

Book Review: Grigoris Balakian, *Armenian Golgotha*

Robert Melson

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Book Review

Grigoris Balakian, *Armenian Golgotha*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009. Pp. 509, cloth. \$35.00 US.

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The twenty-fourth of April 1915 is the date that marks the commencement of the Armenian Genocide. On that day, Grigoris Balakian, a high-ranking Armenian priest, was among the 250 Armenian religious, political, and cultural leaders who were arrested in Constantinople and sent 200 miles east to Chankiri to await their fate. While most of his companions were killed or died during the genocide, Balakian survived both the genocide and World War I. When the war ended in 1918, he started to write *Armenian Golgotha*. This is an astonishing memoir and meditation on his survival and on the course of the mass murder that destroyed more than half of the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire. It is first-hand testimony from a terrible time by a knowledgeable and historically informed witness who was intent not only on recalling his experiences but also on leaving a documented record behind. The book was translated by the gifted poet and historian Peter Balakian—Grigoris Balakian was Peter's great-uncle—with the able assistance of Aris Sevag. Peter Balakian supplies an important and illuminating introductory essay that helps the reader navigate the text.

Grigoris Balakian had studied at German universities and spoke fluent German by the time he returned to Constantinople in September 1914, on the eve of World War I, when he was thirty-eight years old. His command of German saved his life when later he went into hiding, and it gave him a perspective on the role of Germans and Germany—Turkey's ally—during the genocide. He was also well-connected to the establishment of the Armenian Apostolic Church and a well-known figure in Armenian affairs. He arrived in Constantinople two months before Turkey joined Germany and the Central Powers against the Entente, and left it in 1919 as part of the Armenian delegation to the Paris Peace Conference. In those five years he experienced the Armenian Genocide first hand.

When he lived in Berlin, he had been alarmed by the ferocity of German nationalism and the millenarian expectations aroused by the coming of the war. He discovered similar emotions raging among Turks as well as Armenians when he returned to Constantinople. He believed that a rabid form of Turkish nationalism and Pan-Turkism motivated the Committee of Union and Progress, which seized the opportunity of the war to destroy the Armenians and to transform Turkey into a homogenous Muslim and Turkic state. He was critical of the role of the German military and foreign office as well, which he accused of collaborating in the destruction of the Armenians. During his escape, when he posed as a German soldier, he was shocked to overhear ordinary Germans refer to Armenians as “Christian Jews and as blood-sucking usurers,” accusing Armenians of economically exploiting Turkey (281).

Balakian was a fervent Armenian patriot, but he was also quite critical of his own people's attitudes on the eve of the war. Thus, upon returning from Germany, he found Armenian enthusiasm for the coming war and what it might mean for an independent Armenia both alarming and naïve. He feared that it would play into the xenophobia of the Turks. Referring to the massacres of 1894–1896, he noted that “the bloody experiences of the last thirty years had not made the Armenians any more prudent” (28). In a later passage he said, “In this way we provoked the Turks, who had for a long time been looking for an excuse . . . [to annihilate] the entire Armenian population of Turkey” (32). Balakian could not be aware in 1918 that those who would deny the Armenian genocide decades later would argue that it was the Armenians who had provoked the Turks into committing mass murder.

After spending ten months in prisonlike conditions in Chankiri, in February 1916, Balakian was made to join a forced march toward Chroum and Yozgat, stations on the way to the killing fields in Der-Zor in Syria. It was during this deportation that he documented his extraordinary conversation—amounting to a prolonged interview over many days—with Captain Shukri, the sixty-five-year-old commander in charge of the police soldiers, the unit guarding Balakian and the other deportees. Because of his high status and a well-placed bribe, Balakian was allowed to ride on horseback next to Shukri, who was quite open and unapologetic—even proud—about his participation in the deportation and mass murder. This conversation–interview between a victim and a perpetrator must be unique in the annals of the Armenian Genocide and clarifies the process of destruction as well as the attitudes of the “ordinary men” who both killed and supervised the killing.

In this connection he retells Captain Shukri's account of the destruction of the Armenian women of Yozgat (141–50). Not knowing that their husbands and other male relatives had already been killed, the women were told to bring their children and their valuables, because they would be deported to Aleppo to join their relatives. Captain Shukri headed the detachment of police soldiers that guarded the caravan of deportees, but the women and their children were not destined for Aleppo. On orders from his superiors in Yozgat, the Captain led the women and their children to an isolated valley, where they were first stripped of their possessions and then massacred by villagers from the surrounding hills. Their valuables were then shipped to the authorities in town, with Captain Shukri getting his cut (144).

On hearing this account, Balakian could not contain himself and asked the good Captain how he, a believing Muslim, could participate in the massacre of innocent women and children. Shukri explained his motivations in religious and political terms:

The Sheikh-ul-Islam [the highest Suni religious authority in Turkey] had issued a *fatwa* to annihilate the Armenians as traitors to our state, and the caliph, in turn . . . had ordered its execution . . . And I, as a military officer, carried out the order of my king . . . killing people during war is not considered a crime, now is it? (146)

Balakian reports, “I fell silent because there was nothing I could say in reply to an executioner who had likened the merciless massacre of unarmed, defenseless women and infants to killing people in war. In total he was responsible for the murder of 42,000 innocent people” (146). Balakian suggests that the leaders of the Committee of Union and Progress, like Talaat and Enver, might have been impelled by Turkish nationalism and Pan-Turkism, but the ordinary men and women who were the followers and executioners of the genocide were just as likely to respond to religious exhortation and legitimation. Balakian could not know in 1916 that following orders

in wartime would be a recurring rationalization by the perpetrators of genocides, including the Holocaust during World War II and the Rwandan Genocide in 1994.

When he realized that deportation meant certain death, Balakian joined two other Armenian men and escaped on 2 April 1916. He shaved his beard, changed his clothes, and began his life as a fugitive from Turkish authorities. His successful flight lasted until the end of the war. During his extraordinary odyssey, he demonstrated exceptional courage, and ingenuity, at various times impersonating a German railroad worker; a German Jew(!), Herr Bernstein; a German engineer; a railway administrator; a German soldier; and a Greek vineyard worker.

His comment on his transformation tells us much about his boldness and his zest for life:

My transformation . . . had made me a new man, bold and fearless; clothing can change one's disposition and spiritual power in ways I had not realized. A peace-loving and meek servant of the church had abruptly been transformed into a young adventurer ready to employ all of his physical, intellectual, and moral energies to save his life. But any misjudgment would result in death. (263)

Although the memoir records a dark and brutal period, which brought Balakian to moments of despair, he did not shut his eyes to human kindness and courage. His story is punctuated by episodes of Turks rescuing Armenians, of endangered Armenians risking their lives to save him and other victims, and decent Germans, appalled by their country's policies, willing to extend him a hand. During the most wrenching moments of his flight, he was sustained by his faith in a compassionate Christian God and in the patriotic hope that, after the ordeal, Armenia would rise as a free and independent state. He was also sustained by personal optimism, self-confidence, and zest for adventure that cannot easily be taught or duplicated.

Grigoris Balakian speaks up for the Armenian survivors who had much to say about the course of the genocide and about their own experiences during that horrifying period. *Armenian Golgotha* promises to become an important primary document about the Armenian Genocide. Moreover, because of its freshness and immediacy—in parts it reads like daily reports from the front lines of mass murder—it is likely to become a major addition to the literature of witness and testimony describing the violent upheavals and crimes of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.