

# BOOK REVIEWS

(KİTAP TAHLİLLERİ)

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## “LEGISLATING REALITY AND POLITICIZING HISTORY: CONTEXTUALIZING ARMENIAN CLAIMS OF GENOCIDE”

“GERÇEĞİ YASALAŞTIRMA VE TARİHİ SİYASİLEŞTİRME:  
ERMENİ SOYKIRIM İDDİALARININ ÇERÇEVELENDİRİLMESİ”

**Author:** Brendon J. Cannon

**Title:** Legislating Reality and Politicizing History: Contextualizing Armenian Claims of Genocide

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The book *Legislating Reality and Politicizing History: Contextualizing Armenian Claims of Genocide*, authored by Dr. Brendon J. Cannon, aims to provide the reader with an understanding of the evolution of the Armenian campaign to have the 1915 events recognized as genocide and the accusations made towards Turkey in connection to this campaign.

The introduction of the book, written by Professor Michael Gunter, draws attention to the frequent misuse of the term “genocide” by claimed experts and laymen alike. It should be noted here that this frequent (intentional or not) misuse of this term causes confusions in the discussions regarding the already complicated and tragic set of events known as 1915 events that claimed the lives of both Turks and Armenians in great numbers and caused much suffering. As way to counter such misuse, the introduction provides the legal definition of genocide outlined in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (or, more shortly, the 1948 Genocide Convention). The official, legal definition of

“genocide” is as follows, “acts committee with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.” Besides this definition, Gunter reminds the reader that there is no official document that shows that Ottoman Empire intended to exterminate the Armenians. Herewith, the Armenian campaign possesses no evidence to demonstrate the “intent to destroy” that is necessary to prove that an event constitutes “genocide” (pp. 15-16). As a way to clear the above-mentioned confusions, Gunter recommends Cannon’s book as a guide to understanding what happened in 1915 and how the Armenians conceptualize and carry out their campaign.

This is also the primary importance of the book; it informs the reader about crucial terms such as genocide, the dispute over what the 1915 events entail, and what kind of identity Armenians have constructed over time and how this effects their behavior.

Besides the introduction part, the book is broken down into 10 chapters and a conclusion part. Throughout the book, Dr. Cannon aims to highlight several concepts that come up in relation to the term genocide, such crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, trauma, memory, and time collapse (the sense of experiencing a painful past event as if it happened just yesterday). Dr. Cannon also delves into other wide-ranging but related subjects, such as the historical framework regarding the Ottoman Empire and the Armenians, the building of Armenians identity throughout time, nationalistic desires, and idea of self-determination, how Ottoman Armenians were convinced that they would win their independence with the aid of the Russian Empire, and how the Ottoman Empire was struggling against the Great Powers of Great Britain, France and Russia in a time when the Ottoman Empire was gradually disintegrating with the emergence of the nation-states.

Like in the case of other people in other multiethnic empires, the emergence and spread of nationalism effected Armenians as well, and in their case, Armenians started to form a type of identity to define themselves over stories of wrongdoings of the past perpetrated against Armenians. According to the Armenians, the Ottoman Empire was the source of all these wrongdoings and thus the target of these related of accusations. The formation of this new nationalistic and grievance-driven identity (as opposed to being considered the *millet-i sadıka*, the loyal people, of the Ottoman Empire until the transformation of their identity) was helped by the level of literacy and education amongst Ottoman Armenians, as they were amongst the most literate and educated people among the rest of the population of the Ottoman Empire. High literacy rate and education gave Armenians the chance to express themselves in written (and thus potentially permanent) sources like memoirs

(p. 151). This thus allowed them the chance to transfer their memoirs (and thus their grievance-driven identity) from generation to generation, no matter the fact that these memoirs were not necessarily congruent with what actually transpired in the past.

The main issue considered by Dr. Cannon in his book is related to the Armenians' claims of genocide and their efforts to have this recognized as such. Especially in the first two chapters, Cannon emphasizes that Armenians have developed a necessity to identify themselves as being a people subjected to genocide. This identity also serves as a useful tool for gaining political capital and as a way for especially diaspora Armenians to position themselves in the world (p. 29). Despite the religious, linguistic, political, and geographic divisions and variations amongst the diaspora Armenians, the author notes that they are nevertheless united in their belief that they as a people have been subjected to genocide. This belief also creates a profound sense of a malign "Other" (Turks) in the eyes of Armenians and a perpetual sense of victimization against Turkey and the Turkish people. In short, the idea of surviving a genocide has created a common enemy for the Armenians. Diaspora Armenians have thus become indoctrinated to identify Turks as the enemy, which helps explain the wave of terrorism starting in the 1970s perpetuated by extremist Armenian groups against Turkish diplomats and service people and their family members.

In the fourth and fifth chapters, Dr. Cannon focuses on the Armenian's campaign regarding their genocide allegations. The author combines the formation of Armenian identity and the Diaspora's political activism. The chosen trauma of 1915 is used to identify who the Armenians are today. Since 1915 until today, the indoctrination caused amongst Armenians have cause a sense of time-collapse amongst the Armenians. This means that many modern-day Armenians experience the stories regarding the alleged genocide as if it occurred yesterday, meaning such stories elicit a profound emotional response from them. Tied to this, modern-day Armenians have built their minds upon genocide allegations and are driven to promoting their sense victimization as much as possible in various countries they live in such as the United States, France, and Australia (p. 229). Dr. Cannon underlines that the propaganda activities on the recognition of the alleged genocide is helped by the financial resources under the disposal of the Armenian diaspora. These financial resources mean that diaspora Armenians are capable of funding the production of large-scale movies to influence public opinion or funding numerous research projects into the 1915 events that will highlight Armenians' point of view.

There is an important point that the author highlights that can be tied to this; the usage of the term ‘genocide’ is now popularly used to denote any massacre or conflict that resulted in the death of a large group of people. In essence, the popular usage of the term ‘genocide’ has deviated significantly from its official definition as outlined in the 1948 Genocide Convention. In line with this deviation, the 1915 events have come to be likened to the Holocaust, even though they are two very different events that occurred in different contexts. Dr. Cannon discusses the necessary elements for act to be considered and how the 1915 events can be properly assessed in light of the 1948 Genocide Convention (p. 325).

The Armenian campaign over the recognition of the alleged genocide has resulted in notable success in certain countries, especially the ones in Europe. Through intense lobbying, diaspora Armenians have succeeded having resolutions passed in various parliaments regarding their genocide allegations. Though these resolutions are non-binding, non-legal political statements made by parliaments and can be compared to someone simply expressing their opinion on a disputed subject, such parliament resolution nevertheless raise awareness about the Armenian campaign and thus potentially influence public opinion. This results in Turkey being confronted with accusations of being a genocide-perpetrating country. According to Dr. Cannon, through such resolutions, while one’s honor and dignity is seemingly protected (Armenians), the other’s (Turks) honor and dignity is damaged by the other’s accusations (pp. 350-351). As a result of the Armenian campaign, the genocide allegations have come to be considered as historical facts in the public opinion of certain countries, and causes people to overlook the fact that it distorts historical events or intensely politicizes the related dispute, or that the it attempts to circumvent the legal and official definition of “genocide”, thereby diluting its meaning and significance. Therefore, Dr. Cannon, noting the current circumstance, expresses that the reconciliation between Turks and Armenians and a resolution to this dispute seems like a weak possibility.

One saddening omission from this otherwise detailed and informative book is an index. Due to the number of concepts covered and the nature the dispute surrounding the 1915 events, an index would have been very helpful for the uninitiated readers who wish to go back to the specific aspects of the book. Hopefully, a second edition for this book will rectify this omission.

**"THE ARMENIANS IN MODERN TURKEY:  
POST-GENOCIDE SOCIETY, POLITICS AND HISTORY"**

**"ÇAĞDAŞ TÜRKİYE'DEKİ ERMENİLER:  
SOYKIRIM-SONRASI TOPLUM, SİYASET VE TARİH"**

**Author:** Talin Suciyan

**Title:** The Armenians in Modern Turkey: Post-Genocide Society, Politics and History

**Published:** London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2016

**ISBN:** 1784531715

**Language:** English

**Number of pages:** 280

Talin Suciyan's book *The Armenians in Modern Turkey: Post-Genocide Society, Politics and History*, published by I.B. Tauris in 2016, is another contribution to the ever-growing academic literature examining various facets of the Armenian issue. This book is divided into four chapters, viz. "Social Conditions of Armenians Remaining in Istanbul and in the Provinces," "The Legal Context," "State Surveillance and Anti-Armenian Campaigns" and "The Patriarchal Election Crisis: 1944-50." The book is primarily based on the periodicals and publications of the Armenian community in Turkey, in addition to interviews and limited use of archival documents.

This book primarily seeks to analyze interactions between Armenians and the Turkish state in a paradoxical "post-genocide" Turkey in which the genocide "has not come to an end; on the contrary, the catastrophe of genocide is endless and irreversible" (p. 22). To establish this method of analysis, Suciyan seeks to demonstrate that the Armenians of republican Turkey were little more than a mass of victims without agency and whose "testimonies were silenced and denied – as the perfection of the crime proves, memoirs and testimonies were inverted" (p. 1).

This argument is heavily indebted to a narrative of one-sided victimhood. Suciyan asks why the Armenians so easily "become targets for victims of various physical or verbal attacks? The answer lies in the historical context

that has constituted the ‘social’ environment for the majority in Turkey, the post-genocide habitus of denial” (p. 198). Here, not only is the agency of Armenians denied, but Suciyan overlooks the role of Armenian revolutionary committees in the deterioration of relations between Armenians and Muslims during the last years of the Ottoman Empire and how this consequently also shaped relations between the two communities in the republic. To substantiate this point, Suciyan further seeks to demonstrate that one of the most “intransigent characteristics of Kemalism,” was the “institutionalized denial of the events in 1915/16-23” (p. 89). What Suciyan refers to as “institutionalized denial” can only be fully understood when analyzed within a framework that also evaluates how and why the Kemalists also refrained from instrumentalizing the traumatic experiences of Ottoman Muslims for political purposes.

In establishing the narrative of one-sided victimhood, it is noteworthy that Suciyan’s study almost entirely disregards those Armenians who engaged in public life in republican Turkey. In the case of Armenian Member of the Turkish Parliament Berç Türker (Keresteciyan), Suciyan castigates him as merely representing a “good showcase” for the republican elite (p. 118). Yet Keresteciyan was not alone. Other Armenians were elected to parliament, and others such as Agop Dilaçar served in prominent positions in important bodies such as the Turkish Language Association. Despite this, Suciyan continues by arguing that the “anti-Armenianess of Kemalism was all-inclusive” and that not only were “Armenians living in Turkey unwanted, but also Armenian survivors all over the world were regarded as enemies of Turkey” (p. 141). Herein lies an important contradiction. Suciyan argues that genocide continued in republican Turkey, yet refrains from explaining the paradoxical nature of this argument given the prominence of some Armenians in public life.

Unfortunately, this is not the only major inconsistency in the book. Suciyan seeks to substantiate the above argument by arguing that the ruling Republican People’s Party (CHP) had an affinity with both Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. Suciyan opines that both state representative’s praise of fascist leaders, and the CHP’s “encouragement of racist ideas among the intellectuals and scientific circles highlighted Turkey’s position on the *wrong* side by the end of the war,” and that this process led to the İnönü government working to distance “Kemalist nationalism from the fascist and racist elements that were widespread and continuous from the Young Turk to the Republican elites” (p. 14). Here Suciyan makes a crucial mistake by not drawing a line of demarcation between intellectuals and the state. Indeed, many of the racist intellectuals on the fringes of social life in Turkey were also opposed to the

CHP such as Hüseyin Nihâl Atsız and many of those with latent fascist sympathies within the party were driven to the margins.

This lack of nuance is also apparent in Suciyan's arguments relating to the "Citizen, Speak Turkish!" movement as an example of intermittent campaigns "to prevent non-Muslims from speaking their own language in public" (p. 69). Suciyan argues that the campaign, "rather than a campaign to speak in Turkish" was a campaign "to silence, to make people invisible in the public realm" (p. 72) which when combined with other campaigns "coalesced to create, over the span of several decades, a normalized social habitus with an intrinsic history of racism and denialism" (p. 90). Suciyan disregards the support afforded to the campaign of Turkification by prominent non-Muslims such as Moiz Kohen (Tekinalp) and Avram Galanti (Bodrumlu) and this again demonstrates the paradoxical nature of her argument.

It is important to juxtapose Suciyan's argument relating to what she terms the racist nature of Kemalism with her revisionist approach to the activity of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation – Dashnaksutyun. Suciyan's work displays a lack of critical engagement with the sources on this matter. Suciyan quotes a letter from the head of the ARF London Bureau rejecting claims of Nazi collaboration and additionally refers to the ARF's "anti-Nazi" views (pp. 154-156). What is most striking here is that Suciyan mentions the friction between the ARF and the Armenian Church in the US in 1933 – but neglects to mention the foundation of the ARF's youth wing, the Armenian Youth Federation, in Massachusetts the same year. The AYF was founded under the auspices of Karekin Nezhdeh, a senior ARF activist who along with another senior ARF member, Dro Kanayan, engaged in active military cooperation with Nazi Germany. Other senior ARF figures such as Vahan Papazian were involved in the collaborationist Armenian National Council. Similarly, ARF publications such as the *Hairenik Weekly* had been churning out anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi articles by the mid-1930s. Not only that, the ARF had even proposed sending armed units to fight alongside Fascist Italy in Abyssinia. This blatant attempt at revisionism regarding ARF collaboration with the Nazis is startling given that the author's doctoral dissertation undertaken at the University of Munich constitutes the core of this book.

Another major deficit of the book is the emphasis that the author places on normative arguments. This is a common theme in works on the Armenian issue, and serves to cloud the potential for informed scholarly debate, and instead distorts the discussion into one focused on ideology. Suciyan argues that the "denialist habitus of Turkey" has turned the "concept of 'diaspora' into a smear, thus dehumanizing and demonizing the victims, the survivors and their



offspring” (p. 31). This line of argument is further underpinned by non-scholarly terms such as the “deep evil within society,” (p. 61) and the claim that the “dehumanization of the diaspora” resulted from “Kemalist constructs” (p. 32). Turkey’s difficulty with the diaspora arises primarily because of the political activity undertaken against Turkey’s interests. This includes the efforts of the ARF to assassinate senior Turkish statesmen including Kemal Atatürk and İsmet İnönü, and the ARF’s role in collaborating with Kurdish nationalists in an effort to ferment rebellion within Turkey in the 1930s. More recently, the present Turkish view of the Armenian diaspora was formed under the shadow of the terrorism directed against Turkey starting in 1975 – primarily by the ARF’s Justice Commandos of the Armenian Genocide (JCAG) and the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA).

On the whole, the role of Armenian revolutionary committees and their campaign of violence is absent in this work. Suciyan discusses the narrative that Armenians had “stabbed the empire in the back,” as having been established based primarily on “photographs in which Armenians appeared armed with many weapons. Correspondence and statements of prominent Armenian leaders were selectively presented, the content of the education in Armenian schools was problematized, literary pieces were ‘translated’ as evidence and theoretical background for the hostility of Armenians against the Ottoman Empire” (p. 83). Here, Suciyan again neglects to ascribe agency to Armenians, and disregards the campaign of violence pursued by Armenian revolutionaries as irrelevant to the wider questions relating to what led to the relocation of Armenians in 1915 and the situation afterwards.

Similarly, Suciyan mentions the “policies against the remaining non-Muslim communities in Turkey, with peaks like the 6-7 September 1955 pogroms, the Wealth Tax of 1942, the expulsion of Greek nationals in 1964, the mass murder and genocidal politics in Dersim in 1938 and the expulsion of Jews from Thrace in 1934, constitute areas in which Turkish academic literature has become increasingly substantial in the past two decades” (p. 11). There is no effort on the part of the author to establish the relationship between events and to demarcate whether they were organized by the state or the result of mob activity. Suciyan instead elects to present a broken chain of events in which non-Muslims are invariably the victims, and Turks the victim makers. In doing so, she once again refrains from ascribing agency to non-Muslims and refrains from attributing importance to ‘push and pull’ factors when explaining emigration. This is further demonstrated by Suciyan’s claim that the “Rum population of Asia Minor was expelled” in 1923 (p. 47), rather than addressing events in their proper context, i.e. the relocation of populations between Turkey and Greece as a result of an international agreement.



While Suciyan's work is novel in many regards, both the author's highly ideological and often paradoxical approach and the issues raised above unfortunately serve to undermine the positive aspects of the book. The book's final chapter entitled 'Patriarchal Election Crisis: 1944-50' has illuminated what was a blackspot in the academic literature. However, despite the author's claim that this book encompasses the history of Armenians in "post-genocide" Turkey until 1950, there are major gaps in the narrative, such as the role of prominent Armenians in public life and the social life of Armenians in general. Other issues such as the ARF's cooperation with the Kurdish nationalist Hoybun organization, and the activities of the ARF in general aimed at fermenting difficulties within the borders of Turkey have also been neglected.



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