

The New York Review of Books
August 9, 2001

MASSACRES OF THE ARMENIANS

By James R. Russell

In response to "Turkey's Hidden Past" (March 8, 2001)

To the Editors:

Christopher de Bellaigue ["Turkey's Hidden Past," NYR, March 8] has done his part to keep Turkey's past hidden, with these two references to the Armenians: "Under ['Abd al-Hamid's] rule thousands of Anatolian Armenians died while rioting against Ottoman Muslims during the 1890s." Actually 200,000 Armenians (none rioters) were systematically massacred in 1895–1896.

The second: "A Turkish identity had emerged out of the ethnic conflict, particularly the conflict between Turks and Armenians, some half a million of whom died during the deportations and massacres of 1915." Three times that many were murdered, in a premeditated genocide. De Bellaigue's curious usage, "Anatolian Armenians," makes it seem as though they were from elsewhere. The Turks were. Armenians are the natives.

Armed opposition to Ottoman rule was slight. Armenians were mostly unarmed: they could not defend themselves against Turkish depredations. Like the European Jews, Armenians were prominent in the big cities, but powerless. Many Armenians fled to the US in the 1890s but most remained. Armenian reformists supported the Young Turk revolution and served in their new government. Soon after the latter came to power there was a pogrom in Adana: by 1912 American consular officials were warning Armenians to send children abroad. I know some who survived this way.

In April 1915, the leaders of the Armenian community at Constantinople were arrested and murdered, leaving the nation headless. Telegrams to provincial governors then coordinated the extermination of the Armenians: young men were drafted into slave labor battalions and worked to death or killed. The rest were assembled at collection points for deportation. In Van there was some warning: Armenians resisted till the Russians came. Everywhere else, from Izmit to Erzurum, the genocide was total.

In towns far from any border, death marches ("deportations") were the means of murder; on the Black Sea coast, it was drowning. Nearer Russia and escape, people were burned in barns. In 1918 Turkey invaded Russian Armenia and Iran to finish the holocaust. In the east, Azeris began to massacre Armenians in Artsakh (Karabagh). But the campaign stalled.

Turkey lost the war. But war crimes trials at Constantinople stopped when Mustafa Kemal ejected the Allies. He declared the Ottoman leaders heroes: there had been no Armenian genocide; there had never been any Armenians. Their towns were given Turkish names. Monuments were destroyed, and continue to be: in 1994 I visited the monastery of Narek, near Van, and found a Cross-stone of the tenth century, which I photographed—when I returned in 1997 the Kurdish villagers told me the police had come soon after my visit and destroyed it. Turkey uses the struggle for self-determination in Karabagh as a pretext for blockading the Armenian Republic. Tens of thousands have died as a result, and hundreds of thousands more are emigrating.

This is a continuation of the genocide.

If a reviewer wrote that only a third of the actual number of Jewish victims of the Holocaust had died, or that their deaths came about because they had rioted, or elected to make war against the German government, would you print it? No. But if the Nazis had not been defeated, and had successfully promoted their falsified version of the Holocaust, one might write of the crime against the Jews this way, with a clear conscience. The big lie is easily swallowed. But France has not swallowed it. Armenians and their allies now turn our energies from combatting Holocaust denial to pursuing justice. Turkey howls as though its world—an edifice erected on a lie—were coming to an end. Maybe it is.

James R. Russell

Mashtots Professor of Armenian Studies
Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations
Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts