

THE FIRST AMERICAN ACADEMIC BOOK CRITICAL OF THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE THESIS

(ERMENİ SOYKIRIMI TEZLERİNİ ELEŞTİREN
İLK AMERİKAN AKADEMİK KİTABI)

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The Armenian massacres in Ottoman Turkey: a disputed genocide
By Guenter Lewy, University of Utah Press: Salt Lake City, 2005

Abstract: *Guenter Lewy's book entitled The Armenian massacres in Ottoman Turkey: a disputed genocide is the first book critical of the Armenian genocide thesis, produced by a western publisher. This book critically analyzes both the Armenian and the Turkish theses, and attempts to reconstruct the discourse on Turkish-Armenian problem. In this article, we'll try to analyze Lewy's book by critically evaluating the evidences and the literature used. Thus, the article briefly suggests that even though the author tries to be critical and objective, he is still under the powerful influence of "Armenian genocide literature" which includes thousands of publications in Western languages. His inability to study Turkish archives and literature is a weak point. But still, the book is the first one published by a western publisher to criticize the Armenian theses.*

Keywords: *Guenter Lewy, objectivity, "Armenian Genocide" Thesis*

Öz: *Guenter Lewy'nin "Osmanlı Türkiye'sinde Ermeni katliamları: tartışmalı bir soykırım" başlıklı kitabı, Ermeni soykırımı tezini eleştiren ve Batılı bir basımevi tarafından yayınlanan ilk kitaptır. Bu kitap hem Ermeni hem de Türk tezlerini eleştirel bir şekilde değerlendirmekte ve Türk-Ermeni sorunu konusundaki söylemi yeniden inşa etmeye çalışmaktadır. Bu makalede Lewy'nin kitabı kullanılan kanıt ve literatürler değerlendirilerek incelenektir. Nitekim makaleye göre yazar her ne kadar eleştirel ve objektif olmaya çalışırsa çalışsın, hala Batı dilinde yayınlanmış binlerce basılı kitap içeren "Ermeni soykırımı literatürünün" güçlü etkisi altında kaldığını öne sürmektedir. Türk arşivleri ve literatürünü çalışmıyor olması büyük bir zaafiyettir. Ancak buna rağmen kitabı Ermeni tezlerinin eleştirebilen ilk Batılı basımeviden çıkan kitaptır.*

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Guenter Lewy, objektiflik, "Ermeni Soykırımı" Tezi*

In the 19th century, almost all of the Balkan Christian nations separated themselves from the Ottoman Empire by organizing revolutionary committees, rebellions, and by getting support from Russia and other great European states. Armenians, who wanted to achieve the same result, followed the same path, during the last quarter of the 19th century. They organized several rebellions in the Ottoman Empire, even in the imperial capital, Istanbul. When the Ottoman government decided to enter the First World War on the side of Germany, the leaders of the separatist Armenian revolutionary organizations considered this the right moment to gain their independence. Their voluntary forces cooperated with the Russian, French and British

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armies. They revolted against the Ottoman administration in Van, and announced an independent Armenian state. As a consequence, the Ottoman government decided to relocate the Armenians living in “critical places” to the safe areas of the Empire where there was no war. During the relocation, many Armenians lost their lives due to attacks by Eastern Anatolian tribes, the geographical difficulties of the region, the

climate—deadly hot in summer and extremely cold weather in winter—starvation, diseases, and so forth. Since those events took place, some Armenian authors and their supporters, have claimed that the process of relocation was only a mask for a genocidal decision of the Ottoman government to exterminate all Armenians. By this argument, the Ottoman government and the Turks are the alleged perpetrators of the first genocide of the 20th century. Guenter Lewy, professor emeritus of political science at the University of Massachusetts, has critically analyzed both the Armenian and the Turkish theses, and attempted to reconstruct the case by publishing his most recent book.*

In this study, Levy aims to evaluate what has been produced on behalf of the Armenian and Turkish positions: “This book subjects the rich historical evidence available to the test of consistency and (as much as the state of knowledge allows) attempts to sort out the validity of the rival arguments. [...] My purpose is not to put forth yet another one-sided account of the relocations and mass-killings; still less am I in a position to propose a conclusive resolution of the controversies that have raged for so long. [...] I attempt a historical reconstruction of the events in question—to show what can be known as established fact, what must be considered unknown as of today, and what will probably have to remain unknowable. My hope is that such an

1 Guenter Lewy, *The Armenian massacres in Ottoman Turkey: a disputed genocide*, (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005).

undertaking will clarify and advance our understanding of these fateful occurrences and perhaps also help build bridges between the two rival camps”.(p. 8)

In the first of four chapters, *The Historical Setting*, Levy discusses how the professional Armenian revolutionaries successfully provoked the Turks and Muslims into attacking the Armenians. Lewy explains that the harsh reaction of the Turks and Muslims to Armenian attempts at revolt arose from the process of reforms and democratization in the Ottoman Empire during the late 19th century, which made the Muslims afraid of losing their advanced status. The stories of more than one million Muslim refugees, who came from the lands that had been lost as a result of the Ottoman-Russian War of 1877-78, also supported that attitude.

In the second chapter, *Two Rival Historiographies*, the Armenian and the Turkish narratives of the most critical period in Turkish-Armenian relations is introduced. The Armenians claimed that Unionists had already decided upon the Armenian Genocide at the Congress of Thessaloniki in 1910, at which Talat allegedly mentioned it in his speech which was reported to London by Arthur B. Geary, the British vice-consul at Monastir (Bitola), and by other diplomats to their capitals. They spoke of these as proved facts, but indeed that was not the case. None of the sources mentioned shows a planned destruction of the Armenians. For instance, in Geary’s report to his government, dated August 28th, he speaks about the “task of Ottomanizing the Empire”, but not about destroying the Armenians. Another “proof” of Talat’s secret speech is Galip Bey, who was the former director of post and telegraph in Erzurum, and who participated to the Congress. He supposedly confided to Dikran Surabian, the official interpreter at the French Consulate at Erzurum, who then reported it to Jean Naslian, the bishop of Trabzon. However, even some pro-Armenian authors are not satisfied with this explanation at all. Ternon, for instance, claims that “This assumption is not based on any solid proof”.

One of the most important “proofs” of the Armenian claims is the so-called telegrams of Talat Pasha. Those documents, it is claimed, “establish without the shadow of a doubt the intent and involvement of the highest Ottoman authorities” in the massacres. According to this explanation, Aram Andonyan bought the memoirs of someone named Naim Bey who was the chief secretary of the relocation committee of Aleppo. In those memoirs, there were supposedly several official documents, telegrams, and decrees. Those documents were translated into English, French and Armenian and printed in 1920 and 1921. For a long time they were presented as solid proof of Armenian genocide. However, recent researches have proved that those

documents were not authentic. There was no Naim Bey, as it was claimed, and the original documents do not exist. The Ottoman and European dates in the purported documents do not accurately correspond to each other. If they had been original, these mistakes could not have been made on an original official document. Moreover, the numbers on those documents do not correspond with the numbers in the files of the Ottoman Ministry of the Interior. The signatures and the documents were simply fabricated. One of the other important “evidences” used in support of the Armenian claims is “The Turkish Courts-Martial of 1919-22”, but the author emphasizes that those courts were established only to please the victorious Allied Powers.

There are many more examples, but it can be concluded that the claims of the Armenian authors are not well proved. In order to prove their claims of genocide, they added sentences to the documents, or omitted some passages from the documents, in order to exaggerate or distort the import of the documents. Lewy describes Dadrian, the champion of such claims, as like a lawyer who defends his client by any means, rather than an objective historian.

After gathering the “evidences” of the Armenians, Levy evaluates and compares with the other sources, and then he concludes that the Armenian claims of genocide are baseless. In my opinion, this is the strongest side of the book. He concludes the second chapter with this sentence: “As I see it, so far they have not been able to put forth evidence that could convince either a legal tribunal or a disinterested student of the history of these tragic events”. (p.128)

In the book’s third chapter, “Historical Reconstruction: What We Know and What We Do Not Know”, the author introduces and evaluates the sources of available information on this disputed subject. Turkish archives, German Ministry of Foreign Affairs archives, German eyewitnesses’ reports, the Blue Book, American archives, missionary archives, and the reports of Armenian eyewitnesses are each introduced and evaluated for their weak and strong sides. Lewy claims that the Turkish documents were destroyed or disappeared at the end of WWI, yet there are enough available sources for the events of 1915-16. But while most of the documents are about Armenian rebellious activities, very few deal with the relocation of Armenians, and the confiscation of their properties.

The documents which Johannes Lepsius used in his famous book *Deutschland und Armenien 1914-1918: Sammlung Diplomatischer Aktenstücke* (1919), were, Lewy argues, modified in favour of the Armenians. German consular reports describe the suffering and deaths of

Armenians but do not demonstrate the responsibility of the Turkish government for this. During WWI, the Russian armies committed barbarities against the Jews which were then discovered and exploited by Germany. The German government used this information against the Allies. England, worried that this news might create an anti-Alliance feeling among the politically influential Jewish community of the United States, decided to use the Armenian issue as propaganda against Germany. The much publicized “Blue Book” was the product of those conditions. It “is important, but hardly an ‘exemplary academic exercise’”, writes Lewy. In fact, “All well-informed Americans in the country” treated American consular reports suspiciously because of their close relations with the Armenians. In addition, “The strong commitment of the missionaries to the Armenian cause made many of their writings less than objective and often led them to include half-truths.”

Even though Lewy does not mention it, the other sources which should have been introduced and evaluated in this chapter, include the relevant archives in Armenia, the other important Armenian archives outside Armenia such as the Istanbul Armenian Patriarchate, the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem, and the Tashnak archives in Boston. As well, Russian and Persian archives might also contain a lot of valuable materials. Lewy also finds baseless the claim that the Germans played an important role on taking the decision of the relocation.

In the first half of the book, Lewy explains how some writers changed and published some documents in order to prove the claims of Armenian genocide. However, paradoxically, in his chapters on the relocation and resettlement of Armenians, he uses those same documents without much hesitation, and claims that the relocation was carried out very badly, and that those Armenians were sent to die or to be killed.

Lewy points out that during the WWI, many Turkish people were also lost, but emphasizes that the situation of Armenians will remain as a very special tragedy. In several passages of his book, the author emphasizes that before and during the period of relocation many Armenians died or were killed, however it was not a result of a preplanned decision of genocide on the part of the Unionists but of bad management and the inexperience of the Unionist leaders. Nobody can, of course, claim that the inexperienced Ottoman government which was not able to keep alive 70,000 of her own soldiers in the cold of the Eastern front at the beginning of the WWI, did manage to relocate the Armenians successfully. The Ottoman government could not even care for her injured soldiers, immigrants and war prisoners. Certainly, some of the most fanatical Unionists might have been glad to see Armenian losses. However, all these things do not mean that there was a plan for Armenian

genocide. The sorrows of the Armenians must not be neglected, but it is imperative that historical events be treated in the contexts of their own conditions. The Ottoman government is indirectly, rather than directly, responsible for these deaths because which resulted from starvation, disease, and attacks by groups of Kurds and fanatical Muslims.

In the concluding chapter, *The State of the Controversy*, the author shares the viewpoint of Gwynne Dyer, who “maintains it is impossible to prove conclusively that the Young Turk regime did not initiate a program of deliberate genocide in the spring of 1915, ‘but it seems to me most improbable that this was the case. Such a program requires a degree of calculation and foresight which was almost entirely absent in all the other actions of the C.U.P. government in the war.’” Therefore, “while the Ottoman government bears responsibility for the relocations that got badly out of hand, the blame for the massacres that took place must be put primarily on those who did the actual killing.”

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Even though the author tries to be critical and objective, he is still under the powerful influence of “Armenian genocide literature” which includes thousands of publications in Western languages. His sources are mostly published American, British and German

archival documents and related literature in English, French and German. He is, unfortunately, incapable of studying the Turkish archives and of using the literature produced in Turkish. When attempting to write “what happened, and how happened”, he returns to use materials which he has previously criticized as unreliable. This is the weakest point of the book; however, it reflects a situation for which Lewy cannot be solely blamed. Turkish historians have not produced enough scholarship in Western languages to be available to this debate.

In spite of these weaknesses, Lewy’s work is the first book critical of the Armenian genocide thesis, produced by a western publisher. Lewy and the University of Utah Press deserve congratulations for their objectivity and courage.