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War on the Rocks

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## THE HISTORY THAT HAPPENED: SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT ON THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

RYAN GINGERAS  
COMMENTARY

DECEMBER 4, 2019



For a brief moment this fall, world interest fixed its attention to an event of the past. News that the U.S. Congress approved a formal resolution recognizing the Armenian Genocide was carried as a leading story by media outlets worldwide. Most analysis of the vote focused on the immediate political implications. With U.S.-Turkish relations still reeling from earlier confrontations over Syria and

Ankara's ties with Russia, Washington was simultaneously preparing to welcome President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in only a few weeks' time. Most outlets in the United States accepted the material substance of the resolution at face value.

Turkish media sources struck a stark contrast in their treatment of the resolution. Newspaper commentators and television personalities reiterated the Turkish government's categorical rejection of the bill. More than a few outlets condemned Congress' decision as an insult, one inspired by the political tensions of the day. Embedded within this coverage was a staunch rejection of the resolution's historical premise. "The Armenian bill," in the words of Turkey's presidential spokesperson, was "one of the most embarrassing uses of history in politics." He added, "Those who charge Turkey with genocide should look at their own history."

#### BECOME A MEMBER

On this side of the Atlantic, it has been difficult to find voices in support of Ankara's point of view. Among the most prominent to detail such criticisms was Edward Erickson, retired professor of history from the Marine Corps University. In an essay in *War on the Rocks*, he agreed that Congress erred factually in passing the bill. The significance of this fallacy, the article contends, goes beyond Congress' folly in passing judgment on Turkey's national history. Acknowledging this history, he poses, promises to "damage[s] Turkish-American relations at a time when neither country can afford it."

My aim in responding to Erickson's article is limited: It is not my intention to debate the efficacy of Congress' decision to recognize the Armenian Genocide (or other genocides for that matter). Nor is it my intention to delve into how Congress' actions may affect relations between Washington and Ankara. My goal here is to dispute two of the essay's central contentions: that historians are divided on this

issue and that the available data related to the Armenian Genocide is either exculpatory or has been left untapped. I write this response as someone who has spent the whole of his career writing about the end of the Ottoman Empire. Each book I have written is predicated on archival research in Turkey and outside of it. I write this response as someone who has not only written specifically about the fate of Ottoman Armenians but also more broadly about the violent conditions that beset the empire's collapse. My first book was a comparative history of Ottoman Muslims and Christians who were victims of mass violence at the hands of the government.

Erickson's article is riddled with gross inaccuracies. His mischaracterization of the state of research regarding the Armenian Genocide cannot be chalked up to differences over perspective. It is wrong and misleading on multiple counts.

The most revealing, and I would argue most heinous, claim made in Erickson's article is his contention that the literature on the Armenian Genocide "tends to be dominated by non-historians." Only historians, specifically those with "the appropriate linguistic and research skills," should be trusted to weigh in on the genocide's authenticity. This statement is not only baldly inaccurate, but it is also clearly underhanded in its intent. A person who professes expertise in late Ottoman history should know that the study of the Armenian Genocide has grown into a rather sizable subfield of research. To say that non-historians dominate the field, or that professional historians "try to avoid the topic entirely," requires one to be either unaware of or ignore the contributions of both younger scholars — such as Ümit Kurt, Uğur Ümit Üngör, Fuat Dündar, and Lerna Ekmekçioğlu to name just a few — and long-established experts, a list by no means limited to the likes of Ronald Suny, Hilmar Kaiser, Hans Lukas Kieser, and Raymond Kevorkian. Even if one were to set aside the decisive contributions of these and many others, to assert that scholars like Fatma Müge Göçek and Taner Akçam lack the expertise to explore the Armenian Genocide is scandalous. Both have produced an impressive body of work that speaks to their linguistic abilities and general mastery of the field of late



Ottoman history. Though trained as sociologists, their contributions to the study of the Ottoman Empire have earned them some of the highest honors awarded in the broader field of Middle East studies.

After casting these early doubts on the state of expertise in the field, the remainder of Erickson's article focuses on what he contends is the mistaken belief that genocidal intent can be proven in this case. The archival record, he asserts, should leave historians with some certitude that genocidal intentions did not drive the Ottoman government's actions during World War I (though he concludes the piece by saying the genocide remains "an open question" as a historical event). Much of his analysis derives from his book, *Ottomans and Armenians*. But like the title of this volume (which may be read as though Ottomans and Armenians were separate peoples), the essay misrepresents critical elements of the field at large. In doing so, he presents the casual reader with interpretations and observations that do not reflect the wider scholarly consensus.

Critical to Erickson's rendition of events is his assertion that "a large amount of archival evidence" has been excluded from what he derisively calls "the Armenian version of the narrative." Beyond presuming that ethnic bias is the cause for the controversy, such a statement infers that genocide scholars have failed to take advantage of the full archival record. Again, such a claim is both inaccurate as well as highly misleading. For one thing, rigorous archival research is now, more than ever, the yardstick by which any work dealing with the Armenian Genocide is measured. One may say that the high bar for scholarship in the field is due to the Turkish government's insistence that Ottoman archival documents prove there was no ill intent in the 1915 campaign against Armenians. Cumulatively, there is a broad understanding of what the archival record says and does not say. Though there is always more work to be done, the evidence that has already come to light is damning.

The records of foreign representatives living in the Ottoman Empire during World War I are both diverse and consistent. Even if one ignores the accounts of Istanbul's wartime opponents (such as British, French, American or Russian observers), reports from German and Austrian diplomats and officers offer testimony drawn from both high Ottoman officials and observations in the field. Though certainly not privy to all available information, German and Austrian accounts give clear indications of what one diplomat referred to as Ottoman efforts "to make a clean sweep of their internal enemies, the indigenous Christians." From the contemporary perspective of Istanbul's allies, the Ottoman administration intended to use mass deportations and massacres to cull the empire's Armenian population to the point that it no longer presented a threat to the state and nation.

The Ottoman documentary record does not undermine these impressions. More than anything, internal correspondence among imperial officials offers both nuance and clarity to our understanding of the Armenian Genocide. Recent research underscores that the deportations of Armenians were not fully contingent upon events that unfolded in 1915. Rather evidence suggests that the plans implemented against Armenians at least partially derived from policies conceived during the preceding years. The intended goals of the deportations are most visible in Ottoman records pertaining to Armenian property seized by government officials. Senior officials carefully tracked the locations and value of homes and business taken from banished Armenians. The mass appropriation of Armenian wealth was a policy publicly touted as a broader effort to strengthen Muslim control over industry and commerce. Ottoman directives make clear that the resettling of Armenian homes with Muslims was itself one of the key achievements of the deportations, a step aimed at more broadly eliminating "hostility to Ottomanism and Turkishness." In this respect, the archival record delivers a clear judgment: In seizing Armenian homes and installing Muslims in their place, the Ottoman government expected Armenians not to return.

It is certainly true that available archive sources do not give us a complete picture of the genocide. The Ottoman archives, for example, offer no clear insights into how high imperial officials arrived at their decision to deport Armenians in 1915. Nor do the archives provide copies of memoranda explicitly ordering the murder of Armenian men, women, and children. Although newly uncovered documents may yield direct evidence of a government-directed plan of mass killings, this challenge underscores critical limitations within the Ottoman archival record. It is widely believed, for example, that several records belonging to the Committee of Union and Progress, the governing party, were destroyed at the close of the war. In more recent years, scholars have accused Turkish officials of purging the Ottoman archives of incriminating documents. The difficulty in establishing the extent to which records have been lost is magnified by the conflicting policies that govern access to state archives. It is true that scholars tend to be given unfettered access to the main Ottoman archives in Istanbul (much of which is now digitized). This is less the case for other repositories. Scholars can access the Archives of the General Staff, which holds Ottoman military records, without any tools (for example, cameras or cell phones) other than pencils and paper. Obtaining copies of the documents is possible but laborious. Other archives, such as those of the Interior Ministry and the Ministry of Justice, are closed altogether.

What is especially glaring in Erickson's depiction of the historical record is its utter avoidance of perhaps the most important source of all: the testimony of victimized Armenians themselves. Collections such as those amassed by the Zoryan Institute and the University of Southern California's Shoah Foundation allow students access to literally hundreds of videos of men and women who experienced the worst of the 1915 campaign, massacres, rapes, and abductions at the hands of Ottoman soldiers, gendarmes, and irregulars. Unlike with the archives in Turkey, one does not need to travel to Toronto or Los Angeles to access these collections. The value of these oral accounts extends beyond the insights they offer into the organization and execution of the genocide. They stand as vivid and essential reminders of the human costs of 1915.

This latter point is not meant purely to pull at the reader's heartstrings. It is critical in understanding the origin and effect of efforts to deny the validity of the Armenian Genocide. Since the time of the deportations, government officials have labored to refute charges of wrongdoing by placing the blame on the victims themselves. While denying any attempt at harm, senior Ottoman ministers insisted that all deported Armenians, be they men, women, or children, were participants in a grand conspiracy to rebel against the empire ("Armenians committed treason," the Ottoman Foreign Ministry declared in 1916, "this is very clear"). The real crime, the government countered, was the Armenian campaign of murder targeting Muslims in Anatolia. Counter-charges of Armenian treason and mass killings remain critical to the Turkish government's defense of Istanbul's actions — a defense echoed in Erickson's article.

This effort at "bait and switch" has not escaped the attention of present-day scholars. Pointing to the crimes committed by Armenian irregulars or soldiers from the Armenian Republic does not absolve the Ottoman government of its own transgressions. More importantly, scholarly recognition of the killings of Muslim civilians during World War I has not led to a thawing among denialists. In this regard, one must recognize the great lengths to which the Turkish government has gone in its attempts to thwart discussion of the Armenian Genocide (attempts that have included past and present efforts at making public use of the phrase itself illegal). Conversely, works that defend Ankara's refutation of the genocide, including Erickson's book *Ottomans and Armenians*, are actively promoted through official outlets.

A casual reader should not take this response to Erickson's article as a matter of conflicting opinions. It is instead meant to underscore the degree to which such essays are symptomatic of longstanding attempts to negate the Armenian Genocide as both history and as a human experience. The legalism found in Erickson's argument echoes Ankara's exceedingly narrow, and misleading, standard for what constitutes proof of any wrongdoing. Rather than engage the

work of contemporary scholars, the essay recycles long-refuted arguments (some as old as the genocide itself). At its core, the essay is meant to make the events of 1915 appear obscure or muddled. Understanding what happened to Armenians, however, is not challenging. During World War I, government agents forced almost every Armenian person, with limited exceptions, from their homes. The breadth of the deportations included tens of thousands living well beyond the front (contrary to Erickson's contention, this did include areas such as Edirne, Istanbul, Izmir and Bursa). Most were then exiled to the northern Syria desert. There or along the way, untold thousands were either murdered, starved to death, or died of exposure or disease. Similarly, large numbers were subject to sexual violence or abduction. The goal of this government effort was to effectively eliminate the Armenian population as a viable community in the empire. It was a campaign that complemented other initiatives that targeted native Greeks, Assyrians, Kurds, and others. It is true that scholars do debate key semantics regarding the goals or the staging of the deportations. But the consensus among scholars of the Ottoman Empire, and in the field of genocide studies as a whole, is strong. Undergirding this consensus is a body of data that points overwhelmingly in one direction. To say otherwise is false.

## BECOME A MEMBER

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