

9-4-2020

Book Review: *The Thirty-Year Genocide: Turkey's Destruction of its Christian Minorities 1894-1924*

Steven A. Usitalo
Northern State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gsp>

Recommended Citation

Usitalo, Steven A. (2020) "Book Review: *The Thirty-Year Genocide: Turkey's Destruction of its Christian Minorities 1894-1924*," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*. Vol. 14: Iss. 2: 176-178.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.5038/1911-9933.14.2.1782>

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gsp/vol14/iss2/13>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

Book Review: *The Thirty-Year Genocide: Turkey's Destruction of its Christian Minorities 1894-1924*

Steven A. Usitalo

Northern State University
Aberdeen, South Dakota, USA

The Thirty-Year Genocide: Turkey's Destruction of its Christian Minorities 1894-1924
Benny Morris and Dror Ze'evi
Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2019
672 Pages; Price: \$35.00 Hardcover

Reviewed by Steven A. Usitalo
Northern State University

This is an intensely exasperating work. It is also an impressive achievement. Benny Morris and Dror Ze'evi, the authors of *The Thirty-Year Genocide*, are new to the now well-established field of Late Ottoman genocide studies. This substantial contribution tends to provoke on nearly every page (no mean feat for a tome as massive as this one). This is hardly surprising from the contentious historian of Israel and Palestine, Benny Morris. Ze'evi is a respected scholar of Ottoman history with a rather more temperate record than Morris's. At a superficial level, the authors are rigidly deterministic in imposing an unsustainable thirty-year timeframe for genocide in the late Ottoman Empire, lasting until the foundation of modern Turkey, and suggestively, well beyond (if in less "genocidal" modes of violence).

Their views of the "Turkish" perpetrators, who attempted to de-Christianize the Ottoman Empire, and nearly succeeded in doing so by the time that Atatürk established his rule in the Republic of Turkey, reads as distressingly essentialist. The authors only perfunctorily distinguish the Ottoman regime from Turks as an operative ethnic/national group. The perpetrators "sought power, wealth, and sexual gratification,"¹ often ill-defined motives that mixed with Turkish fears of foreign domination and rapidly developing Turkish nationalism. Exclusionary Turkish nationalism, along with politicized Islam, were the ideological drivers that led the, as argued here nearly undifferentiated Muslim population, to attempt to rid the Ottoman Empire of its Christian minorities. The authors give only minimal attention to the organizers of the Armenian Genocide, the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) and its leadership, with the exception of Talaat Pasha, cast by the authors, correctly, as the primary future genocidaire, in search of a "definitive solution of the Armenian question."²

The authors afford little attention to the evolution of CUP ideology and policies from its late nineteenth century origins to its surprising—surprising to this reviewer and likely to most scholars of the Armenian Genocide—emergence as the organizer of mass atrocities against Armenians, Assyrians, and Greeks. Indeed the secular views so often ascribed to many in the CUP are dismissed in Morris and Ze'evi's analysis, all is reduced to Islam, for "while not all Muslims were trustworthy in the eyes of the CUP, just about anyone who was trustworthy was Muslim."³ All is abstracted to inadequately conceptualized politicized Islam: "among top CUP officials, Islam defined the boundaries of the nation. In this respect, they were Islamists like [Sultan] Abdülhamid, not the secularists assumed in conventional history."⁴ Islam as crafted in the work under review is purely an instrumental ends to excluding Christians from Ottoman lands. Except, of course, when they are not murdering, raping, and pillaging them.

As the authors assert, the perpetrators at every level of Ottoman Society, and later the leaders of the Turkish Republic, were "acting in defense of Islam and in defense of the sacred Islamic

¹ Benny Morris and Dror Ze'evi, *The Thirty-Year Genocide: Turkey's Destruction of its Christian Minorities 1894-1924* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2019), 5.

² *Ibid.*, 172.

³ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 147.

domain. For most, the slaughter of the Christians, innocent as well as combatants, was imperative in a state of declared jihad.⁵ The innumerable conversions forced on Armenians, Greeks, and to a lesser extent Assyrians, and which to a degree saved many from death, is “proof of the religious impulse underlying Turkish Muslims actions.” On nearly every page of the work under review the authors graphically describe the mass rape and abduction of (primarily, but not exclusively) Armenian women and children, the murders and forced marches endured by the victimized Christian communities, attacks on priests and various notables, in short the massacre of between 1.5 and 2.5 million Christians between 1894-1924.⁶ Grounding their work on a significant base of primary sources (largely from what remains of Ottoman sources along with the accounts of foreign diplomats and missionaries), along with (nearly) all relevant secondary literature, this an intensely vivid account of the occasionally systematic, often chaotic, victimization of Armenians, Assyrians and Greeks. With the exception of an extended chapter on the “population engineering” experienced by Greeks, and indeed other Christians and Muslims, much of the book is devoted to the destruction of the Armenians. Due to the paucity of available materials, the genocide suffered by the Assyrians is persuasively, if briefly, delineated in this volume.

The Christian population of the Ottoman Empire was twenty percent of the total in 1894; it declined to two percent by 1924. In subsequent decades, the population of Christians in the Turkish Republic would continue to decrease. This story, the authors aver, is both “deeper and wider”⁷ than the Armenian Genocide. The authors locate three waves of violence during the three decades of history under discussion: the 1894-96 “Hamidian” massacres; the 1915-1916 genocide of the Armenians and Assyrians; and the “destruction” of the remaining Armenian community, along with the violent removal of the Greeks and Assyrians from 1918-1924. Profuse accounts by both perpetrators and victims, reprinted here, often without searching analysis by the authors, leaves the reader numb. It is clear from any judicious reading of this volume that the authors consider neither the Hamidian massacres of the 1890s, nor the 1918-24 expulsions, as constituting a genocide. Rather, referring to Richard Hovanissian’s assessment, they see the period as defined by “a ‘continuum of genocidal intent’ and a ‘continuum of ethnic cleansing’.”⁸ Certainly, to Hovanissian, and to the authors here, the Sultan did not think “in terms of complete extermination.” Although Hovanissian focuses on the “de-Armenization” of the Empire, Morris and Ze’evi more compellingly contend, “de-Christianization was what the Ottoman and Nationalist Turks were after.” As for the Young Turk organized assault on the Armenians and Assyrians in 1915-16, no serious-minded scholar denies that the attacks evolved from arrests, harassment, deportations, to centrally directed mass murder. Morris and Ze’evi’s work contributes a vast amount of detail, little of which is not already known to both scholars and students of the subject, on the horrors visited on principally Armenians and Assyrians in 1915-16. So if the authors themselves fail to give credence to anything more than a culture of violence that both led up to the Genocide of 1915-16, and that later scarred Turkish society, then the notion of a thirty-year genocide is absent any epistemic value. It is deployed here merely as a rhetorical device.

Unable to uncover any evidence indicating a clear timeline for the 1915-1916 genocide, Morris and Ze’evi even so maintain that very preliminary planning, and even preparations for the genocide, began perhaps as early as late 1914. At the very latest, “CUP activists began the planning” for a systematic offensive against Armenians after the defeat of Ottoman forces, to their existential enemies, the Russians, at the Battle of Sarikamish in January 1915.⁹ By the time of the arrest of Armenian notables in Constantinople on April 24, 1915, preparations for the Armenian Genocide were already in place. Assessing and dismissing Donald Bloxham’s “cumulative-radicalization”¹⁰ approach in which Bloxham scaffolds an evolutionary methodology onto the Armenian Genocide.

⁵ Ibid., 494.

⁶ Ibid., 488.

⁷ Ibid., 3.

⁸ Ibid., 491.

⁹ Ibid., 249.

¹⁰ Ibid., 246.

This does not encompass Young Turk planning for the physical destruction of the Armenians before May-June 1915. Bloxham's conclusions, which reflect a consensus among recent scholars of the genocide blends intentionalist and functionalist frameworks familiar in Holocaust historiography. In fact, Morris and Ze'evi conclude their monograph with a sustained, and quite thought-provoking comparison between the Holocaust and the Armenian Genocide.

The authors are most persuasive when arguing that the Armenian community in the Ottoman Empire was destroyed in 1915-16 not mainly for nationalist reasons, but because they were Christians who were alleged to be in league with the Russians. Assyrians suffered a similar fate to the Armenians, except that they were not allied, even in the fevered imaginations of their killers, to any outside power. Many Greeks were massacred before and especially after the First World War, but their fate was more deportation than community-wide slaughter. They had a clear place where they might be re-settled. If only the authors had been more nuanced in their approach to the perpetrators and not, erroneously, conflated the killers with quite nearly the entire Ottoman population and indeed ascribed their motivations to a rather monolithic image of Islam. Often elegantly written, with emphatic arguments advanced throughout, *The Thirty-Year Genocide* demands no previous knowledge of the topic on the part of the reader, and should have wide appeal to a general reader interested in the Armenian Genocide, or genocide studies.