



Ronald Grigor Suny, Fatma Müge Göçek, Norman M. Naimark, eds. *A Question of Genocide: Armenians and Turks at the End of the Ottoman Empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. xxii + 434 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-539374-3.

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Published on H-Human-Rights (September, 2011)

Commissioned by Rebecca K. Root

## Reaching for Consensus: A Question of Genocide and the Process of Historiography

For decades, Armenians and Turks have clashed over the deportations and deaths of the Armenian population in the Ottoman Empire. Through several rounds of revisions, the Turkish government has blamed the deaths on the depredations of World War I; a civil war unleashed by Armenian traitors; or negligence on the part of Ottoman leaders intent on displacing, but not destroying, the Armenian minority. The argument put forth by the Armenian diaspora—and Armenia after its independence—has continued largely unchanged: the Ottoman Empire committed a state-sponsored act of genocide.

Over the years, the scholarly community emulated this pattern. Hardly any scholarship existed until 1965, when Armenians resurrected the tragedy from obscurity through demonstrations, lobbying of foreign governments, and terrorism. The timing of this resurrection coincided with growing academic interest in human rights. But at first, biased, often amateur, productions authored by Armenians and Turks who doubled as historians and advocates mired the field with contradictory explanations borrowed from their respective nationalities. In many ways, these scholarly clashes served as another theater of the battle between the two foes.

Eventually, authoritative studies by Vahakn N. Dadrian and Richard G. Hovannisian broke through, followed by a growing list of Turkish historians, Holocaust scholars conducting comparative studies, and other non-Armenians. These historians mined overlooked archives from various nations (though Ottoman records remained largely closed to those who did not support Turkey's position); injected sociological, psychological, and economic analysis into the growing body of literature; and integrated firsthand accounts by survivors, perpetrators, and third parties

to add to the understanding of the tragedy. Atop this mountain of evidence, the International Association of Genocide Scholars declared the tragedy a genocide in 1997. Three years later, 126 Holocaust scholars agreed.

The establishment of this consensus did not stop a small but steadfast group from contesting this categorization. Largely made up of Turkish scholars with a handful of historians from elsewhere, they continued to support the official Turkish narrative. Nor did the consensus mitigate the often contentious interaction among scholars. Regardless of the authenticity (or lack thereof) of their scholarship, by doubling as advocates—repeatedly testifying before Congress, for instance—the opposing camps tied their academic dispute to the political arena. And through it all, they largely talked past rather than to each other in an endless volley of attacks and counterattacks.

In 2000, Ronald Grigor Suny and Fatma Müge Göçek founded the Workshop on Armenian and Turkish Scholarship (WATS) to break this logjam. *A Question of Genocide* emerged from WATS's efforts (as well as from a series of meetings of the Mellon Foundation Sawyer Seminar on Mass Killing organized by the book's third editor, Norman M. Naimark). "The discussions" at the seven WATS workshops, the organizers explain in the book's introduction, "were free of partisanship and nationalism" (p. 4). After a decade of dialogue, the opposing "nationalist narratives were replaced by a single shared account" (p. 5). The most controversial area of contention remained beyond reach, however. The more than eighty participants failed to agree on whether a genocide took place. "The title of this volume," the two University of Michigan founders expound, "reflects both the certainty of some and the ambiguity of

others” on how to describe “the nature of the killings” (p. 10).

On one level, the book serves the field admirably. The fifteen pieces in the collection look at diverse—often overlooked—elements of the era through fresh eyes and new sources. Some, like Stephan H. Asourian’s exploration of the role of agrarian policies, look at broad influences. Others provide a narrow yet deep analysis, like Hans-Lukas Kieser’s examination of how a Turkish patriot transformed into a mass murderer. Contributors offer new insights into Germany’s role as an Ottoman ally, Russia’s presence on the Caucasian front, the role of Armenian political organizations, and the annihilation of the Assyrians. The collection also unveils the nuanced motives of and methods employed by the mass murderers and three essays add to the understanding of Turkey’s veil of silence that ultimately led to its unwavering policy of denial.

But at another level, the book disappoints by missing out on a unique opportunity to explore a topic that speaks not just to the heart of this ongoing controversy, but also to the entire profession—the historical process. Alongside the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the Armenian genocide remains among the most controversial topics in modern academia. WATS’s ability to bring together competing, and at times hostile and politicized, scholars offers lessons on the development of a historiography with few equals in the profession’s history.

The revelations proffered by the editors in the brief introduction leave a reader longing for more. Just how did WATS reach a “rough consensus” (p. 8)? Who refused to join that consensus and why? What did scholars do when faced with countervailing but convincing evidence? Who was left out of WATS and why? Did collaboration emerge from confrontation? How did external pressure influence the process, especially among the Turkish partici-

pants who were denounced and threatened for holding a conference in Istanbul? And most important, did the establishment of a shared narrative contribute to the establishment of truth or undermine it?

Several participants could have produced their own accounts to tackle the complex issues highlighted in the introduction. It would have been illuminating to hear from scholars who grudgingly acceded to new conclusions and revealed the difficulties on a personal and professional level that grew out of these admissions, or to see how the initial distrust among the participants crumbled over a span of ten years. The most edifying disclosures would have come from those participants who still questioned the applicability of the genocide label after a decade of dialogue.

The exclusion of these issues foregoes an opportunity to delve into areas of the profession that rarely receive much attention. What role does personal bias or archival access (or lack thereof) play in a scholar’s decision making? How is a historian influenced by colleagues? How do ossified positions clash against new truths and interpretations? What differentiates legitimate revisionism from the exploitation of the historical process?

It is understandable that the contributors wished to avoid breaching confidences and disclosing private conversations, or simply did not fathom producing a type of confessional writing unfamiliar to most historians. On its terms—as a scholarly addition to the understanding of the Armenian genocide, the late Ottoman Empire, and the beginning of the Turkish Republic—*A Question of Genocide* succeeds. Yet it could have offered revelations not just about events that took place a century ago but also about overcoming nationalistic pressure and deeply held biases in investigating and narrating the past. In essence, it could have offered lessons on the most difficult and noble functions of a historian.

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**Citation:** Michael Bobelian. Review of Suny, Ronald Grigor; Göçek, Fatma Müge; Naimark, Norman M., eds., *A Question of Genocide: Armenians and Turks at the End of the Ottoman Empire*. H-Human-Rights, H-Net Reviews. September, 2011.

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