

## A Re-Exploration of the Armenian Genocide

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REVIEW OF: Hülya Adak, Fatma Müge Göçek, and Ronald Grigor Suny, eds., *Critical Approaches to Genocide: History, Politics and Aesthetics of 1915* (New York: Routledge, 2023). 304 pp. (hardcover). GBP 125.00. ISBN 9780367085834.

The multiple genocides committed by the Ottoman Empire in 1915, aimed at predominantly Christian communities, are still denied by the Turkish Republic today. While the genocides, in particular the Armenian Genocide, have already been recognised by various states,<sup>1</sup> Turkey's denialist strategies are still in place, causing further suffering of the communities involved.<sup>2</sup> *Critical Approaches to Genocide: History, Politics and Aesthetics of 1915*, the edited volume by Hülya Adak, Fatma Müge Göçek, and Ronald Grigor Suny, is an intervention in Turkey's genocide denialism and offers new methodologies to counter it and to broaden the field of Eastern Turkey studies to include hitherto marginalised voices. The editors come from various fields—Adak specialised in Gender Studies and Comparative Literature, Göçek in Sociology, and Suny in History and Political Science—forming an interdisciplinary volume that covers multiple scholarly disciplines. The volume is a result of the 'Workshop on Armenian-Turkish Scholarship' (WATS) conferences of 2015 and 2017. WATS is a recurring workshop that was formed in 2000 when discussions regarding Turkey's actions in 1915 had opened up space for

- 1 See Fatma Müge Göçek, *Denial of Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 1; Jordan Koopmans, 'The Armenian Genocide, Customary International Law, and U.S. Recognition', *Intercultural Human Rights Law Review*, 17 (2022), 89–151; 'The Armenian Allegation of Genocide: The issue and the facts', *Republic of Türkiye: Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, n.d., <<https://www.mfa.gov.tr/the-armenian-allegation-of-genocide-the-issue-and-the-facts.en.mfa>> [accessed 7 December 2024].
- 2 See Racho Donef, 'Sayfo and Denialism: A New Field of Activity for Agents of the Turkish Republic', in *Let Them Not Return: Sayfo – The Genocide Against the Assyrian, Syriac, and Chaldean Christians in the Ottoman Empire*, ed. by David Gaunt, Naures Atto and Soner O. Barthoma, (New York: Berghahn, 2017), pp. 205–18; Abdulmesih BarAbraham, 'Turkey's Key Arguments in Denying the Assyrian Genocide', in *Let Them Not Return: Sayfo – The Genocide Against the Assyrian, Syriac, and Chaldean Christians in the Ottoman Empire*, ed. by David Gaunt, Naures Atto and Soner O. Barthoma, (New York: Berghahn, 2017), pp. 219–32; *Denial of Violence*, ed. by Fatma Müge Göçek (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Tunç Aybak, 'Geopolitics of Denial: Turkish State's "Armenian Problem"', *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 18.2 (2016), 125–44.

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a larger debate on accountability. Taking advantage of the momentum, the organisers created WATS in order to bridge the gap between various generations of scholars that either defended Turkey's violent past or critiqued it.

The volume's strength lies in the variety of angles and perspectives from which it illuminates both the denialism and the Genocide. While it does not dwell much on existing scholarly research that explains how denialism is implemented in Turkey's political and national memory, it instead provides various methods of countering the denialism, contributing to the current state of the art. Recent scholarship on the Armenian Genocide has expanded the field to include various minority communities that were also affected by the events of 1915, as well as voicing criticism of Western states that influenced, or rather showed their indifference to, the events.<sup>3</sup> This volume, similarly, aims to point the field towards research that discusses not only the Armenian Genocide individually but, rather, places it in a multidirectional conversation with other historical events, e.g. the Holocaust. It also discusses how the lessons that can be drawn from research on the Genocide and Eastern Turkey are not meant to advance these topics alone. The interdisciplinary, transnational, and transhistorical approach the volume adopts, results in a rich, multilayered collection that contributes to fields such as memory studies, genocide studies, and perpetrator studies.

*Critical Approaches* is divided into five parts that each try to steer research on the Armenian Genocide into new, unexplored territory. The first four chapters in Part I, 'New Methodologies and Directions in Armenian and Genocide Studies', map the state of the art of the field and mark the gaps that can still be explored. Ronald Grigor Suny (Chapter 1) provides a concise overview of Turkey's denialist approach to the Genocide in the past century and how WATS has contributed to turning scholarship on the Genocide into a collaborative effort between the communities involved in order to combat the denialist structures. Uğur Ümit Üngör (Chapter 2) brings into focus the complex historiography of Eastern Turkey. The region is predominantly

3 See *The Genocide of the Christian Populations in the Ottoman Empire and Its Aftermath (1908-1923)*, ed. by Taner Akçam, Theodosios Kyriakidis, and Kyriakos Chatzikyriakidis (London: Routledge, 2023); *The Assyrian Genocide: Cultural and Political Legacies*, ed. by Hannibal Travis (London: Routledge, 2018); *Sayfo 1915: An Anthology of Essays of the Genocide of Assyrians/Arameans during the First World War*, ed. by Shabo Talay and Soner Ö. Barthoma (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2018); *Let Them Not Return: Sayfo – The Genocide Against the Assyrian, Syriac, and Chaldean Christians in the Ottoman Empire*, ed. by David Gaunt, Naures Atto and Soner Ö. Barthoma, (New York: Berghahn, 2017).

inhabited by minority communities, e.g. the Armenians and Kurds, whose history has been distorted by official channels (pp. 12–13). Üngör suggests a postcolonial approach that involves decolonising the archives to uncover the silenced past and present of marginalised voices in Eastern Turkey. The inclusion of these communities and their stories would counter the homogenisation of Turkey and its history. In Chapter 3, Ohannes Kılıçdağı pleads for the inclusion of local and micro stories into the broader discourse, which would ‘enrich and solidify our understanding of the Genocide’ (p. 22). He believes that, despite the numerous difficulties and conflicting scholarly evidence regarding the starting point of the Genocide, local witness accounts can provide proof of the deliberate intent with which authorities oppressed and terrorised the victims of the Genocide. Lastly, Andrea Petö (Chapter 4) narrates the life of Eghia Hovhannesian, an Armenian refugee during the Hamidian massacres in the 1890’s and a complicit actor in the Holocaust. The chapter aims to complicate the position of the Armenian community in Hungary in the early twentieth century by challenging the boundaries between perpetrator and victim, providing space for further discussion regarding Armenian perpetration.

These chapters all introduce relevant perspectives and approaches for the study of the Armenian Genocide, posing questions and offering research ideas that could further develop the field. Üngör provides clear directions of how to decolonise the Turkish nationalist, historical narratives—inclusion of microhistories, accessibility of sources, and placing Turkey in a transnational context. The deliberately unanswered questions he poses near the end are meant to inspire other scholars to expand the field. Similarly, Kılıçdağı explains why new approaches to study the Armenian Genocide are necessary in order to prove the intentionality of the perpetrators (p. 33). While he is careful to emphasise the fragilities of his own argument, he believes that the inclusion of local and contradicting voices is a starting point of accurately representing the course of a genocide. Petö situates Hovhannesian’s complicity in the sociopolitical, historical context of the Armenian community in Hungary during WWII. She raises the question whether, perhaps, ‘the lessons learned from the Armenian genocide influence[d] strategies for survival’ that led Armenians to implicate themselves in another genocide (p. 47). Through the detailed description of Hovhannesian’s life, she explains how his ‘chosen amnesia’, a concept coined by Susanne Buckley-Zistel (p. 48), of the Armenian Genocide is a tool used for his convenience. He invoked the memory of the Genocide during his trial

for complicity in the Holocaust in the hopes of acquitting himself, but did not consider his community's own suffering when causing another's. Ultimately, through the case of Hovanessian, the chapter seeks to trouble fixed or static boundaries between victim and perpetrator.

Part II, 'Repertoires of Violence and Demographic Engineering', discusses both national and international politics and how foreign states managed to influence the course of the Genocide. Richard Antaramian (Chapter 5) provides a detailed description of how Armenians sought power in an increasingly oppressive Ottoman Empire. He deconstructs the dichotomies between the communities involved, e.g. Muslim and non-Muslim, often viewed as the cause of the Genocide, and showcases the complexities of political ideologies, e.g. nationalism, that influenced oppressive policymaking. Chapter 6 is the only chapter in the volume that centres a community other than the Armenians—David Gaunt discusses, what he refers to as, the Assyrian Genocide in Southeast Turkey. This genocide, also referred to as *Sayfo*, was aimed at various Christian minorities—Aramean, Assyrian, and Chaldean, among others—at the same time as the Armenian Genocide. Gaunt highlights the difficulty of developing 'an iconic narrative of what happened [during the *Sayfo*] in order to make a shared commemorative memory' (p. 77). The Christian communities mentioned by Gaunt all have a different account of the *Sayfo*, making it an easily contestable subject for the perpetrators. However, Gaunt offers evidence that proves the Ottoman government's intent in killing and displacing the people in the Southeastern region. He links this to Ben Kiernan's concept of 'settler genocide' which refers to the 'permanent removal of the native inhabitants through a combination of killing and expulsion' in order to 'redistribute their land and resources to a completely new population' (p. 88).

Chapter 7 (Christin Pschichholz) and Chapter 8 (Rolf Hosfeld) both discuss Germany's involvement in the Ottoman Empire and Armenian Genocide. Germany's imperialist motives, its *Weltpolitik*, led to an alliance with the Ottomans before and during World War I, which also caused the former to turn a blind eye to any violence committed by the latter toward the Armenians. Pschichholz discusses official documents of the German government that prove the country's knowledge of Armenian suffering. Authorities chose not to intervene in the conflict and, instead, planned to politically and economically benefit from it (pp. 95-96). These documents have been studied before,<sup>4</sup> but Pschichholz's main aim is to

<sup>4</sup> See *The Armenian Genocide: Evidence from the German Foreign Office Archives, 1915-1916*, ed. by Wolfgang Gust (New York: Berghahn, 2013).

view Germany's stance in the conflict through the prism of imperialism. Hosfeld explores the humanitarian movements in Germany and Europe that lent support to the Armenians. He does this by focusing on the figure of Johannes Lepsius, a German writer and activist who is heralded as a major contributor to the Armenian cause. Lepsius, an Enlightened Christian who raised awareness for the Armenian Genocide on, mostly, religious grounds, wrote multiple articles, some anonymous, and books that criticised Germany's lack of intervention in the Genocide. One of his most famous works was *Bericht über die Lage des Armenischen Volkes in der Türkei* (1916) which reported on the atrocities committed in Turkey in chronological detail, including a discussion on the causes of the Genocide. Lepsius also joined a secret organisation that fought against Germany's territorial expansion plans and fought for the country's further democratisation. Hosfeld's chapter emphasises the necessity and importance of civilians to speak up when atrocities like the Genocide occur; it is the 'basis of civil morality' (p. 108).

All four chapters in this section approach the Genocide from the question of where power and agency reside. Antaramian disregards the idea that a victim is ultimately powerless. He clearly illustrates the Armenians' cleverness in acquiring power, despite the odds against them. Their attempts, though ultimately failed, to gain control in an increasingly totalitarian empire are further proof of the Turks' systematic weakening of the Armenians in order to strengthen their own political standing. Pschichholz's focus on Germany's 'colonial pragmatism' (p. 97) opens up an important area of inquiry, namely, the question of the implicated foreign powers that allowed the Genocide to happen. The shift from Turkey as the sole perpetrator to other states as complicit or implicated actors situates the Armenian Genocide in an international context, broadening its relevance in international politics. Hosfeld, similarly, connects the Genocide to German history, even mentioning how Hitler publicly admired Enver Pasha, one of the organising perpetrators of the Genocide, for his ability to purify the Turkish population (p. 105). Hitler's statements relating to Enver and Germany's knowledge on how the Genocide was conducted beg the question if perhaps the Armenian Genocide also inspired the Holocaust in WWII, especially since, though not mentioned in this volume, Hitler himself reportedly referenced the Armenian Genocide as a forgotten event before the invasion of Poland in 1939.<sup>5</sup>

5 Richard Albrecht, "Wer redet heute noch von der Vernichtung der Armenier?" Kommentierte Wiederveröffentlichung der Erstpublikation von Adolf Hitlers Geheimrede am 22. August 1939, *Zeitschrift für Weltgeschichte*, 9 (2014), 115-32.

Hosfeld, in his chapter, emphasises the importance of civil responsibility. In fact, Lepsius's criticisms pertaining to the German government for not intervening in the Armenian Genocide resonate with the current international, public outcry for heads of state to mediate the Israeli and Palestinian conflict in contemporary politics. However, Hosfeld heralds Lepsius as a hero while downplaying what one could call a German superiority complex. As Hosfeld shows, Lepsius's aim was to 'westernize the world, aiming at the implementation of human rights and 'good government' everywhere on the globe by missionary activities as a 'universal world power' (p. 102). The distinctly colonial undertones here remain uncommented.

Lastly, Gaunt's discussion of the *Sayfo* is highly complex. One of the important points he touches upon is the sociopolitical tension between the Aramean and Assyrian communities.<sup>6</sup> He clearly distinguishes them at first but later refers to all communities involved as 'Assyrian' or 'Christian', negating his earlier distinctions. While his discussion would have benefited from more consistency in terminology, he does emphasise the difficulties of assigning these minorities a universal name, as multiple historical and social factors played a role in the division of these communities and their formation of the genocide's narrative (p. 82). Importantly, the inclusion of these communities in a volume on the Armenian Genocide, gives them a voice and significantly expands the discussion of the Genocide.

The third part of *Critical Approaches*, 'Aesthetics, Linguistic Pluralism and Memory', situates the Armenian Genocide in literary studies and linguistics. Nanor Kebranian (Chapter 9) links Russian literature and literary theory, especially Fyodor Dostoevsky and Mikhail Bakhtin, to Hagop Oshagan, an Armenian author whose own work was inspired by Dostoevsky. Through the discussion of Oshagan's works, the chapter illustrates how identity formation is transcultural and defies the binaries placed upon the individual. Both Armenians and Turks think and act in the other's cultural framework, creating an identity that is 'both/and' and not 'either/or'. In a multidirectional approach, Murat Cankara (Chapter 10) places the Holocaust and the Armenian Genocide next to each other and looks at the role language played in different stages of survival for the victims. He analyses how speaking Turkish and Armenian by Armenians could have either placed them

6 Cf. Johny Messo, *Arameans and the Making of 'Assyrians'*, (Aramaic Press, 2017).

in grave danger, by giving themselves away as Armenian, or hid their ancestry from the Ottomans. This is similar to Jews who had to possess some degree of German in order to survive prosecution and the concentration camps. Lastly, David Kazanjian (Chapter 11) dissects the word 'restoration' as 'reappropriation of improprieties to prior appropriators' (p. 162), i.e. a repetition of an improper act, such as Armenians reclaiming land, aimed at the previous perpetrator, in this case Turkey; it is a continuous cycle of violence. He questions the nationalist Armenian narratives that claim their right to territory through the reading of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Aikaterini Gegisian's collaged photo album *The Small Guide to the Invisible Seas*. The literary analyses of these sources lead him to the conclusion that the lands Armenians and Turks fight over carry a history that intertwines both very intimately; to allow only one of the states to restore or reclaim the territory is to deny the other their equal right to it.

What these three chapters have in common is that they bring new methodologies or perspectives to the study of the Armenian Genocide. This is particularly the case with Kebranian and Cankara. The former, by connecting Oshagan's work to the literature of Dostoevsky and Bakhtin, opens up a new space for a discussion regarding the identity of the Armenian-Ottomans and Turks who are often defined by stereotypical, nationalist-driven characteristics that restrict them from becoming their true selves—pluralistic figures that think and act in 'synthesis' (p. 133). The chapter stands out from the others in the volume because it focuses on the repercussions of the events of 1915 and how those can affect the dynamics between and identity formation of the Armenians and Turks. Cankara explains how language was used as a means of othering the Jews and Armenians, exploring similarities in the mechanisms of dehumanisation and the role of language in this process. He is careful to emphasise that his chapter is not a comparison between the Holocaust and the Armenian Genocide, but rather an attempt at moving the field towards a more multidirectional and linguistic approach and makes suggestions for how to develop this method further (pp. 153-54).

Kazanjian asks who is allowed to (re)claim the land that the Genocide divided and concludes that, instead of looking back to the past in order to uphold the old structures and divides, we should move forward together. Histories are complicated, especially when nationalist narratives contradict each other. Similarly to some of his fellow authors in

this volume, Kazanjian emphasises the plurality of cultures and communities in the lands of Eastern Turkey, and further complicates the notion that the Armenians are exclusively entitled to a land that is rich with a history of all these communities. Rather than upholding structures of othering, through dialogue, we must pay attention to the intertwined histories of the actors involved, represented in the landscapes of the territories they wish to claim.

In Part IV, 'Gender and Sexuality', Ayşe Gül Altınay, Arlene Avakian, and Fethiye Çetin (Chapter 12) make an 'intersectional feminist intervention' (p. 177). Their chapter aims to create a 'space for co-witnessing and co-resistance' wherein stories of trauma, happiness, and everything in between are shared (pp. 177-78). They do this through each providing a definition of keywords—genocide, survival, and gender—with a personal connection to each, and to feminist scholarship more generally. In Chapter 13, Deanna Cachoian-Schanz discusses the neglected voices of the queer Armenian community. The narrative that Armenia and its population, weakened after the Genocide and subsequent oppression, needs to strengthen its numbers through reproduction in order to have a stronger claim to its land, Cachoian-Schanz argues, is heteronormative and patriarchal, as it excludes the members of the Armenian community who do not commit to the cause, e.g. queer Armenians. The genocidal trauma and desire to preserve the 'original' Armenian culture reinforces this heteronormative attitude (p. 202).

Altınay, Avakian, and Çetin beautifully illustrate how collaboration on a topic as sensitive as the Genocide can positively impact the research field. The authors, all originally specialised in feminist studies, included the Armenian Genocide in their research after self-reflection and discussions about it with other people. They explain how gender has long been excluded from the discourse on the Genocide and how they managed to bridge that gap together. It is an inspirational chapter that asks its readers to speak up when voices are being silenced. Cachoian-Schanz rightfully makes a case for the queer, Armenian exiles in a field that is mostly concerned with genocide denialism and remembrance. However, she refers to nationalism as the main cause for queer Armenians being exiled from their communities but does not mention another important reason—religion. Armenians very much still identify themselves as Christians, which comes with a conservative attitude that, indeed, tends to exclude this particular community.



The fifth and final part, 'Higher Education and Genocide Commemorations in Contemporary Turkey', focuses on the contemporary discourse of the Armenian Genocide. Chapter 14 is a speech by Tosun Terzioğlu (edited by his daughter Ayşecan Terzioğlu) that describes how Turkey openly embraces its perpetrator past, as opposed to other countries with shameful histories who try to distance themselves from it, e.g. Germany. Ayşe Kadioğlu (Chapter 15) emphasises the importance of remembering the past in order to learn from it and not repeat it. The future, according to Kadioğlu, can only be realised if the past is acknowledged. And lastly, Egemen Özbek (Chapter 16) centres the act of commemoration as an act of 'performing' identity (p. 239). He provides two examples of genocide remembrance in Istanbul—one organisation held two commemorations at actual crime scenes related to the Genocide where acts of violence had been perpetrated; the second was held at Taksim Square, as the location is 'closely connected with the construction of Turkish national identity' (p. 245). With both examples the chapter aims to counter the Turkish, nationalist narrative.

Both Terzioğlu's and Kadioğlu's chapters provide concise overviews of how denialist structures have been perpetuated, but, compared to the previous chapters, do not explicitly refer to scholarly approaches. Özbek, on the other hand, provides two strong examples that focus on perpetrator spaces and how they are continuously used to perpetuate and celebrate a nation's violent past. The commemorations discussed raise questions of what histories our surroundings tell us and how we as a society should deal with that past.

*Critical Approaches* provides excellent suggestions and avenues for new directions in the research on the Armenian Genocide. The book is also a plea for a broader awareness of historical events like the Genocide. Multiple chapters emphasise the necessity to speak up because others are not able to (e.g. Altınay, Avakian, and Çetin, and Hosfeld). As mentioned, some authors make connections between the Armenian Genocide and other genocides and historical events. In this sense, the edited volume is not just a contribution to the scholarly body of the Armenian Genocide but to genocide studies as a whole. While the volume does not go into depth regarding the Genocide's chronological timeline and its causes, it does provide enough historical context to understand how each individual chapter aims to further develop the research on the Armenian Genocide as well as the fields of memory studies, genocide studies, and perpetrator studies. Thus, *Critical Approaches* is an important volume for those (relatively) new to the topic who want to

learn more about the current state of the art, as well as for those already familiar with the field.

However, one point of critique relates to the minimal space dedicated to other victimised communities during the events of 1915. Gaunt's and, to some extent, Üngör's are the only chapters that discuss Turkey's denialist strategies in this context. Considering that the title of the volume does not explicitly, nor exclusively, refer to the Armenian Genocide but, rather broadly, to the year 1915, it seems a missed opportunity to not have highlighted the small yet growing body of research on these other communities that were also affected by the events, e.g. the Arameans and Assyrians.

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