995. It found the government guilty, however, of violating international law by failing to prevent such murders. In 2015 the court rejected claims of genocide made against each other by Croatia and Serbia.

In 2007, a Turkish national, Doğu Perinçek, went to Switzerland, where genocide denial had been criminalized, with the specific intention of breaking the law. Speaking publicly in Lausanne, he declared that the Armenian ‘genocide’ was an “international lie.” Duly prosecuted in a cantonal court, he was found guilty. The conviction was confirmed in an appeal court and finally the federal Supreme Court. Perinçek then appealed to the ECHR, claiming that his rights under various articles of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms had been violated. The case went to a lower court, which decided in his favor. On appeal by the Swiss government it then moved up to the Grand Chamber which in October, 2015, again ruled in his

favor. It found that the Swiss courts had violated his rights under article 10 (freedom of expression) of the Convention, elaborating on this finding in the following statement:

“Taking into account all the elements analysed above – that the applicant’s statements bore on a matter of public interest and did not amount to a call for hatred or intolerance, that the context in which they were made was not marked by heightened tensions or special historical overtones in Switzerland, that the statements cannot be regarded as affecting the dignity of the members of the Armenian community to the point of requiring a criminal-law response in Switzerland, that there is no international-law obligation for Switzerland to criminalise such statements, that the Swiss courts appear to have censured the applicant for voicing an opinion that diverged from the established ones in Switzerland, and that the interference took the serious form of a criminal conviction – the Court concludes that it was not necessary, in a democratic society, to subject the applicant to a criminal penalty in order to protect the rights of the Armenian community at stake in the present case.”¹

The court did not engage in arguments over whether or not the massacres and mistreatment of Armenians in 1915 constituted genocide. Its considerations centred only on the balance between freedom of expression and respect for the dignity of Armenians. As there had been no expression of hatred or intolerance by Perinçek, the court ruled, he was entitled to express his opinion and should have been allowed to do so in Switzerland without falling foul of the law.

The belief that Armenians were subjected to genocide is widely held, with genocide resolutions being passed by numerous parliaments whose members, it must be said, have no specialized knowledge of late Ottoman history. These resolutions carry political weight but have no value as a measure of truth in history. The fact remains that no court has ever ruled on the fate of the Armenians during the First World War: no matter how often Robert Fisk or anyone else uses the word ‘genocide,’ it remains no more than their opinion.

2. Ottomans and “The Turks”

Fisk’s starting point is his allegation that “in 1915 the Ottoman Turkish authorities carried out the systematic genocide of one and a half million Christian Armenians”² He also gives the time frame of 1915-1917 as to when precisely this happened (in Armenian sources the period is often extended to 1923, thus including Armenians who died during inter-ethnic conflict and massacres in the Caucasus after 1918). Fisk varies in his description of who was responsible, moving at different points from “the Ottoman Turks” to the “Ottoman Turkish authorities” and to “Ottoman Turkish Muslims.” In fact, Ottoman subjects of all ethno-religious backgrounds – including Kurds and Christian Armenians and Greeks - filled senior positions in the government and the bureaucracy. Even Talat Paşa, the Interior Minister held primarily responsible in the Armenian and ‘western’ mainstream narrative for the wartime fate of the Armenians, was of Bulgarian *pomak* (a Slav convert to Islam) descent. Amidst otherwise positive remarks about Fisk’s writings, Donald Quataert has picked him up for “almost always” and anachronistically substituting Turk or Turkish for the “historically accurate term” of just ‘Ottoman.’³

¹ “The Court delivers its Grand Chamber judgment in the case of Perinçek v. Switzerland,” press release, ECHR 325 (2015), October 15, 2015.

² “Holocaust denial in the White House,” *Independent*, November 10, 2007.

³ Donald Quataert, “The Massacre of Ottoman Armenians and the Writing of Ottoman History,” in *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 37, no. 2, autumn (2006): 249-259.

According to government statistics, the Armenian (Gregorian and Catholic) population of the Ottoman Empire in 1914 was 1,229, 007.⁴ The Ottoman history of census-taking went back to the 1830s so there was close on a century of counting the population, for the usual reasons: tax, the number of young men available for conscription and the number of people in need of government services. There were many other estimates, by the Armenian patriarchate and by European observers of the Ottoman scene, but only the Ottoman government actually counted the population.

Allowing for undercounting (especially of women and children) Justin McCarthy, who leads the field in demographic studies of the Ottoman Empire, has put the total Ottoman Armenian population in 1912 at 1.698.301.⁵ As hundreds of thousands of Armenians survived the war, a large number fleeing into surrounding lands while it was still being fought, 1,5 million Ottoman Armenians could not have died even during the whole course of the war. Wartime and postwar estimates on the Allied side put the number of deaths at between 600.000-1.000.000. Ottoman and Turkish/'pro'Turkish estimates range from 300.000 to about 600.000 but the claim that 1,5 million died just in 1915 is a wild exaggeration that has no evidential basis.

Furthermore, whatever the true death toll, whatever the number actually massacred, a large number of Armenians died of malnutrition, disease or exposure, as reported by missionaries and American consuls. Others died in combat, fighting in the Russian army or sabotaging the Ottoman war effort as insurgents from behind the lines.

In the Armenian narrative the 'genocide' began on April 24, 1915, when Ottoman authorities rounded up hundreds of Armenians in Istanbul and many more in other cities. In Fisk's version of what happened on that day, "the 250 men, the cream of Armenian Istanbul society, were put on a train which stopped before Ankara. The first carriages were sent on to Ankara, where most of the passengers were executed. Of the 250, 175 were killed, shot in the head besides prepared graves." ⁶

Except for the fact of the arrests and travel by train, this account is untrue. As the Ottoman archival research by Yusuf Sarıay shows,⁷ 235 men were arrested on April 24 because of their affiliations, real or suspected, with Armenian political committees at a time Armenian revolutionaries were active in the Ottoman capital and planning the assassination of senior figures in the government. They were sent to Ankara by train the following day. There were no prepared graves and none of the arrested men were shot on arrival. They were divided into two groups, one sent to the nearby town of Ayaş and the others to Çankırı, where they were placed under house arrest, free to move around but having to report to the police station every 24 hours.

In the coming months, dozens of the Çankırı detainees were found to be innocent, released and allowed to return to Istanbul: others were released but not allowed to return to Istanbul or Izmir. Others were sent to Ayaş or Ankara and 57 were sent to Deir al Zor, their fate from that

⁴ Kemal H. Karpat, *Ottoman Population 1830-1914. Demographic and Social Characteristics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 188. The small number of Armenian protestants apparently were included under the general heading of 'Protestants.'

⁵ Justin McCarthy, "The Population of the Ottoman Armenians," in Türkayya Ataöv, ed., *The Armenians in the Late Ottoman Period* (Ankara: Turkish Historical Society, 2001), 70.

⁶ "Armenian genocide: Turkey's day of denial and remembrance of a genocide in all but name," *Independent*, April 24, 2015.

⁷ Yusuf Sarıay, "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.

point on not clear in Sarıay's research: according to Armenian accounts, however, a number were murdered on the way.⁸ The Ayaş Armenians were all accused of being members of the central committees of the Dashnak or Hunchak organizations and were thus in a more dangerous category. Sarıay writes that they were held there until the end of the war and the signing of the armistice, after which, apart from one who had died, all were released.

Along with the speculation of the Australian writer Robert Manne⁹ Fisk ties the start of the 'genocide' on April 24 to the Gallipoli land campaign, which began the next day. He quotes an Armenian: "You must understand the significance of Gallipoli in all this. At first the Turks didn't kill them (the Armenians) because they thought the Allies would win at Gallipoli and rescue them all. But by July it was obvious the Allies were losing. So the Turks set about the killing."¹⁰

In *The Great War for Civilisation*, Fisk enlarges on this line: "Encouraged by their victory over the Allies at the Dardanelles, the Turks fell upon the Armenians with the same fury as the Nazis were to turn upon the Jews of Europe two decades later."¹¹ In fact, there is no evidence linking the arrests April 24 to the Allied landing at Gallipoli the next day. The most likely trigger was a large-scale Armenian uprising in the city of Van, to be discussed later in this article.

Furthermore, it was not at all obvious by July that the Allies were losing at Gallipoli. As for victory, 'the Turks' could not claim it until December at the earliest, when the bulk of Allied forces were withdrawn, with the remainder pulled out in January. By this time the 'relocation' of the Armenian civilian population that had been ordered in the wake of the Van uprising was almost over: although many Armenians were still on the road and their suffering was to continue, Interior Minister Talat Paşa would formally declare the 'relocation' at an end in February, 1916. Indeed, in certain regions, he had already been calling an end to it in late 1915.

3. From Sarıkamış to Van

The Van uprising was launched a week to ten days before the arrests of April 24. To understand why the government responded as it did the military history of the previous six months needs to be understood. In late 1914 the Ottoman Third Army launched an assault on the Russian stronghold of Sarıkamış in the Allahuakbar mountains of northeastern Anatolia. The offensive began well but was unexpectedly disrupted in late December by a blizzard high in the mountains. Caught in the open without adequate winter clothing, tens of thousands of soldiers froze to death. At the beginning of the first major offensive on December 22 the Third Army had a combat strength of 118,660 soldiers: by March 24 the number was put at 24, 469.¹² Suffering such a severe loss of manpower, with the military already hard pressed on other fronts, the Third Army was seriously weakened in the face of impending Russian assaults. At the same time, it was incapable of stemming Armenian insurgent actions behind the Ottoman lines, directed at Muslim villages as well as at troops, police and jandarma.

⁸ Raymond Kévorkian quotes "an Armenian survivor" for his claim that 56 detainees from Cankırı were slain on the road, with others killed later. See *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History* (London and NY: I.B.Tauris, 2011), 528-9.

⁹ Robert Manne, "A Turkish Tale: Gallipoli and the Armenian Genocide," *The Monthly*, February, 2007.

¹⁰ Fisk, "Armenian genocide: Turkey's day of denial ..."

¹¹ Robert Fisk, *The Great War for Civilisation. The Conquest of the Middle East* (London: Fourth Estate, 2005), 393-4.

¹² Edward J. Erickson, *Ordered to Die. A History of the Ottoman Army in the First World War* (Westport Conn: Greenwood Press, 2001), 57 and 64.

In the five months between the defeat at Sarikamış and the decision to ‘relocate’ the Armenian civilian population at the end of May, insurgent and inter-ethnic violence reached a peak in Van province. Reports of arms stockpiling, mutual attacks by Armenians and Muslim civilians on each other and insurgent killing of troops and gendarmes poured in from across the region. Van had been a centre of armed uprisings since the late 19th century and the fall of the city in early May foreshadowed an attack on Bitlis - close to the other end of Lake Van - and possibly other cities. While the government had been considering its options in the previous months, it was the Van uprising that finally precipitated the decision to isolate the insurgents by removing the Armenian civilian population.

Fisk concedes that Van Armenians took revenge by massacring the inhabitants of local “Turkish Muslim villages”.¹³ For context, it must be noted that Muslims whose coreligionists had been slaughtered by Armenians also had the motive of revenge, “the most pitiful, comprehensible and terrible of emotions,”¹⁴ as Fisk writes of the Armenians. Far from simply being revenge, the capture of Van was followed by an attempt to ethnically cleanse the Muslims of the province as far as possible. After the fall of the city and the killing and pillage in the Muslim quarter, Armenian *druzhiny* (volunteer) detachments, armed civilians and Cossack units moved systematically from village to village around the lake massacring thousands of Muslim villagers. Tens of thousands of other Muslim villagers managed to flee the province, some harassed and killed by Armenians en route.¹⁵

Whatever the true death toll in Van, many of the dead (and perhaps most, seeing that Armenians were the victors) were Muslims. In this region most victims of Armenian bands would have been Kurdish Muslims and not Fisk’s “Turkish Muslims,” a point that is important to grasp when considering motives for Kurdish attacks on Armenian civilian convoys being moved south after the ‘relocation’ was ordered. That the Armenian insurgents were bent on exterminating the Kurds is clear from the writings of Aram Manukian, appointed governor of the Van ‘republic’ before the province was incorporated into the Russian administration of the Caucasus.¹⁶

These atrocities committed against Muslims have virtually no place in the narratives woven by Fisk and Taner Akçam, who writes only that in the Van region, “the First and Second Armenian volunteer units saw success against the Turkish [sic.] irregulars and attacked and looted Muslim villages.”¹⁷ Fisk claims that 55,000 Armenians were killed in Van “under the authority of Cevdet Bey,” the governor, who fled the city on or about May 16.¹⁸ Clarence D. Ussher, the American missionary based in Van who picked this estimate up from a Russian source, was not himself a reliable observer. In 1917, shortly after the US joined the war, Ussher tried to persuade Harvard students that far from fighting alongside Russian troops, Armenians had hurled them back into

¹³ Fisk, “Genocides begin in the wilderness, far from prying eyes – in Ottoman Turkey as well as Nazi Germany,” *Independent*, July 25, 2009

¹⁴ Fisk, “The story of the Armenian Legion is finally being told – and it is a dark tale of anger and revenge,” *Independent*, October 18, 2018.

¹⁵ The most detailed study of the Van uprising is Justin McCarthy, Esat Arslan, Cemalettin Taşkıran and Ömer Turan *The Armenian Rebellion at Van* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2006).

¹⁶ Yektan Turkeyilmaz, “Rethinking Genocide: Violence and Victimhood in Eastern Anatolia, 1913-1915,” Ph.D thesis, Department of Cultural Anthropology, Duke University, 2011. See the chapter on events in Van, 267-321.

¹⁷ Taner Akçam, *A Shameful Act. The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility* (Constable: London, 2007), 146.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Russia.¹⁹ The claim is absurd at a time Armenians were fighting as regular soldiers in the Russian army or were enlisting with the *druzhina* units. Early in 1915, as a consequence of Armenian desertions, the Ottoman military command banned Armenians from bearing arms and transferred them to labor battalions. Some Armenians continued to serve in the military until the end of the war, generally as translators or doctors

4. The 'Relocation' (*Tehcir*)

In late May the government ordered that the bulk of the Armenian civilian population be 'relocated' out of war zones. Accordingly, hundreds of thousands of Armenian men, women and children were uprooted from their homes in towns and villages and put on the road south in the direction of Syria. Suspicion and no doubt a measure of paranoia determined that the eastern region from which they should be moved was gradually expanded to include much of western Anatolia, if not Izmir and Istanbul.

At no stage does Fisk investigate the Ottoman military record to see whether the argument of military necessity for the 'relocation' actually holds up, rather than serving as a pretext for genocide. In fact, the military had concluded that the threat to the war effort from Armenian insurgents was so serious that the protective cover of the civilian population had to be removed. Other military commanders in many other wars or countries under military occupation (Cuba, the Philippines, Malaya, Algeria and Vietnam) have reached the same conclusion when facing uprisings or resistance. In the view of Edward Erickson, who, unlike Akçam or Fisk, has done the research in the Ottoman military archives, the 'relocation' was successful as a military measure,²⁰ even if the consequences were disastrous for the 'relocated' Armenian civilians. For the Ottoman military command, this was a life and death struggle, so finely balanced that unless the insurgency behind the lines was crushed it could cost the empire the war.

The reasoning behind the 'relocation' is explained in numerous official documents, with emphasis being placed on the need to move them safely. They were not moved safely, as it turned out: whether walking or being entrained, no proper facilities, whether sanitation, health, accommodation and food, were provided. Tens of thousands of Armenians died en route, many massacred or dying from malnutrition, disease and exposure and thousands of others dying in Syria.

While emphasizing courtroom accusations made against the Ottoman government during the Allied occupation of Istanbul, neither Akçam nor Fisk pay any attention to the courts-martial held in 1915/16 after the Ottoman government set up three commissions of inquiry to investigate crimes committed against Armenians (as the trials are far from having been fully researched, perhaps Muslim civilians as well). More than 1600 individuals were prosecuted and more than 60 sentenced to death.²¹ Most of these death sentences appear to have been carried out in 1916. These were hardly the actions of a government committed to the annihilation of the Armenians.

Leaving aside the question of military necessity, what could have been the motives for the massacres of Armenians en route to Syria? Very probably some/many Armenians were killed for

¹⁹ "Dr Ussher Told About Many Atrocities at Siege of Van. Turkish Outrages and Conspiracies by Germans Brought to Light," *Harvard Crimson*, May 3, 1917.

²⁰ Edward J. Erickson, *Ottomans and Armenians. A Study in Counterinsurgency* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 3: "This strategy enabled the feeble Ottoman forces in eastern Anatolia to defeat easily the surviving insurgent bands, thus ending the insurrection."

²¹ See Yusuf Sarmay, "The Relocation (*Tehcir*) of Armenians and the Trials of 1915-16," *Middle East Critique* 20 no. 3 (2011):299-315.

no other reason than being Armenian and thus representative of an ethno-religious group seen to have betrayed the homeland. Another motive, already noted in the case of the Kurds, would have been revenge for the killing of Muslims. Ottoman documents based on the accounts of survivors indicate that of the 2-2,5 million Muslim civilians who died during the war,²² from the same combination of causes as Ottoman Christians, more than 500,000 were massacred by Russian and/or Armenian military or paramilitary units but mostly by Armenians.²³

The horrors inflicted on Muslims by Armenians even before the ‘relocation’ was ordered would have invited retaliation in its most primal form: blood for blood, with neither the very young nor the very old exempt. The convoys were poorly guarded and thus vulnerable to attack, creating the opportunity for tribes, villagers and townspeople to strike back as the Armenians passed through their districts. Plain banditry was another motive. Even if not killed, the Armenians were liable to be stripped of their possessions, in some cases with women and children allegedly being carried away.

As is the case with any government documents dealing with wartime atrocities, allowance has to be made for exaggeration or invention but Muslim survivors in towns and villages across a wide region told the same or similar stories of what they had endured when the Ottoman army was able to return to the eastern provinces in 1918, after the withdrawal of Russian and Armenian forces. For the sake of argument, even if the round figure of more than 500,000 is to be regarded skeptically - as all round figures in all archives should be - it is clear that there was an enormous loss of Muslim life through massacres by Armenians, often committed with the most sadistic cruelty. The most basic research would have unearthed an approximation of the truth for Robert Fisk.

5. Questionable Sources

Journalists or historians are only as good as their sources and one of many problems in Fisk’s understanding of history is his reliance on British wartime propaganda and articles shown through close scrutiny to be seriously flawed. He leaves no room for those who disagree with his view of history, to the point of jeering at them. Stephen Kinzer, Istanbul correspondent of the *New York Times*, is taken to task for referring to “vast numbers” of Armenians who died rather than 1.5 million or “at least one million” and for writing of “ethnic cleansing” and not Fisk’s preferred “premeditated mass killing.” Kinzer is accused of going back to “his old denialist tricks” when

²² Only estimates can be made of the Muslim civilian deaths. There was no census after the war until 1927, by which time all the Arab provinces of the empire were nascent independent states or under foreign occupation/dominion. The REPARES site puts civilian deaths at 2,150,000 but makes no distinction between Muslims and Christians or Ottomans of other religious backgrounds. www.census.gov/history/pdf/repares112018.pdf Looking the six eastern vilayets alone, Justin McCarthy’s estimates of Muslim population loss during the war range from 15 per cent (Sivas) to 62 per cent (Van), with other significant losses in Bitlis (42 per cent) and Erzurum (31 per cent). (Justin McCarthy, *Turks and Armenians. Nationalism and Conflict in the Ottoman Empire* (Madison Wisconsin: Turko-Tatar Press, 2015), 184). Stanford Shaw writes that of the 1,604,031 Muslims officially registered as refugees in 1919, 701,166 had died on the road from hunger or disease or had been massacred (Stanford J. Shaw, *The Ottoman Empire in World War I* (Ankara: Turkish Historical Society, 2008), vol. II, 993). Extrapolating from the available figures, the Muslim civilian death toll would seem to fall into the 2-2.5 million range.

²³ See *Ermeniler Tarafından Yapılan Katliam Belgeleri 1914-19/Documents on massacre [sic.] perpetrated by Armenians* (Ankara: Prime Ministerial State Archives General Directorate, 2001), 2 vols. Tabulated figures are given on pp. 375-377 (vol. 1) and 1053-54 (vol. 2). Facsimiles of all the original Ottoman documents are published, along with Turkish translations and English summaries.

writing that the events of 1915 remain a matter of intense debate. "Here we go again," Fisk responds.²⁴ For Fisk, the facts are known and the debate - such as it ever was - is closed.

Bernard Lewis, who was fined a nominal amount (one franc) in a French court in 1995 for telling a *Le Monde* interviewer that the suffering of the Armenians was the "brutal byproduct of war" and not genocide, is dismissed by Fisk as "an elderly historian whose work deteriorates with the years."²⁵ Fisk's favorites include Peter Balakian, the "indefatigable" Vahakn Dadrian and Dadrian's protégé Taner Akçam, on whom he heaps praise, as "that fine Turkish historian,"²⁶ "that bravest of Turkish academics,"²⁷ "that most brave of Turkish historians,"²⁸ who writes on the Armenian question with "immense authority."²⁹ In fact, detailed scrutiny of Akçam's output provides scholarly evidence that these accolades are not warranted.³⁰

As for Balakian, he is primarily a poet who dipped into Ottoman history with a book entitled *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide*, which the late Ottoman and Turkish historian Andrew Mango described as "an advocate's impassioned plea, relying at times on discredited evidence such as forged telegrams attributed to Talat." Some of Balakian's assertions, wrote Mango, "would make any serious Ottoman historian's hair stand on end."³¹

Dadrian's works fall into the category of propaganda rather than scholarly studies. Akçam is taken more seriously despite the numerous errors of fact and translation in his books and articles, apart from the spurious 'documents' and letters which both he and Dadrian use in their attempts to prove that the Ottoman government ordered the annihilation of the Armenians.

These 'documents' include the so-called 'ten commandments', handed to the British during the Allied occupation of Istanbul. According to these 'commandments,' the ruling Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) government took a decision to "exterminate" all Armenian men under the age of 50 and to enslave women and children and convert them to Islam. In fact, there is no evidence that the Ottoman authorities ever took such a monstrous decision. Not even the British occupation authorities took this piece of paper seriously and it languished forgotten for decades until Dadrian dug it up and tried to turn it into proof of genocide.³² In the text of his best-known

²⁴ *The Great War for Civilisation*, 748-50.

²⁵ "Robert Fisk: Let me denounce genocide from the dock," *Independent*, October 14, 2006.

²⁶ Fisk, "Genocides begin in the wilderness."

²⁷ Fisk, "The Ottomans were once humiliated by Yemen rebels – today the Houthis have done the same to Saudi Arabia," *Independent*, December 20, 2018.

²⁸ Fisk, "In the cases of two separate holocausts, Israel and Poland find it difficult to acknowledge the facts of history," *Independent*, February 15, 2018.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ See Erman Şahin, "Review Essay: A scrutiny of Akçam's Version of History and the Armenian Genocide." Review of Akçam's *A Shameful Act* in *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 28, no. 2 (2008): 303-319; Erman Şahin, "The Armenian Question: Resolved or Further Poisoned?," Review of Akçam's *Ermeni Meselesi Hallolunmuştur: 'Osmanlı Belgelerine Göre Savaş Yıllarında Ermenilere Yönelik Politikalar* ('The Armenian Question is Resolved': Policies Toward the Armenians in the War Years According to the Ottoman Documents,) (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2008), *Middle East Policy*, vol. XVII, no. 1 (2010): 144-163; and Maxime Gauin, "Taner Akçam's Methods of 'Proving' A 'Crime Against Humanity.'" Review of Akçam's *The Young Turks' Crime Against Humanity: The Armenian Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), in *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 35, no.1 (2015): 141-157.

³¹ Andrew Mango, review of *The Burning Tigris. The Armenian Genocide* (London: Heinemann, 2002), *Times Literary Supplement*, September 17, 2004. Subtitled in the US edition "The Armenian Genocide and the American Response."

³² Vahakn Dadrian, "The Secret Young-Turk Ittihadist Conference and the Decision for the World War I Genocide of the Armenians," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol. 7, issue 2 (1993): 173-201.

book, *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Genocide*, Akçam also quotes from these ‘commandments’ while burying their spurious origins in endnotes.³³

Akçam’s ‘documents’ also include a collection published in 1920 by Aram Andonian which, Akçam notes in his introduction to *A Shameful Act*, before going on to use them himself, researchers have tended to avoid due to inaccuracy or accusations of forgery.³⁴ Andonian claimed his ‘documents’ (telegrams) were purloined by a low-level government employee, Naim Bey, variously described as working in a refugee office or a grain warehouse, but in either case hardly in a position to steal top-secret documents. These ‘documents’ consist of instructions allegedly telegraphed from Istanbul to provincial authorities ordering the annihilation of the Armenians.

In fact, it has long since been demonstrated that the Andonian papers are forgeries. In a book published in 1983 two Ottoman scholars, Şinasi Orel and Süreyya Yuca, compared Naim Bey’s ‘documents’ with authentic documents in the archives, and concluded, largely on the basis of signatures and cipher numbers that did not match, that they were forgeries.³⁵ Akçam has been persistent in trying to prove that they are genuine³⁶ but the evidence of forgery would seem to be irrefutable.

Akçam has also failed to produce credible evidence to support his claim that the CUP central committee met early in 1915 and decided to wipe out the Armenians. In *A Shameful Act* his suppositions and the slippage from decisions for massacres to a decision for genocide are spread out over several pages and stand as a model of transgressive ‘historical’ writing. On page 162 he writes that it is “very likely” that the “key decisions concerning the massacres” were made within the CUP in March. He provides no evidence of when, where and by whom such ‘decisions’ were taken.

Two pages later he writes, in a striking piece of academic legerdemain, that “we have many indications that *the decision for genocide*” - this time not just for massacres - “was made by the CUP Central Committee deliberately and after long consideration.” His ‘evidence’ includes newspaper accounts of accusations made during the postwar trials organized in occupied Istanbul by a puppet Ottoman government but newspaper reports and such phrases as “indications” and “very likely” are no substitute for the solid evidence he would need to prove his allegations.

Fisk claims that a “carbon” exists of an instruction sent to Aleppo by Talat Paşa ordering the destruction of all “intended persons” (Armenians) irrespective of age, sex or “scruples of conscience.”³⁷ Much of what Talat said has been (wilfully) taken out of context and he has been a main target of forged documents, which would appear to include this “carbon.” There is no

³³ See *A Shameful Act*, 177, for the reference to a certain “Ahmet Esat” and the ‘documents’ he handed to the British, and endnote 81/489 where Akçam at least concedes that the British were “sceptical” about both Esat and his ‘documents.’

³⁴ Ibid., xiii

³⁵ Şinasi Orel and Süreyya Yuca, *The Talat Pasha Telegrams: Historical Fact or Armenian fiction?* (Nicosia: K. Rustem and Brother, 1986).

³⁶ See Sean Patrick Smyth, “From smoking gun to muddied waters: the alleged telegram of Bahaeddin Şakir,” Centre of Eurasian Studies (AVIM), June 5, 2017. <https://avim.org.tr/en/Analiz/from-smoking-gun-to-muddied-waters-the-alleged-telegram-of-bahaeddin-sakir>

³⁷ See Chapter 10 of *The Great War for Civilisation*, “The First Holocaust,” a phrase which requires the reader to overlook the countless millions who died in Africa during British, French, German, Belgian and Italian rule during the 19th-early 20th centuries, the millions of Muslims ethnically cleansed from the Balkans and the Caucasus during or after the Ottoman wars with Russia and the millions of victims of imperialism and colonialism in many other parts of the world.

evidence that he sent out any such instruction, including the original of this supposed "carbon." Fisk certainly does not produce it.

Akçam (followed by Fisk ³⁸) claims that Mustafa Kemal ('Atatürk') called the 'genocide' a "shameful act," which he could not have done, seeing that the word genocide was not coined until the 1940s. Furthermore, Akçam has mistaken the Ottoman word *faziha* (a shameful deed) for the more general *fazihat* (shame or disgrace, reproduced as *fazahat* in the Turkish text), the word Mustafa Kemal actually used during an early postwar address to the Grand National Assembly.
³⁹

Although he may have had the 'relocation' in mind, Mustafa Kemal made no direct reference to the Armenians in the context of wartime suffering. At no stage does he use the phrase "a shameful act," referring only to the more general 'shame' of the early stages of the war. His clear intention in his address was to draw attention to the way the Allied powers were using the past in an attempt to discredit the Turkish nationalists and divert attention from the atrocities committed by the Greek army along the Aegean coast after it landed in Izmir in May, 1919.

In a recent article, 'When Was the Decision to Annihilate the Armenians Taken?,' ⁴⁰ Akçam writes that a decision to annihilate the Armenians is to be found in two letters allegedly written by a senior government agent, Bahaettin Şakir, in March and April, 1915. The letters do not come from Ottoman archives but from a book published in 1921, *A Great Crime*, written by Aram Andonian, who in 1920 had published the 'documents' Örel and Yuca exposed in the 1980s as forgeries. In the first letter (dated March 3) Şakir is said to have written that the CUP had decided "to annihilate the Armenians living in Turkey [sic.], not to allow a single one to remain and has given the government broad authority in this regard." No Armenian is to be given protection or assistance. The second letter (dated April 7) reiterates these alleged instructions.

The claim is the same as that made by Akçam in *A Shameful Act* when quoting an Ottoman official in the town of Bayburt as being told "to leave not a single Armenian alive." ⁴¹ In fact, in the newspaper account quoted by Akçam, the official is instructed to leave "not a single Armenian" ('behind' by inference) and not 'not to leave a single Armenian behind *alive* as Akçam writes. ⁴²

The central problem with the March 3 letter quoted by Akçam (given in English translation only) is that there is no proof Bahaettin Şakir ever wrote it. Akçam himself admits in his article that the letter "has never been considered authentic by scholars in our field." Its provenance is totally spurious. As quoted by Akçam, Andonian could not decipher the signature and only knew it was Bahaettin Şakir's when shown a copy of an Armenian newspaper of August 19, 1920, in which the alleged letter was published over Şakir's signature. As Şakir's signature had been published several times after 1908, under articles he wrote for the newspaper he edited, *Şurayya Ümmet*, it would obviously have been possible to forge or reproduce it.

Akçam writes that this 'letter' was among 50 handwritten 'documents' delivered to Andonian by Naim Bey, "about whose originality doubts have persisted to this day." In other words, these

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ For Atatürk's remarks see *Atatürk'ün TBMM Açık ve Gizli Oturumlarındaki Konuşmaları* (Ataturk's speeches in open and closed sessions of the Turkish Grand National Assembly), 59, (Ankara: Kultur Bakanlığı Yayınları, 1992).

⁴⁰ "When Was the Decision to Annihilate the Armenians Taken?," posted online, July 17, 2019, and subsequently published in the *Journal of Genocide Research* vol. 21, no. 4 (2019): 457-480.

⁴¹ *A Shameful Act*, 178.

⁴² *Tercuman-i Hakikat*, August 5, 1920.

were *not* letters written by Bahaettin Şakir at all, but only *reportedly* or *allegedly* written by him, with no credible evidence being produced to show that he actually did write them. Only finally does Akçam qualify his claims, writing that “*if these letters are indeed authentic*” they confirm that the decision to annihilate the Armenians had been taken before March 3. Yet in an article based on Akçam’s research Fisk takes these totally suspect letters at face value, writing that an Erzurum decision to annihilate the Armenians was initially taken by Bahaettin Şakir.⁴³

There is nothing new about these alleged letters anyway. Şinasi Orel and Süreyya Yuca investigated their provenance in their 1983 book and concluded after a meticulous scholarly examination that included comparison with authentic documents in the Ottoman archives that the ‘letters’ were forgeries “concocted by Andonian and the Armenian circles he represented.”⁴⁴

The Erzurum decision as alleged was uncovered by Akçam during a document search in what Fisk describes the “hitherto unexplored Prime Ministerial Ottoman archives.”⁴⁵ In fact, these archives are a primary general source for Turkish historians. They have already been heavily worked, but as there is a vast number of documents, a researcher is always going to come up with one no one else has seen.

In his research Akçam claims to have “come across” a piece of information that a decision to annihilate the Armenians was taken by a “central committee” in Erzurum and then submitted to Istanbul for approval. This committee was the ‘Central Committee of the Caucasus Revolutionary Organization’ (*Kafkasya İhtilal Cemiyeti*), which Akçam claims was the Erzurum branch of the Ottoman intelligence and black operations group *Teşkilat-i Mahsusa* (Special Organization), without producing the proof that it was.

All the correspondence between the central government and provincial authorities from the beginning of the war to the middle of 1915 has to be interpreted in the context of a steadily worsening situation behind the Ottoman lines as Armenian insurgents sought to disrupt the war effort. On December 1, 1914, the Erzurum committee send a telegram to Istanbul referring to decisions conveyed to Van and Bitlis that were intended to reduce the threat in both provinces. According to this communication, as quoted by Akçam, “Those Armenians both in the city centres [of Bitlis and Van] and in the surrounding [towns and villages] who are suspected of being potential leaders of the revolt or who attack Muslims are to be arrested in advance [and] in case of attacks on Muslims they [those arrested] are to be despatched to Bitlis immediately in order that *they be exterminated*.” The emphasis is Akçam’s.

Although Fisk concedes that the order was clearly directed only against armed Armenians or actual or potential leaders of uprisings, he insists that “the liquidation of Armenian men, women and children was first instigated on 1 December, 1914 in Erzurum” and concludes: “No euphemisms here - like the Nazis’ final solution. The Ottoman officials use the Turkish word for extermination: *imha*.”

There is a small mystery here because while *imha* is used in the original Ottoman document, nowhere in his article does Akçam give the original Osmanlica word for any of the destructive expressions he uses, leaving the reader to assume that Fisk perhaps got *imha* from Akçam in private correspondence.

⁴³ Fisk, “Genocides begin in the wilderness, far from prying eyes – in Ottoman Turkey as well as Nazi Germany,” *Independent*, July 25, 2019

⁴⁴ *The Talat Pasha Telegrams*, 29-44.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

While *imha* is modern Turkish for extermination, it had a variety of meanings in Osmanlica. In three of the 19th century dictionaries consulted for this article 'extermination' is not included in the meanings given for *imha*.⁴⁶ Akçam has chosen the worst possible modern Turkish meaning for the word. Furthermore, it is clear from many documents filed in the Ottoman archives and not just those utilized by Akçam that the sole intention of the central government and provincial authorities was only to suppress a developing insurgency and not to destroy the general Armenian population. Only those actively engaged in attacks on Muslims were targeted for destruction.

On November 7, in a document quoted by Akçam, the governor of Van, Cevdet, refers to Armenians fighting with Russia and to "a general uprising by Armenians" for which he needed extra troops to crush. On November 17, Tahsin, the governor of Erzurum, tells Talat that the time has come to take "permanent decisions and orders in regard to the Armenians." Talat tells him to "carry out what the situation demands but with well-considered measures until definite orders are given in regard to the Armenians."

Writing again on November 28/29, Cevdet warns Talat that to wait until the blaze was burning out of control would be suicidal: in reply Talat tells him to take the measures demanded, "but judiciously." Akçam sees these messages as an attempt to force Talat's hand: others would see them as fully-warranted warnings of an insurgency that could quickly spread out of control unless immediately checked.

On March 29, the governor of Sivas, Muammer, makes references to "mass removal and elimination," "annihilation and removal" and "mass deportation." Read in context, it is clear that Muammer is calling for the destruction of the insurgent leadership and to expose it to military action by removing the protective cover of the Armenian civilian population, a common tactic in situations of warfare and occupation. Warnings of a dangerous insurgency were repeatedly sent and the Van uprising was the evidence that they were not heeded in time. Akçam refers to instructions being sent on how to carry out "the killings and massacres" but the example he gives does not indicate any such intent, referring only to "urgent measures to [be] taken in response to Armenian activities."

By April 18, the Van rebellion having been launched, Muammer is telling Talat that "if we do not crush them [the Armenians] they will obliterate us without mercy and at the first opportunity." Before them these governors had the example of the 1912-13 Balkan wars, a sudden attack which caught the Ottoman government off guard and exposed Muslims to massacre and ethnic cleansing that practically emptied Macedonia of its remaining Muslim civilian population.

As the massacres of Muslims during the Van uprising were also about to show, this was exactly what Armenian insurgents would do when they had the opportunity. The deteriorating security situation in the east was the subject of many warnings from provincial authorities over many

⁴⁶ Sir James Redhouse's *Turkish and English Lexicon* (1890) translates the word as effacing, obliterating or destroying; R. Youssouf's *Dictionnaire Portatif Turc-Francaise* (1890) as effacement or destruction; Sami Frascbery's *Dictionnaire Turc-Francaise* (1809?) as *action de faire disparaître* (making something vanish or disappear), effacement and destruction. "Extermination" does appear, however, as one of several meanings in modern online Osmanlica-Turkish compilations. The *Osmanlica-Türkçe Sözlük* (dictionary) list of meanings for *imha* includes *bozmak* (ruin or destruction), *yok etmek* (destruction, annihilation or extermination), *mahvetmek* (destruction, devastation or ruin) and *yikmak* (destruction or demolition). The *Osmanlica Sözlük* prepared by Pamukkale University gives *yok etme* (destruction, annihilation or extermination) and *yok edilme* (devastation). *Kubbealti Lugatı* translates *imha* as destruction, annihilation, eradication and obliteration, with the example given of the suppression or destruction of a hostile or armed enemy force.

months. Sounding an alarm bell, they called for the insurgents to be crushed before it was too late.

They were clearly *not* calling for the annihilation of the Armenians as a people and Fisk's claim that the December 1 message was the beginning of a campaign to liquidate all Armenian men, women and children is an inflammatory distortion of what was intended. His further accusation that the Ottoman functionary Bahaettin Şakir issued an order to annihilate the Armenians is based on 'letters' comprehensively shown to have been forged. Even Akçam concedes the spurious provenance of these letters but Fisk states their content as established fact. The conclusion is inescapable that he is believing what he wants to believe.

6. "Who Now Remembers the Armenians?"

Fisk frequently attempts to link the fate of the Armenians in 1915 with the Nazi attempts to annihilate the Jews. Along with many others, he repeats the claim by the American journalist Louis P. Lochner that in a speech made on the eve of the invasion of Poland Hitler remarked: "Who now remembers the Armenians?" In fact, the Nuremberg war crimes tribunal prosecutors decided not to present the Lochner version as evidence of what Hitler said and to look for something they thought would be more reliable. The versions of his speeches they did table, based on the diaries and recollections of officers who were present, make no mention of the Armenians.⁴⁷ Fisk claims that Vakahn Dadrian has found five separate other versions of Hitler's reference to the Armenians but as he makes no further mention of them, their authenticity (or otherwise) cannot be checked.⁴⁸

The parallels with Nazi Germany made by Fisk and others are deeply misleading. Germany in the 1930s was a modern industrial state; the Ottoman Empire during the First World War was pre-industrial, pre-modern in most respects and largely agricultural; Germans were amongst the most well-educated people in Europe, whereas a large percentage of the Ottoman population was illiterate⁴⁹; Germany had a long history of anti-semitism, whereas there was no history of anti-Armenian racist sentiment in the Ottoman Empire; no German Jews took up arms against the German state, whereas Armenians had been taking up arms against the Ottoman state since the late 19th century. Those thousands of Ottoman Armenians who fought alongside the enemy in 1914-18 or otherwise tried to subvert the government's war effort were naturally and justifiably regarded as traitors. Many of those who were caught and prosecuted were executed. In the context of war, the Ottoman government was hardly unusual in this respect.

Finally, if there were racists and nationalist knchauvinists among the Young Turks, and Armenian nationalists, for that matter, this would hardly be surprising at a time all national groups were strongly influenced by theories of race and racial superiority, manifest destiny and social Darwinism. None of these ideas were native to the Ottoman Empire: they came from Europe or the United States.

Fisk claim that "the Turks [sic.] even formed a 'Special Organisation' – teshkilat i-mahsusiye [sic.] – to carry out exterminations, an Ottoman predecessor to Hitler's Einsatzgruppen, the German 'Special Action' groups" is a compound of distortions. The *Teşkilat-i Mahsusa* was an

⁴⁷ See Heath W. Lowry, "The US Congress and Adolf Hitler on the Armenians," *Journal of Political Communication*, vol. 3 (1985) issue 2: 111-140.

⁴⁸ "The First Holocaust."

⁴⁹ Karpas, *Ottoman Population 1830-1914*, 221, gives an overall figure of "about 46 percent" for illiteracy in the general Ottoman population but concedes, 58, that statistical literacy rates are "probably" rather high.

arm of the Ottoman government: it was not formed by "the Turks"⁵⁰ and neither was it formed to "carry out exterminations."

Before the war, the *Teşkilat* was an intelligence and propaganda organization, with desks assigned to cover various regions of the world. Leading figures in the CUP, along with civilians volunteering for patriotic reasons and Arab officers who were to become notable as politicians in the postwar period, were all part of its leadership structure. Its agents in the field came to number tens of thousands.

During the war the focus of the *Teşkilat*'s work changed to black operations behind the lines, or across them, for which purposes Muslims who lived near or in Russian-occupied territory were valuable human intelligence conduits. The dirty work involved skills of a different nature: common criminals were pardoned if they agreed to sign up, and naturally they had to be prepared to kill. In all of these respects, the *Teşkilat* was not greatly different from the intelligence services of other countries. Nevertheless, untrained and undisciplined *Teşkilat* units frequently took advantage of their position to engage in banditry and kill civilians. *Teşkilat* members were among the guards moving the Armenians south and some were court-martialled by the Ottoman government in 1915/16 for the crimes they committed, not necessarily just against Armenians, as further research into these trials may show.

The 'relocation' was never a *Teşkilat* operation and neither was the *Teşkilat* some kind of Ottoman precursor to Einsatzgruppen death squads tasked with the mass murder of Armenians. The claim is a distortion of history, with the apparent intention of smearing by association.

In *The Great War of Civilisation* Fisk takes his parallel with the Nazis to an even greater extreme. He writes of a visit to Margada (present day Al Markada), north of Aleppo, accompanied by an Armenian driver from Deir al Zor and his five year old son. On a hill above the Khabur river his photographer runs her hand through the soil and finds a skull. Fisk joins in and they find three skeletons "as tightly packed as they had been on the day they died in terror in 1915, roped together to drown in their thousands ... as many as 50,000 Armenians were murdered in this little killing field."

Margada and the desert around it, Fisk declares, is the "Auschwitz of the Armenian people, the place of the world's first forgotten holocaust."⁵¹ Against the background of genocide and cultural destruction in north America, Latin America and Africa (especially in the Congo) before the 20th century this claim would seem to be more than a little exaggerated. Far from being "forgotten," the fate of the Armenians dominated headlines during and after the 1914-18 war and for the past half century has been constantly thrust into news cycles by Armenian lobbyists and the assassination of Turkish diplomats and consular staff around the world by Armenian terrorists.

Fisk's driver tells him what happened at Margada: "The Turks [sic.] brought whole families here to kill them. It went on for days. They would tie them together in lines, men, women, children, most of the starving and sick, many naked. Then they would push them off the cliff and shoot one of them. The dead body would then carry the others down and drown them. It was cheap that way. It would cost only one bullet."⁵² How, a century later, Fisk's driver would know all

⁵⁰ *The Great War for Civilisation*, 398.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 390.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 390-91.

this, down to “as many as 50,000 Armenians” roped together and drowned in their thousands, is not explained.

Elsewhere, Fisk writes, “so great was the slaughter near the town of Erzinjan [Erzincan] that the thousands of corpses in the Euphrates formed a barrage that forced the river to change its course for a hundred meters.”⁵³ In another article this is changed to “up to half a mile.”⁵⁴ Standing on the hill at Margada it occurred to Fisk, as he relates in *The Great War for Civilisation*, that “just as the Euphrates had changed its course after its waters became clogged with bodies so here too the Habur’s [Khabur] waters might have become choked with human remains and moved to the east.”⁵⁵

By 2013 “might have” is turned into what actually happened: “... It was difficult to find the bones because the Khabur river, north of the city of Deir al Zor, had changed. So many were the bodies heaped in its flow that the waters moved to the east. The very river had changed its course.”⁵⁶ He presents no evidence of any kind to support this view. North of Margada, at Shedadi, Fisk comes across “another little Auschwitz, a cave into which Turkish troops drove thousands of Armenian men during the deportations.”⁵⁷ Part of it had collapsed but Fisk and his Armenian companion were able to crawl inside and look around the help of a cigarette lighter.

Boghos tells Fisk that “they” killed about 5000 Armenians here “they stuffed them into a cave and then started a bonfire at the mouth and filled the cave with smoke. They all asphyxiated. They all coughed until they died.”

Again, how Fisk’s Armenian driver could know all this is not explained but Fisk accepts it without question: “Up here in the cold dry desert the Turks turned this crack in the earth’s crust into the twentieth century’s first gas chamber. The principles of technological genocide began here in the Syrian desert, at the tiny mouth of this innocent cave in a natural chamber in the rock.”⁵⁸ Fisk returns to his accusations in 2014, stating as a fact that in the northern Syrian desert, ‘the Turks’ “engineered the first primitive gas chambers, by driving thousands of Armenians into rock caves [not one cave any longer] and asphyxiating them by lighting bonfires [sic.] at the entrance.”⁵⁹

In a later article Fisk refers to an unnamed Armenian “witness” to other atrocities before again quoting Akçam, who writes that “we learned in no uncertain terms that in the area around Samiye, 300 children were thrown into a cave opening, gas was poured in and they were burned alive.”⁶⁰ Even though the heading of his article refers to “the facts of history,” Fisk produces no independent evidence that this story is a fact of history rather than lurid wartime propaganda.

Many thousands of Armenians died in Syria. Some were massacred but a much greater number, the evidence indicates, died of malnutrition, disease and exposure, as hundreds of thousands of Syrians did during the war. In any case, only a forensic examination of human

⁵³ Ibid., 395.

⁵⁴ “Fisk: Let me denounce genocide from the dock.” Also see Fisk, ‘Confronting Turkey’s [sic.] Armenian Genocide,’ *Counterpunch*, October 14, 2006.

⁵⁵ *The Great War for Civilisation*, 397.

⁵⁶ Fisk, “Nearly a century after the Armenian genocide these people are still being slaughtered in Syria,” *Independent*, December 1, 2013.

⁵⁷ *The Great War for Civilisation*, 398.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 398.

⁵⁹ Fisk, “The 1915 Armenian genocide: Finding a fit testament to a timeless crime,” *Independent*, April 6, 2014.

⁶⁰ Fisk, “In the cases of separate holocausts Israel and Poland find it difficult to acknowledge the facts of history,” *Independent*, February 15, 2018.

remains at Markada or anywhere else could establish who the dead were, how they died, how many were killed and how they were killed. Yet standing on a hill in northern Syria, Robert Fisk claimed to have the answers.

7. Bryce and Toynbee

Fisk's sources include *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire* (1916), a propaganda document prepared as a Blue Book (collection of parliamentary papers) for the British government by James Bryce and Arnold Toynbee.

As a former ambassador to the US, a former member of parliament and a well-respected historian, it was assumed that Bryce's standing and authority would put the credibility of his report beyond question. In fact, Bryce already had form as a propagandist, having headed the inquiry which in May, 1915, produced the *Report on the Committee of Alleged German Outrages in Belgium*. After the war, none of the 'documents' used by this committee could be found, and commissions of inquiry (one Belgian) found that there was little truth in many of the outrages as described in the report. (All the 'documents' and background material used in the production of *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire* were also found to have disappeared after the war).

Whereas the German report was written as a narrative, the second publication consisted of 'documents' whose evidential probity Bryce claimed would stand up in any court of the commonwealth. Anyone who examines these 'documents' even cursorily would know that this is manifestly untrue. Many of the 'documents' are not documents at all but newspaper reports, including many appearing in anti-Ottoman Armenian newspapers published in Tiflis (Tbilisi) or Geneva.

Others are accounts provided by unnamed sources, such as "an especially well-informed neutral source at Constantinople"; "letter from an authoritative source published in the New York journal *Gotchnag*"; "extracts from a letter dated Athens from an Armenian formerly resident in Turkey"; "memorandum from a well-informed source at Bucharest"; and "statement made by a foreign resident of Constantinople to a Swiss gentleman at Geneva." Bryce claimed that "nearly all" of his publication came from eyewitnesses, when in fact it is mostly it is a collection of hearsay accusations.

Fisk repeats tales of the most horrible atrocities taken from the Bryce-Toynbee collection and other sources without producing any independent evidence of how true they might be in part or whole. He repeats a *New York Times* account of October 7, 1915, of 800,000 Armenians already counted as dead, including "10,000 people drowned "at once,"⁶¹ without apparently asking himself how and by whom were the Armenian dead counted and how, where and by whom it would have been possible to drown 10,000 people "at once." Neither does he question Dadrian's "discovery" that "tens of thousands of Armenians were burned alive in haylofts."⁶² At face value this would surely strike any non-partisan reader as crude wartime propaganda, but Fisk repeats it as truth.

He writes that "as many as" 50,000 Armenians were murdered at Margada, that "more than" 20,000 women and children were butchered by "Kurds and Ottoman troops" at the Kemah (Kemakh) gorge near Erzincan, that "more than 900" women were drowned by "the Turks" in the

⁶¹ *The Great War for Civilisation*, 401.

⁶² "Fisk: Let me denounce genocide from the dock."

Tigris (Dicle) river at Bitlis and that “massive” drowning operations took place in the Black Sea and the Euphrates.

The lurid stories pouring into the press on both sides of the Atlantic through Bryce-Toynbee or the British propaganda headquarters at Wellington House primed the public to believe that ‘the Turks’ were capable of any monstrosity, no matter how improbable. This alleged eye-witness report from Van, as published in an American newspaper, is yet another example: “I saw Turks bury Armenian victims with the dogs, divide the women among them as wives and throw babies into the lake. 35,000 of its 75,000 inhabitants were killed or starved to death.”⁶³

The Kemah (Kemakh) gorge near Erzincan was the site of the alleged massacre of thousands of Armenians. In one Bryce-Toynbee account based on an “interview” between a British cleric and an American missionary resident in Erzurum, about 15,000 Armenians were moved to Erzincan and then taken on foot in the direction of Kemakh, Egin and Arabkir. At Kemakh “it is reported” that the men were separated from the women and killed, their bodies thrown into the Euphrates.⁶⁴

In another report taken from the Armenian journal *Mschak* in Tiflis, Armenians moved from Erzurum were attacked on the road by “chettis” (bandits – *çeteleter*). Many were killed and the remainder attacked again at the Kemah gorge, with many drowning in the river. Armenians were also moved to the gorge from the town of Baiburt. “An educated Armenian lady,” Madame Zarouhi, related how the river was filled with corpses: she was thrown in but managed to save herself by clinging to a boulder, before making her way to Erzurum⁶⁵ In a third version of these events, from a statement made by Mr A.S. Safrastian in Tiflis on March 15, 1916, and published in Bryce-Toynbee, 15,000 Armenian peasants from the plain of Erzurum were taken to Mamahatun.

On the way, at the entrance to the Kemah gorge, they were ambushed in a volley of gunfire by “unknown robbers.” Only a few escaped and in two hours the valley was turned into a “vast cemetery.” In the last week of June several parties of Armenians moved from Erzerum were allegedly massacred by shooting or drowning.⁶⁶ More than seven months later, after the occupation of Erzurum by the Russians (February, 1916), Madame Zarouhi, now described in Mr Safrastian’s account as an “an elderly lady of means,” told the Armenian representative of the All Russia Urban Union how “she shuddered to recall how hundreds of children were bayoneted by the Turks and thrown [in]to the Euphrates and how men and women were stripped naked, tied together in hundreds, shot and then hurled into the river. In a loop of the river near Erzindjan, she said, the thousands of dead bodies created such a barrage that the river changed its course.”⁶⁷

⁶³ James Bryce, *The Treatment of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, 1915-16. Documents Presented to Viscount Grey of Fallodon, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, by Viscount Bryce* (London: His Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1916), 112, “Van: Interview with a refugee, Mrs Gazarian,” published in the *Pioneer Press* of St Paul, Minnesota, USA.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 53, “Vilayet of Erzeroum. Record of an interview between the Rev. H.J. Buxton and the Rev. Robert Stapleton, a missionary of the American Board, resident in Erzeroum from before the outbreak of the war until after the capture of the city by the Russians.”

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 56, “Abstract of a report by Dr Y. Minassian, who accompanied Mr Khounountz to Erzeroum as the representative of the Caucasian section of the ‘All-Russian Urban Union,’ published in the Armenian journal *Mschak* at Tiflis, March 8, 1916.”

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 57, “Erzeroum: statement by Mr A.S. Safrastian, dated Tiflis, March 15, 1916.”

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

This version would seem to be the primary source of Fisk's claim that the river was blocked by bodies. There is no mention in any of these accounts of Fisk's "more than 20,000 women and children" being killed at Kemah. The sources also differ as to who was responsible, from bandits and "unknown robbers" to 'Turks.' In an Armenian history written decades later the death toll is swollen to 25,000 Armenians killed just in one day,⁶⁸ with babies collected in sacks and thrown into the Euphrates.⁶⁹

Two Red Cross Danish nurses related that their cook told them of how Kurds had attacked the convoy at Kemah and killed "a great number of the exiles." Their Greek driver told them that the Armenians had their hands tied behind their back before being thrown from the cliffs into the river. They claimed gendarmes confirmed these accounts.⁷⁰ These lurid accounts were all reproduced in a British propaganda document whose prime purpose was to blacken the name of 'the Turks.' These accounts are not even consistent with each other and cannot be taken as an accurate guide to what actually happened at the Kemah gorge, as bad as it might have been.

As for "mass drownings", a former resident of Trebizond (Trabzon) wrote that a number of lighters loaded with people set off for Samsun further down the Black Sea coast but "it is generally believed that such persons drowned." Another report quoted "a Turk" as saying a boat carrying members of the "Armenian committee" had been attacked from another boat by gendarmes and all the Armenians had been killed. A number of boats leaving for Samsun with Armenian passengers usually returned empty after a few hours, i.e. before they had time to get to Samsun and back, implying that the passengers must have been deliberately drowned.

The former Italian consul-general in Trabzon is quoted in Bryce-Toynbee as saying that hundreds of children placed on a ship drowned when the vessel capsized or was capsized. Other victims are said to have drowned or been drowned in a river. These unreliable hearsay accounts would appear to be the source of Fisk's claims of "mass drowning operations in the Black Sea and the Euphrates."

8. Elderly Survivors

Fisk's sources include the recollections of elderly Armenians whom he interviewed in Lebanon and the US. In Beirut, in 1992, a woman of 88 in a home for the blind gave him an account of how "we saw them go" when men were taken away from the city of Muş and shot before their bodies were stripped of their valuables and thrown "into the river."⁷¹ This woman remembered her mother telling her she had watched this happen. Another elderly woman told Fisk "of how Turkish gendarmes piled up babies and set them on fire."⁷² At face value, can this be regarded as credible, rather than as something this woman had heard and in her declining years was passing on to Fisk?

In 2014, at a home for the aged in California, Fisk interviewed Yevnigue Salibian, 100 years old, born on January 14, 1914, thus 15 months old when the Armenians were arrested in Istanbul on April 24, 1915, and three years old when she described what she says she saw in the town of

⁶⁸ Kevorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History*, 310.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 310

⁷⁰ *Treatment of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire*, 245-254, "Erzindjan: statement by two Red Cross nurses of Danish nationality, formerly in the service of the German military mission at Erzeroum, communicated by a Swiss gentleman of Geneva."

⁷¹ *The Great War for Civilisation*, 394-5.

⁷² Fisk, "The 1915 Armenian genocide: Finding a fit testament to a timeless crime."

Aintab in 1917. Through a crack in the front door Yevnighe told Fisk she saw children who were being “deported” by being driven down the street and beaten with whips and “big sticks.”

What a person of 100 years of age said she could remember seeing when she was three obviously raises the question of credibility. Research shows that while children of three or even two can remember, their memories quickly fade. Child memories are also subject to what the child has been told by the adult: this can be transformed into what the child says he/she remembers. In short, while Yevnighe’s sincerity is not to be questioned, what she thought she remembered at the age of three is questionable. Fisk claimed her memory was “impeccable” but how could he have known that?

As already noted, the ‘relocation’ of Armenians was officially ended in February, 1916. There is no evidence of this continuing into 1917, let alone evidence of orphan children being kept back for “deportation” at a later stage. It is true that the Ottoman lands were swarming with orphans but they were Muslim as well as Christian. Taken in by families and orphanages, their true identities – Muslim or Christian - were contested by Ottoman authorities, missionaries and European or American aid societies for a long time after the war.

Had Fisk travelled to eastern Anatolia when he was visiting elderly Armenians in Beirut or California he could have found elderly Turks or Kurds who could have told him of what they and their families experienced at the hands of Armenians during the war or what they heard from others. Eyewitness testimonies were being taken in the late 1970s, notably from survivors of the Van massacres of thousands of Muslims. The inclusion of such evidence would certainly change the perspective of any reader of Robert Fisk’s articles but none of it is there.

Fisk claims that during the postwar French occupation of what is now southeastern Turkey, Turkish forces massacred Armenians “in their thousands.”⁷³ The truth of this matter is that France sent troops into the southeast accompanied by an Armenian legion, which soon had to be dismantled because of indiscipline, generally in the form of attacks on the Muslim civilian population. Gradually French and Armenian forces were driven out of the towns they had occupied, the Armenian civilian population retreating with them. Whatever the true number of Armenians who died in this secondary war, civilians as well as soldiers, a large number of Muslims also died or were driven from their homes in towns and villages. Fisk seems entirely oblivious to the record of Armenian violence against Muslims during the French occupation, as established in numerous sources.⁷⁴

Fisk also refers to massacres of Armenians in Yerevan at the tail end of the war. In fact, Armenian forces prevented the Ottoman army advancing through the Caucasus from even reaching Yerevan. The massacres took place elsewhere, many in and around Baku, during a situation of combat and mutual massacres in which thousands of Muslim civilians (mostly Azerbaijanis) as well as Armenians were killed.

Fisk also rises to the defence of the Assyrian Christians, a faction of whom took up arms against the Ottoman government during the war. Fleeing the southeastern region of Hakkari to northwestern Iran, the fighting men and their families subsequently fled south into Iraq, suffering

⁷³ Fisk, “The story of the Armenian Legion is finally being told - and it is a dark tale of anger and revenge,” *Independent*, October 18, 2018.

⁷⁴ See for example Yücel Güçlü, *Armenians and the Allies in Cilicia 1914-1923* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2010), 117-126; and Robert F. Zeidner, *The Tricolor Over the Taurus 1918-1922* (Ankara: Turkish Historical Society, 2005), 105-119, 123- 137, 175-240.

severe casualties on the way and ending up in a refugee camp at Baquba, north of Baghdad. They were to be bitterly disappointed by the British government's refusal to uphold what they thought was a pledge of autonomy in return for taking up arms against the Ottoman government.

In 1924, Assyrians conscripted as British levies, ran amuck in Mosul, plundering houses and shops and killing, according to the estimate of a British diplomat, more than 300 Muslims.⁷⁵ In July, 1933, Assyrians camping on both the Iraqi and Syrian side of the Tigris river opened fire on Iraqi troops, triggering off a 36-hour battle in which 34 Iraqi officers and men and at least 100 Assyrians were killed.

According to General Bakr Sidqi, the Iraqi commander, the Assyrians mutilated the bodies of Iraqi soldiers, gouging out eyes and cutting off noses.⁷⁶ The Iraqi army took its revenge by plundering and destroying or partly destroying numerous Assyrian villages around Mosul, with civilians allegedly machine-gunned in the village of Simel. Outside estimates of the dead went as high as 3000 but a British official who visited the villages could count only 315 bodies.⁷⁷ This is what Fisk describes as "an exterminatory attack on members of the Assyrian community," in an account that makes no mention of the armed Assyrian violence of 1924 or the bloody fighting along the river that triggered off the attack on Simel.⁷⁸

In *The Great War for Civilisation* Fisk takes the Labor government of Tony Blair to task for deciding that there was no "unequivocal" evidence of genocide of the Armenians. In this case, he remarks, "the government must believe that the Bryce report; Churchill; Lloyd George; the American diplomats posted across the Ottoman Empire at the time of the massacres; Armin Wegner, the photographer of the Armenian Holocaust; and the scholar Israel Charny – not to mention the actual survivors and the 150 professors who signed a declaration that the 1915 slaughter was genocide – are or were all frauds. This is clearly not true."⁷⁹

This list of sources has to be disaggregated. Churchill and Lloyd George were senior figures in Britain's wartime government and of course would say what they did say about Britain's enemies. Some US consuls wrote detailed and reliable accounts of the horrors inflicted on the Armenians but their ambassador, Henry Morgenthau, scarcely moved out of Istanbul: his regular diplomatic despatches and his wartime diary, in some places differing from each other, were largely put together by his Armenian secretaries. Armin Wegner's photographs depict the terrible day-to-day suffering (only) of Armenians but are scarcely 'eyewitness' evidence of genocide: Martin Tamcke, a leading German historian whose special interests include the history of the 'eastern' churches, has researched Wegner's time in the Ottoman Empire as a lieutenant in a volunteer sanitation unit, and concluded that Wegner's writings belong "not to history" but "the realm of legends."⁸⁰ Israel Charney is a researcher whose findings are as open to challenge as any other researcher's.

⁷⁵ Sir Francis Humphreys to Sir Robert Vansittart, Baghdad, August 24, 1933, Alan Rush, ed., *Records of Iraq 1914-1966* (London: Archive Editions, 2001), vol. 7, 583.

⁷⁶ Ibid., Humphreys to Sir John Simon, September 14, 1933, on "the part played by the Iraqi army in the repression of the Assyrian rebellion in July and August, 1933," 585-89.

⁷⁷ "Assyrians in Iraq; Prisoners Shot Untried," *The Times*, August 17, 1933.

⁷⁸ For Fisk's account of what happened at Simel see chapter 10, 'The First Holocaust,' in *The Great War for Civilisation*.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 425.

⁸⁰ See "Armenian Fabrications. The photo collection of Armin T. Wegner." www.liveleak.com/view?t=Of2_14408u595&language_code=ru Wegner's writings included *Der Weg ohne Heimkehr* (The Road of No Return), 1919, and *Der Schrei von Ararat* (The Scream from Ararat), 1922.

9. Railways and the ‘Relocation’

Fisk’s attempts to present ‘the Turks’ as Nazis in all but name include the comparisons he attempts to draw between a poorly developed Ottoman railway network and the lines the Nazis laid straight into the death camps. According to Fisk, “the Germans were also involved in building Turkey’s [sic.] rail system and saw with their own eyes the first use of cattle trucks for human deportation, men packed ninety to a wagon – the same average the Germans achieved in their transports to the Nazi death camps – on the Anatolian and Baghdad railways.”⁸¹

In fact, along a railway line still being constructed, with the military having first call on available engines and carriages, cattle trucks would have been the only means of transporting a mass of people unless they were to walk. The same dire situation lay ahead of Muslims driven out of the Balkans in 1877-78 and 1912-13. The Ottoman authorities mostly had only wagons – cattle trucks and closed luggage vans at best – to take the refugees to Istanbul. The scenes along the way were horrific, with women and children freezing to death or toppling to their death from the top and trains arriving in Istanbul with the dead to be unloaded as well as the living. Without even the wagons, the death toll would have been even higher and Fisk’s crude attempt to draw a parallel between the Ottoman railways and trains being sent directly into Nazi death camps is completely misleading.

As for the general Ottoman railway network, Fisk writes that Armenian scholars “have completed maps of their people’s persecution every bit as detailed as the maps of Europe that show the railway routes to Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka, Dachau and the other Nazi camps. The Armenians in Sivas were driven to Malatya, from Malatya to Aleppo or from Mush [Muş] to Diyarbakir to Ras al Ain – or via Mardin – to Mosul and Kirkuk.”⁸²

Lest general readers conclude from this passage that all these towns were connected by rail, none of them were. There was no rail network in central-eastern Anatolia at the time. The Mardin station was built in 1918, Malatya’s in 1931 and Diyarbakir’s in 1935. A short stretch of line (about 70 kms) had been laid between Adana and Mersin in the 1880s but a continuous rail link from Istanbul to Baghdad – the Ottoman stretch of the famous ‘Baghdadbahn’ – was not completed until 1940.

There is no way of knowing how many of the 486,000 Armenians known to have reached Syria by early 1916 travelled part of the way by train but most went on foot or by such wagons or carts that they could afford. Rail development was concentrated in the western provinces of the empire: there was no direct route into Syria. Although, for strategic reasons, the government welcomed rail development, profit was the motive for the companies given concessions to construct railways.

The most famous line, the Orient Express, ran from Vienna through the Balkans to ‘Constantinople,’ an exotic and increasingly popular destination for adventurous travellers. Rail development before 1914 inched ahead in the western Anatolian provinces, down the Aegean coast, with Istanbul eventually linked to Eskişehir and Ankara in central Anatolia. From Eskişehir a line was laid through Afyon to Konya, from where it was continued stage by stage in a southeastern direction towards Adana.

⁸¹ “The First Holocaust,” 400. Fisk does not say where he got the “90 to a wagon” from.

⁸² Ibid., 398-99.

In the eastern Mediterranean the Taurus and Amanus mountain ranges separate the Anatolian plateau from the maritime plain. The rail line from Konya could go no further than the Cilician Gates until dozens of tunnels had been bored through the mountains and viaducts built over gorges. Thousands of German engineers and railway workers were engaged in this massive project. The tunnels were not completed until 1917, which meant that until then the transit of goods and passengers could proceed only in stages. Blocked by the mountains, goods and passengers would have to move on foot or be carried by wagon to the other side, where train travel could be resumed.

For any passengers, travel along these broken stretches of railway line must have been an gruelling experience. As the military had first call on all forms of transport there was no guarantee that the train taking passengers to one station would go any further. Long waits could be involved until the next train was scheduled.

Although a propaganda document, the Bryce-Toynbee report still sheds valuable light on conditions along the line. A correspondent reporting in November, 1915, on a trip to Pozantı, a railhead town standing at the approaches to the Taurus mountains, noted that while Armenians were being transported, most of the movement was the other way, of "great numbers of raw Arab recruits" being sent from Syria to Eskişehir and Istanbul.⁸³

Of about 2000 Armenians stuck at Pozantı about one third had been given permission to remain because they were artisans or members of soldiers' families. They were given a loaf of bread a day but, the correspondent notes, even the rations for the soldiers were not sufficient. Around Pozantı, the Armenians were living in tumble-down shacks or tents. All were sick and about 100 children had been abandoned because of illness or because they were too young to walk: all but 20 had been adopted "as Moslems." Many were too poor to hire wagons to take them to Tarsus, 18 hours away, or too feeble to attempt the journey on foot.

On September 27, 1915, a correspondent in the town of "AE" tells of children being abandoned or thrown from the windows of railway carriages and left by the roadside. This correspondent describes the lack of proper transport facilities as "the most important factor in causing this misery."⁸⁴ Long distances were not covered by railways and the lack of carriages and "carts" were compelling many to go on foot. The carts were "of the most primitive kind" and only those with ample means could afford a carriage, evidence that if Armenians had the money, travel in relative comfort was available, if the seats were also available. No attempt had been made "of late" to solve the problem of providing the Armenians with sufficient food, a situation which was true of all stations on the "deportation route."

A letter dated Aleppo, November 5, "from Dr L, a foreign resident in Turkey to Mr N at Constantinople," refers to thousands of Armenians being stuck along various stretches of the railway line: 10,000 between Pozantı and Tarsus, 20,000 at Tarsus, 40,000 between Osmania (Osmaniye) and Islohia (Islahiye) and 40,000 to 50,000 at "Kotmo." From Aleppo, once inside

⁸³ *Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire*, 433-36, "Letter: dated 25th November, 1915, from Dr E to Mr N at Constantinople, communicated by the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief."

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 451-53, "AE, a town on the railway, series of reports from a foreign resident at AE, communicated by the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief."

Syria, “those who can pay are sent by train to Damascus. Those who can’t are sent by road to Deir al Zor.”⁸⁵

Huge encampments developed around most railway lines. At Osmaniye, on the present Turkish-Syrian border, no attempt at sanitation was made either by Turks or Armenians, according to this account. Epidemic diseases brought on by insanitary conditions were common everywhere. Typhus had broken out at Aleppo: hundreds of Armenians sent to the Hauran were dying every day, while Turks and Kurds meeting the “caravans” were selling food at exorbitant prices.⁸⁶ In his memoirs Cemal Paşa talks of travelling from Aleppo to Pozanti where he issued an order “that bread was to be provided for the emigrants from the Army depots and [I] ordered the doctors on the lines of communication to look after the sick Armenians.”⁸⁷

Only round numbers are given for the number of Armenians stuck along the railway line and the situation was clearly terrible but in no way is it consistent with Fisk’s attempt to set up the train transport of Armenians as some kind of parallel to the Nazi trains sent directly into Auschwitz or Dachau.

The picture in Syria was extremely diffuse. Not all the Armenians sent to Syria were settled in camps. Many were able to stay in the towns and cities with many officials, including the governor, Cemal Paşa, doing their best to provide them with food, accommodation, hospital care and work for men, women and children. Many thousands of Armenians died in the camps, mostly of disease or malnutrition, but the camps were not set up as death camps.

Fisk describes Cemal as “one of the architects of the 1915 genocide” (later murdered, he claims, in “the Turkish town of Tiflis.” In fact, Cemal was assassinated in the Georgian city of Tiflis/Tbilisi)⁸⁸ In his memoirs Cemal said he had not been involved in the “negotiations” preceding the ‘relocation:’ furthermore, far from being responsible for massacres, he had prevented them and had directed all possible help to be given to the Armenians.⁸⁹ His record of trying to ease the suffering of the Armenians has been well-documented⁹⁰ even if not known to Robert Fisk.

Fisk accuses Cemal and the feminist writer Halide Edib Adivar⁹¹ of helping to run an “orphanage of terror” on Mt Lebanon in which Armenian children were “systematically deprived of their Armenian identity and given new Turkish names, forced to become Muslims and beaten savagely if they were heard to speak Armenian.”⁹² Orphanages anywhere at the time were grim places and likely to be harshly run whether in a London slum or on Mt Lebanon but famine and epidemic diseases had spread across Syria and children undoubtedly suffered and died in this orphanage. They were buried outside, where jackals and wild dogs would dig up the bodies to eat and scatter the bones.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 454, “The Taurus and Amanus passes: extract from a letter dated Aleppo, 5th November, from Dr L, a foreign resident in Turkey, to Mr N at Constantinople, communicated by the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief.”

⁸⁶ Ibid., 459-463, “Smyrna-Aleppo-Damascus-Aleppo-Smyrna: itinerary of a foreign traveller in Asiatic Turkey, communicated by the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief.”

⁸⁷ Djemal Pasha, *Memoires of a Turkish Statesman 1913-1919* (New York: George H. Doran, 1922), 278.

⁸⁸ Fisk, “Living proof of the Armenian genocide,” *Independent*, March 9, 2010.

⁸⁹ *Memoires of a Turkish Statesman*, 279.

⁹⁰ See Guenter Lewy, *The Armenian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey. A Disputed Genocide* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005), 218-19, for examples of Cemal’s attempts to ease the suffering of the Armenians.

⁹¹ “Living Proof of the Armenian Genocide.”

⁹² Ibid.

Fisk writes that some of the children would record "how they were forced to grind up and eat the skeletons of their dead fellow orphans in order to survive starvation." His Armenian source, taken to the orphanage when he was six, tells him the children would use the ground-up bones for soup or mix them with grain.

This horrifying story is unfortunately consistent with the general conditions of life and death in Syria at that time. There was not enough food for anyone, soldiers included. People were dropping dead from malnutrition in the streets of Damascus and Beirut or in the villages of Mt Lebanon. They were eating any fragments of food they could find and reports were even coming in of cannibalism. Crop production had dropped off because military needs had drained the agricultural sector of manpower.

The locust plague of 1915, the worst in living memory, stripped southern Syria (Palestine) of crops and vegetation. The allied blockade of the Mediterranean coast killed off the imports and exports necessary to a cash economy. The Syrian historian George Antonius estimates that no less than 350,000 Syrians died from starvation alone and that the total wartime death toll was close to half a million (out of a population of about four million).⁹³ The allied blockade and the locust plague, followed by famine, help to explain why the children in the Antoura orphanage were starving.

As for children "forced to become Muslim" and Turkified, orphaned Muslim and Armenian children alike were caught in the middle of a tug of war after the war between missionaries, the occupying Allied authorities and Christian aid societies on one side and the Ottoman or Turkish governments and charities on the other, the first claiming that many Muslim children were actually Christian and the second arguing the reverse. The situation was desperate, with "uncounted numbers of children orphaned by the tragedies which had engulfed the Ottoman Empire during the previous decade poured into the major cities, living off the streets as best they could, many not knowing even who they were or which community they should go to in order to appeal for assistance."⁹⁴

In *The Turkish Ordeal* (1928), Halide Edib gives examples of Muslim children who had been 'Armenianized' and beaten by their Armenian keepers. She ran the Antoura orphanage for seven months in 1916-17 and regarded the period as the happiest years of her life: a Turkish historian who supports the Armenian narrative has remarked that "one has to say" conditions at the orphanage improved while Halide Edib was there.⁹⁵ An Armenian reviewer of a book on the orphanage described the staff as "some benign and some cruel."⁹⁶

⁹³ George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening. The Story of the Arab National Movement* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1938), 240-41

⁹⁴ Stanford J. Shaw, *From Empire to Republic. The Turkish War of National Liberation 1918-1923. A Documentary Study* (Ankara: Turkish Historical Society, 2000), vol. I, 216.

⁹⁵ Selim Deringil, Ottoman history podcast, April 21, 2016. www.ohp.com/2016/04/antoura.html

⁹⁶ See review of Karnig Panian, *Goodbye Antoura. A Memoir of the Antoura Orphanage* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2015) on www.genocidededucation.org/books/new-goodbye-antoura/

Conclusion

Fisk once warned journalists against “blinkered history” and the loss of perspective.⁹⁷ He also wrote once of the damage done to their credibility “by the acceptance of one side of the story only, when not a single reporter can confirm with his or her own eyes what they are reporting.”⁹⁸

However, accepting “one side of the story only” is precisely what Fisk did in his articles on the Armenian question. He wrote as an advocate for a particular view of history, indeed as a propagandist, a designation that should be anathema to any journalist faithful to the fundamental principles of his craft (balance, accuracy, fact-checking and a striving for objectivity in the pursuit of ‘truth’). Fisk would not have seen it this way, of course, because clearly in his own mind he knew what the truth was and needed to look no further.

As this article demonstrates, Fisk’s truth is very far from the truth that would be established through a balanced evaluation of late Ottoman history. He was entitled to his opinion but for reliable accounts of the disaster that overwhelmed Turks, Kurds, Armenians and Ottoman subjects of other ethno-religious backgrounds during the First World War, his readers should look elsewhere.

⁹⁷ Fisk, “Lack of perspective: why journalists should be haunted by a history of blinkered reporting,” *Independent*, November 22, 2018.

⁹⁸ Fisk, “We are not living in a ‘post-truth’ world, we are living the lies of others,” *Independent*, December 29, 2016.

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