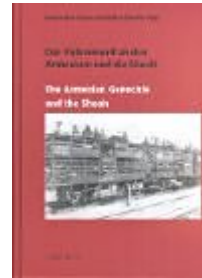


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Hans-Lukas Kieser, Dominik J. Schaller, eds. *Der Voelkermord an den Armeniern und die Shoah*. Zurich: Chronos Verlag, 2002. 656 pp. EUR 44.90 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-0340-0561-6.

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There was a time not long ago when very few people outside the victim community knew anything at all about the Armenian genocide of 1915-1916. For nearly a century the murder of approximately one million Christian Armenians at the hands of the Young Turk government during World War I was essentially a lost history.[1] It has only been since the last decade of the twentieth century, with the proliferation of genocide studies (and genocides themselves, unfortunately), that the Armenian atrocity has been historically reclaimed. *Der Voelkermord an den Armeniern und die Shoah* (*The Armenian Genocide and the Shoah*), is a substantial collection of essays on the connection between the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust. Its publication in 2002 is not only proof that the history of the Armenian genocide has been resurrected, but also that the study of the event itself is a growing scholarly exercise.

The book was the result of an international research project at the University of Zurich headed by Hans-Lukas Kieser, one of the editors of the book. He, in collaboration with Dominik Schaller, the Director of the Centre for Genocide Research at the University of Zurich and Kieser's co-editor on this project, worked together with leading scholars from Europe, the Near East, and the United States to produce what I would argue is the most comprehensive collection of essays on the Armenian genocide published to date. The essays are in three languages: German, French, and English, and represent the most recent scholarship on the subject. Importantly, the book includes three appendices. The first appendix contains abstracts of all of the articles in the collection. The abstract is presented in English if the article was originally written in German or French, and it appears in German if the article was originally written in French or English. This is followed by a biographical summary of the

contributors, while the final appendix is a chronology of the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust from 1895 to 1945, culminating in the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. The title of the book suggests that the contents are at least partially comparative, but the truth is that the majority of the essays are about the Armenian genocide itself and not the Holocaust. Those essays that do deal with the Jewish genocide are written principally with an eye to comparing it with the earlier case in Turkey, or, as in some essays such as those by Christian Gerlach and Hamit Bozarslan, the authors each compare economic factors and ideological elements of the two genocides with the intention of elucidating the causes of the Armenian genocide.[2]

The lengthy collection is divided into three sections. The first contains essays that deal exclusively with the Armenian genocide. The second section is devoted to a comparison between the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust, and the third and final section examines the reception of the Armenian genocide in various national and political contexts. There are twenty-two essays in total that cover a wide range of themes and methodologies from regional case studies, to contextual analyses of the event, and finally to thought-provoking reflections on the meaning of the Armenian genocide in the broader historical context of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and in different national settings.

Kieser and Schaller have done an excellent job organizing their material into clearly delineated themes, but the main aim of the book is evident from the beginning: to historicize the Armenian genocide. After their lengthy introduction to the subject (eighty pages), the book opens with an illuminating and important article by Ronald Grigor Suny, "The Holocaust before the Holo-

caust: Reflections on the Armenian Genocide,” in which Suny thoughtfully (and candidly) explains the troubled history of the historiography of the Armenian genocide. I found this essay particularly refreshing in that it not only articulates the main problems scholars have encountered when writing after the Holocaust about the Armenian genocide, but it also highlights the current political dimension that makes the study of this genocide so problematic. Suny concludes his piece with a summary of what he sees as the most relevant and convincing arguments for the case of the Armenian genocide. Specifically he argues that the genocide of 1915 represents a radical break from the oppressive policies of previous rulers and that the Committee of Union and Progress, the ruling government of the Young Turks, implemented their revolutionary policy of genocide in an attempt to save their dying empire. In other words, Suny dispels two significant myths about the murder of the Armenians. First, that their mass murder in 1915 was the logical outcome of centuries of anti-Armenian policy, and second that their murder was not a genocide at all, but a struggle between competing nationalisms and nothing more. This article is a major departure from much of the overly nationalistic and exaggerated historiography of the past and it sets an impressive scholarly tone for the rest of the book.

Suny’s article is followed by essays from some of the leading scholars of the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust, including Donald Bloxham, Hilmar Kaiser, Erik Jan Zürcher, Raymond Kévorkian, Hans-Lukas Kieser, Taner Akçam, Aron Rodrigue, Hamit Boarslan, Christian Gerlach, Mark Levene, Wolfgang Gust, Martin Tamcke, Dominik Schaller, Hans-Walter Schmuhl, Annette Schaeffgen, Yair Auron, Michael de St. Cheron, and Peter Wien. Akçam’s work is an important inclusion in this volume. He is the first Turkish scholar to break with the entrenched nationalist historiography of Turkey and acknowledge the historical authenticity of the Armenian genocide. And while Akçam’s essay does not deal with the veracity of the genocide per se, but rather with how the Entente powers failed to deal with Turkey’s nationalist aims after the war, he does speculate about Turkey’s nationalist historiography vis-à-vis the Armenian genocide. He believes that had Turkey been forced by the Entente powers to confront its crimes during World War I—in the form of trials—then perhaps Turkey would not have embraced revisionist history and continue to deny the genocide today. In other words, his essay really represents an attempt—perhaps the first historically—to come to terms with Turkey’s recent past and for this reason alone is an extremely important contribution to the col-

lection. But Akçam’s article is not the only one in this collection to contend with the legacy of the genocide. The final section of the book includes six essays devoted entirely to the various ways in which the Armenian genocide has been viewed historically in Germany, Israel, and the Arab world.

Hilmer Kaiser’s essay, a case study of Erzerum, is also worth mentioning as an important example of scholarship that assesses the degree to which the murder of the Armenians was a planned event. His analysis offers the reader a microhistory of the genocide at the local level, evaluating some of the most contentious issues in the study of the genocide such as the role of the Kurdish population in the murder of the Armenians. Kaiser is not alone in tackling controversial elements of the genocide, however. Donald Bloxham has taken up the challenge and examined the role of Germany in the genocide of the Armenians.[3] He concludes that while Germany was Turkey’s ally during the war and may have influenced them militarily, contrary to Vahakn Dadrian’s interpretation, Germany did not have power over Turkey’s domestic policy and, most importantly, there is no basis in the documentation whatsoever to indicate that Germany had a role in formulating the genocidal policy of 1915.[4]

As someone working on the Armenian genocide, I found this book extremely informative and a refreshing change from the excessively nationalistic interpretations one too often encounters when reading on the subject. I recommend this collection to anyone working in the field of genocide studies, but especially to those whose area is the Armenian genocide or comparative genocide studies. Many of the essays in the collection could be used for teaching and could easily be incorporated into undergraduate and graduate courses in history, international relations, and comparative genocide studies. Individually, each essay makes for highly interesting reading. But this is a case where the whole is more important than the individual parts. Taken together, the collection provides the first comprehensive historiography of the Armenian genocide. For this reason it is a valuable contribution to the emerging field of genocide studies, but most especially to the new and newly objective history of the Armenian genocide.

Notes

[1]. The number of victims of the genocide is contested, but the figure of between one and one and a half million is the accepted convention.

[2]. Gerlach’s article is titled, “Nationsbildung im

Krieg: Wirtschaftliche Faktoren bei der Vernichtung der Armenier und beim Mord an den ungarischen Juden,” and Bozarslan’s is titled, “L’extermination des Arméniens et des juifs. Quelques elements de comparaison.”

[3]. Bloxham has two essays in the collection. The other essay is titled “The Beginning of the Armenian Catastrophe: Comparative and Contextual Considera-

tions” in which he talks about geography, nationalism, religion, and other ideologies as factors that led to the genocide.

[4]. Vahakn Dadrian is an Armenian historian who has written widely on the subject. He did not contribute to this collection.

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