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The following essay was published in the letters page of the TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT, February 9, 1996. It responds to D. Cameron Watt's critique of UNITED STATES OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS ON THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE, compiled and introduced by Ara Sarafian (Armenian Review Books, 1993).

Turkey and the Armenian People

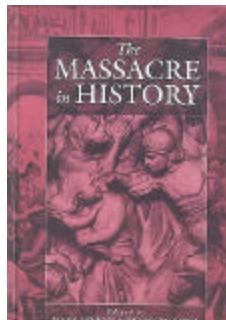
By Mark Levene

[Mark Levene, a genocide scholar and member of the International Association of Genocide Scholars is joint author of *The Massacre in History*, (Berghahn Books, Oxford, 1999).]

D Cameron Watt in his February 2, 1996 article misses the point entirely on the Armenian genocide. What motivated the Armenian genocide, a term which, according to the review, is apparently only applicable in inverted commas, was primarily neither a matter of race nor religion. Rather, it was a critical by-product of the dual processes of Turkish state formation and nation-building and thereby cannot be so easily disassociated from "the present Turkish republic" as Professor Watt would have us believe.

More alarmingly and disturbingly, not only does his review seek to belittle the Armenian events of 1915-16 but does so by questionable cross-references to the Holocaust. Not that comparison between the two is not pertinent. It most definitely is. Watt's whole thrust, however, is to suggest that while what happened to the Jews was genocide, what happened to the Armenians was not. Thus, while he refers to women being lost to the Armenian "nation" (his inverted commas), through forced conversion and incorporation into harems, he conveniently ignores the fact that the vast majority of women and children were massacred either IN SITU close to their homes, on death marches, or at extermination sites such as Res-ul-Ain and Der Zor in the Syrian desert. There are, of course, important

points of dissimilarity between what happened to them and Jewish women and children in the Holocaust. Young Jewish women and girls, were, for instance, very rarely raped before death, young Armenian women and girls invariably were.



Volume 1 in the "War and Genocide" series. An in-depth analysis of particular massacres from the eleventh century to the present including fifteenth-century Christian-Jewish relations in Spain, the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre, the rape of Nanking in 1937 and the Second World War origins of the Serb-Croat conflict.

Professor Watt continues his minimization of these events with the almost laughable idea that "many of the massacres followed and resulted from the withdrawal of legal status and protection from the Armenians rather than from the deliberate action of the Ottoman state". Certainly, legal status and protection were withdrawn, but Watt clearly in his reading has never encountered the

Teshkilat-i Makhsusyie, the Special Organization set up on the authorization of the inner secret circle of Committee of Union and progress (CUP), whose 1915 remit under the personal control of circle members, Drs Behaeddin Sakir and Nazim, was to organize and carry out the elimination of the Armenians. Certainly, the

Teshkilat did not do all the killing. As in the Holocaust, lack of personnel, logjams in the killing process and the sheer scale of what was required meant that all sorts of expedients had to be considered—and rapidly—often very messily, implemented. The Armenian genocide was not a "clean" final solution. But nor was the Holocaust, except in the minds of historians and sociologists too enamoured of modern, industrial conveyor-belt systems.

As for Professor Watt's depreciation of the contemporary evidence of genocide in Ara Sarafian's collection of US official documents, as "a maddening mixture of hearsay, speculation and first-hand evidence", I am reminded that this was pretty much the sort of evidence available when news of Einsatz killings of Jews began to filter out from the Russian borderlands in late 1941 and early 1942. What is, thus, most bewildering about this review is that Watt or indeed anybody else should be contesting the evidence at all. The facts of the case were meticulously and thoroughly documented at the time both in the British official report, compiled by Arnold Toynbee, and in the parallel German, if independent, investigative work of Johannes Lepsius. Prima-facie evidence of the genocide would have also led to war-crime trails of the chief perpetrators, both by a post-CUP Ottoman government and possibly by the Allies, if the party around Kemal Ataturk had not intervened to overthrow it and the terms of the Western-imposed armistice.

So if what we are talking about is a genocide, why in heaven's name should the present publication of a series of documents be presented, in Professor Watt's words, as the Armenian "campaign of revenge . . . against the present Turkish state"? Is the literature on the Holocaust produced for similar purposes? But then Chancellor Adenauer's republic has learned to face up to its origins. Ataturk's successors have never done so.

What is more unforgivable, however, is that there should continue to be a steady stream of Western academics who are willing to write lame apologias on Turkey's behalf. In charging foul play against the publication of documents, on the grounds that "the Ottoman state perished in the years 1918-20 and that the present Turkish republic did not exist at the time, Watt provides us with a picture of dramatic discontinuity between the actions and motivations of the CUP Triumvirate and that of Kemal Ataturk.

Yet is Professor Watt unaware that Ataturk and his successors pursued the destruction of the Armenians after 1920 by war, famine, and direct massacre; that he proceeded to massacre or deport the vast majority of the Greek population; that this policy of ethnic cleansing was then continued with the Kurds, who suffered massacres and deportation, culminating in events around Dersim, in 1938, which the British consul in Trabzon specifically likened to the tragedy of the Armenians in 1915-16?

None of this means we have to look at the Armenians, the Kurds, the Greeks or any of the would-be nations in the moribund empire as blameless innocents or plaster-cast saints. The Armenians were, for instance, eventually singled out for extermination by the post-1908 CUP in power, because they were perceived as a threat, not so much as a threat to succession, almost an impossibility given their dispersion and the demographic realities of eastern Anatolia, but more strikingly, because they represented, in political, social, economic and cultural terms, an alternative path which the empire might have taken.

In other words, there was a genuine dynamic going on here, a contest between a revolutionary but, nevertheless, essentially weak and insecure party of the centre attempting to throw off the shackles of Western neo-dependency and its challengers, most coherently represented by the Armenian revolutionary parties, seeking similarly to modernize and democratize the empire but in a multinational framework and with what would probably only have been a qualified independence from Russia or other European domination.

The challenge of the study of genocide does not lie in its black-and-white simplicity. At least professor Watt and I can agree on this, and that explaining its broad occurrence in the twentieth century requires more than a perpetual restatement of the race theories of Gobineau and his acolytes.

All the more reason, I would venture, why the Armenians do not ultimately need "to invoke the spectre of the Holocaust", nor do they have to find some "motivation" to publish documents about their genocide.

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