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## **REVIEW ESSAY: THE DENIAL OF THE RIGHT TO DISAGREE**

(DEĞERLENDİRME YAZISI:  
HEMFİKİR OLMAMA HAKKININ İNKÂRI)

**Jeremy SALT\***

Fatma Müge Göçek, *Denial of Violence. Ottoman Past, Turkish Present and Collective Violence Against the Armenians, 1789-2009* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 629 pp.

**T**his book is a study of violence and the consequences of what the author claims is its 'denial' by state authorities in the late Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey. She argues that 'unless [the] Turkish state and society come to terms with the collective violence embedded in their past' they will not be able to recover trust and respect in each other. The focal point of her study is the 'Armenian question' from the past to the present.

Like most books published in the mainstream on the 'Armenian question' over the years, the moral traffic in this publication is all one way. The heinous nature of generalized Turkish behaviour is highlighted endlessly: the heinous nature of others, including Armenians guilty of mass murder in the First World War, is minimised to a degree that would be unacceptable to readers familiar with late Ottoman history and indeed insulting to the descendants of Turks or Kurds slaughtered by Armenians in eastern Anatolia. This particular understating of historical reality should have no place in a book about 'denial.'

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The author states that the *tehcir* ('relocation') and massacres of Armenians in the First World War was 'the first instance of a crime against humanity.' In fact it was not; it was the first use of the phrase and only the first *allegation* that such a crime had been committed. Furthermore, the accusation by Britain, France, and Russia, specifically of 'crimes against humanity', was part of an intense propaganda war being waged against the Ottoman Empire by the allied powers. They had built their own empires through war, mass murder, and the destruction of cultures and were wide open to the same accusation many times over. Indeed, the recorded history of the human species is characterised by such crimes. The ethnic cleansing of Muslims from the Balkans twice in the

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19<sup>th</sup> century (1877-78 and 1912-13) and the atrocities committed by the Greek army after its landing at Izmir in 1919 would be open to the same accusation. The same British government that accused the Ottomans of committing 'crimes against humanity' ushered the Greek army into western Anatolia in 1919. When this army's atrocious behaviour was exposed, it could only react in embarrassed silence or try to distract attention by reheating accusations of crimes committed against the Armenians. The hypocrisy in all of this is so monumental that it speaks for itself.

Given the demographics, inevitably far more Ottoman Muslims died in the First World War than Ottoman Armenians. A very large number were massacred by Armenian gangs, far more than the author is willing to concede. None of

this is to diminish the suffering of Armenians, but the virtual invisibility of one injured party in the narrative cannot produce anything like a balanced 'history.' As the fate of the Armenians flowed on from the decisions of the Ottoman government, it ultimately has to bear the responsibility for what happened to them, but there is no evidence that it could foresee the consequences of its decisions or, even worse, that it decided to wipe out the Armenians. On the basis not of evidence, but conjecture and speculation, such an accusation is inflammatory in the extreme, coming close to group slander, yet still manages to find its way into the pages of books published by prestigious university presses.

A centrally orchestrated mass murder of Armenians was improbable in the first place, given the ramshackle state of Ottoman administration, as admitted by

virtually every outsider who travelled through Ottoman lands. This was not a modern industrial state capable of such slaughter, but a pre-modern, pre-industrial state in which the authority of the government weakened the further it extended from the centre to the periphery. The wartime reality was much untidier. Soldiers, *jandarma*, and senior provincial officials were all implicated in the violence against Armenians, but much of it was clearly a localized reaction by armed groups, often tribal, Kurdish or Arab, out for booty or revenge for the killing of Muslims by Armenian bands.

The war did not set Armenians and Kurds against each other, but only accelerated a process set in motion after the Congress of Berlin in 1878 when 'reforms' were demanded of the Ottoman government that would privilege the Armenians in provinces where they constituted 20 per cent or less of the general population. The Kurds could see their land being swept from under their feet and eventually set aside for an Armenian state. This they would never accept. The explosion of violence in the east in 1894-96 was partly -if not largely- the consequence of this meddling in Ottoman affairs, especially by Britain, and, in this context, the interplay of violence in the eastern provinces during the First World War was not just a product of the war, but the culmination of tensions that had been building up for a long time.

Furthermore, the roots of violence in the Ottoman Empire had other sources beyond the decisions of governments. Sociologically, they are to be sought not only in political history but in the codes of behaviour of social groups, especially tribal groups in eastern or south-eastern Anatolia. Another element is education or rather the lack of it, amongst an Ottoman population that was almost 90 per cent illiterate. Unable to read or write, how did soldiers, police and the general population know what was going on around them and what effect did their illiteracy have on their behaviour and general world view? Here is a rich field of research for the sociologist. Yet another element is religious conservatism; yet another the inability of the government to control inter-ethnic violence in remote regions, as opposed to allegedly sponsoring it. All this and more would have to come into play to properly understand the events of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and what happened during the First World War, but none of it appears in this book.

The author deliberately eschews official documents in favour of memoirs as her principal source of information, as if they are somehow more reliable. Her reason is that official documents are used by 'those representing the Turkish state position', these same people also relying on 'some Western sources that support, or at least do not challenge, the official Turkish state position' (p. 2). Precisely the same accusation could be made against writers identifying with

or (unofficially) representing the Armenian state position or ‘at least’ not challenging it. There is no shortage of misquotes in their ‘histories’, no shortage of quotes taken out of context and no shortage of unsubstantiated charges but whether Turkish, Armenian or anyone else, the fact that some people misuse official documents does not invalidate them as an essential source of information.

Official documents anywhere need to be read carefully and sceptically, but their exclusion as a source base would not even be considered in works of history written by historians. The centrally relevant fact here is that if the author took the official documents into account, she would be confronted with a hard core of irrefutable truth that would completely subvert the narrative she has chosen to write. Sidestepping the problem, she chooses memoirs, a notorious avenue for taking personal revenge or shifting the blame, whatever the truths they also contain.

As an argument against what she calls the ‘official Turkish discourse’ on the Armenian question, the author uses the fact that that Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) does not contain ‘a single reference to the works of those advocating the official Turkish stand’ (p. 2). It is not clear who she means by this: there are, in fact, many independent scholars who write the truth as they see it, and not the truth as the Turkish government sees it. They are not ‘advocating’ anything, but trying to write history as best as they can. Their difficulty is not finding source material to substantiate what they write, but finding editors brave enough to publish it, given the stranglehold that Armenian lobbies have managed to put around public opinion.

Every age has its taboos and in this age the ‘Armenian question’ is one of them: it is a ‘question’ no-one is allowed to question, lest the gatekeepers of academic and more general opinion be smeared by association with ‘denialists’, a word used against scholars who happen to disagree with the mainstream narrative and are prepared to challenge it, whatever the cost to their own reputations.

As editors do not dare publish what they write, of course nothing shows up in the SSCI statistics and writers like this author can claim this as proof of what she calls the ‘consensus’ of the ‘western scholarly community’ (p. 2). As the vast bulk of this ‘community’, so described, has no specialized knowledge of late Ottoman history, its alleged consensus boils down to opinions based on a ‘truth’ which this same vast bulk of academics have never independently tested for themselves.

Majority opinion is a tactic that has been used throughout history to silence dissenters. On the realities of the ‘Armenian question’, however, in the view

of authors inside the Armenian propaganda and propaganda-as-history network, the dissenters are not just wrong but ‘denialists’. In this theological Star Chamber approach to the writing of history, there can be no dissent or disagreement. There can be only truth and denial of truth. The alarm bells should be ringing; what authentic historian would ever claim to know *the* truth, as opposed to the truth as he or she sees it?

It needs to be noted here that the accusations of crimes against humanity and the genocide of Armenians has never been tested in court. The hearing of the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights in 2015 comes closest to a finding on the second accusation. Upholding the appeal by Doğu Perinçek against conviction in a Swiss court for saying in public that there was no genocide, the chamber ruled that the Swiss court had violated his right to express his opinion, and was wrong in punishing him for it. At the very least, this was a very important legal precedent. What Fatma Müge Göçek calls ‘denial’ is actually disagreement with her view of history.

*‘Denial’ is a weapon in the hands of the propagandist and the historian who uses it risks being put in the same category. What it means is that all relevant facts are known and beyond challenge. To question them is to ‘deny’ their truth. In a work of history, such an approach should be completely unacceptable. In their entirety, facts are never known. One history is only the layering over of other histories, to be replaced in its turn as new facts and more plausible explanations come to light. When it comes to the Armenian question, however, this process is short-circuited by ‘denial’.*

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What more effective way could there be of closing down debate than this smear of those who just happen to disagree with Fatma Müge Göçek’s reading of

history? Who would want to face such an accusation; whatever the contrary facts at hand, better and safer to go along with the mainstream view, to shut up and say nothing, to write nothing and if one is an editor, publish nothing.

### **‘Bombing the place flat’**

There is no clear starting point for the communal violence that shook the eastern Anatolian provinces in the 1890s, but the Sasun/Talori uprising of 1894 was a landmark event. Of this upheaval, Göçek writes that ‘when the Armenian subjects refused to pay their taxes the sultan’s official sent to contain the resistance instead bombed the place flat’ (p. 127). This is a cartoonish caricature of what actually happened. What the author calls ‘resistance’ was an Armenian uprising which involved atrocities committed against Kurdish Muslim villagers, including women. The army was called in and what followed was a regular military operation carried out over weeks, and adjusted accorded to what was known of the number of Armenians involved in the uprising.

The ‘official’ sent to Sasun was Zeki Paşa. He was sent not from Istanbul but from Erzincan, and he was not an ‘official’ but the *ferik* (commander) of the 4<sup>th</sup> Army garrison. The information is available in the official documents Göçek chooses not to consult and thus she gets even these small details wrong. These documents were authentic daily reports and memoranda written in 1894 and exchanged between the government in Istanbul and the army in the field. In the two years of violence that followed Sasun, the author claims that the sultan’s Kurdish Hamidiye regiments carried out ‘most of the murders’ (p. 17). Stated as fact, without any attempt at substantiation, this is only her opinion: no-one could know who was responsible for ‘most’ of the killings. The Hamidiye -notoriously poorly trained and hard to discipline- were useful as a mobile auxiliary force at a time of deepening insurgency. On duty, they were under the command of regular army officers. Off duty, they may well have joined mob attacks on Armenians, as reprisals for Armenian attacks on Muslims or because they believed militants were planning new attacks. However, the ‘regiments’ as such are not to be blamed for this and if there is evidence that they were responsible for ‘most of the murders’, the author does not produce it.

### **Wavering Approximations**

When it comes to numbers, Göçek writes that ‘approximately 100,000 to 200,000 Armenians were massacred’ between 1894-96 (p. 20); later she increases these figures to 100,000-300,000 (p. 62); later again, she refers to

‘approximately’ 300,000 Armenians being massacred, this time not between 1894-1896 but between 1893-1896 (p. 71). Such wavering ‘approximations’ from different years and from one enormous round figure to another even more enormous are not plausible. It is certainly not true that anything like 300,000 or even 200,000 Armenians were killed in the 1890s. These exaggerations came out of Armenian, missionary, and ‘humanitarian’ sources pushing the Armenian case, in Britain, France, or the US: other estimates (well below the author’s lowest figure) that should be introduced for readers to contemplate have no place in this book.

When it comes to the First World War, the author claims that while the Ottoman wartime government, the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), destroyed 800,000 to 1.5 million Armenians, ‘Armenians massacred at most 40,000 to 60,000 Muslims’ (p. 216). This statement is stricken with inaccuracies. Census figures put the pre-war Ottoman Armenian population at 1.2 million. Allowing for all variations, the total Ottoman Armenian population in 1915 could not have been much more than 1.5 million. As hundreds of thousands of Armenians survived the war, 1.5 million could not have been ‘destroyed.’ Furthermore, however many Armenians died, they died during the whole course of the war, not just in 1915, and they died from precisely the same mix of causes that ended the lives of millions of Muslim civilians, namely massacre, malnutrition, exposure, epidemic diseases, and inter-ethnic violence. Many Armenians crossed the border into the Caucasus during the war to get away from the fighting, shrinking the number of Ottomans who were allegedly massacred even further.

Even if the relevant facts are not in this book, they can be found by readers willing to dig a bit deeper. The true Armenian death toll, according to the careful estimates of Justin McCarthy, who has done the hard slog on Ottoman demographics, probably stood at between 500,000-600,000, a figure surely large enough not to need exaggeration. Other critical elements in the general civilian death toll, affecting Muslims as badly as Christians, included the blockade of the Mediterranean and Black Sea coasts by allied navies and the locust plague that devastated Syria in 1915. As a result, not just displaced Armenians but hundreds of thousands of Syrians died during the war.

While increasing the Ottoman Armenian dead to an impossible maximum, the author reduces the Muslim dead at the hands of Armenians to an unacceptable minimum. She gives no source for her 40,000-60,000 figure, but the evidence suggests it is a gross under-estimate. Included in the ‘official sources’ the author chooses not to consult hundreds if not thousands of Ottoman documents recording what the survivors of massacres told army officers and government

officials when they were able to return to the eastern provinces in 1918. These documents are very specific, down to the names of those killed and often the names of the Armenians who killed them. These were large-scale killings of a horrific nature, coming from towns and villages across the eastern region and telling the same or similar stories of extreme violence at the hands of Armenians. Based on the evidence, these records show that more than half a million Muslim civilians were killed between 1914-19 by Armenian and/or Russian forces. Allowing for exaggerations, inventions and tales told by people not actually present, the same cautions one has to apply to the estimates of Armenian dead, by no means can this figure be credibly reduced to 40,000-60,000.

### A Tainted Source

The author quotes the memoirs of Ahmet Refik (Altınay) on the mistreatment and massacres of Armenians during the *tehcir*, referring finally also to Altınay's 'accounts of the massacres the Armenian revolutionary committee Dashnak committed against the Muslims in 1918 from Erzurum all the way to Trabzon' (p. 154). She allocates three pages to the former and three lines to the latter, totally omitting the horrific detail of what Ahmet Refik saw in Erzurum, a shattered town littered with the butchered bodies Armenians left behind when they retreated. These were the most shocking scenes, yet the author questions Altınay's use of them, as in her view this 'second wave' of violence (Second to what? Armenian bands had been massacring Muslims since the beginning of the war) was 'nowhere close to the ferocity of the violence committed by the CUP', as she puts it (p. 154-55). Even a moral philosopher would have trouble making such a judgment.

She refers to an assumption of the Young Turks that they could 'annihilate the Armenian presence in the empire or at least reduce it to no more than to 10 per cent of the local population' (p. 63). In her view 'a radical CUP' faction exploited wartime conditions to destroy the Armenians. Quoting a source identified as Rifat Mevlanzade, she writes that 'it appears that the CUP decision to deport and destroy the Armenians was duly taken in January, 1915, by select members' (p. 202). The same claim of a decision taken in secret early in 1915 is also made by the author's Turkish-American colleague Taner Akçam and his mentor, Vakahn Dadrian, both of whom resort to 'documents' that detailed research has shown to be forged.

According to Mevlanzade, government officials in the provinces 'sprung [sic.] into action' on receiving orders from the CUP. The Armenian victims were



turned over to ‘the slaughterhouse of ferocious SO [Special Organization or *Teşkilat i-Mahsusa*] monsters’, who dispatched them ‘amid laughter and applause’ (p.202).

There are so many problems with these passages that it is hard to know where to begin. First of all, the accusation that a CUP faction took a decision to annihilate the Armenians is so inflammatory that it should never be made, let alone published, without concrete proof. These authors do not even have plausible evidence. The *Teşkilat i- Mahsusa* was a black operations group of the kind established by governments in wartime and maintained in peace as intelligence agencies. Göçek claims that it carried out ‘most of the mass killings outside of settled areas’ (p. 22) and that it was ‘secretly ordered to massacre the Armenians’ (p. 154). She provides no proof for either of these claims: certainly, more than a century later, it would be impossible to say who carried ‘most of the mass killings’ of Armenians outside towns and villages.

As for Rifat Mevlanzade, he is a tainted source. Readers are not told -as they should have been - that he was bitterly hostile to the CUP; that he was equally hostile to the Kemalist government; that he left Turkey after the victory of the national resistance, never to return before his death in 1930; and that he was a Kurdish nationalist, this very probably explaining his shifting of Kurdish responsibility for the killing of Armenians on to the shoulders of the *Teşkilat*. Furthermore, these quotes underline the general dangers of using memoirs in history; they can be useful, but in any language, they are a notorious vehicle for taking personal or political revenge.

The *Teşkilat* was an unsavory organisation, some of whose members were recruited because their criminal background suited them to the dirty work at hand, yet it did not organize the *tehcir*. That responsibility was handed to provincial authorities and whatever the involvement of the *Teşkilat* in this process, whatever the crimes committed by some of its members then or at other times, the massacres of Armenians was the work of many hands. In the annals of secret ‘black’ organizations, the *Teşkilat* was hardly unique. All governments find dirty hands to do their dirty work and the Ottoman government was no exception.

The claim that the CUP wanted to ‘reduce’ the number of Armenians to no more than 10 per cent of the local population is derived, inaccurately, from instructions sent out to provincial authorities during the ‘relocation’. Where the Armenians were resettled, they were not to amount to more than 10 per cent of the local population and were to be kept away from infrastructure vital

to the war effort such as railways. These were security considerations, consistent with the thinking behind the decision to 'relocate' the Armenians in the first place: where Armenians built up to more than 10 per cent of the local population orders were sent for them to be moved on. The question was not one of 'reducing' the Armenian population but of not allowing it to build up beyond a certain level in any specific location. In wartime conditions, suspicion and fear of the internal enemy, fed by Armenian desertions and sabotage from behind the lines, ensured that the regions from which Armenians were moved quickly widened.

The 'relocation' of the Armenians was ordered on the recommendation of the military command. The military record is absolutely central here. Those who claim that 'military necessity' was a pretext are surely obliged to study the mass of documents and prove their point. Otherwise, their claims have no logical value. Göçek bypasses the military record altogether in favour of speculation and conjecture, concentrating on the atrocities committed during the 'relocation' and sticking to her view of a nefarious plan of annihilation being set in motion long before the 'relocation' decision was taken at the end of May 1915. Edward Erickson, a military historian who has done the work in the Ottoman archives, concludes that the perception of a lethal threat from Armenian insurgents to Ottoman lines of supply and communication, to the point of endangering the entire war effort, was genuinely held in the military high command. Only one of these competing narratives is introduced in this work of 'history' and it is not Edward Erickson's.

### Wartime Trials

The author gives space to the post-war trials held in Istanbul under the auspices of occupying allied powers and the puppet government they controlled. Two Ottoman officials were convicted and hanged, the execution of one demonstrating the underhand political nature of these trials, as even Göçek makes clear. Other members of the wartime government or sympathetic to it had been exiled to Malta where they were finally released, according to Göçek, 'in exchange for the same number of captured British nationals': in the end 'not only [do they] escape justice and are never held accountable for the atrocities they committed but some became prominent members of the new Turkish national assembly, eventually serving as ministers, prime ministers and even as president' (p. 45). The salient facts here are that as hard as they tried, the British could not find the evidence anywhere, not in the Ottoman records, not in their own records, and not in US records that would be necessary to launch successful prosecutions. They had no option but to release their

prisoners. As they were never tried, it is not for Göçek to pass judgment, that they escaped justice and were not held responsible for the atrocities *she* - not any court- says they committed.

Göçek ignores the far more significant trials held in late 1915/16 after the Ottoman government set up commissions of inquiry into crimes allegedly committed against Armenians. These were real trials, not trials held under the aegis of occupying powers determined to destroy the Turkish national movement and break up the Ottoman Empire in their own strategic interests. In these earlier trials, more than 1600 individuals, including soldiers, gendarmes, members of the *Teşkilat* and town and provincial officials, were court-martialled. Hundreds were convicted and more than 60 sentenced to death. The Interior Minister, Talat Paşa, after receiving reports of attacks on the Armenian convoys, had sent out numerous instructions to officials to protect the Armenians and punish the perpetrators of violence. The trials were the evidence that he was serious in his warnings. They raise an obvious question: if the central government was so hell-bent on annihilating the Armenians, why was it prosecuting and even executing people charged with committing criminal acts against them? These trials would throw a spanner in the works of Göçek's narrative, if they had any place in it.

The author touches on the Ottoman defeat at Sarikamış but not in the detail needed to assess the consequences. This shattering blow destroyed the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army's ability to launch offensive operations for a long time to come. Denuded of manpower because of the demands at the front, and because of the disaster at Sarikamış, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army was unable to staunch attacks on lines of communications and supply by Armenian bands fighting with the Russians from behind the lines. Neither could it offer any protection to civilians. It was in this climate that the Armenians of Van launched their uprising in April. While there had been piecemeal removal of Armenians, along with other ethnic groups, it was only after Van fell to Armenian rebels and was handed over to the Russians that the mass 'relocation' of Armenians was ordered.

Göçek pays no attention to what the Armenians did in and around Van during and after their capture of the city. Had readers been given some insights into the bloody detail, they would understand why the military command reacted as it did. The destruction of government buildings and the Muslim quarter in a city close to the Russian border was accompanied by the slaughter of Muslim civilians in Van and in villages around the lake by Armenian and Cossack bands. Many thousands died. Having seized the city, the Armenians handed it over to the Russians. No general staff anywhere, in any war at any time, could

contemplate these developments with anything but the determination to immediately stop the situation deteriorating any further. Hence, the decision to deprive the Armenian insurgents of the sea in which they could swim undetected, by removing the general Armenian population. Such a decision is hardly unique in history: Spain, France, Britain, and the US have all relocated suspect populations in the past century, in South Africa, Cuba, the Philippines, Algeria, Malaya, and Vietnam. The Ottoman decision was ruthless and the consequences dire, but it made military sense from the point of view of the general staff.

### **‘Plunging’ Into War**

In her narrative runup to the outbreak of war, the author deals with the Ottoman defeat in the Balkan War (1912-13), as experienced by the political class, by the refugees pouring into Anatolia, and by a general population stirred up by patriotic fervour and anger at European duplicity and indifference to Muslim suffering. The author writes of the Ottoman government ‘plunging’ into the war (p. 43), certain of a swift victory. In fact, the Ottoman state did not plunge into war but was *plunged into it* by the four Balkan states: Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece, and Montenegro. They had long been planning for war; the Ottoman state did not want war, and was not planning for it, apart from trying to keep abreast of the growing military strength of the Balkan states, particularly the strength of the Greek navy. Their war followed the Italian invasion of Ottoman Libya.

With war forced upon the Ottoman Empire yet again, the Muslim population responded with fiery declarations to fight to the end, as civilian populations always do in wartime. From this atmosphere of patriotic fervour, the author manages to extrapolate the finding that the catastrophic outcome of the Balkan Wars for the Ottoman Empire ‘legitimated the subsequent collective violence against the non-Muslims of the empire in general and the Armenians in particular’ (p. 228). In other words, even before the war began, even before the decision it allegedly took early in 1915, the Ottoman government was all set to wipe out the Armenians: in Göçek’s depiction of events, all subsequent developments were ancillary to this central reality.

The suppositions on her part are contradicted by the view, based on the military records, that the fate of the Armenians unfolded in correlation with developments on the battlefield and insurgent actions behind the lines and had little or nothing do with the understandably bitter feelings stirred up by the Balkan war. The attack on the Empire in 1912 was a war for territory clothed

in Christian religious propaganda. The war further poisoned relations between Ottoman Muslims and Christians, but this was not the reason for the decision to relocate the Armenians in 1915. The decision originated with the military and was directly tied to the situation on the battlefield.

Göçek argues that while about two million Muslims died during the course of the war, ‘they did so throughout the empire, primarily at battlefields fighting the Allied soldiers and thereby without any contact with the Armenians’ (p. 250). Both parts of this sentence are inaccurate. Between 1914 and 1919, the Ottoman population fell by about four million. The total number of Muslim civilian dead was probably about 2.5 million. Ottoman military deaths (killed, missing in action, and dying of wounds) amounted to 305,085, according to the computations of the military historian Edward Erickson, with a further 330,796 soldiers dying of disease, according to the estimates of Hikmet Özdemir. In other words, most Muslims did *not* die on the battlefield but, like the Armenians, were massacred or died from the shocking conditions created by total war. In absolute terms, inevitably, given their preponderance in the population, far more Muslim civilians died in the war than Armenians. Both groups died of exactly the same combination of causes, massacre, exposure, malnutrition, disease, and inter-ethnic conflict at the civilian level.

### Unequal Suffering

Göçek regards the argument of equal suffering as a ‘false equation’ (p. 250), a point which raises the question of how suffering is to be measured; weighed according to the number of bodies or measured according to some other criteria? Apparently, it is not sufficient to say that both religious communities suffered terribly and let the matter rest there. No, an equivalence in suffering cannot be allowed; for the sake of the genocide narrative, it has to be shown that the suffering of the Armenians was worse, however ‘worse’ might be calculated.

As we have seen, in absolute terms, the Muslim civilian death toll was far higher than the Armenian (or Christian) death toll. On the basis of numbers, we might argue that Muslim suffering was greater: if we talk of proportionality, Muslim and Christian depopulation in the eastern provinces was about the same. The crucial difference lay in the ability of the overwhelming Muslim majority to absorb such losses. Logically, seeing that the word is theirs, the advocates of genocide should also be called upon to explain why the large-scale killing of Muslims in eastern Anatolia should not be put in the same category, but they deal with this by completely understating the reality.

Unfortunately, the dead cannot be summoned to be asked who they thought suffered the most.

Included in the author's pre-war narrative is the communal violence which followed the crushing Ottoman defeat in the Balkan War. The necessary prelude to the reaction of Ottoman Muslims against Ottoman Greeks is the ethnic cleansing of Balkan Muslims which had just taken place. On the author's scale of relative suffering, the reprisals taken against Greeks down the Sea of Marmara and the Aegean coast weighed far less than the mass ethnic cleansing of Balkan Muslims by Bulgarians, Serbs, and Greeks in 1912-13, yet it is only the former which the author describes as 'pogroms' (p. 208). She holds the CUP government responsible, when it is clear that much of the violence was spontaneous, orchestrated (if at all) at the local level and not sanctioned by the CUP government.

The region was flooded with Muslim refugees telling stories of the horrors they had endured, and they or other Muslims struck back. The source of many of the accusations made against the CUP was the British government, extremely hostile to the nationalist government in Istanbul because it was threatening British interests, financial and strategic, in the Near East. But even from British documents, it is clear that the CUP government, with the Interior Minister Talat Paşa, taking the lead, tried to stop the violence, secure the return of Christians to their homes, and settle Muslim refugees away from Christian villages.

The author tries to maintain the thread of Turkish 'denial' of violence right up to the wave of assassinations of Turkish diplomatic and consular staff (and sometimes members of their families as well) by Armenian terrorists in the 1970s-80s, not that the author calls them 'terrorists': they are merely 'assailants.' In one passage, dealing with the 1982 attack in Lisbon that left a Turkish embassy attaché dead and his wife fatally wounded, she comes close to blaming the state and Turkish people for these crimes: 'yet this was not the end of the violence incurred [sic.] by the Turkish state and society' (p. 446).

### **Internal 'Orientalization'**

This thread is maintained throughout the book. Violence directed against the Ottoman state, the Ottoman people, the Turkish state, and the Turkish people is discussed primarily in the context of how, in the author's view, it was instrumentalized by the state to justify its own violence. In similar vein, the

plunder of Greek or Armenian property is raised, but nothing is said of the mass of property destroyed or plundered *by* Greeks and Armenians. There is a mountain range of evidence showing the extent of the massive damage they did, but the question of reparations for destroyed Muslim property is not raised and neither is there any mention of who should be held responsible. Young people are quoted to bolster the author's prosecutorial brief: she mentions, in particular, the anger of Young Civilians (*Genç Siviller*) at the rape and murder of hundreds of thousands of Greeks and Armenians and the theft of their property.

If their statement has been quoted in its entirety, this same group apparently had nothing to say about the murder of similarly large numbers of Muslims and the plunder of their property. This amounts to an internal orientalizing of Ottoman and modern Turkish history, which has as its precedent the 19<sup>th</sup> century servility of local servants of European imperial interests. Those Turks demanding restitution for Armenians should surely be demanding restitution for the Muslims as well. The fact that they do not helps to preserve an unbalanced 'western' mainstream narrative in which only the Armenians were the victims of extreme violence and only 'the Turks' the perpetrators of such violence.

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Contrary to what some might assume are the effects of state propaganda, Turkish school textbooks have little to say on the Armenian question and young people know little of what happened to the civilian population of the Ottoman Empire in 1914-18. Ambitious young scholars tend to avoid the subject not just because they fear it might get them into trouble in their own country, but because they know that if they challenge the mainstream 'western' discourse, it will get them into trouble outside their own country. Placed in the category of 'denialists' of a sanctified truth, all doors will be shut; there will be no fellowships and no scholarships for them. They will be shunned, and if they want to get on, they will have to think of a different topic for their Ph.D theses.

The same is true of Turkish academics who, more or less, have adopted the official Armenian discourse, but have nothing to say about the millions of Muslims who died in this war and the very large number massacred by Armenians. They also know, even if they are not going to admit it, that if

they challenge the mainstream ‘western’ discourse, all doors will also be shut in their face as well. No more visiting professorships and guest lectures for them at prestigious American or European universities: ruined reputations will be their lot. In this sick state of affairs, truth in history, and the possibility of reconciliation between Armenians and Turks, are the main victims.

Modern Turkey has a turbulent history. The author understates the meddling of the European powers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, writing that ‘while the origins of the Armenian issue were domestic, it was presented by the sultan as internationally instigated’ (p. 62). In fact, the Armenian ‘question’ would not have been turned into a question without the intervention of European powers acting in their own strategic interests. Britain, in particular, did great damage by its meddling in the affairs of the Ottoman Empire, worsening rather than improving the situation of its Armenian protégés. By the 1890s, the eastern provinces of the Empire were a powder keg which Britain helped to ignite before shunning all responsibility and seeking to offload it on to other shoulders (essentially the sultan’s). Britain was to continue its insidious role in Ottoman affairs down to the outbreak of the First World War, saying nothing about attacks on the Empire unless and until it saw its own interests being threatened. Hostile even after the war had ended, it sponsored the Greek invasion of western Turkey and the attempt to destroy the Turkish national movement in its infancy.

The 1908 revolution was followed by the turmoil and violence common to a post-revolutionary period. There was nothing unusual about it and nothing wrong with the government’s wish to shake off the status of a semi-colonised power: neither was there anything unusual in the desire of European imperial powers to preserve a situation which suited them. Wars with one or another of the powers from 1911-1918 were followed by more wars and the attempts of the same powers to partition Ottoman lands. Out of the literally smouldering ashes, a new country, a new society, and a new culture had to be built. It was not going to be a tidy process. Hard decisions would have to be taken: what would have seemed necessary then can be seen as wrong or misguided now, but then hindsight is a wonderful thing. Up to the present day, Turkey’s modern history is no less free of turbulence. Many who would disagree strongly with Göcek’s reading of the Armenian question may well be just as critical as she is of the actions of the state when it comes to other issues. There is no blind clinging to an ‘official discourse’ here.

The author’s use of the word ‘denial’ is surely presumptuous. What the word means is that she knows the truth and others do not. No true historian would



ever write like this, but then, by training, the author is not an historian but rather a sociologist who has succeeded in writing a book which falls neatly between these academic disciplines. Her writings overlap with the ‘official discourse’ of the Armenian government and the propaganda of Armenian lobbies around the world in the same way the writings of other scholars overlap with the ‘official’ Turkish discourse. If this is to be regarded as coincidental when it comes to Professor Göçek, scholars who disagree with her are entitled to expect the same courtesy. The ‘official discourse’ is a red herring anyway. Books are to be judged on their contents and the flaws in this author’s narrative, factual and otherwise, are sufficiently numerous to show that her grasp of truth is not nearly as complete as her repeated use of the word ‘denial’ would seem to indicate.

Truth in history -‘the’ truth and not the approximations that are about as close as anyone can get- is always elusive and can never be completely captured. Historians are *strivers* after truth, and generally speaking, they are far too cautious (perhaps humble) to claim anything else. The truth implicit in ‘denial’ is for theologians, not historians. Even then, only the most fundamentalist of theologians would refuse to entertain challenges to their belief in the existence of God. Those who uphold the mainstream Armenian narrative live by the same illiberal standards, shaping their histories around a central truth to which they hold as powerfully as any revelation. Amongst the religiously faithful, this is predictable, but amongst the historically faithful, it is not acceptable. One cannot be faithful to history by putting certain questions out of bounds, but this is the central principle around which Fatma Müge Göçek has woven her narrative.

