Explaining the Unexplainable: Recent Trends in the Armenian Genocide Historiography

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Introduction

The historiography of the Armenian Genocide, one of the classic cases of genocide in the twentieth century, has developed considerably over the past three decades. New approaches provide more complex analyses of the genocide that venture beyond rudimentary and essentialist arguments and representations. Concomitantly, the denialist literature has also developed, presenting “alternative” ways of viewing the event in order to counter “Armenian allegations.” The latter group increasingly employs the medium of American academic presses and journals to provide more legitimacy to its controversial endeavor. This article concentrates on the development of the Armenian Genocide historiography in Western scholarship, primarily in Europe and the United States, during the past three decades. After positioning this development in the context of the global changes taking place at the time, it is clear that there are several approaches to interpreting the genocide. It is, of course, a daunting task to interpret the development of the Armenian Genocide historiography in its entirety. For the sake of brevity, I discuss the interpretations of several influential scholars. The primary aim is to understand the forms of the arguments they employ and the variety of causal arguments they provide in explaining the genocide. Toward the end of the article, I provide suggestions for further research in nascent areas of the field. I have chosen six important issues: debates of religion and continuum, debates of nationalism and continuum, cumulative policy
radicalization, demographic engineering and assimilation, state imperialism and contingency, and understanding the second phase of the Armenian Genocide. The development of the historiography cannot be understood without situating it in the larger global context.

Global Context of the Development of the Armenian Genocide Historiography

The historiography of the Armenian Genocide began to take shape immediately in the postgenocide period. This phase was characterized by rudimentary approaches taken mostly by Armenian scholars who were survivors of the genocide, written in their indigenous language. Their writing ranged from preliminary historical studies to memoirs of their experiences. In the name of academic objectivity, some historians have downplayed the importance of these sources in the reconstruction of the history of the Armenian Genocide. Additionally, because these materials were written by members of the victim group, others have argued that they cannot constitute valuable or reliable historical documents, because of their lack of objectivity. Following this line of reasoning, some Armenian historians have systematically avoided the use of Armenian sources to avoid having their scholarship labeled by international historians or Turkish scholars as biased.

Another set of useful sources is the history books written by pan-Armenian unions in the Armenian diaspora during the interwar and Cold War periods. Their main objective was to preserve the local histories of the provinces, towns, and villages of their historic homeland. Ninety percent of these works were written in Armenian. While one could argue that much of this literature represents a way of mourning the lost homeland, whatever was written during this period is unique. As far as I know, there is no popular counterpart mirroring the same period of time in Turkish historiography. Although some of these pieces sound more folkloric/amateur than methodologically sound and historical, this does not negate the fact that they provide invaluable information on the history of the Armenian Genocide. It is only recently that these studies and memoirs began to gain momentum in Western scholarship as a result of the relentless efforts of Armenian historians and organizations such as the Zoryan Institute. During the last two decades, three important projects brought forth the importance of these volumes. These projects, which must be applauded, are as follows: the thirteen-volume series *Historic Armenian Cities and Provinces*, edited by Richard Hovannisian of the University of California, Los Angeles; the *Houshamadyan* project, based in Berlin and directed by Vahé Tashjian; and the translation of important memoirs about the genocide by the Gomidas Institute, headed by Ara Sarafian.
I deem it necessary here to mention three examples of such translations. The first is Vahram Dadrian’s diaries, titled *To the Desert: Pages from My Diary.* Dadrian was born in Chorum in 1900. He began writing his diaries at the age of fifteen, starting on May 24, 1915, during the fateful period for the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire. He and his family were deported to Aleppo and then to Jerash (Jordan), until the conclusion of World War I. He survived the harsh conditions of the deportation and returned to Istanbul in 1919, where he prepared his diary notes for publication. The accounts were published in Armenian as a book in 1945. In this unique work Dadrian recounted the story of the fate of thousands of Armenians who were sent to Aleppo, Ma’an, and al-Salt. He provides ample information about the genocide through discussing his family’s fate as they survived and died during the deportation. His diaries are crucial to understanding the anatomy of the genocide.

The second work is Yervant Odian’s *Accursed Years,* first published in Armenian in 1919. Odian, who is considered one of the most important Armenian satirists in the Ottoman Empire, was an eyewitness to the Armenian Genocide. He avoided arrest in Istanbul on April 24, 1915, but he was eventually arrested and deported to the Syrian Desert. He escaped death by becoming a translator for a German official in Der Zor. During this period he witnessed the fate of the other Armenian deportees. His memoirs raise important questions about the prevailing perceptions of the Armenian Genocide, mainly how such a famous Armenian intellectual was able to survive the genocide in Der Zor. The third book, by Thomas K. Mugerditchian, is *The Diyarbekir Massacres and Kurdish Atrocities.* First published in Armenian in 1919, the book provides ample information about the Diyarbakir massacres. It reaffirms the fact that these are the best-documented massacres of the Armenian Genocide.

There is no doubt that the three most important Western figures involved in establishing the basis for the genesis of the Armenian Genocide historiography were Arnold Toynbee, Johannes Lepsius, and US Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire Henry Morgenthau. The development of the professional historiography in the past three decades took place in the context of larger regional and global developments and was influenced by wider debates in the public sphere within Turkey and the West. To understand the global context of these developments, it is beneficial to situate them in the proper periods. Historian Hans Lukas-Kieser provides five phases of historiographical development concerning the destruction of the Ottoman Armenians: 1) the phase of the genocide, 1915–1923; 2) in the shadows of European history,
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1923–1945; 3) from the Genocide Convention in 1948 to the Armenian revival in the 1960s; 4) international debates, Holocaust studies, and the shadow of Armenian terrorism, 1970s–1980s; and 5) the transnational, postnational period in history writing since the 1990s. One needs to approach Kieser’s periodization critically because he does not incorporate developments within the Armenian public sphere in general, or in Armenian historiography in particular. For example, he does not discuss the major edited volume by Kersam Aharonian, published on the fiftieth anniversary of the genocide. What interests us here is the last phase, that of history writing since the 1990s. But before dwelling on this, it is necessary to discuss Armenian Genocide historiography written in English prior to 1990.

Since the fiftieth anniversary in 1965, the English-language studies have concentrated on four areas. The first focused on the documentation of the events. Extensive effort was invested in preparing collections of archival material, based on the French, Austrian, and German archives. This was an important step toward reinforcing the historical veracity of the Armenian Genocide in the Western scholarship against the rising tide of denialism. The second area focused on compiling all the relevant news pieces and eyewitness accounts from the American, Canadian, and Australian press. This provided not only ample information about the reaction of the Western press but also accounts from people on the ground. The third area pertained to memoirs and autobiographies written in English by survivors of the genocide. Rare accounts, they provide a plethora of information about the anatomy of the genocide, covering the deportations in, for example, Marash, Harput, Sivas, Trabzon, Konya, Malatya, and Husseinig. The fourth area concentrated on preliminary studies. Despite the fact that most of these works are descriptive in nature, they established the basis for future studies of the Armenian Genocide; the most important are by Vahakn N. Dadrian, Yves Ternon, and Richard Hovannisian.

The Last Decade of the Twentieth Century

The 1990s should be considered one of the most important phases in the history of the second half of the twentieth century. Many of its developments had direct and indirect impacts on the development of the Armenian Genocide historiography. The opening negotiations on the possible entry of the Turkish Republic into the European Union caused a crack in the Turkish wall of silence pertaining to the Armenian Genocide. External pressure on Turkey by European governments and the Armenian lobby also contributed to the pollination of the
discourse on the topic. The Turkish government’s active repression of a subject that had been taboo since the early days of the republic was finally crumbling. Sociologist Fatma Müge Göçek explains this history of denial in a fascinating manner in her latest book, *Denial of Violence: Ottoman Past, Turkish Present, and Collective Violence against the Armenians, 1789–2009.* It is in the last decade of the twentieth century that we see new critical studies in Turkish historiography that deviate from the official narrative (*resmi tarih*) emerging in the West. The historiography of the Armenian Genocide got a boost in the Western academic sphere with the development of Holocaust Studies in general and comparative genocide studies in particular.

What highlights the period is the emergence of global history as a discipline in tandem with postnationalist approaches to history, both of which had a profound impact on the development of the field of comparative genocide studies. Thus, it is in the 1990s that we see a new trend emerging among Turkish liberal historians writing on the Armenian Genocide. Most of these scholars happened to be outside Turkey, reaping the fruits of academic freedom in their quest to counter the official Turkish narrative. Moreover, the mass violence inflicted upon the other marginalized Christian groups within the Ottoman Empire, mainly the Assyrians and Greeks, began to be recognized in the academic scholarship. The most important contribution to the field has been by David Gaunt in his *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors: Muslim-Christian Relations in Eastern Anatolia during World War I*, published in 2006.

One of the earliest academic exchanges about the Armenian Genocide between an Armenian and a Turkish scholar took place in a 1997 Dutch documentary titled *A Wall of Silence*, directed by Dorothée Forma of the Humanist Broadcasting Foundation, which dealt with the academic relationship between Vahakn N. Dadrian and Taner Akçam. In 1998 an academic exchange took place between Armenian and Turkish scholars in one of the issues of the *Armenian Forum*, edited by Ara Sarafian, on the factors that led to the Armenian Genocide. It featured Ronald Grigor Suny, Vahakn N. Dadrian, Engin Akarlı, and Selim Deringil. The core issues within these exchanges were contingency in the Armenian Genocide and the motivations of the Young Turks in perpetrating the genocide. Exchanges between scholars rose to a new level in the year 2000, when two important international and interdisciplinary groups featuring Armenian, Turkish, and European scholars met to examine the Armenian Genocide and the last phase of the Ottoman Empire. Known as the Workshop of Armenian-Turkish Scholarship (WATS), it was organized by Ronald Grigor Suny and his
colleagues Fatma Müge Göçek and Gerard Libaridian from the University of Michigan–Ann Arbor. First convened in 2000 at the University of Chicago, it was held again at the University of Michigan in 2002. WATS has initiated a total of nine meetings since its inception, the last of which took place in October 2015 at Sabancı University. WATS’s efforts culminated in a volume edited by Ronald Grigor Suny, Fatma Müge Göçek, and Norman N. Naimark titled *A Question of Genocide: Armenians and the Turks at the End of the Ottoman Empire.* Despite some shortcomings, the book should be regarded as both an important contribution to the historiography and the worthy continuation of a collaborative effort to address the different dimensions and approaches to the history of the Armenian Genocide.

Another major development in the field was the conference titled “Ottoman Armenians during the Era of Imperial Decline: Academic Responsibility and Issues of Democracy,” which was held in Istanbul in September 2005. Organized by Boğaziçi, Bilgi, and Sabancı universities, it had been scheduled to take place at Boğaziçi University on May 25–27, 2005. The conference was deferred because of the strong reactions of the government and both the ruling and opposition parties. Following Minister of Justice Cemil Çiçek’s characterization of the conference “as treason against Turkey” (*Türkiye’ye hiyanet olarak*), Boğaziçi University announced the postponement of the conference. However, after weeks of deliberations and numerous attempts by the Turkish government to block the conference, it was held on September 24–25 at Bilgi University. The conference is considered an important step for Turkish liberal historiography because, for the first time since the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923, a meeting within a Turkish university questioned the state narrative on one of the most sensitive issues: the Armenian Genocide, whether or not it was given the name. Of course one should not forget that these developments took place parallel to a time in which the Turkish state intensified its denialist campaigns.

**Interpretations of the Armenian Genocide within the Historiography:**

**The Debate of Religion and Continuum**

One of the earliest interpretations of the Armenian Genocide in western academic spheres dealt with the correlation between Islam and the fate of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. The pioneer of this approach was Vahakn N. Dadrian, the prominent genocide scholar and sociologist whose work immensely influenced the genesis of Armenian Genocide studies in the western hemisphere; he has been writing about the genocide since the
1970s. It was not until 1995, however, that he published his major work, *The History of the Armenian Genocide: Ethnic Conflict from the Balkans to Anatolia to the Caucasus*. Considered a classic, it is based heavily on Turkish, German, English, French, and Armenian archives. His other important book about the factors that led to the genocide, *Warrant for Genocide: The Key Elements of the Turko-Armenian Conflict*, was published in 1998. By analyzing the Ottoman theocratic system, Dadrian argues in these two works that the genocide stemmed primarily from religion and secondarily from nationality. In the former book Dadrian argues that to understand the nationality conflicts, it is necessary to examine Islam as a major determinant in their genesis. According to him, a “culture of massacre” developed in the Ottoman Empire that rationalized the necessity of state violence as “a weapon to deal with the outbreaks of internal nationality conflicts.” In the latter work, Dadrian argues that the Armenian Genocide was the culmination of a deep-seated Turco-Armenian conflict that had existed in the empire for centuries. He contends that this was mainly the result of the incompatibility of the theocratic Ottoman state with the rule over a heterogeneous population having diverse religions and cultures. He views the nineteenth-century Tanzimat reforms in the empire as “a repudiation of fundamental socio-religious traditions deeply enmeshed in the Turkish psyche, and institutionalized throughout the empire.” This would result in the enactment of violence against minorities to prevent reform or concessions to them. Dadrian is a staunch supporter of the *continuum approach*. He views the earlier massacres—the Hamidian Massacres (1894–96) and the Adana Massacres of 1909—as “a prelude to, if not a rehearsal for, the World War I genocide.” According to him World War I provided the “opportunity structure,” the necessary conditions for genocide. Dadrian makes an important observation: these earlier massacres were committed with impunity. He argues that past impunity emboldened the Young Turks to commit acts of violence toward the vulnerable Armenian population.

Nationalism and Continuum

Nationalism has been regarded by some scholars as another causal argument in explaining the genocide, according to which the Armenian Genocide was the by-product of the Young Turks’ nationalist ideology. This argument was first made in 1986, in *The Armenian Genocide in Perspective*, edited by historian Richard G. Hovannisian. Most of the articles in this volume were limited to explaining the Armenian Genocide as being the result of Turkish nationalist ideology and the
political ambitions of the leaders of the ruling party, the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP).\textsuperscript{41} Over the years, Hovannisian edited multiple interdisciplinary volumes on the Armenian Genocide, and his articles and edited volumes should be regarded as significant contributions to the field. The edited volumes are: \textit{The Armenian Genocide: History, Politics, Ethics} (1992), \textit{Remembrance and Denial: The Case of the Armenian Genocide} (1998), \textit{Looking Backward, Moving Forward: Confronting the Armenian Genocide} (2003), and \textit{The Armenian Genocide: Cultural and Ethical Legacies} (2007).\textsuperscript{42} I will concentrate only on the latter volume, which is a collection of papers from the proceedings of the ninetieth anniversary conference of the Armenian Genocide, \textit{After Nine Decades: The Enduring Legacy of the Armenian Genocide}, organized by Hovannisian at the University of California, Los Angeles, in April 2005.

In the first article of this work, Hovannisian discusses his latest views. He says that the “combination of a xenophobic nationalist mindset and a total war ethic produced a lethal atmosphere from which the Armenians could not escape.”\textsuperscript{43} Here Hovannisian presents the arguments \textit{for and against} continuum of genocidal intent and contends that “these are not mutually exclusive.”\textsuperscript{44} He argues that the genocide of 1915 was quantitatively and qualitatively different from the Hamidian massacres of the 1890s. According to him, the Hamidian massacres were a futile effort to preserve the status quo. In contrast “the extreme wing of the CUP . . . did not want to maintain the status quo but rather to alter it drastically by creating a new society based on a single ethno-religious, linguistic, and cultural identity.”\textsuperscript{45} In doing so they rejected the old system of plural society and the confessional-based \textit{millet} system. In this new order there was no place for Armenians and other non-Muslim and non-Turkish elements. They all had to be either assimilated to fit in the new order or eliminated. Despite the difference, Hovannisian argues that the entire period from the 1890s to the 1920s “constituted a continuum of ethnic cleansing, forced religious conversion, and de-Armenianization of the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey.”\textsuperscript{46} He concludes by arguing that the Armenian Genocide was indeed premeditated but not necessarily inevitable. Developments in World War I provided the cover under which to intensify and accelerate the cleansing process and enact the final solution.\textsuperscript{47}

Demographic Engineering, Assimilation, and the Armenian Genocide

During the past decade historians of the Armenian Genocide introduced a new interpretation of the events that focuses on demographic engineering. Historians such as Fuat Dündar, Uğur Ümit Üngör, and Taner Akçam became the pioneers
of expanding our knowledge about the relationship between demographic engineering and the Armenian Genocide. For example, in The Young Turks' Crime against Humanity: The Armenian Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in the Ottoman Empire (2012), historian and sociologist Taner Akçam provides new evidence from the Ottoman archives to demonstrate that the Armenian Genocide and the expulsion of the Greeks from the Ottoman Empire were part of a deliberate CUP policy intended to get rid of the empire’s Christians. In the case of the Greeks, this was done through ethnic cleansing, and in the case of the Armenians, it was carried out through systematic annihilation. To prove this Akçam relies on 600 documents from the Prime Ministerial Ottoman Archives. By uncovering the central roles played by demographic engineering and assimilation, Akçam attempts to both change how the Armenian Genocide is understood and show that physical destruction was not the only aspect of the genocidal process. Akçam starts his work by concentrating on the ethnic cleansing of the Greeks, which the Ottoman government pursued throughout 1913 and 1914, until its entry into the war. Akçam sees clear continuity between the ethnic cleansing of the Greeks and that of the Armenians, arguing that “the policies that were set in motion against the Greeks between 1913 and 1914 appear to foreshadow the subsequent wartime deportations of the Armenians.” The difference between the two policies is that while the Greeks were deported and expelled with brutality, the Armenians were targeted for outright annihilation. In the decision to exterminate the Armenians, the CUP’s prime objective was the homogenization of the population of Anatolia. Akçam strongly believes in the concept of “process” and argues that the annihilation of the Armenians did not result from a single decision on a given date; rather, the genocide appears to have been “the cumulative outcome of a series of increasingly radical decisions, each triggering the next in the cascading sequence of events.” He contends that the final decisions to eliminate the Armenian population were made during discussions held in Istanbul at the end of March 1915. The elimination was done by using a dual-track mechanism: the Ministry of Interior sent deportation orders to the governors of the provinces through official channels that were then forwarded to the security service units in the region, and party secretaries sent coded orders for massacres to the provinces.

What shaped the Armenian deportations, according to Akçam, were demographic anxieties: “The population ratios where Armenians were deported and where they remained were decisive, and the deportations were carried out accordingly.” The government’s population and settlement policy was to guarantee that the number
of Armenians being resettled in a certain area not exceed 5 to 10 percent of the total population. Despite the fact that the government applied the same principle to the Greeks, in the case of the Armenians this demographic engineering took the form of genocide. Thus the Armenian Genocide, for Akçam, was not implemented only as demographic engineering but also as destruction and annihilation, and it is here that the percentage principle played a crucial role: care was taken that neither the number of Armenians remaining behind nor those deported to Syria would exceed 5 to 10 percent of the population in the areas in which they “settled.” According to Akçam such a result could be achieved only through annihilation.

Argument of Cumulative Policy Radicalization and the Genocide

With the development of the Armenian Genocide historiography, new approaches reexamined the increasing extremism of the CUP’s policies toward the Armenians. This approach negated the fact that the genocide was premeditated, an approach that was prevalent in the historiography’s earlier phases. Some historians propounded the idea that the genocide was a by-product of the cumulative radicalization of the CUP’s Armenian policies. The prominent historian of this approach is Donald Bloxham, whose article “The Armenian Genocide of 1915–1916: Cumulative Radicalization and the Development of a Destruction Policy” was the first to highlight this issue. A couple of years later, Bloxham published The Great Game of Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism, and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians (2005), in which he argues that the Armenian Genocide was “an archetypal example of a nationalist genocide.” He adds that “the genocide represents a clear logic of ethnic nationalism when carried to its absolute extreme in multinational societies.” According to Bloxham, the CUP wanted to create a European state model of ethnic-national homogeneity. An important aspect of this effort was the expropriation of Christian property, which was a decisive factor in creating a Turkish Muslim bourgeoisie. This class became an engine not only for Turkish nationalism but also for economic independence. World War I accelerated the tendencies of exclusion and chauvinism “in the fullest and most unrestrained form, through murder.” Bloxham contends that the Armenian Genocide was an ideological response to real external and internal structural stresses that had amassed on the empire by 1915. He does not believe in the existence of a pre-World War I blueprint to exterminate the Armenians. He argues that despite the great deterioration of CUP-Armenian relations, especially after the Balkan Wars and the Armenian Reform Project of 1914, “there is little evidence that a policy physically to destroy the community was forged prior to the First World War” (my emphasis).
Bloxham’s central argument is that the genocide emerged from a series of more limited measures, initially implemented regionally, that then transformed into an empire-wide plan through a process of cumulative policy radicalization. He maintains that it is difficult to determine the exact time in this period of radicalization that murder and atrocity transformed into genocide. According to him, it is only by the early summer of 1915 that it is possible to speak about a “crystallized policy of general killing and death by attrition.” After the Sarıkamış defeat on January 15, 1915, the Armenian Van uprising (April 19–May 17, 1915), and the Anglo-French assault on the Dardanelles (April 25, 1915–January 9, 1916), Turkish policy toward the Armenians became more radicalized, turning from deportations from selected regions in the previous period to the general deportation of all Armenians. Bloxham states that “we should not imagine the deportation decision signified a decision for total murder.” For Bloxham, the Van uprising is “precisely illustrative of a process of cumulative radicalization toward a policy of genocide”; he maintains that the relationship between intention and contingency remained intimate during the course of the genocide. He concludes by arguing that the Armenian Genocide and the expropriation of Armenian properties were central to the development of the Turkish Republic in 1923.

State Imperialism, Contingency, and the Armenian Genocide

While some historians have emphasized the fact that the Armenian Genocide was a premeditated event, and World War I provided the “opportunity structure,” others have placed more emphasis on arguing that the Armenian Genocide was a contingent affair. Historian and political scientist Ronald Grigor Suny is a proponent of this approach. Rather than concentrating on religion or nationalism as a factor, Suny considers ideology to have been an important factor in the Ottoman plans for the Armenians. For Suny, the Young Turk ideology was an unstable mix of Turkish nationalism, pan-Turanism, pan-Islamism, and several forms of Ottomanism. He argues that genocide did not take place so the Young Turks could create a “Turkey for the Turks,” or a homeland for the Turkish nation; rather, he contends that it was carried out “as a perverse and extreme security measure based in an ethnoreligious framing that depicted Armenians as a deadly threat to the empire.” Suny firmly maintains that even on the eve of the genocide the imperial mission of the CUP still involved ruling a multinational empire. In his latest book he emphasizes the fact that the Young Turks who carried out the genocide were never purely Turkish ethnonationalists, nor were they religious fanatics; they remained Ottoman modernizers in their fundamental
self-conception, and their aim was to preserve the territorial integrity of the empire. According to him the murder of hundreds of thousands of Armenians was primarily an effort to save a crumbling empire.\textsuperscript{67}

Suny argues that there were three main factors that led to the genocide: First, he maintains that there was a shift in the nature of the Ottoman Empire from a traditional multireligious state to a modernized, centralized state with overlapping ideologies of Turkish nationalism, pan-Turanism, and pan-Islamism, which created a new source for political legitimation. With this shift in the nature of the Ottoman Empire, the Young Turks undermined the traditional sources of legitimacy.\textsuperscript{68} Second, he contends that as a result of these transformations, there was a shift in the attitude of Armenians and Turks toward one another that led to growing animosity between them.\textsuperscript{69} Third, he argues that the real threat from the Russians and the British during World War I and the imagined danger from the Armenians provided the radical clique of the Young Turks with a new opportunity to solve the Armenian Question.\textsuperscript{70}

Like the other scholars, Suny contends that sometime in February or March of 1915, the CUP decided to implement a vicious policy of deportation, coupled with selective killing, to clear the region of Armenians. This policy, initiated by the state in the context of war, rapidly deteriorated into a massive campaign of murder.\textsuperscript{71} For Suny genocide came to be seen by the Young Turks as an opportunity to rid the empire of the Armenian problem, which had become an excuse for the European and Russian intervention in the empire’s internal affairs. He does not view the genocide as a by-product of Turkish animosity toward the Armenians. He concludes:

Rather than a long-planned and carefully orchestrated program of extermination, the Armenian Genocide was more a vengeful and determined act of suppression that turned into an opportunistic policy to rid Anatolia of Armenians once and for all, eliminating the wedge that they provided for foreign intervention in the region, and open the way for the fantastic dream of a Turanian empire.\textsuperscript{72}

The Second Phase of the Genocide

Until the late 1990s most of the scholarship tended to view the Armenian Genocide as a singular event that began with the deportations and ended with the destruction of the Armenian communities in Der Zor. Historian Raymond Kévorkian challenged this view with his groundbreaking work. Unlike other historians, he firmly states that it is essential to exploit the Armenian sources, comparing them with materials provided by European diplomats and missionaries and also with each other. Kévorkian for decades researched the Aram Andonian collection preserved in
the AGBU Nubarian Library in Paris. The collection consists of sixty-two cases, amounting to about five thousand documents that were collected by Andonian between 1918 and 1920. They recount the events and the status of the Armenian refugees in Syria and Mesopotamia. Based on the fifteen files pertaining to these two regions, Kévorkian published major studies of these events, which he characterized as the second phase of the genocide (la deuxième phase du génocide), lasting from February to December 1916. In this work, Kévorkian presented the “documentary foundations of this period of the genocide, hitherto virtually unknown to historians, trying among other things to reconstruct the network of concentration camps set up locally by the sub-directorate of the deportees in Aleppo.”

By examining the region-by-region process of deportation and annihilation, in his latest book Kévorkian demonstrates that the Young Turks’ liquidation plan targeted only the populations of the six eastern provinces considered to be the Armenians’ historical lands. Kévorkian contends that the convoys sent out from the eastern provinces were systematically destroyed on the way and that only a small minority of deportees arrived at their final destination. In contrast those deported from the colonies in Anatolia or Thrace were sent to Syria, reaching as far as Cilicia. The second phase of the genocide targeted these survivors, most of whom came from Anatolia or Cilicia. Kévorkian argues that this phase of violence, including the concentration camps in Syria or Upper Mesopotamia, was long a terra incognita for scholars. According to him the decision to destroy these remaining deportees was taken in late February or early March 1916 and affected 500,000 surviving deportees who had reached Syria and Mesopotamia at least six months earlier.

Kévorkian contends that the second phase of the genocide “illustrates the Young Turk Central Committee’s genocidal will even better than the first, for the Central Committee could not, in this case, take shelter behind its discourse about security and its theory about a plot against the Turkish state.” This phase aimed at destroying a population, the great majority of whom were women and children.

Conclusion and Suggestions

The above examples demonstrate that the Armenian Genocide historiography has developed from monolithic and essentialist interpretations to multicausal interpretations, by using new methodologies and unearthing new sources, beginning in the late 1990s. Concentrating on a few approaches, I strove to demonstrate the level of sophistication that the historiography of the Armenian Genocide has reached since the last decade of the twentieth century. Despite the fact that all the scholars I have discussed agree that the crime perpetrated
against the Armenians was genocide, they disagree on important issues pertaining to premeditation, contingency, continuum, and motives. While it is difficult for a scholar to endorse one approach over another, I believe that one can appropriate different aspects in constructing new approaches to the genocide. At the end of the day, history is about interpreting the past, and interpretation is based on the critical evaluation of available documents, and using sound methodological approaches. Of course historians’ inclinations also affect the results. Until we have full access to all the archives pertaining to the period, most importantly the military archives in Ankara (Askeri Tarih ve Stratejik Etüt Başkanlığı Arşivi, ATASE), we will not be able to reach conclusions about the major issues, such as premeditation, contingency, and cumulative radicalization, that have been debated by historians.

Despite the positive developments in the field of the Armenian Genocide, with its variegated interpretations ranging from religion and continuum to state imperialism and contingency, there are many areas within the field that remain in their infancy.79 These areas are:

1. microhistorical approaches to the Armenian Genocide;
2. the Armenian Genocide in the broader context of the Christian genocides in the empire;
3. an in-depth examination of the second phase of the genocide;
4. the economic dimension of the Armenian Genocide;
5. comparative perspectives on the Armenian Genocide;
6. women and children during the Armenian Genocide;
7. humanitarianism and humanitarian intervention in the Armenian Genocide;
8. cultural genocide; and
9. oral history and the Armenian Genocide.

I would like here to concentrate on the microhistorical approaches. I deem it necessary to understand the Armenian Genocide from the perspective of the peripheral regions. It is well known today that the genocide was not a monolithic process. It was dependent to a large extent on the local exigencies and most importantly on the cooperation and resistance of local actors (elites, tribal leaders, notables, gendarmes, and so on). The dynamics of power within each region were different, and these dictated the course of the massacres. Kévorkian, in addition to his contribution to our understanding of the second phase of the Armenian Genocide, has also contributed to the microhistorical study of the genocide by meticulously covering the different provinces.80
In terms of monographs, however, the two most important microhistorical studies of the genocide remain those by Uğur Ümit Üngör and Hilmar Kaiser, which are detailed case studies of the genocide in the province of Diyarbekir.81 In his path-breaking book, Üngör, by concentrating on the province of Diyarbekir and the destruction of its Christian and Kurdish communities, argues that from 1913 to 1950 the Young Turk regime subjected eastern Turkey, a region that used to be an ethnically heterogeneous area, to different types of homogenization processes in order to incorporate it into the Turkish nation-state. By using an intriguing conceptual approach, Üngör argues that the regime used different types of emerging technologies of population engineering, such as physical destruction, forced assimilation, deportation, and memory control. His book is extremely valuable because it argues for the clear presence of continuity in population policies between the first Young Turk regime, represented by the CUP (1913–1918), and the second, represented by the Republican People’s Party (1919–1950).

In his thought-provoking book, Hilmar Kaiser reconstructs the annihilation of the Armenians in the region of Diyarbekir. Based on correspondence of the Ottoman Ministry of Interior with the provincial authorities of Diyarbekir, Kaiser demonstrates the decision-making processes and policies enacted by the Ottoman central government and the regional and local agents. He argues that the deportation and extermination of Armenians appeared to be a “chaotic process” rather than a premeditated, smoothly organized crime.82 His study offers a reassessment of Diyarbekir’s governor Reshid Bey’s role in the massacres, and he argues that the decision to commit crimes, and the manner in which they were perpetrated, was often a local affair, contrary to what has been accepted among historians. Kaiser does not employ the word genocide in his book. He prefers to use the term extermination to describe the killings in the province of Diyarbekir.83

It is the hope of the author of this article that the new generation of historians builds upon the vital contributions that have been made in the field in the past three decades, and continues their path toward researching the areas in the field that remain in their infancy. By doing so they will not only contribute to our understanding of the different facts of the Armenian Genocide, but also contribute to our understanding of the ways in which state orchestrated violence influenced the different dimensions of societies in the 20th century.
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Notes


4. The Zoryan Institute for Contemporary Research and Documentation was established in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1982, followed by The Zoryan Institute of Canada, Inc., in 1984. Both institutes are devoted to the documentation, study, and dissemination of material related to genocide and human rights, diaspora studies, and Armenian studies. See www.zoryaninstitute.org.


7. See various publications by the Gomidas Institute: http://gomidas.org/books.


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28 See *Armenian Forum* 2 (Summer 1998).


35 Ibid., xxiii.


37 Ibid., 165.

38 Ibid., 20.

39 Ibid., 156.


Ibid., 6.

Ibid.

Ibid., 7.

Ibid., 15.


This was applied particularly against the Greeks in Thrace and the Aegean littoral.

Akçam, The Young Turks’ Crime against Humanity, 94.

Ibid., 128.

Ibid., 194.

Ibid., 227.

Ibid., 48.

Ibid., 243.


63  Ibid., 102.
64  Ibid., 111.
65  Ibid., 121.
69  Ibid., 97.
70  Ibid.
71  Ibid., 97–98.
73  Aram Andonian (1875–1952) was an Armenian columnist, novelist, historian, and editor of periodicals. He, along with the other Armenian intellectuals, was arrested on April 24, 1915. On the way to Chankiri, he fell from the carriage and broke his hip. He was sent back to recover, so he did not share the fate of the others in the group, who were murdered. Eventually, he was able to escape and join a caravan of deportees. In 1916 he arrived in Meskene, one of the Armenian concentration camps, where he witnessed the horrendous condition of the Armenian refugees. Eventually he was able to escape to Aleppo and then was exiled to Lebanon. For his biography, see Rita Soulahian Kuyumjian, The Survivor: Biography of Aram Andonian (London: Taderon Press, a joint publication of Gomidas Institute and Tekeyan Cultural Association, 2010).
77  Ibid.
78  Ibid., 809.
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80 Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide*.


83 Ibid., 10.