

Benny Morris, Dror Ze'evi. *The Thirty-Year Genocide: Turkey's Destruction of its Christian Minorities, 1894-1924.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019. 672 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-91645-6.

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Dror Ze'evi, a respected Ottomanist, and Benny Morris, well known among 1980s “new historians” on Zionist policy in Palestine, have co-authored a massive 672-page study on Turkey’s late Ottoman history of violence. The authors mainly rely on British and Ottoman primary sources as well as the rich recent research literature. Does their *historical* qualification of a “thirty-year genocide” stand the test of historical analysis, or is it rather a rhetorical, metaphorical label? (A retroactive *legal* application of the term “genocide” is *a priori* out of question.) This review will present the book’s main arguments before assessing them in a broader context of historical scholarship and political thinking.

Ze'evi and Morris argue that late Ottoman and early Kemalist “Turks”—rulers, elites, and considerable parts of the populace—perpetrated a thirty-year genocide against native Ottoman Christians. In an unconventional use of the term, they subsume three decades of both local pogroms and state-organized, countrywide destruction of native Christian communities under the notion of “genocide.” The book is divided into three parts: the first on Sultan Abdulhamid II, taking the large-scale anti-Armenian massacres in 1894-96 as the beginning of the thirty-year genocide; the second on the Young Turks (of the party Committee of Union and Progress, CUP), including

the well-researched genocide of 1915-16; and the third on early Kemalism (1918-24), whose violence against, and dispossession of, native Christians was largely forgotten during the West’s subsequent alliance with Turkey. Ze'evi and Morris’s sustained description of anti-Christian violence is of unequaled density. It exposes recurrent patterns, including less known but frequent aspects like enforced public circumcision and public torture of priests.

By 1900, Armenians, Assyrians, and *Rûm* (Greek Orthodox Ottoman nationals) accounted for about 20 percent of Ottoman Asia Minor’s population (pp. 24-25, 487). The book argues that between 1894 and 1924, three waves of violence swept across Asia Minor, reducing native Christians to 2 percent (p. 487). It further states that most historians have treated these waves as distinct events and successive Turkish governments depicted them as an unfortunate, perhaps tragic sequence of accidents. Although embedded in the macro-political dynamics of culminating European imperialism, late Ottoman state violence, jihad, and dispossession of oriental non-Muslims appear as intrinsic to the politico-societal fabric. Morris’s and Ze'evi’s undeterred comparison and connection of their topic with the Holocaust proves the cutting-edge productivity of their approach (pp. 499-505). Their comparisons to the

Holocaust are important because one of Ankara's favorite arguments denying genocide is that the Holocaust was unique.[1]

Morris and Ze'evi conclude that despite the swing from Sultan Abdulhamid II's autocracy to republicanism after 1918, Turkey's exterminatory patterns persisted, as did the rallying cry of (domestic) jihad until the early 1920s. Thus, the killing of about two million Christians purposefully served to Islamize and Turkify Asia Minor, making it by the early 1920s an almost purely Turkish-Muslim national home and nation-state.

This book contains a serious and skillful, though possibly provocative, historiography by two seasoned scholars. It exposes extremely violent patterns persistently, insisting on the often understated but fundamental and continuous link to religion. There is clearly more depth and detail of research than something like an adapted reloading of Daniel J. Goldhagen's or Samuel P. Huntington's broad-brush arguments on cultural clashes and violent societies.[2] There was, as Ze'evi and Morris rightly state, a sharply anti-Christian stance of declining late Ottoman imperial Islam which pervaded Turkish nationalism and early Kemalism, the latter's secular aspiration and surface notwithstanding. The Ottoman Christians were, of course, "not the only victims" of the era (Bruce Clark's review in the *New York Times*, April 23, 2019). Yet, this criticism amounts to the truism of multiple victims of any great conflict. Morris and Ze'evi certainly got the point right: millions of late Ottoman Christians were systematically targeted by violence, "otherized," and made to brutally disappear in Asia Minor. They were the main victims in the historical framework at issue.

Morris and Ze'evi focus on the systemic violence of the late Ottoman era, rather than analyzing the political thought of the period.[3] They confront their readers with a brutally frank, matter-of-fact account of the mass crimes built into Turkey's foundation. The book's ability to expose

hard truths is reminiscent of Benny Morris's eye-opening 1987 monograph, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*. However, Morris disappointed his previous supporters when, in response to the failure of the 1990s peace process and the murderous Second Intifada, he argued in the early 2000s for the necessity of ethnic cleansing of enemies who wanted Israel's annihilation. [4] Through this work, he is exploring new horizons of modern Middle Eastern history: the violence of quite another magnitude in the making of modern Turkey.

It would be unfair and a superficial reading to say that Morris and Ze'evi utilize a monolithic, deterministic analysis, even though there are some caustic tendencies on Morris's side, as emerged during a public workshop on the book. [5] The book's sustained focus on religion certainly requires elaboration on terminology, persons, and ideological developments to prevent sweeping conclusions. Despite the authors' writing style, a reader's fresh experiences with the "Islamic State," Islamist terror, and genocide denial in the name of Islam by Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan might prompt such foregone conclusions easily. Authors cannot, however, be made responsible for intentional misuse of their findings.[6] It is evident that this situation does not speak against, but for clarifying systemic persecution. Anti-minoritarian violence in the Middle East in the twentieth century was long notoriously downplayed, first by Wilhelmine Germany, then by Western states once they diplomatically embraced post-Ottoman strongmen like Atatürk, Saudi founding monarch Ibn Saud, and their successors. In Morris and Ze'evi's analysis, society requires catching up to decades of downplaying the Armenian Genocide in public history and diplomacy.

Despite this needed catching-up, much welcomed by this reviewer, he disagrees with the label of the book. Considered from their result, the various instances of late Ottoman anti-Christian violence and coercion may certainly appear as

congruent elements of an overarching extinction of late Ottoman Christianity, thus making the whole era appear as one thirty-year genocide. The price for this conceptualization is, however, a devaluation of periods of peace, hope, and some prosperity during those thirty years. Intention is a key element of the UN definition of genocide. This reviewer agrees with Morris and Ze'evi's nuanced deliberation of the CUP leaders' exterminatory intents from the first months of World War I. He shares their critique of an overstrained use of the concept of cumulative radicalization that focuses too exclusively on spring 1915 (pp. 244-55). Interior Minister Talaat took incisive anti-Armenian measures from September 1914. As the book and other new research demonstrates, there was a CUP-sponsored, never-revoked political rhetoric of exterminatory hatred lasting from 1912 to 1922.

This and further arguments do not allow for drawing a consistent line of intention from 1894 to 1924, and thus the application of "genocide" according to the UN Convention. Terminological stringency therefore prompts us to take the book's title as metaphorical. For accuracy and terminological coherence in history-writing, it is certainly wise to limit the term "genocide" to high numbers of victims in periods of extreme violence that directly led to an extermination and almost disappearance of the targeted group in its habitat. This renders questionable, therefore, the use of "genocide" for the Hamidian and Adana massacres, and in particular for the expulsion, removal, massacre, and forced migration of the *Rûm* of western Anatolia (1914-24). Most of that violence took place during the Greco-Turkish War in western Anatolia (in contrast, however, to the genocidal removal of the Pontic *Rûm*[7]).

There is a related critical point. For general readers of Morris and Ze'evi, constructive late-Ottoman departures and efforts do not come to the fore, even if they are briefly mentioned. All-too-real shadows prevail. Yet the former are real also.

Even if they failed in their time, they constitute an historical treasure: a lasting potential of political thought for better futures in the post-Ottoman world. They include efforts towards a constitutional, supra-ethnoreligious patriotism; thriving practices of interreligious coexistence; and a myriad of experiences of conviviality. Many individuals and groups did not conform to those who perpetrated, connived in, or profited from violence. In this context, the book's occasional use of blanket terms like "the Turks" is misleading (e.g., pp. 114 and 377).

To demarcate the specific, multidimensional destruction of the Ottoman social fabric that then started, scholars refer to the "Ottoman cataclysm"—that long last decade of made-up hatred and war from which the Turkish nation-state emerged.[8] Most readers of Morris and Ze'evi will not read scholarly works such as Yigit Akin's 2018 book, *When the War Came Home*, which include details about the domestic devastation affecting Muslim masses during and following the First World War. As a consequence, they might too easily find self-affirmation, within Manichean worldviews, in the concept of a Muslim thirty-year genocide of Christians. From 1913 only, with the establishment of single-party rule, hope for common Ottoman constitutional rule died for good.

Another critique regards religion: the role of political Islam and (I add "domestic," in contrast to military) jihad in the Armenian genocide is rightly emphasized, but not clarified. In contrast to a recent strand of scholarship, the authors are right in suggesting that Islam was not only an ethnic marker of national identity, but impacted doctrinally and operationally on genocide. It did this certainly more directly than Christianity's anti-Judaic traditions: these informed antisemitism, the matrix of the Shoah, but scarcely directed action during the Holocaust. As a matter of fact, many perpetrators of anti-Christian massacres referred directly to Islam to justify what they did. Even—to

take an example that does not figure in the book—the CUP director of a state orphanage for Armenian children hammered Islamic superiority into the transferred children’s heads to extirpate their Christian-Armenian identity.[9] Yet the book leaves the reader alone to sort out a complex reality, marked by declining imperial Islam tied to protofascist pan-Turkism and Talaat’s project of making Asia Minor a Turkish-Muslim national home at any price. *This* was the specific matrix of genocide. Shaped by Talaat’s friend, the CUP’s ideologist Ziya Gökalp, this mind-set estranged a number of prominent Muslims, including Said Nursi, Sheykulislam Mustafa Hayri, and King of the Hejaz Hussein bin Ali.

Morris and Ze’evi create a narrative that does not go back further than 1894 to point to alternative long-term outcomes. It is very brief on the progressive Reform Edict of 1856 and related, subsequent currents. Nor does the book address the utopian challenge of Ottoman egalitarian plurality. The highly diverse Ottoman Empire stepped toward constitutional equality when there was still slavery in the United States.[10] Sultan Abdulhamid II opposed this course. He prioritized Islamic unity and privilege. He repressed dissidents and decimated the restive Armenians, who claimed equality—without intending to exterminate them, but to bring them into submission. In his vision of society, non-Muslims must be harshly subjugated, while he compromised with Sunni Kurdish rebels. Far from “curiously” (p. 119), the governor of Sivas encouraged conversion of Armenians to Catholicism in the 1890s because Catholic diplomacy and missionaries strongly emphasized their loyalty vis-à-vis the sultan.[11] Even the countrywide wave of domestic jihad that killed 100,000 Armenians in autumn 1895 did not target extermination. It aimed for submission. It prevented egalitarian reforms and, importantly, transferred Armenian land, wealth, and women to Muslims.[12]

Even more destructively than Abdulhamid, the CUP executives opposed internationally monitored reforms. They welcomed in July 1914 a war that promised to bury the Reform Agreement of February 1914, transform Asia Minor, and restore the empire—whereas the February 1914 Agreement on Eastern Asia Minor would have compelled them to follow the constitutional line of egalitarian pluralism and to rescale their imperial dreams. After their defeat, they were forced to abandon their pan-Turkic, pan-Islamic dream of a restored empire. Nevertheless, their genocide made Asia Minor a unitary Turkish-Muslim country, though without a true social contract. Morris and Ze’evi expose violence with outmost clarity—and what are inauspicious methods of nation-building. Patterns and politics of more or less government-controlled anti-Christian domestic jihad started in the late eighteenth century. They grew into large-scale, transregional massacres in the late nineteenth century. Genocide, however, emerged in the first year of the Great War.

Hans Lukas Kieser is the author of Talaat Pasha: Father of Modern Turkey, Architect of Genocide (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018) and Iskalanmış Barış (Squandered Peace), 5th ed. (Istanbul: İletişim, 2018), a standard reference study on late Ottoman Asia Minor.

Notes

[1]. Examples: Yücel Güçlü, *The Holocaust and the Armenian Case in Comparative Perspective* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2011); and the official website of the Turkish Foreign Ministry: <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/the-armenian-allegation-of-genocide-the-issue-and-the-facts.en.mfa>.

[2]. Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (London: Little, Brown and Co., 1996); and Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

[3]. For analyses that include relevant contemporary political thought, see in English M. Şükrü Hanioğlu, *Preparation for a Revolution: The Young Turks, 1902–1908* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); and H. Kieser, *Talaat Pasha: Father of Modern Turkey, Architect of Genocide* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

[4]. Joel Benin, “No More Tears,” *ZNet*, March 9, 2004, <https://zcomm.org/znetarticle/no-more-tears-by-joel-benin/>.

[5]. Workshop in the Lepsiushaus, Potsdam, June 26, 2019, <https://www.hsozkult.de/event/id/termine-40434>.

[6]. Suffering of, and discrimination against, Ottoman and post-Ottoman Christians and other minorities has become an argument of far-right terrorists and racial “white-genocide” conspiracy theorists like Anders Brevik and Brenton Tarrant. See A. Dirk Moses, “‘White Genocide’ and the Ethics of Public Analysis,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 21, no. 2 (2019): 210-13; <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2019.1599493>.

[7]. Kieser, *Talaat*, 257-58, 319-20, 401.

[8]. See introductions to *World War I and the End of the Ottomans. From the Balkan Wars to the Armenian Genocide*, ed. H. Kieser, Kerem Öktem, and Maurus Reinkowski (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015); and *End of the Ottomans: The Genocide of 1915 and the Politics of Turkish Nationalism*, ed. Margaret L. Anderson, Seyhan Bayraktar, H. Kieser, and Thomas Schmutz (London: I. B. Tauris-Bloomsbury, 2019).

[9]. Selim Deringil, “‘Your Religion Is Worn and Outdated’: Orphans, Orphanages and Halide Edib during the Armenian Genocide: The Case of Antoura,” *Études arméniennes contemporaines* 12 (2019): 35-65, <http://journals.openedition.org/eac/2090>.

[10]. Point made in H. Kieser, *Nearest East: American Millennialism and Mission to the Mid-*

dle East (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 27, 32-33, 44-51, 129.

[11]. H. Kieser, *Iskalanmış Barış* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2018), 181.

[12]. For the newest research on those massacres, see the special issues of *Études arméniennes contemporaines* (nos. 10 and no. 11, 2018): Boris Adjemian and Mikael Nishanian, eds., “The Massacres of the Hamidian Period (I): Global Narratives and Local Approaches,” <https://journals.openedition.org/eac/1300>; and Boris Adjemian, ed., “The Massacres of the Hamidian Period (II): Perceptions and Perspectives,” <https://journals.openedition.org/eac/1678>.

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