

**THE THIRTY-YEAR GENOCIDE: TURKEY'S  
DESTRUCTION OF ITS CHRISTIAN  
MINORITIES, 1894–1924**  
(BENNY MORRIS AND DROR ZE'EVİ)

August 6, 2019

This book, a massive study by two Israeli historians, aspires to answer why and how Turkey exterminated its Christian population in the thirty years between 1894 and 1924. Usually this extermination, or part of it, is referred to as the Armenian Genocide, except by the Turks, who to this day deny their crimes, and so don't refer to it at all. That usual term is misleading, however. As Benny Morris and Dror Ze'evi document exhaustively, the primary target was all Christians, and the primary goal religious cleansing of the Turkish nation. Proving this is the object of *The Thirty-Year Genocide*.

No serious historian denies the Genocide occurred. Not even the Turks deny that they killed Christians, though they minimize the numbers and, more importantly, ascribe the killings to their justified reaction to perfidious Armenians and Greeks, rebellious and disloyal, supposedly working to further the interests of Russia, Greece or other enemies of Turkey. Disproving this claim is the other major object of *The Thirty-Year Genocide*.

The authors identify three distinct phases of the Genocide, each with somewhat different motivations and practices, but all with the same lethal core rationale: 1894–1896, 1915–1916, and 1919–1924. According to them, theirs is the first major study of the first and third phases. A central premise of this book is that although a different Turkish government was in charge during each phase (respectively, Sultan Abdülhamid II; the “Young Turks”; and Mustafa Kemal), they were in complete agreement, for somewhat differing reasons, on the need to eliminate all of Turkey's Christians. As the authors summarize:

At play were fears of foreign machinations and interference, Turkish nationalism, ethnic rivalries, economic envy, and a desire to maintain political and social dominance. Perpetrators sought power, wealth, and sexual gratification. A combination of these motivations was manifest in each period and location. In the course of our research we have also

concluded that these forces were joined by another overarching element: Islam. As an ethos and an ideology, Islam played a cardinal role throughout the process, in each of its stages.

The immediate objection by some will be, I suspect, that post-Ottoman Turkey was supposedly an aggressively secular state, so claiming Islam bound together the latter two phases of the Genocide must be historically inaccurate. However, as the authors show, putative secularism of the top leadership did not change the view of nearly all Turks, from top to bottom, that Turkey was a Muslim state and that non-Muslims had to go. Kemal may have wanted to reduce the power of the clerics; he was in total agreement with them that Christians were a dangerous alien presence in Turkey that needed to disappear, and nearly every Turk, whatever his religiosity, was happy to cooperate to make that happen. Supposed secularism had no effect at all in diminishing the Genocide, or the cardinal role of Islam in it.

The authors carefully describe their research. Most of the relevant Turkish archives are sealed, and those that are not have been carefully purged of incriminating material over the past hundred years, though enough shows up to corroborate some specific events. The bulk of evidence, and it is very bulky, is contemporaneous writings from Western observers throughout the dying Ottoman Empire, ranging from pro-Turkish diplomats (including the historian Arnold Toynbee) to anti-Turkish Christian missionaries. The authors examine and cross-reference these sources, as well as news reports, summaries made immediately after World War I of Turkish documents that have since disappeared, and other sources such as memoirs. From the beginning, the authors knew that the Turkish response to any scholarship about the Genocide (which can also be seen in reactions to this book) is always, and has been for a century, to simultaneously claim that it is all lies, and that anyway the victims deserved it, and, by the way, the Armenians and Greeks did the same things that the Turks didn't do. Still, in their usual careful manner, Morris and Ze'evi examine and discuss, and then dismiss, each of these contradictory objections as transparently false.

It's not really surprising that to this day the Turks conspire to deny what they did. They were never conquered, and so have never been forced by others to face up to their sins. During the Cold War, the United

States, which usually performs the role of global moral enforcer, had good reason to not annoy the Turks, so the Genocide faded further into the background. And even today, nobody, except perhaps the Russians, and naturally the Armenians and the Greeks, has much reason to talk about the Genocide. As a result, most discussion of it is confined to academic works, and occasional mentions in the newspaper, usually when Turkey throws a fit upon the mention of their crime by some ambassador or global leader.

As the nineteenth century wound down, the rise of nationalism combined with the accelerating decline of the Ottoman Empire to unsettle the Turks, who had generally lived more or less in peace with their subjugated Christians, so long as they hewed to the requirements of *dhimmi* status. The Russo-Turkish war, ending in 1878, resulted in Turkish losses in the Balkans and, perhaps more importantly, a siege mentality combined with an inferiority complex for the Turkish ruling class. Armenians and Greeks were very numerous in both rural and urban areas of Turkey; they were there long before the Turks arrived, of course, and many urban Greeks stayed after the Ottomans conquered Constantinople in 1453.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the Armenian intellectual elite began to foment some Armenian national sentiment—more, surprisingly, than the Greeks, who by this time had an actual nearby nation to look to for support. As a result, a small, but active, Armenian independence movement operated in portions of the Empire. However, the actual threat from Armenians to Turkish interests or lives was nil. The Greeks lacked a similar independence movement—for reasons that partially escape me, but could be various, the Greeks even today tend to take a highly conciliatory attitude toward the Muslims. This is true, for example, of the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church, and was true of Greeks and their religious leadership during this time period as well.

The first phase of the Genocide, under the Sultan Abdülhamid, from 1894 to 1896, was disorganized, just like the Empire of the time. That did not make it less effective; it is easy to kill masses of people without tight central control, if you don't care how it's done and you can appeal to varying motives, from Islamic supremacy to the desire to steal to the desire to rape. Most Christian villages were already under the thumb of

local Muslim tribes, often Kurds, who had long preyed on them without the government interfering, and it was not a big step to simply encourage the Kurds to make an end of the sheep entirely, paying them to do so if necessary. In larger towns, however, the local administration generally coordinated an assault on the Armenian population, upon orders from higher up. Greeks were largely spared in this phase, aside from occasional impromptu massacres by over-zealous local administrators.

Very soon the authors establish the pattern for this book; a village-by-village, town-by-town, area-by-area close examination of what happened to the victims of the Genocide. The broad process is similar everywhere; the result almost always the same. Any variations are in the details. Torture and rape, along with simple killing, were both nearly universal and explicitly condoned by those administering the Genocide. (The authors note that in all their research, which documents innumerable rapes and forcing of young girls and women into permanent sexual slavery, including establishment of public slave markets, not once did they ever come across any reference to any punishment of a Turk for any sexual crime.) Killing was sometimes done on the spot, but very many times victims were marched out of their home area, for "resettlement," and shot, or hacked to death, along the way in isolated areas. Armenian property was then confiscated and shared out among Muslim neighbors, or hired Kurdish or Circassian killers, or local Ottoman officials. The Turks did not care that those killed were very economically productive and in many cases provided craft and professional services difficult to replace; such arguments carried no weight with the authorities. Rinse and repeat, off and on, for thirty years.

This first phase ended up with, the authors decide after carefully evaluating various alternative calculations, about 100,000 Christians (almost all Armenians) directly murdered, and at least that many more, and perhaps twice as many, dying of resulting causes, including exposure to the elements and disease. That was small potatoes compared to the second phase, which overlapped World War I. The authors go to great lengths to analyze possible motives for this second phase, during which the so-called Young Turks, formally called the Committee of Union and Progress, ruled. The war was one factor, but another was the First Balkan War, ending in 1913, which the Ottomans lost and which resulted in perhaps 1.5 million Muslim refugees flooding the

Empire, with stories of hardship and oppression, inflaming Muslim opinion. Tensions rose steadily, and various incidents of mass removal of Armenians and Greeks occurred, in part to seize housing for Muslim refugees. In Armenian areas, the forced conscription of young Armenian men for the Turkish army, thousands of whom were killed by the Turks as the war went badly for the Turks and they were perceived as possible traitors, inflamed Armenian opinion as well.

But the second phase only formally kicked off in 1915, with coordinated mass deportations followed by killing essentially everyone, beginning in the mountain town of Zeytun. I will spare you a summary; it is more of the same, for 250 pages, documenting a million or so dead. As with most chronicles of mass killing, from Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men* to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, the reader becomes numb from what seems like an endless recitation of murder and torture (though sadism and torture was more prominent in the Genocide than under either the National Socialists or the Soviets). This is not the sort of book that a reader will enjoy, or a casual reader is likely to finish. What makes it worse, perhaps, is that the reader knows that no justice was meted out to the Turks, and none will be, in this life, at least. They got what they wanted and they paid no price. Nonetheless, as with the Holocaust, studying the details is extremely valuable, because it fights against the human tendency to gloss over the past. And studying the Genocide has another benefit—it reminds us that the Holocaust was not, as some like to think, a one-time aberration, but one of multiple such events, where modern technology and modern ideologies and technologies combined with ancient hatreds to produce something very new and very bad. Rwanda and ISIS have shown us more recently that genocide is not on the way out, whatever UN bureaucrats tell us, and there is no reason, in fact, that such events could not happen here in America, given the right circumstances.

Morris and Ze'evi examine mountains of evidence trying to evaluate the degree of central coordination, sifting documents, dates, and events. Their conclusion is, in essence, that there was more central coordination in the second two phases than under the Sultan, but as in the Holocaust, less than complete central coordination as to the specific means. Every so often a planned massacre would be called off, if a Western observer that the Turks wanted to keep in the dark arrived in the area. Of course, the

ability to call off imminent, already-organized massacres (which were often initiated with a single call from the muezzin's minaret) suggests strong central control, as the authors point out. (It is also interesting to note that any observer from the United States was treated with extra delicacy. "In particular, the United States was viewed as an unknown, but powerful, quantity, having previously demonstrated its naval strength against Barbary Coast pirates in Ottoman territory.")

And the third phase, from 1918 through 1924, was yet more of the same, under Kemal and the Nationalists, not the CUP, but for these purposes, that's a distinction without a difference. Kemal was better than the CUP at playing off the Allies against each other, thereby enabling him to quickly bring to an end the brief postwar period where the British and French tried to protect Christians and even help some move back. The Allies mostly ended up supervising mass exoduses from Turkey, of Christians from Thrace and other areas not directly part of the Genocide. Woodrow Wilson's desire to carve an Armenian homeland out of Turkey died stillborn, and Kemal was given a free hand to complete what his predecessors had begun.

The Nationalists focused primarily on the Greeks, who were incidental to earlier killings and ethnic cleansing. Part of that was a reaction to the Greek occupation of parts of Anatolia during the Greco-Turkish war of 1919 to 1922, but removal of the Greeks was necessary to complete the vision of Turkey for the Turks. (The few Jews left also were strongly encouraged to leave, suffering various economic persecutions if they did not, resulting in only a tiny number of Jews remaining in Turkey today.) Deportations alternated with killings, so a somewhat higher percentage of those persecuted survived in this third phase. Nonetheless, perhaps close to another million Christians died in these years (including the Assyrian Christians, who had largely escaped past persecutions). And that was the end, since there was nobody left to kill.

One theme that jumps out at the reader is how many times the first thing the Turks did to Christians was confiscate any and all weapons. Variations on this must show up at least fifty times in the book. Sometimes this was demanded on pain of instant death; other times it was sold to victims as the path to ensuring peace, by "decreasing tensions." The result was always the same—all the communities who gave up their weapons were massacred, whatever promises were made,

with metronomic regularity, with the job made smooth by the earlier removal of weapons. I wasn't surprised; such an approach is universal among tyrants and killers, as Stephen Halbrook has documented for the Third Reich. It's not clear that refusal was an option—in some cases, the Turks merely brought up artillery and shelled uncompliant villages. But in some cases, armed Christians were able to make the cost too high for the Turks. Assyrian Christians made a stand at Diyarbekir in 1915, as did Armenians in Musa Dagh, near the Turkish-Syrian border—by which is today the only Armenian village in Turkey. Still, such examples were very much the exception, and it is hard to say if coordinated defensive violence would have ended better for the Armenians. On the other hand, it couldn't have ended worse. Regardless, such historical examples are why resisting the calls of proto-tyrants of the Left for further gun control in the United States are critical. As we approach our own days of flame, any agreement to disarm is likely to have fatal consequences, and must be resisted with vigor.

Another theme is coerced conversions to Islam, which were extremely common. Usually adult men were still killed after conversion; perhaps that is why few adult men did convert. For children and for young women, though, the Turks sometimes preferred conversion; the children could be raised as Muslims, and the women handed over to Muslim men as second or third wives, or used as sex slaves for local notables. (Such sexual slavery is approved under certain brands of Islam; it occurs in the modern world on a massive scale in areas controlled by adherents to those brands, including Nigeria and under ISIS, and was strongly approved of by all levels of Turkish authority.) Widespread coercion to convert, obviously, supports the authors' thesis of the centrality of Islam to the Genocide.

Naturally, the "Islam is a religion of peace" people were displeased by this book, which not only assigns blame to Islam but specifically calls out "the ideology of Muslim supremacy" which is at the very core of Islam. Every so often the authors attempt to split hairs and suggest that they are not arguing that Islam is the problem. They try to distinguish Islam and "political Islam," which is like separating the vodka out of a Screwdriver cocktail, but it's nice of them to make the effort. They also go out of their way to name and document individual Muslims who helped victims. Such a superficial sugar-coating isn't a new approach;

Morris and Ze'evi quote the British Ambassador to the Sublime Porte, in 1896, similarly assuring the Sultan, "The religion of Mohammed [is] highly respected in England and that no one attributed the crimes that had been committed to its teachings." Then they say, "This was hogwash." Everyone in Britain, from highest to lowest, most definitely attributed the crimes to Islam, pointing to the Sultan's deliberate whipping up of religious hatreds in a desperate attempt to keep his rule from fracture, and British diplomats, even aside from the killings, reported an enormous wave of anti-Christian animosity. Such sugar-coating is no more convincing today.

Something else this book taught me was the dubious history of the Kurds. In the United States, the Kurds are often viewed positively today, since they have fought with us against ISIS, and they present themselves as scrappy warriors espousing a moderate brand of Islam. What the Kurds want is their own nation, to be carved largely out of Turkey, but also out of Iraq and Syria, and they seem to have a good propaganda team. Still, we should not let soldierly sentiment and propaganda blind us. So-called Kurdistan mostly consists of where Armenians once dominated, and a great many of the Armenians killed were slaughtered by the grandfathers or great-grandfathers of today's Kurdish allies. The Kurds are not our friends, even if they are sometimes temporary allies, any more than Saladin, a Kurd as well, was a friend of the Crusaders. Mutual respect does not mean shared goals.

But it's not like the Armenians are going back to their ancestral homelands. Perhaps one conclusion to be taken from this book is a harsh one. Namely, that through evil the Turks succeeded, and there is no way to reverse what they did. Sometimes there just is no solution, or no solution that is accessible through conceivable human action. I am certainly in favor of turning Istanbul back into Constantinople, and the Hagia Sophia back into a church, but short of mass conversion of the Turks, neither goal could be accomplished without imposing even more suffering than the Turks imposed on Christians. There are, after all, only 2,000 Greeks left in Constantinople. We have, in fact, recently exacerbated the problem of Christianity's destruction in its ancient heartland, by dynamiting order in the Middle East over the past fifteen years, resulting in further extermination of Christians (thanks, George W. Bush!). We are responsible, but we cannot effectively now protect

Christians in the Middle East from the consequences of what we have done (not that we try to do so), much less reverse what happened a hundred years ago. I'd be all for, say, letting the Russians carve an explicitly Christian homeland out of parts of Turkey, but let's not pretend that could be done without a truly massive degree of violence.

Tearing our gaze away from Asia Minor, it is important to note that reading about the Genocide in the United States of 2019 feels a bit like looking in a warped mirror. The men who organized it were the most modern of men, with modern reasons for doing what they did, even if Islam was the binding force that was also used to drive ground-level killing. One can imagine our own near-future urban elites casting themselves in a Kemalite mold, coldly viewing the benighted masses who are holding America back from realizing a true paradise of multicultural (but non-white) intersectional joy and free stuff for everyone, and deciding that, for the good of the future, the deplorables need to go. Logically, the Turkish solution is the proper choice, given that end and the premises of the Left. That'd be difficult to get started right now, but the idea and the desire are certainly there among many in our elites, although it is hard to tell how widespread or self-acknowledged. But if turbulence hits, depression or disease, we can be certain that the same types of beliefs will be reified, at which point, we can learn from this book that waiting around to see what happens is not a profitable course.