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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

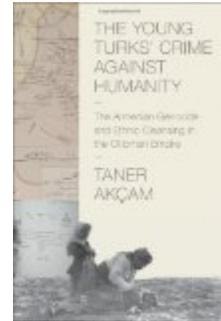


Taner Akçam. *The Young Turks' Crime against Humanity: The Armenian Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in the Ottoman Empire.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012. xlii + 483 pp. \$39.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-15333-9.

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This book is dedicated to the memory of Hrant Dink, an Istanbul journalist and editor who worked to foster dialogue between Turkish and Armenian peoples, who was prosecuted for offending Turkish identity in statements regarding Armenian history, and who was killed by a young nationalist. Taner Akçam has publicly defended Dink, and, while likely carrying out research for this text, Akçam's own freedom of speech was on trial at the European Court of Human Rights. An official Turkish position denies use of the legal term "genocide" in reference to the atrocities experienced by Ottoman Armenians during World War I. Voices of Armenian memory have fought this denial for decades, arguing for at the least acknowledgement of genocide and at the most restitution. In this book, Akçam carries forward ideas presented in his previous publication, *A Shameful Act* (2006), which situates the Armenian genocide in the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of the Turkish Republic through utilization of archival sources, including Ottoman documents. Here he narrows his focus toward investigation of the operations, communication, and mindset of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), commonly known as Young Turks, to address questions of intentionality and process.

Akçam positions this text alongside others, such as *A Question of Genocide: Armenians and Turks at the End of the Ottoman Empire* (2011), edited by Ronald Grigor Suny, Fatma Müge Göçek, and Norman M. Naimark, that explore the meeting of two polarized and politicized frameworks about the Armenian genocide. Akçam claims that it is speculative to argue that the CUP explicitly decided on a plan, in anticipation of the right moment to carry it out, of extermination of the Ottoman Empire's Ar-

menian population. He suggests that no archive will produce documentation of such a clearly premeditated plan, and this book is not presented as primarily a search for evidence of genocide. Yet Akçam does not question that genocide occurred. Here he presents new materials, including recently declassified Interior Ministry documents, from the Ottoman Archive of the General Directorate of the Prime Ministerial State Archive of the Turkish Republic (PMOA).

In doing so, he continues to contribute significantly to the historiography of the Armenian genocide by introducing hundreds of documents into a field that he describes as challenged by a lack of attainable sources. The archives in which Akçam conducted research have been difficult to access. He relies, not exclusively but heavily, on Ottoman materials to show that the Armenian genocide was processually and structurally intertwined with CUP practices of demographic engineering. His use of German and US archival material is meant to demonstrate through comparison that the PMOA has not been purged of documents that point to genocide, as some may accuse. Neither are PMOA documents to be taken as superior to nor more valid than foreign archival materials. This work focuses in on areas of agreement among the archives toward understanding the process of genocide in relation to CUP policy and practice. Akçam finds no contradiction in the materials.

A strength of this work is that it intelligently builds on an established tradition of research to point to new areas for academic exploration. For one, Akçam conceptualizes genocide in a less paradigmatic manner that neither exemplifies the Holocaust, seeking to measure the

Armenian case against it, nor relies singularly on a legal definition of “genocide.” Like Naimark, Göcek, and Suny, Akçam situates processes of the Armenian genocide in a context where comparison to Greeks, Kurds, Palestinians, and Native Americans becomes productive in moving forward not only research on the Armenian genocide but also theoretical literature on genocide and mass violence more broadly. For example, Akçam does not seem concerned with evidencing concentration camps or a final decision to annihilate, but rather shows how a population can be utterly victimized and violated in a unique process that builds into genocide. Akçam echoes other scholars, including Jacques Semelin (*Purify and Destroy: The Political Uses of Massacre and Genocide* [2007]) and Marc Nichanian (*The Historiographic Perversion*, translated by Gil Anidjar [2009]), in appealing to a moral rather than legal notion of genocide and describes genocide as simultaneously destructive and constructive. That is, he treats genocide as a moral concept as well as a legal one, and as a phenomenon that can be studied in relation to the injustices of nation building, race, and war without the need to satisfy legal requirements of the term. Akçam shows genocide to have emerged as an aggregate result of increasingly drastic and far-reaching decisions by Ottoman authorities, each pushing the next toward a greater extreme. He covers an extensive amount of ground in this effort, from the effects of the Balkan Wars on state politics to the transfer of property from Armenians and Greeks to Ottoman Muslims, and to the institution of Special Organization units used to carry out violent missions.

On moral grounds, Akçam calls for the acknowledgement of past injustices to Ottoman Armenians. For some, this explicit stance could be interpreted as contradicting his stated intent toward fair-mindedness. In chapter 11 of this work, Akçam directly seeks to present Ottoman documents against what he describes as “baseless” claims of denial in discourses of the Armenian genocide (p. 373). For example, in an argument that Ottoman Armenians were not the targets of a total plan for annihilation, some have claimed that Armenians in Istanbul or those who practiced Catholicism were not deported by Ottoman authorities. Against this, Akçam presents coded Ottoman telegrams that speak to their deportation, and his rebuttal demonstrates the significance of the sources in the PMOA. Yet other aspects of this book also lean toward what might appear to be the use of Turkish archival materials to counter Turkish historiography, which could be interpreted, despite Akçam’s intention to thoughtfully critique historiographic silences, as a politicized act of

silencing. Because the Turkish government and society have been accused of amnesia, of forgetting the Armenian genocide, some might find Akçam’s descriptions of Turkish carelessness and destruction of archives an attempt to evidence such. Nevertheless, Akçam is justified in attending to specifically Turkish and Ottoman silences on the basis that this book is dedicated to exploring the PMOA, and Akçam has earned confidence among scholars of the Armenian genocide as a fair-minded expert on war and postwar Turkish politics in the face of attempts to silence his own voice.

For future study, Akçam points researchers to the role of assimilation as a process of genocide; to a diversity of positions held among Ottomans, Turks, and Armenians during those processes; and to the relation of official and unofficial communications behind those processes. First, he emphasizes the role of assimilation in the nation-building project that includes genocidal processes by directly linking demographic engineering to both physical and cultural destruction. Coerced religious conversions, prohibition of Armenian education and language, and the adoption of Armenian children, if studied in more detail, could elaborate on the relation between conceptualizations of genocide and ethnocide. Second, while postwar court testimonies and other documents, including personal journals, should be contextualized and interpreted further, there exist in this text traces of refusals by Ottoman authorities to promote or allow violence to Armenians. Likewise, this text presents the possibility to rethink the role of local and personal influences on nationalist histories and in genocide.

Third, the main arguments of this work largely hinge on the use of a dual-track mechanism through which CUP policy, orders, and communication flowed through simultaneous official and unofficial channels. Officially, that is, orders were given to deport and resettle. Unofficially, Akçam claims, orders were given to commit violence on a grand scale. His mindful narrations of several key CUP communications locate destructive intent, on which the legal concept of genocide rests, in the unofficial communication channels. Akçam claims that the dual-track mechanism was developed by Ottoman authorities prior to the processes of the Armenian genocide, during an ethnic cleansing of the Ottoman Greek population. When found to work successfully, Akçam writes, it was purposefully utilized to carry out destructive, anti-Armenian actions. Akçam presents this mechanism as one that strengthened over time, allowing Ottoman authorities to deceive international powers at the same time it was protecting itself, fighting enemies on both exterior

and interior fronts. To further study such a mechanism of communication would be significant because its existence could explain and simultaneously support paradigmatic historiographic approaches, those that rely on official archives as evidence or those that rest on memory despite lack of official record. It could potentially bring together official and unofficial histories toward more inclusive, less partial views.

If placed alongside critical, theoretical views toward the archive and historical production, as in the work of Nichanian or Michel-Rolph Trouillot (*Silencing the Past:*

Power and Production of History [1997]), who remind one that history is also produced outside of academia, that archives are always partial assemblages, and that legitimated facts display power's effect, this text could be read with regard to the constructive and destructive elements of historiography alongside those of genocide. From papers marked "destroy after reading" to the entanglement of history and memory in their own dual-track mechanism, Akçam's work could be incorporated into a substantive discussion about the role of archival research in relation to facts of memory and experiences of survivorship.

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