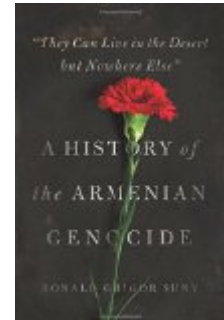




**Ronald Grigor Suny.** *“They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else”: A History of the Armenian Genocide.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-14730-7.



**Reviewed by** Marc David Baer

**Published on** H-Nationalism (June, 2016)

**Commissioned by** Cristian Cercel (Ruhr University Bochum)

In recent years scholars of Ottoman history have published a number of path-breaking, award-winning academic studies documenting the annihilation of the Armenians in 1915.[1] Published on the one hundredth anniversary of that horrible event, Ronald Grigor Suny’s monograph stands out as another superb work, in this case the best narrative account explaining “why, when, and how” the Armenian genocide occurred (p. xi).

A leading scholar of nationalism, empire, Armenian history, and Russian history, Suny engages throughout the study with a century of historiography on the genocide. He criticizes those who rationalize the destruction of a people by referring to reasons of state. He summarizes the denialist argument as, “There was no genocide, and the Armenians were to blame for it” (p. xii). The book as a whole dismantles the denialist position argument by argument, and presents in its place evidence of genocidal intent on the part of the Ottoman regime. At the same time, Suny has little patience for those who would explain the genocide in orientalist terms, blaming the Turks’ al-

leged brutal nature, religious fanaticism, or Islam for the genocide. He also disentangles the earlier massacres of 1894-96 and 1909 from the genocide, arguing the former killings were a warning to those considering rebellion and intended to reimpose Ottoman Muslim dominance over Christians, and that in 1909 the central government did not play a main role. Suny avoids the pitfall of depicting a simple tale of perpetrators and victims; he gives ample attention to the activities of Armenian revolutionaries, and their resorting to terror, even against other Armenians. Furthermore, because Suny utilizes Russian documentation, he counters a number of denialist arguments regarding the loyalty of Ottoman Armenians, and the extent of Armenian support for Russia and for their own revolutionaries.

Suny argues that rather than nationalism, it was a desire to save the empire that drove the leaders of the wartime Ottoman Committee of Union and Progress regime—especially interior minister Talat Pasha and minister of war Enver Pasha who had seized power in a coup in 1913—

to commit genocide against the Armenians. During the Balkan Wars of 1912-13 the Ottomans lost most of their remaining territory in southeastern Europe, including Salonica, the origin of many of the CUP leaders. As a consequence, millions of southeastern European Muslims fleeing persecution streamed into the Ottoman Empire, fueling hostility against Christians, as they sought vengeance for their misfortune. In autumn 1914 the empire joined an alliance with Germany against archenemy Russia, long seen as meddling in Ottoman affairs on behalf of the Armenians. The leading Armenian politicians, political parties, and church supported the empire's war efforts, whereas Armenians in Russia supported that empire. But in denialist writing, as in contemporary Ottoman accounts, all Armenians are lumped together without mentioning this important distinction: "Except for the few who defected from the Ottomans to the Russians at the beginning of the war, most Armenians stayed loyal to their home empire" (p. 229). That some Ottoman Armenians joined the Russians was enough, however, to confirm to the Ottoman regime that all Armenians were traitors, no matter the fact that "far more Ottoman Armenians joined the Ottoman army and fought against Russia until they were disarmed," sent to labor battalions, and subsequently executed (p. 231). The demobilization occurred after Enver Pasha blamed Armenians for the destruction of the Ottoman Third Army at the battle of Sarıkamış against Russia (December 1914-January 1915). Between the defeat at Sarıkamış and the landings at Gallipoli in April the regime decided to deport all the Armenian civilians of the eastern provinces.

The deportation order was made by the Interior Ministry in written decrees to provincial officials. The CUP's paramilitary unit, the Special Organization, filled with convicted violent criminals and headed by Bahaeddin Şakir, was given oral orders to wipe out the columns of Armenians as they marched toward the deserts of Syria. In the wake of Armenians rising in the eastern city of

Van, the regime then murdered hundreds of leading Armenian intellectuals and politicians from Istanbul. Suny details the concentration camps in the desert to which tens of thousands Armenians who had survived the journey from Anatolia were sent to die—by starvation, thirst, exposure, and massacre. These "were not intended to be places of refuge. They were way stations toward extermination. They were death camps" (p. 314). By the end of the First World War, 90 percent of Armenians had disappeared from Anatolia.

In order to explain why the Ottoman regime engaged in genocide, Suny uses the concept of "affective disposition," the emotional state of the perpetrators, which convinced them that it was necessary to annihilate the Armenians (p. xx). Panic, despair, and a desire for revenge caused the regime to see a hidden Armenian hand everywhere, to at first engage in sporadic deportations and massacres, and then mass murder and pillage. Suny is able to substantiate this argument because he relies on extensive Ottoman documentation. He cites ample Ottoman archival sources including government decrees; telegrams sent by Talat Pasha and Enver Pasha in which they detail massacres of Armenians; postwar trial records of Ottoman officials; and memoirs of Kurdish and Turkish perpetrators including army commanders. Of particular interest is the especially brutal governor of Diyarbekir, Dr. Mehmed Reşid, who explained his murder of 120,000 Christians by declaring, "The Armenian bandits were a load of harmful microbes that had afflicted the body of the fatherland. Was it not the duty of the doctor to kill the microbes?" (p. 295).

Suny also quotes extensively from the accounts of German diplomats and officers who served with the Ottoman army. As allies of the Ottomans they cannot be considered to have been engaged in wartime propaganda when they revealed atrocities. Lieutenant Colonel August Stange, commander of a Special Organization unit from the end of 1914 through summer 1915, for

example, wrote “hundreds of thousands have simply been murdered” as part of “a long-held plan fundamentally to weaken if not to destroy, the Armenian people [...] decided on and well organized in Constantinople by the Young Turk Committee using the army and voluntary bands with members of the CUP present at localities;” to him it was obvious that deportations meant the “intended destruction” of the Armenians (pp. 300-301).

Filled with such explicit accounts of genocidal intent by the perpetrators and their allies, Suny’s monograph is a convincing narrative explaining what Talat Pasha meant when he declared, “We will not have the Armenians anywhere in Anatolia. They can live in the desert but nowhere else” (p. 270).

#### Note

[1]. Ronald Grigor Suny, Fatma Müge Göçek, and Norman Naimark, eds., *A Question of Genocide: Armenians and Turks at the End of the Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Uğur Ümit Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Taner Akçam, *The Young Turks’ Crime Against Humanity: The Armenian Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Uğur Ümit Üngör and Mehmet Polatel, eds., *Confiscation and Destruction: The Young Turk Seizure of Armenian Property* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013); Fatma Müge Göçek, *Denial of Violence: Ottoman Past, Turkish Present, and Collective Violence against the Armenians, 1789-2009* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

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

**Citation:** Marc David Baer. Review of Suny, Ronald Grigor. *“They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else”*: A History of the Armenian Genocide. H-Nationalism, H-Net Reviews. June, 2016.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=46542>



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