



The Armenian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey: A Disputed Genocide

GUENTER LEWY. The Armenian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey: A Disputed Genocide. Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2005. Pp. xiii, 370. \$24.95

*Ramazan Hakkı ÖZTAN**

Targeting the two rival (national) camps of history on the events of 1915, Guenter Lewy's new study explores the validity of sources, consistency of arguments, selective nature of scholars, and discrepancies in source material on both sides and shows how historians came to construct 1915 as they saw fit despite unsupportive documentary evidence. In this debate on Armenian genocide, the Armenian position maintained that the Ottoman Empire deliberately targeted the elimination of its Armenian population (emphasis here on premeditation) and thus the unfolding of events in 1915 were genocidal in nature. The Turkish position argued that the Ottoman state had to relocate the rebellious Armenians in a time of war and both Armenians and Muslim Turks endured terrible human suffering. The book has three sections. The first part provides the readers a brief historical background on the conflict with a particular focus on the political history of the Empire from the 1870s to 1914. While the second section of the book is where Lewy charts the positions of two rival historiographies, the third section first questions the sources we as historians have on the topic and then reconstructs the course of events of 1915. His main research problem is not to question the extent of Armenian suffering in 1915 and its aftermath but rather to see whether the events of 1915 constituted a genocide or not. It should be noted that his source material in this reconstruction of events are mostly German, British, and American documents; he makes use of Turkish sources which are available in translations. For Lewy, an alternative explanation on the events of 1915 exists. He argues that the Turkish position wrongly insists on downplaying the outcome of the

* *Middle East Center, University of Utah - USA*

deportations, while at the same time documentary evidence simply does not exist to suggest premeditation and intent to destroy the Armenian community.

After a brief excursion to the pre-history of 1915, Lewy looks at the implementation of the Armenian genocide. Questioning the historical and legal validity of documents such as the *Memoirs of Naim Bey* and the records from the Courts-Martial of 1919-22, he reaches the conclusion that these sources were more like political tools shaped by the political needs of the time rather than reliable sources on 1915. For Lewy, Teskilat-i Mahsusa's involvement in the Armenian massacres is questionable as well since the majority of connections as such come from the records of the Courts-Martial, which should be examined skeptically in the first place. As for the section on the pro-Turkish position, Lewy's arguments are: the general Turkish argument on armed insurrection against the Ottoman state is not substantiated; in the revolt of Van, the real motive of the insurrection will continue to be in dispute; the Turkish claim that the Ottoman state did everything to stop and prosecute the crimes against the Armenians is less than convincing; the argument that what happened was a civil war within a global war should be dismissed since such a claim, agreeing with Selim Deringil on this point, is a travesty of history because most of the deaths occurred as a result of deportations, not intercommunal fighting. The issue of the release of the Malta prisoners by the British on the other hand reveals for Lewy the discrepancy between legal and historical notions of proof/evidence of crime.

Lewy's historical construction of the events of 1915 begins with a lengthy and very objective account of the reliability of sources. Lewy, who was constantly labeled as pro-Turkish, clearly depicts the double standards and the two-tier system in the Turkish state archives. As for the deportations, Lewy argues that the nearly inaccessible nature of the CUP decision-making mechanisms makes it very difficult for scholars to come up with a final proof on the pre-planned nature of physical extermination of the Ottoman Armenians. In the literature of 1915, while the Armenian scholars traditionally argued that deportations were the covered means through which the CUP administrated a genocidal policy, the Turkish position maintained that the deportation order was made and executed in order to stop the Armenian rebellion. Lewy warns the reader that the German responsibility in the deportations were questionable and flawed. As for the course of the deportations, he points out that there are enough documents available to understand how the deportations took place on a local level where the Ottoman central government's control of provincial politics and dynamics was minimal. The result was that the deportations destroyed the Ottoman Armenian community with its high death-toll as an end-result, even though the Ottoman state had a resettlement plan for the deported populations. For Lewy, the 'fair-sounding plans' and instructions to the local officials were hardly ever realized, and most of the Armenians lost their lives on the way or in their new destinations which were largely inhospitable. Discussing the massacres in the resettled areas, he maintains that it would probably be never known whether they "were perpetrated on command from above" (210). And regarding the perpetrators, he claims that it was mostly the Kurds, Circassians, brigands, irregulars, and gendarme that committed the terrible crimes, while not much evidence exists for the involvement of the Special Organization in the massacres. The book ends with his conclusion and with a fairly balanced section on what Lewy calls the politicization of history through which pro-Turks and pro-Armenians propagate their own versions of history in media and academic outlets.

To say the obvious, this book is a historiographical account of the events of 1915. The author does not provide any definition of genocide in his book but it is obvious for anyone interested in similar topics that Lewy has the legal UN definition of 1948 in mind, which particularly puts an emphasis on intent to destroy. Throughout the book Lewy rejects the

Armenian position on the basis of documentary evidence, or lack thereof, that the Ottomans intended to destroy the Armenian community or plan to do so. As for the arguments that emphasize the systematic nature of massacres, he stresses the local variations in the massacres (see the twelfth chapter). The point is that while Lewy rejects the existence of a genocidal policy he does not provide an alternative explanation. Was it ethnic cleansing or crimes against humanity? These two definitions are particularly important since they fill the gap that genocide as a strictly defined term leaves.

It is clear that Lewy does what he promises to do at the beginning of the book. He focuses on historiography and 1915. The brief historical context in the beginning weaves the international and Ottoman context together, then explaining the progress of history from the 1870s to 1914. Yet, some formative events such as the Balkan and Circassian immigrations are missing in his narrative. Other than the first part that focuses on this particular historical setting, the theme of foreign interventionism and the context of imperialism are missing in his account as well. Perhaps the most crucial aspect that demerits Lewy's scholarship is his lack of focus on socio-economic dynamics that were at play in the unfolding of events in 1915. Such an approach would strengthen his argument on the importance of local variations of massacres and would explain why these local variations occurred. Thus, some overview of secondary literature would have helped. In chapter eight, Lewy assesses the source material on the subject before he starts the reconstruction of events. While he gives due attention to the evaluation of Armenian survivor testimonies, he does not talk about the situation of Armenian archives. His criticisms of Turkish archives are valid; one expects the same attitude to the Armenian archival holdings.

My biggest criticism of this book is about the way Lewy structures the debate on 1915. He portrays it as a two-sided discussion as if no one has ever taken a middle route. While criticisms of the pro-Turkish position focus on many individual historians, it is clear that Vahakn Dadrian is his main target in the Armenian camp. Thus, he is selective and the individual scholars he puts under scrutiny do not necessarily represent the full-fledged debate on the issue. Yet, I really like the way he ended the book i.e. with a wish that scholars should concentrate more on understanding what happened, as Selim Deringil puts it, on "a common project of knowledge" rather than whether what took place in 1915 was a genocide or not.

There is much written on this controversial book and Lewy has been labeled as a prime example of genocide denier. I personally think that a common historical understanding did not form on 1915 since most of the accounts reinforce a nationalist vision and reasoning. Is Lewy objective in his account? Is his book scholastic and populist propaganda? My personal view is that Lewy is less a propagandist or populist than some earlier examples.