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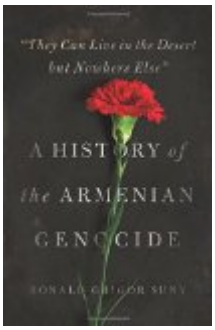

Ronald Grigor Suny. *"They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else": A History of the Armenian Genocide.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-14730-7.

Reviewed by Eldad Ben-Aharon

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"They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else", is to be regarded as a solid contribution to scholarship on genocide studies in general and the Armenian genocide in particular. Ronald Suny's methodological approach is to situate the Armenian genocide as part of an integrated view of the history of the European and Ottoman empires and the emergence of the modern nation-state system.

The events of 1915 belong to two exclusive historiographies: those who assess the 1915 deportations and deaths as genocide, and who specifically emphasize a genocidal premeditated intent in the regime of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP). By contrast, those who represent the denialist historiography of the Turkish republic official narrative who argue that the events of 1915 never had a genocidal intent, but were rather a response of a CUP government to a rebellious Armenian population in the particular circumstances of the First World War. Suny identifies that both groups agree on some basic historical facts of the 1915 events, however, "for decades various authors have emphasized different elements and in general either avoided explanation of the causes of the events or implied an explanation even while not systemically elaborating one" (p. xii). The current book under review can be seen as an attempt to resolve the dispute between those two historiographies.

The book is divided into ten chapters in which Suny provides an inclusive explanation of why the Armenian genocide occurred. While each of the chapters are worthy of debate and critical comment, the most important ones for understanding Suny's premise and methodological choice are the first four chapters of the book. Traditionally, historians have assessed the genocide, as the Ottoman Emperor's (the sick man of Europe), almost final attempt to retain his power by creating a homogeneous ethnic nation state. Suny, however proposes, an alternative assessment. He suggests that the overlapping modernisation processes of the old European empires, especially the Austro-Hungarian Russian and Ottoman empires should be understood in tandem with the appearance of the modern nation-state system as a fresh analytical tool to encompass the origins of the Ar-

menian genocide. These processes, he argued, served to push the Ottoman Empire to redefine itself, and its geographical, ethnic and religious boundaries, as a hybrid modern empire nation state.

Chapter two describes the identity crisis of the Armenians during the course of the nineteenth century. Suny charts their transformation from a religious Christian community, to an ethno-religious community with nationalist aspirations. Suny proposes that the power struggle and the conflict of identity between the old Armenian elite (represented by the Church) and the new secular, ethno-nationalists who promoted the idea of a modern Armenian nation state, should be seen as part of the historical change that led to the genocide. Furthermore, in chapter three, Suny maintains that the "Ottoman Armenians were torn between those who sought a life within the empire, accommodating themselves to the cosmopolitan imperial setting, and those radicals influenced by Caucasian Armenians and Western nationalisms who were intrigued by possibilities of greater self-rule" (p. 64). Suny goes on in chapter four to analyze the Sultan Abdülhamid II massacre (1894–1896). He assesses this event against the traditional explanation in Armenian genocide scholarship that argues that this massacre was part of the genocidal intent against the Armenians and the first phase of the genocide. See among others Raymond Kévorkian, The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History, London 2011, p. 11. Suny, by contrast, argues that this massacre served to deliver a different message to the Armenians: that the Armenians should stay loyal to the regime and but at the same time, the regime should not try to uproot the Armenians from their land, as happened in 1915. This assessment also contributes to Suny's core argument in the book about the lack of evidence for an Armenian "final solution". Suny explicitly concludes that the events of 1915 were indeed genocidal, but the genocide was not a premeditated event perpetrated by the Young Turks. Accordingly, in Suny's view, the decision to perpetrate the violence against the Armenians was taken only in the early days of the First World War. Suny concludes by connecting modern genocide, ethnic cleansing, the Jewish Holocaust, and the Armenian genocide into an integrated history: "The imperial ambitions of Europeans and the subsequent settler colonialism, beginning immediately after the discovery of the Americas in the fifteenth century and continuing into the twenty-first resulted in horrendous violence and forced movements of peoples, brutal precedents to the policies carried out by the Young Turks and the Nazis." (p. 351)

To understand the genesis of Suny's argument better, it is helpful to introduce the frameworks into which he situates the Armenian genocide and his scholarly background. Firstly, Suny engages with some of the current and recent debates in the field of Holocaust and genocide studies, and situates the Armenian genocide within these more complex analyses. Scholars such as Moses, Stone, Bloxham, Confino, and others, maintain that the history of the Holocaust should be reframed in a more integrated way in wider trends in European history, such as racism and colonialism, rather than being seen as a single and unique historical phenomenon. Even more important and applicable to Suny's book is Mark Levene's research project that argues that the appearance of a homogenous ethnically-based modern nation-state system has been an primary factor in perpetuating modern genocide. See for instance A. Dirk Moses, 'Conceptual blockages and definitional dilemmas in the "racial century": genocides of indigenous peoples and the Holocaust', in: Patterns of Prejudice 36 (2002) 4, pp. 10–12; Dan Stone, 'The Historiography of Genocide: Beyond "Uniqueness" and Ethnic Competition', in: Rethinking History 8 (2004) 1, pp. 127–142; Donald Bloxham, The Final Solution: A genocide, Oxford 2009 and Mark Levene, Genocide in the Age of the Nation State: Volume 1: The Meaning of Genocide, London 2005. These new paradigms in Holocaust and genocide studies have clearly helped to shape

Suny's original attempt to situate the Armenian genocide within a wider and more integrated history. Secondly, Suny's previous works focused on the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia, as well as on modern Armenian history and the history of European empires. This background has undoubtedly shaped Suny's more integrated historical perspective on the Armenian genocide.

Suny's position in this regard has been contentious among scholars of the Armenian genocide; the edited volume by Suny, Göçek and Naimark, "A Question of Genocide: Armenians and Turks at the End of the Ottoman Empire" (Oxford 2011) was the later scholarly product of a collection of Turkish liberals, Kurdish and Armenian scholars originally convened for the Workshop in Armenian Turkish Studies (WATS) more than a decade ago. This group aimed to write a collaborative historical survey, incorporating the perspectives of social scientists and historians of multiple nationalities on the Armenian genocide. Suny and Göçek who co-edited "A Question of Genocide", were criticised by the Armenian scholar, Bedross Der Matossian, precisely on account of their attempt to reach "a 'consensus' or 'compromise' between Armenian and Turkish liberal scholars, thereby admitting not only the fact of the politicization of genocide historiography, but also its validity." Furthermore, Der Matossian asserts that "it is important not to shy away from the sound evidence and conclusions established by prior scholarship; nor does it seem fruitful, nearly a century later, to put the validity of 'genocide' on trial." Der Matossian, concluding acerbically that it is not clear if their introduction to the volume represents an effort in "scholarship or in diplomacy." Bedross Der Matossian, The "Definitiveness" of Genocide and *A Question of Genocide*: A Review Essay, in: Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies 20 (2011), pp. 175–176.

The author of this review thinks that Suny could have widened the scope of his analysis of the debate by including in his introduction discussion those who challenge his contentious claims. Especially, Der Matossian, who raise criticisms regarding the presentation of some of the events of 1915 by scholars associated with WATS, particularly since a number of these contentious points are carried over relatively uncritically into the present book. Overall, however, this is a minor weakness in an otherwise impressive monograph that makes important progress in attempts to integrate the Armenian genocide within its wider historical and historiographical context.

The book under review should be of an interest to graduate and postgraduate research students, genocide scholars and historians interested to gaining fresh understandings of the historical dynamics leading to the Armenian genocide, and the connections between imperialism, nationalism and the Armenian genocide during the twentieth century. Additionally, the book provides the groundwork for further debate on how to integrate the Armenian genocide more completely within an understanding of the historical trends of its period.

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