

Vicken Cheterian. *Open Wounds: Armenians, Turks, and a Century of Genocide.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. xii + 393 pp. Images. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-84904-458-5.

Reviewed by Yasar T. Cora

Published on H-Nationalism (May, 2017)

Commissioned by Cristian Cercel (Ruhr University Bochum)

Vicken Cheterian's *Open Wounds: Armenians, Turks and a Century of Genocide* deals with the Turkish state's more than a century-old denial of the Young Turk government's planned extermination of its Armenian (and Assyrian) populations during World War I. Two characteristics distinguish Cheterian's important and timely work from the many other publications on the fate of Ottoman Armenians which have proliferated since 2015. First, Cheterian not only examines the wounds that the genocide created but, even more strikingly, goes on to explain why those wounds are still kept open. On the latter issue the author is not absolutely pessimistic. Indeed, leafing through the book, the reader sees subtle sprigs of hope cracking through the grim silence that covers the history of Armenians in Turkey. The author makes this point clear at the beginning of the book, which he describes as a product of the "tension between hope that truth cannot be repressed and will eventually prevail ... [and] frustration that human beings can accommodate living in darkness for so long" (p. x). A second strong point of the book—one which sets it apart from many other works—is its prose. Coming from a journalistic and political science background, Cheterian writes in a style easily accessible to nonspecialist readers, keeping them company through each

step as he establishes links between the past, present, and future of a troubled country.

Open Wounds tells the story of Armenians in Turkey and denial of the genocide in more than three hundred pages and thirteen chapters—all of which cannot receive the attention and praise they deserve in this short review essay. The book opens with a chapter on Hrant Dink, the Armenian journalist who was murdered in Turkey in 2007. Cheterian reconstructs Dink's life, his murder, and his funeral as a series of events which encapsulate that tension between frustration and hope: the violent suppression of a dissident Armenian voice, on the one hand, and the thousands of Turks and Kurds who joined the funeral march to show their solidarity with Armenians, on the other. The chapter both establishes the conceptual framework of the book and sets a pattern for the structure of the subsequent chapters, with the introduction of a theme through a biography, a striking event, or an interview with a prominent figure followed by a section digging into the historical background of that event, person, or moment in the dark history of the genocide. This structure makes clear the merits of Cheterian's approach by highlighting the close links between past and present and between hope and frustration in the history of Armenians in Turkey.

In the following chapters of the book, Cheterian accompanies his readers through the pages of the history of Ottoman Armenians. After providing the historical background of Armenians in Ottoman Anatolia (chapter 2), he examines the history of the denial of the genocide in the republican era, then outlines continuities between the empire and the republic and their shared anti-non-Muslim attitudes (chapter 3). In the next chapter, the author examines issues that resist the official narrative of denial, which Cheterian labels “writing as resistance.” He offers excerpts from accounts of genocide survivors and historians of the Armenian Genocide, among them notably Vahakn Dadrian (chapter 4). Then Cheterian delves into the history of Armenian terrorism against Turkish diplomats in the period between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s, a series of events which the Turkish state utilizes in its denialist rhetoric (chapter 5). The following two chapters deal with Turkey’s changing approaches to the Armenian past. Cheterian examines biographies and works of historians, journalists, and publishers from Turkey who courageously pursued the history of Armenians and challenged the official narrative (chapter 6). Then he focuses on the rise of Erdoğan’s AK Party in the context of EU-Turkey relations in the 2000s and on the various diplomatic and academic relations between Turkey and Armenia in the same context (chapter 7). In the next three chapters (chapters 8-10), Cheterian turns his attention to Anatolia and pursues three of Turkey’s strongest taboos: Islamized Armenians who survived the genocide by converting to Islam; the destroyed Armenian heritage in the eastern and southeastern regions of the country—the historical Armenian homeland; and the fate of confiscated Armenian property, which constituted the economic base of the Turkish republic. The following two chapters (11 and 12) analyze current politics and show the extent to which Turkey’s “Armenian Question” is entangled with Kurdish politics in the Kurdish-populated regions of Turkey, and with the Karabagh conflict and the international stale-

mate in post-Soviet Caucasia. Cheterian’s *Open Wounds* thus offers readers a unique combination of the personal and the historical, the social and the political, the domestic and the international, while narrating a rich account of the history of Armenians in Turkey.

The tension between hope and despair—the two forces that dominate the current politics of Armenians in Turkey—is examined in different ways in each chapter. The intellectuals’ quest for recognition of the genocide in Turkey, or at least the attempts at addressing “the conscience of the simple Turkish person” (p. 34) in Anatolia by telling the truth, confronts the official narrative and organs of the state. Likewise, the few but positive developments in returning confiscated Armenian properties to their original owners do not conceal the fact that even the former presidential palace of Turkey was once an Armenian property. Renovation of the Church of Akhtamar on Lake Van and its opening as a museum (later allowed to hold mass, but only once a year, a topic the author does not touch upon) demonstrate the ongoing tension between the Turkish state fulfilling its role of addressing the needs of all its citizens and its use of these developments in PR campaigns to assuage the pressures coming from Europe and the United States. Through these cases and others, Cheterian successfully depicts the present of Turkey, where the Armenian past is increasingly visible and present—a task he achieves through very accessible prose.

The cases examined and the language of the text may facilitate pleasant reading for the non-specialist reader; however, there are some issues in *Open Wounds* which can be problematic, especially for specialists on Armenians in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey. For instance, a historian may find troublesome the inclusion of the memoirs of Captain Torossian, which aroused great debate within academic circles in Turkey (mostly among scholars who recognize the genocide), in the chapter on “writing as resistance,” especially given the

numerous and no less prominent (but less controversial) works by hundreds of genocide survivors. Likewise, long summaries of easily accessible and relatively well-known works by Dadrian and Akçam given in the text certainly serve the purpose of providing information on the development of the scholarship to the lay reader, but are redundant for historians. Similarly, inconsistent transliteration of personal names and Turkish words may go unnoticed by untrained eyes, but can be frustrating for specialists, as is the case with the misspelling of probably the most critical word in the book, *soykırım* (not *soykirim*), the Turkish word for genocide. One may also add here problems with some of the terminology in *Open Wounds*: to give but one example, the author's reference to non-Muslim communities in the Ottoman Empire as "minorities." Recent scholarship has questioned the use of this term because of its essentialist and static connotations. Instead, it has regarded the non-Muslims in the empire as semi-autonomous ethno-religious communities and focused on power relations and the process of their "minoritization" as a result of ethnic cleansing, genocide, and population exchange. Their minority status is a result of these changes, which took place at the end of the empire and was ratified only after the treaty of Lausanne in 1922.

A major problem that can be identified with Cheterian's work, however, does not stem from these technicalities, as they in no way jeopardize the author's goal of writing an accessible and informative book for the general reader—a goal he achieves to the fullest extent possible. The problem rather concerns the author's crucial but in some ways subtle argument about the role of the European Union and to some extent the United States in the changing attitudes in Turkey towards Armenians since the 2000s. Cheterian identifies these relations with Erdoğan's governing party's initial liberal-democratic policies in the early 2000s and the space that these policies created for intellectuals to speak relatively freely about the genocide. Yet this narrative, which I admit is un-

questionably true for state policies in that period, still needs to be qualified by taking into account two important developments which do not receive in *Open Wounds* the attention they deserve. First is the rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia in the early 1990s, which took place outside the framework of EU-Turkey relations. This very interesting period, which came to an end with Turkey's support of Azerbaijan in the Karabagh conflict, is touched upon only briefly in the book, but it shows that there were other options for creating relatively peaceful relations between the two countries, however pragmatic the motivations may have been. Second, and more importantly, one would like to hear more about the views of the ordinary "Turks" with whom Cheterian opens his book and whom he includes in his subtitle. Their voice is lost as the book focuses on state policies, Turkish intellectuals, Armenian Genocide survivors, and Islamized Armenians, Kurdish politicians, and members of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation. The voices of those Turks who participated in Hrant Dink's funeral—or, one could say, of the hope in the search for truth and for future recognition of the genocide—need to be more prominent. Given the current political situation in Turkey, it is not easy to argue that the present state of internalization of certain universal values, such as human rights and democracy, and the demand for justice among the Turkish population, is due solely to pressures from the EU, however important these pressures may have been at some point.

By examining the complex attitudes and multiple actors that keep "open wounds" bleeding, as well as those who are trying to heal them, Cheterian successfully presents a picture of Turkey's present in which it has still not confronted its troubled past and its destructive and discriminatory policies against Armenians. Because the book was completed before 2015, we do not have the chance to read Cheterian's analysis of the changing politics of Turkey in general and government policies regarding the 2015 commemoration of

the genocide in particular. In a later article, the balance between hope and frustration that the author maintains in *Open Wounds* appears to have shifted in favor of the latter on account of Turkey's inability to free itself from "its own heart of darkness." [1] Nonetheless, instead of these words, which suggest a rigid and unchanging essence of Turkey, I prefer to close this review with the author's final line in *Open Wounds*: "I know that in the future Turkey will recognize the genocide, and it will be a beautiful country" (p. 313). In this hope one can only join wholeheartedly.

Note

[1]. Vicken Cheterian, "A Genocide Century: Armenia's Light, Turkey's Denial," Open Democracy website, April 25, 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/vicken-cheterian/genocide-century-armenias-light-turkeys-denial>, last accessed May 23, 2017.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-nationalism>

Citation: Yasar T. Cora. Review of Cheterian, Vicken. *Open Wounds: Armenians, Turks, and a Century of Genocide*. H-Nationalism, H-Net Reviews. May, 2017.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=49766>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.