

BOOK REVIEW

(KİTAP TAHLİLİ)

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“THE ARARAT ILLUSION”

“AĞRI YANILSAMASI”

Author: David D. Minier

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On January 27, 1973, Mehmet Baydar, the Turkish Consul General of Los Angeles, and Bahadır Demir, the Vice Consul, were murdered in a hotel cottage in Santa Barbara, California by a 73-year old retired Armenian named Gourgen Yanikian. The diplomats were both shot at point-blank range in a deceptive ruse that Yanikian had planned for months. After emptying his first gun into the two men, Yanikian then shot Baydar and Demir each in the head with a second weapon, to make sure they were dead. He then called the police, reported the crime and sat down to wait for the arresting officers to arrive. In a lengthy manifesto posted to media outlets and individuals around the world days before the murders, Yanikian called on the global Armenian diaspora to take up arms against the Turkish government and kill its representatives. This historical tragedy serves as the prologue to David Minier’s novel, *The Ararat Illusion*, and the book’s main character, detective Michael Page, who was the (fictional) first responder to the double homicide.

Ararat Illusion then jumps 13 years in the future, to April 1986, and spins a tale of late Cold War murder, mystery, espionage, and potential nuclear

annihilation as (the now experienced) Detective Lieutenant Page plays a deadly cat-and-mouse game with Victor Kalik(ian), a renegade Armenian-American KGB agent with nothing less than fate of the world at stake. The book takes place primarily in and around Santa Barbara, the location of the Yanikian murders, with quick jaunts to San Luis Obispo, Palo Alto, San Francisco, Yosemite National Park, and Washington, DC. While the story is mildly entertaining, similar to a low-budget action film with limited characters, panned dialogue and requisite car chases, the mistakes (the Stanford Cardinals [sic], gorilla bands [sic], etc.), an unconvincing plot, tiring high-profile cameos (Ronald & Nancy Reagan, William Casey, Mikhail Gorbachev, etc.), and an unbelievable climax ultimately detract from the story. The moral and legal implications of Armenian terrorism referenced throughout the book are overlooked and, to Minier, are only important when American lives are at stake. What is more interesting, however, than the veneer in which this former District Attorney encases Armenian political violence, is why David Minier chose to write this story at all.

Some Armenians heard Yanikian's call. Between 1975 and 1988, the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA) and the armed wing of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), first as the Justice Commandos of the Armenian Genocide (JCAG) and later as the Armenian Revolutionary Army (ARA) led one of the most unique terrorist movements to emerge out of the eastern Mediterranean and Europe. These terrorists killed approximately 90 individuals and wounded hundreds more through a combination of assassinations, bombing campaigns and violent assaults that spanned North America, Europe, the Middle East and the south Pacific and targeted ethnic Turks, assets of the Turkish government, and Turkish business interests. In the early 1980s, various U.S. government officials described Armenian terrorists as the most dangerous, savage, and mysterious group in existence, and in 1981 they actually accounted for the highest number of documented international terrorist attacks in the world.¹ The groups' most notorious acts were the murders of Turkish diplomats and their immediate family members, which took 29 Turkish lives by the time the assassinations stopped in 1984.

While largely neglected in public and historical discourse, the rather bizarre and brutal case of Armenian terrorism has been the subject matter for at least two other writers. The first was Kevork Ajemian who, in 1997, published *A Time for Terror*. The second was Oleg Steinhauer who wrote *Liberation*

1 "Armenian Terrorists," January 10, 1983, CIA, CIA-RDP88-01070R000100520004-4; "Patterns of International Terrorism: 1981," in Department of State Bulletin Vol. 82, No. 2065 (August 1982): 16; and Micheal M. Gunter, "Pursuing the Just Cause of Their People": *A Study of Contemporary Armenian Terrorism* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 1.

Movements in 2010. While Steinhauer appears to have no personal connection to Armenian terrorism, Ajemian is (allegedly) one of the founders of ASALA. Minier too, has a direct connection to Armenian terrorism. As the District Attorney in Santa Barbara in 1973, it was Minier who successfully prosecuted Yanikian for the murders of Mehmet Baydar and Bahadır Demir. Minier therefore, is well placed to understand the significance of Armenian terrorism and certainly followed its history and trajectory in the 1970s and 1980s. It is rather curious, then, why Minier chose to pick up his story in 1986, after Armenian terrorism had largely run its course, and chose to center his tale around the spurious notion that the violence was a creation of the USSR, not an Armenian phenomenon.²

At its core, Minier's self-published *The Ararat Illusion* reads like a *mea culpa* for not having allowed Yanikian to turn his trial for the assassinations of Baydar and Demir into a condemnation of the Republic of Turkey for the alleged crimes of the Ottoman Empire in 1915.³ Yanikian's defense attorney had hoped to stage a re-enactment of another Armenian assassin's trial, Soghomon Tehlirian, in Berlin in 1921, which resulted in Tehlirian's acquittal for the murder of the former Ottoman official, Talat Pasha. In 1973, Minier blocked the testimony, arguing that the events of 1915 had no relevance to murders 58 years later. More recently, however, Minier has stated that "looking back, I regret I hadn't the courage to allow such evidence, and trust the jury to follow the law."⁴

Perhaps Minier has forgotten that most of Yanikian's testimony was, like Tehlirian's before him, largely fabricated. Perhaps he has forgotten that Yanikian was a vital link between the ARF's assassins of the early 20th century and the generation of Armenian terrorists that emerged in 1975. Whereas Tehlirian and his associates gained the adulation of the Armenian diaspora through the assassination of men who, at least in their own minds, had been responsible for the massacres of 1915, Yanikian proved that 60 years removed

2 The final terrorist attack by the ARF against a Turkish target was the takeover of the Turkish Embassy in Ottawa, Canada on March 12, 1985. The terrorists killed a Canadian security officer protecting the entrance as they fought their way inside the building, took over ten hostages, and wounded the Turkish Ambassador, Coskun Kırca. See "Terrorist Attack on Turkish Embassy Ends," OTTAWA 01836, March 12, 1985. Despite the continued efforts of the world's best counter-terrorist analysts, no direct link between the Soviet Union and either Armenian terrorist organization was ever established. See: "Armenian Terrorism: Is There a Soviet Link?" STATE 137146, May 10, 1984.

3 For a recent in-depth analysis of Gourgen Yanikian's trial and the role of David Minier see Haluk Şahin, *The Hate Trap: The Anatomy of a Forgotten Assassination* (Offenbach am Main, Germany: Manzara Verlag Bölge, 2017).

4 David Minier, "Armenian Genocide: How Valley prosecutor missed his chance to be 'immortal symbol of justice'," *The Fresno Bee*, January 26, 2018, <http://www.fresnobee.com/opinion/readers-opinion/article196785924.html>

from the events of 1915, the Diaspora would now support the assassination of any Turk; and carrying out these death sentences made one an instant hero, regardless whether the victim was a diplomat, spouse or even a child. One can only hope that Minier's change of heart, his decision to callously overlook the devastation wrought by the violence inspired by Yanikian's murder, is not simply an attempt to gain the admiration of a community that once scorned him for doing his job. We can also hope, given what appears to be an alt-right conspiracy laden second self-published novel titled *One Nation, Under Obamas...: A Descent into Tyranny*, it is not simply Islamophobia.⁵

Violence breeds violence, and if true historical reconciliation is the ultimate goal of writers and scholars involved in Turkish-Armenian relations, books like *The Ararat Illusion* should be avoided. Thankfully, it appears that his books are hard to find.⁶

5 David D. Minier, *One Nation Under Obamas...* (David Minier, 2012), https://www.amazon.com/One-Nation-Under-Obamas/dp/098598130X/ref=tmm_pap_swatch_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=1518517425&sr=8-3

6 "The Ararat illusion: a riveting tale of revenge and political intrigue, set in Santa Barbara," *WorldCat.org*, www.worldcat.org/title/ararat-illusion-a-riveting-tale-of-revenge-and-political-intrigue-set-in-santa-barbara/oclc/816690281&referer=brief_results