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Donald Bloxham. *The Great Game of Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism, and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. xiv + 329 pp. $29.56 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-927356-0.

Raymond KÃ©vorkian. *Le GÃ©nocide des ArmÃ©niens.* Paris: Odile Jacob, 2006. 1008 pp. EUR 36.10 (paper), ISBN 978-2-7381-1830-1.

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Keeping a Candle Lit in a Storm: Zooming In and Out on the Armenian

If one had to invoke a metaphor for the study of the fate of Ottoman Armenians in 1915, it would be somewhat like keeping a candle lit amid a rain storm. It is a troublesome endeavor beset by problems related to law, politics, academia, ethics, and especially memory and identity. An international political minefield of high-context cultures and nationalist scholarship seriously raises the threshold for involvement. Some of the camps with varying power are the Turkish and Armenian states, and Armenian, Turkish, Kurdish, and Assyrian nationalist organizations in diaspora. Although the historical events are removed in time by more than ninety years and in space by often more than thousands of kilometers, for the aforementioned actors, studying "1915" is much more than a sterile and dispassionate matter of academic ivory towers. The rivalries between these antagonistic discursive communities reach beyond political activism into the academic world and ranging between vitriolic polemics and lawsuits to conference boycotts and even (threats of) violence. Given this balance of forces, scholars daring to tread this flammable field should be commended for their courage. But even when one maintains awareness and vigilance against the political activism, that is not all. From the perspective of historical research, one of the fundamental matters of discussion is the diminishing potential for discovering new terrain. Many of the large collections of (Ottoman, German, Austrian, French, and American) primary sources have all been mined, published, and depleted for meaningful and original historical use, perhaps with the exception of the surprisingly rich state archives and missionary collections in Scandinavian countries.

Donald Bloxham and Raymond Kévorkian have managed to make two outstanding contributions to our understanding of the catastrophic fate of Ottoman Armenians. Although their works are two completely different studies–a qualification meaning they can truly complement each other–in their own ways they represent the state-of-the-art in the rapidly developing historiography of the genocidal persecution of Ottoman Armenians during World War I. Whereas Kévorkian's book concentrates on narrative and is encyclopedic, Bloxham focuses on analysis and his book is synthetic. As such, this joint review will contrast their qualities and content.[1]

Donald Bloxham, a historian at the University of Edinburgh, has written a remarkable study of careful erudition, scholarly conjecture, remarkable insight, and unfettered opinion. His prose is straightforward, crisp, precise, and he wastes no words on fancy postmodern jargon, rendering the book accessible for non-specialists and even non-scholars. In the introduction Bloxham immediately lays out the tone for the rest of the book, pointing out that in the West the "historical record of massive human suffering has been used and abused up to the present for economic and political advantage in the Near East" (p. 13). Chapter 1, wonderfully titled "Eastern Questions, Nationalist Answers" provides an overview of three interlocking developments in the nineteenth century: the erosion of Ottoman power in its peripheral dominions; the upsurge of (ethnic) nationalism among the empire's Christian populations; and the attitudes of Britain, France, Germany, and Russia toward both of these developments. Chapter 2 is an analysis of the genocide itself. While the genocide is frequently portrayed as an existing blueprint implemented in favorable circumstances by many writers, Bloxham provides an accurate and authoritative panorama of the evolution of what began as a process of persecution, paying close attention to historical detail and the political influences that came to bear. World War I provides a rich backdrop for this

illustrious period, as Bloxham reaches beyond the particularistic discourses of Ottomanists and Turkologists and exposes the interrelations between, and hypocrisies of, the policies of the great powers. The first part is followed by the first of two very important interludes in which the events are placed in the context of an era of nationalist violence.

Much more than a history of the Armenian Genocide, the book is a comprehensive analysis of great power policies towards various political elites and populations in the Middle East, one that is often disregarded in historical accounts of internal affairs. The most important part of the book are those (chapters 4 and 5, and the second interlude) written on the international (read: western) response to mass violence. Bloxham did not write this book to make friends among top European political milieus or Turkish- and Armenian-nationalist pressure groups. Rightly so, since writing a history of the destruction of Eastern Anatolia's entire kaleidoscopic human pallet should not be a popularity contest. Although the skeptical reader should be wary of trendy third-world nationalism and Europe-bashing, there is no trace of either tendencies here, and for that the author can be commended for not hiding in the garb of "moderation," "neutrality," or "objectivity." Instead of passing pointless moral judgements, Bloxham backs up his claim that western responses converged to a general culture of *Realpolitik* towards the mass violence by delving deeply into western diplomatic sources. Furthermore, he demonstrates how nationalist elites accumulated legitimacy in the western-led system of nation-states, resulting in the former's triumph over alternative identity politics–arguably with the exception of Soviet Armenia.

The Great Game of Genocide contributes significantly to at least two lines of theory with which this reviewer is familiar. First, according to one interpretation in nationalism studies, the western European system of nation-states gradually and paroxysmally imposed itself on the world. During the turbulent and long Ottoman century (roughly 1822-1923), this wave hit and overran the Ottoman Empire, leading to the establishment of several nation-states. This book is a timely treatment of this under-researched topic for the Ottoman case, and as such, will (or at least should) be of interest to scholars of nationalism.[2] Second, in his writing and footnotes, Bloxham exhibits that in the burgeoning field of genocide studies he feels like a fish in water. Beyond impressionistic and sporadic cross-references to other cases of mass violence, he quite systematically adopts and applies Hans Mommsen's concept of "cumulative radicalization," a theory that the Nazi genocide arose out of an incremental policy of persecution that radicalized and reassumed its vehemence and violence due to interaction between the center and periphery in the military-bureaucratic power structure.[3] Equipped with this heuristic tool, Bloxham convincingly argues that from autumn 1914 to spring 1915, due to interstate and intrastate pressures, a similar process led to the organization of increasingly drastic measures against Ottoman Armenians (pp.78-90).

In the epilogue Bloxham sums up his main findings and provides food for thought regarding contemporary political issues. In the wake of the recent "Armenian genocide resolution" in the U.S. House of Representatives, which in essence boils down to a horse trade between the humanitarianism of Armenian cries for "recognition" versus the pragmatism of American access to Turkish military air bases, this part too remains of prime importance. Naturally, one can agree or disagree with Bloxham's views and perspectives on current political affairs, but these are for a considerable part contingent on personal convictions and ideological leanings. If this chapter is the one most susceptible to criticism, then that fact itself basically sums up everything about the quality of this book.

Raymond Kévorkian's book is a culmination of his work as director of the Bibliothèque Nubar, an archival gem tucked away in a lovely Parisian neighborhood. His new book, simply titled *Le Génocide des Armeniens*, is highly accessible and transparent, a detailed table of contents being located (typically French) in the back of the book. If one had to characterize this book with two adjectives, I would use the terms "descriptive" and "detailed." The overwhelming thousand pages should not scare the reader, because after reading the first paragraphs and making acquaintance with Kévorkian's lucid prose this fear quickly evaporates and transforms into curiosity. The book is remarkably systematic, as Kévorkian patiently handles the bricks to construct the building, dividing the text into six parts, each alternately comprising about a dozen chapters. He does not limit himself to any "bottom-up victim perspective" or "top-down perpetrator perspective," but takes the reader by the hand and hovers over the empire's two dozen provinces and districts, expounding considerably on day-to-day events in the field. Kévorkian dedicates a good two-thirds of his book to a description of the facts as he breaks down the genocidal process, as it reads on the back cover: "région par région."

The composition of the book is arranged to represent a chronological journey from Sultan Abdülhamid II's

rule to Mustafa Kemal's ascension to power in 1919. In terms of political leadership, Kévorkian's periodization charts the mutual collaboration between the Armenian revolutionary parties and the Young Turks under the absolutism of Abdülhamid II, explains how and why that support eroded and vanished, summarizes the brutalizing war in the Iranian Azerbaijan region, and finishes the last sentence of part 3 on the empire-wide attack on Armenian elites on page 326. The next five hundred pages are dedicated to historical accounts of the genocidal process. Starting in the northeastern province of Erzurum, the author maps out province by province, district by district, how the deportations were ordered and organized at the national level, to be translated and implemented at the local level. The narrative includes local idiosyncracies, such as resistance in the Shatakh region, the "murderous creativity" of Dr. Mehmed Reshid (governor of Diyarbekir), and the underground rescue line of Dersim. For every province, Kévorkian identifies dozens of names of men involved in the killing, pillaging, and kidnapping. In his chapter on the Urfa district, for example, he lists no fewer than fifty perpetrators (p. 770).

At least two important aspects of this book stand out. First, in the historiography of the Armenian Genocide; Kévorkian is the originator of the "Second Phase" thesis. According to him, the persecution of Ottoman Armenians reached a climax twice: first, with the elimination of the Armenian elite and the indiscriminate massacres in the summer of 1915, and second with the large-scale concentration of Armenians along the Syrian Euphrates and subsequent mass killings in the summer of 1916. The calculated timing of these phases of destruction explains the policies of Interior Minister Talaat Pasha, who, at times, decreed Armenian deportation convoys to be protected. Bad faith authors have abused these orders as supposedly constituting evidence for the government's benevolent intentions, but in the fifth part Kévorkian dismisses this claim. He enunciates that "sloppy" massacres on the road caused panic and compromised the secrecy of the whole undertaking; instead, the convoys were to be kept alive until the Syrian Desert, where recurring sequences of massacres in compartmentalized spaces ensured continuous decimation. The second issue is that of sources. Even though there is a sufficient level of *Quellenkritik* in the book, Kévorkian does not *a priori* discriminate in his sources. Unlike other scholars who dismiss survivor testimony as containing "victim bias," Kévorkian favors their use, he argues, "qui ont longtemps été rejetées par la recherche" (p.351). His handling of survivor memoirs is especially enlightening and provides a revealing window for readers unfamiliar with these crucial Armenian texts.

Many students of the genocide would perhaps agree that this book is in fact the first purely historical narrative text dealing solely with the persecution and destruction of the Ottoman Armenians in 1915. In its strengths lay also its weaknesses: no matter how compelling and well documented the narrative, broader analyses "à la Bloxham" are, with minor exceptions, generally thin or lacking. Nevertheless, the pros clearly outweigh the cons. One can only hope that translations into English and Turkish are underway as this review is being written.

All in all, although these books are two different studies on the same topic, both of them promise to remain definitive studies for some time.

Notes

[1]. For a multiple review on the Armenian Genocide see, Hans-Lukas Kieser, "Sammelbesprechungen–Urkatastrophe am Bosporus: Der Armeniermord im Ersten Weltkrieg als Dauerthema internationaler (Zeit-)Geschichte," in *Neue politische Literatur*, 50, no. 2 (2005), 217-234.

[2]. See for example, James Mayall, *Nationalism and International Society* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and John W. Meyer et al., "World Society and the Nation-State," in *American Journal of Sociology*, 103, no. 1 (1997), 144-181.

[3]. Hans Mommsen, "Der Nationalsozialismus: Kumulative Radikalisierung und Selbstzerstörung des Regimes," in *Meyers Enzyklopädisches Lexikon* (Mannheim, Germany: Bibliographisches Institut, 1976), vol. 16, 785-790.

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