

# Late Ottoman Genocides

The Armenian Genocide has lately attracted a lot of attention, despite the Turkish government's attempts at denial. It has been developed into a central obstacle to Turkey's entry into the European Union. As such it attracts the highest political and public attention. What is largely ignored in the debate, however, is the fact that Armenians were not the only victims of the Young Turks' genocidal population policies. What is still largely forgotten is the murder, expulsion and deportation of other ethnic groups like Assyrians, Greeks, Kurds and Arabs by the Young Turks. This not only increases the number of victims, but also changes the perspective on the foundation of modern Turkey and as such on modern Turkish history more generally. The Thematic Issue of the JGR, the republication of which is proposed here, is the first publication, which addresses these wider issues. It contributes not only to our understanding of the Young Turks' population and extermination policies in all its complexities and so helping to bring the forgotten victims' stories "back" into genocide scholarship, but to our understanding of modern Turkey more generally. It is an indispensable tool for everybody interested in one of the great historical controversies of our time.

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# **Late Ottoman Genocides**

**The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and  
Young Turkish population and extermination  
policies**

**Edited by Dominik J. Schaller and Jürgen  
Zimmerer**

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# Abstracts

*Seeing like a nation-state: Young Turk social engineering in Eastern Turkey, 1913–50*

UĞUR ÜMIT ÜNGÖR

This article addresses population politics in the broader Young Turk era (1913–50), which included genocide, deportation and forced assimilation of various minority populations. The article opens with a synopsis of the literature in this field and provides an account of the genesis of Young Turk social engineering. It then focuses on the implementation of these nationalist population politics in the Eastern provinces to exemplify these policies in detail. The article aims to clarify that the Armenian genocide cannot be understood in isolation from broader Young Turk population politics and argues that a generation of traumatized Young Turk politicians launched and perpetuated this violent project of societal transformation in order to secure the existence of a Turkish nation-state.

*The 1914 cleansing of Aegean Greeks as a case of violent Turkification*

MATTHIAS BJØRNLUND

The late Ottoman Empire was to a large degree characterized by violent Turkification: repressive and eliminatory policies directed against non-Turkish groups with the aim of homogenizing the empire. This study is an attempt to examine the 1914 attempted ethnic cleansing of Aegean Greeks as an aspect of violent Turkification, i.e. as more than an isolated incident with little or no relation to other instances of CUP group persecution or to any overall CUP goal of Turkification.

*Perception of the other's fate: what Greek Orthodox refugees from the Ottoman Empire reported about the destruction of Ottoman Armenians*

HERVÉ GEORGELIN

The Ottoman Christians were not a united entity and human interactions throughout Ottoman history had made the Greek Orthodox and the Armenian Apostolic groups into two separate entities. Within this context, how did the Greek Orthodox Ottoman subjects react to the genocide of the Armenians perpetrated by the CUP during World War I, while they themselves faced discrimination and persecution? How did the Orthodox grassroots bear witness of their neighbours' fate, years after their expulsion from the Ottoman lands? The candour of their oral testimony corresponds to the latest research conducted

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in Ottoman archives. The short testimonies considered in this article, and kept at the Archive of the Oral Tradition at the Centre for Asia Minor Studies in Athens, add to quantitative archival surveys and provide today's readers with another point of view, rarely taken into consideration, despite the presence of the Orthodox throughout Ottoman territory.

### *A prelude to genocide: CUP population policies and provincial insecurity, 1908–14*

DIKRAN M. KALIGIAN

There has been little research done on the security conditions in the Armenian provinces of the Ottoman Empire for the years 1908–14. Cooperation between the leading Turkish and Armenian revolutionary parties (the CUP and the ARF) under the new constitutional regime resulted in an initial reduction in violence and the removal of some of the more reactionary and egregiously anti-Armenian officials. As the CUP's political position weakened, however, it adopted increasingly extremist positions and ceased proactively preventing or punishing assaults and robberies. This resulted in an increasingly deteriorating security situation for Armenians in the provinces and the ARF eventually breaking off its relations with the CUP and renewing its efforts to arm the population.

### *Dissolve or punish? The international debate amongst jurists and publicists on the consequences of the Armenian genocide for the Ottoman Empire, 1915–23*

DANIEL MARC SEGESSER

From the nineteenth century onwards, jurists and publicists began to take a great interest in the development of the Ottoman Empire, especially in the question of equality before the law. At the same time, the growing internal political and economic problems of the Ottoman Empire also heightened the interest of the European powers in the future of the Sublime Porte and increasingly led to a policy of interference. Some Christian communities such as the Armenians and the Greeks sought to make use of this process, in order to achieve formal and real minority rights. Jurists and publicists therefore became involved in the debate on minority rights at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. In this context they claimed that the Ottoman Empire owed its still being part of the civilized community of international law to the degree in which it pushed legal reforms and granted minority rights as well as autonomy to the non-Turkish peoples. It is therefore hardly surprising that most jurists and publicists demanded the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, when the deportations and massacres of non-Turkish minorities became known during World War I. It took another World War and another genocide to convince the majority of jurists and publicists that not only uncivilized powers were able to commit such crimes, but also that it was necessary to develop legal means to deal with such issues, rather than relying on the dissolution of the powers responsible.

# Notes on contributors

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# Introduction

DOMINIK J. SCHALLER and JÜRGEN ZIMMERER

From 1899 to 1922, the Swiss deacon Jakob Künzler (1871–1949) headed a missionary hospital in Ourfa, an old city in South-Eastern Anatolia. During his time in the Eastern Provinces of the Ottoman Empire, Künzler became an important eyewitness to the Young Turks' project of large-scale ethnic cleansing and genocide. In October 1915, Künzler had to witness the destruction of the Armenian community in Ourfa when the desperate Armenian resistance against the deportation orders was bloodily suppressed by the Ottoman army.<sup>1</sup> Even before this event, the Swiss deacon was well aware of the Young Turks' policy of extermination. Since Ourfa was a significant regional crossroad, many convoys of Armenian deportees on their way to the Syrian desert passed the city. Künzler tried to relieve as much as possible the distress and pain of the Armenian deportees, who were in a deplorable condition. Furthermore, he made sure their fate was not forgotten. In his book *In the Land of Blood and Tears*, published in 1921 in Germany, Künzler described vividly his horrible experiences in Ourfa during World War I.<sup>2</sup>

As a missionary, Jakob Künzler was very much indebted emotionally to his Armenian coreligionists and felt open sympathy for them. Nevertheless, he understood that the fate of the Armenians was only part and parcel of a wider strategy of population policy by the Young Turkish government. In his above-mentioned report, Künzler stated: "The Young Turks did not only include Armenians and Kurds but also Arabs in their plan of extermination."<sup>3</sup> This is a remarkable statement in two respects. First of all, Künzler talks about a policy of extermination and not only about resettlement, as some groups wanted to make the world believe then and now. Second, he did not turn a blind eye to the fate of Muslims like the Arabs and Kurds, but identified them as fellow victims of Christian groups such as the Armenians. In particular, the deportation of Kurds from Erzerum and Bitlis in the winter of 1916 made quite an impression

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on him, as the following report about these deportations and their consequences shows:

No European newspaper has reported that the same Young Turks, who wanted to exterminate the Armenians, drove the Kurds who had been living in Upper Armenia from their house and home. Like the Armenians, the Kurds were accused of being unconfident elements that would join sides with the Russians. The deportation of the Kurds from the regions of Djabachdjur, Palu, Musch and from the Vilajets of Erzerum and Bitlis was carried out in the winter of 1916. About 300,000 Kurds had to wander southwards. First they were placed in Upper Mesopotamia, especially in the region of Ourfa, but also westward from Aintab and Marasch. Then in the summer of 1917, the transport of the Kurds to the Konya Plateau began. [...] The most horrible thing was that the deportations were carried out in the middle of the winter. When the deportees reached a Turkish village in the evening, the inhabitants were afraid and closed the doors of their homes. Thus, the poor Kurds had to stay outside in the rain and snow. The next morning, the villagers had to dig mass graves for those frozen to death. The suffering of the surviving Kurds who finally reached Mesopotamia was far from being over. [...] The winter of 1917/18 brought new hardship. Despite a good harvest, almost all of the deported Kurds fell victim to a terrible famine.<sup>4</sup>

As we can see from Künzler's statement, Kurds had to endure a very similar fate to that of the Armenians. Forcing them on death marches during the winter closely resembles the Armenian's marches, with a very similar outcome. The overall aim of the Young Turkish policy towards the Kurds was—according to Künzler—genocidal: "It was the Young Turks' intention not to let these Kurdish elements go back to their ancestral homeland. Instead, they should little by little be completely absorbed in Turkdom [... im Türkentume aufgehen]." <sup>5</sup>

Jakob Künzler's observation is of uttermost importance. It reveals that the Kurds were deeply affected by Young Turkish population and extermination policies and subject to social engineering already before the establishment of a Turkish nation state by Mustafa Kemal in 1922.<sup>6</sup> The discussion of the question whether the deportation and forced assimilation of Kurds by the Young Turks has to be labelled as genocide or ethnocide is, at least from a historian's perspective, irrelevant since a clarification of this particularly legal and political issue depends on the definition of genocide one resorts to.<sup>7</sup> It is, however, important to acknowledge that the Young Turkish leaders aimed at eliminating Kurdish identity by deporting them from their ancestral land and by dispersing them in small groups. The Young Turks partially implemented these plans during World War I: up to 700,000 Kurds were forcibly removed; half of the displaced perished.<sup>8</sup>

This important but often neglected fact has consequences for our understanding of the terrible fate of minorities in the late Ottoman Empire. It suggests that the fate of none of those groups, be they Christian as the Armenians, Assyrians or Greek, or be they Muslim as the Kurds, can be treated in isolation. And this leads us to a historiographical problem closely related to memory politics. In accounts and studies on the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the Armenian genocide, the Kurds are almost exclusively portrayed as bloodthirsty

and ruthless murderers.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, it is true that Kurdish Hamidiya regiments had ravaged Armenian communities in the second half of the nineteenth century. In the Hamidian massacres of 1894–96, Kurds killed up to 100,000 Armenians and stole their victims' land.<sup>10</sup> Finally, during the Young Turks' genocidal campaign against the Armenians of 1915–17, Kurdish chiefs and bands participated in massacres, raped Armenian women and benefited from extensive plundering. Nevertheless, it is necessary to note that Kurdish reactions to the persecution of the Armenians were manifold. Whereas many Kurdish tribes joined the Young Turks, some Kurdish groups like the Alevis from Dersim (today Tunceli) decided to oppose the government and gave refuge to Armenians.<sup>11</sup>

Even more importantly, as shown above, Kurds fell victim to a similar treatment at the hands of the Young Turks as the Armenians and other Christian groups. This not only serves as a reminder of the unsettling fact that victims could become perpetrators, but also that perpetrators could turn victims. It is not only activists struggling for the international political and legal recognition of the Armenian genocide that have a lot of difficulty in recognizing that the Kurds, who excelled in the murder of the Armenians, fell themselves victim to Young Turkish population and extermination policies, but also historians, and especially genocide scholars, working on the violent breakup of the Ottoman Empire generally.<sup>12</sup> This is partly due to a problem inherent to the concept of genocide, in as much as the original legal idea of genocide implies a rigid dichotomy between perpetrators and victims. Social reality, however, is much more complex: victims can become perpetrators and vice versa. There are many examples of this in history: many of the Hutu who participated in the Rwandan genocide of 1994, for example, had been expelled from Burundi, where the ruling Tutsi regime waged genocidal campaigns against the Hutu population in 1972 and 1988.<sup>13</sup>

Another problem arises in historical practice: the concentration on a single victim group. Mainly due to public perception of the Holocaust, genocide is commonly understood as a highly ideological crime against a single group of people. This hinders the identification of synchronic similarities and overall strategies.

Due to its deficiencies, some historians plea for the abandonment of the traditional idea of genocide or its replacement through alternative conceptions. Christian Gerlach, one of the pre-eminent voices in this discussion, claims that "extremely violent societies" like the ones in the Late Ottoman Empire or in Nazi Germany are characterized by mass violence against numerous political, religious or ethnic groups instead of only one. A new generation of historians working on World War II and the German war of extermination in Eastern Europe have taken this into account and shown that the Nazis' "struggle for Lebensraum" was not only directed against the Jews—though they held an outstanding position as ultimate arch enemies in Hitler's ideology—but also affected Poles, Russians, Roma and several other groups.<sup>14</sup>

In the case of the Ottoman Empire this has not yet been done sufficiently. The reasons for this are manifold. As Gerlach—amongst others—asserts, most genocide scholars still prefer focusing on one victim group in isolation in order to make this group's fate appear more exclusive and consequently more meaningful.

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This approach has thus to be regarded as a contribution to the creation and strengthening of group identity.<sup>15</sup>

This observation is consistent with the current state of research on mass violence in Anatolia during World War I. The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire is in both historiography and public memory almost solely associated with the murder of the Armenians. Although the Turkish government still denies that the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire fell victim to systematic murder, the extermination of the Armenians is far from being a “forgotten genocide.” No book on the history of genocide can omit the case of the Armenians. In Switzerland and France, the public denial of this event can be a criminal act.<sup>16</sup> The Armenian tragedy has not only entered the realm of collective global memory but also counts as the “first modern genocide.”<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the belief is widely held that the murder of the Armenians is causally connected with the Nazi genocide against the Jews. The intention that lies behind the linking of these two genocides is obvious: as a straight precursor to the Holocaust, the Armenian genocide would gain even more significance.<sup>18</sup> To sum up: Armenian lobby groups, human rights organizations and genocide scholars sympathizing with the Armenian struggle for justice and reparations have been rather successful in the global “competition among victims” (Jean-Michel Chaumont) for international recognition and moral capital.<sup>19</sup> Like the Holocaust, the Armenian genocide has become a universal symbol for evil as such.<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately, achieving the global remembrance of the genocide against the Armenians seems to have downplayed the fate of all other minority groups in the Ottoman Empire that suffered from ethnic cleansing and mass murder at the hands of the Young Turks.

The one-sided association of the Armenian genocide with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire is a relatively new phenomenon. In the postwar period, Western observers were well aware that the Young Turks’ policy of extermination was multifaceted. Henry Morgenthau, who served as US ambassador in Constantinople until 1916, for example, stated in his memoirs: “The Armenians are not the only subject people in Turkey which have suffered from this policy of making Turkey exclusively the country of the Turks. The story which I have told about the Armenians I could also tell with certain modifications about the Greeks and the Syrians. Indeed, the Greeks were the first victims of this nationalizing idea.”<sup>21</sup>

Morgenthau was right when he emphasized that the Young Turks leaders’ systematic policy of violent turkification was first targeted against the Greeks. Even before the outbreak of World War I, more than 100,000 Ottoman Greeks were expelled from the Aegean and Thrace to create living space for Muslim refugees who had themselves been brutally driven away from Crete and the Balkans.<sup>22</sup> Hundred-thousands of Greeks were deported from the coastal region to the interior due to alleged strategic reasons during the war. Finally, the anti-Greek campaign of the Young Turks found its continuation in Mustafa Kemal’s expulsion of the Ottoman Greeks. The burning of Smyrna and the slaughter of its Christian inhabitants in 1922 marked the symbolic end of Greek presence in Turkey. The euphemistically called “population transfer” between Turkey and Greece turned out to

be nothing else than large-scale ethnic cleansing that was internationally approved. This sort of population policy became an influential model for solving minority questions in the twentieth century.<sup>23</sup>

Whereas politicians of the great powers and Western civil societies were well aware of the destruction of the Armenian and Greek communities in the Ottoman Empire, the persecution of smaller Christian minority groups has remained more or less unknown.<sup>24</sup> Since the Assyrians were more vulnerable due to the lack of an international lobby and an external nation state, the Young Turks did not perceive them as dangerous as the Armenians and the Greeks. Thus, Young Turk extermination policy against them was less systematic. Massacres against Assyrians were often the result of initiatives by local government and party officials like Mehmed Reshid in Diarbekir.<sup>25</sup> When German consuls learned about Reshid's actions they informed their superiors in Constantinople and Berlin. Ambassador Hohenlohe-Langenburg let the German chancellor know: "Since the beginning of this month, the vali of Diarbekir, Reshid Bey, has begun the systematic annihilation of the Christian population in his district, without distinguishing between race and religious denomination."<sup>26</sup> German and US diplomats' correspondence and reports by missionaries document the dimension of the mass murder against the Assyrians. Nevertheless, the suffering of the Assyrians is largely forgotten internationally and not recognized as genocide, which embitters the descendants of the victims.<sup>27</sup>

The genocidal quality of the murderous campaigns against Greeks and Assyrians is obvious. Historians who realize that the Young Turks' population and extermination policies have to be analysed together and understood as an entity are therefore often tempted to speak of a "Christian genocide." This approach, however, is insofar inadequate as it ignores the Young Turks' massive violence against non-Christians. As already mentioned above, Kurds suffered from deportations and death marches and forced turkification. Furthermore, the Young Turks' hostile attitude towards Zionism resulted in the expulsion of several thousand Jews from Palestine. Cemal Pasha, member of the Young Turk triumvirate, had originally planned to deport the bulk of Palestine's Jewish population but German and US diplomatic interventions forced him to abandon this idea.<sup>28</sup> Other groups like the Jews from Zakho (in northern Iraq), Druzes from Hauran (the south western region of present-day Syria) and Iranian Shiites in Mesopotamia were also subjected to forced relocations and sporadic massacres.

The Young Turks' overall aim was a demographic reorganization of the Ottoman Empire. All deportations were planned and supervised by the "Directorate for the Settlement of Tribes and Immigrants" that belonged to the Ottoman Ministry of the Interior. A relatively small number of government administrators were thus chiefly involved in the coordination of the murder and expulsion of Armenians, Greeks, Assyrians and other minority groups.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, the isolated study and emphasis of a single group's victimhood during the collapse of the Ottoman Empire fails to really understand Young Turks' motives and aims or its grand design.

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As part of memory politics, the diverse victim groups' fates are still dealt with mainly in the context of their own national histories. And since Armenian, Assyrian, Greek and Kurdish national histories are mainly concerned with their own groups' fate, the wider context is largely ignored, i.e. the interrelations and links between different murderous campaigns led by the Young Turks remain undiscovered. Moreover, the insights won from the concentration on particular groups are lost for a wider historical scholarship as most Kurds won't study the Greek's national history and vice versa, to name just one example.

To assess the knowledge on these groups and to overcome a national historical approach is the aim of this thematic issue of the *Journal of Genocide Research*. It will contribute to our understanding of the Young Turks' population and extermination policies in all its complexities and help to bring the forgotten victims' stories "back" into genocide scholarship. It will also help to shed new light on the last years of the Ottoman Empire.

## Notes and References

- 1 The Ottoman campaign against the Armenians in Ourfa was led by Eberhard Count Wolffskeel Von Reichenberg. The historian Hilmar Kaiser has pointed out that Wolffskeel's role was insofar exceptional, as he seemed to be the only German officer serving in the Ottoman army who directly participated in massacres against Armenians. On the events in Ourfa in October 1915, see Eberhard Count Wolffskeel Von Reichenberg, *Zeitoun, Mousa Dag, Ourfa: Letters on the Armenian Genocide*, edited and introduced by Hilmar Kaiser (Princeton, NJ: Talderon Press, 2001), pp 20–29.
- 2 Jakob Künzler, *Im Lande des Blutes und der Tränen. Erlebnisse in Mesopotamien während des Weltkrieges (1914–1918)* (Potsdam: Tempel-Verlag, 1921).
- 3 Jakob Künzler, *Im Lande des Blutes und der Tränen. Erlebnisse in Mesopotamien während des Weltkrieges (1914–1918)*, edited and introduced by Hans-Lukas Kieser (Zürich: Chronos Verlag, 1999), p 103.
- 4 Künzler, *Im Lande*, p 101f. On Künzler's relationship with the Kurds, see Hans-Lukas Kieser, "'Birader Yakup', ein 'Arzt ohne Grenzen' in Urfa, und seine Wahlverwandschaft mit den Kurden (1899–1922)," *Kurdische Studien*, Vol 1, No 1 (2001), pp 91–120.
- 5 *Ibid*, p 102.
- 6 On Young Turk social engineering in Eastern Turkey from 1913 to 1950, see Uğur Ümit Üngör's article in this issue.
- 7 Mark Levene claims that the overt genocidal motivation of the Young Turks is hard to prove in the case of the Kurds due to insufficient documentation. Mark Levene, "Creating a modern 'zone of genocide': the impact of nation- and state-formation on Eastern Anatolia, 1878–1923," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, Vol 12, No 3 (1998), pp 393–433. David McDowall states that the Young Turkish leadership has never advertised its plan of forced assimilation. See David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1996), p 105.
- 8 McDowall, *Modern History of the Kurds*, p 105f.
- 9 On the perception of the Kurds as brutal murderers of the Anatolian Christians in German literature until 1945, see Dominik J. Schaller, "'Armenische Krämer' und 'kurdische Mordbrenner': Armenisch-kurdische Beziehungen und ihre Wahrnehmung in Deutschland bis in die 1940er Jahre," in *Kurdische Studien*, Vol 3, Nos 1–2 (2003), pp 5–32.
- 10 Jelle Verheij, "Die armenischen Massaker von 1894–1896. Anatomie und Hintergründe einer Krise," in: Hans-Lukas Kieser, ed., *Die armenische Frage und die Schweiz (1896–1923)* (Zürich: Chronos-Verlag, 1999), pp 69–129. Donald Bloxham, *The Great Game of Genocide. Imperialism, Nationalism, and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp 51–57.
- 11 On the rescue of Armenians by Alevis, see the report by the US missionary Riggs: Henry H. Riggs, *Days of Tragedy in Armenia. Personal Experiences in Harpoot, 1915–1917*, edited and introduced by Ara Sarafian (Ann Arbor, MI: Gomidas, 1997), pp 108–117. The Kurds of the Dersim had to pay a high price for their courage. Riggs noted in his report: "One distressing incident which followed the uprising of the Kurds in the Dersim was the effort on the part of the Turkish government to terrorize those Kurds by treating them as they had treaded the Armenians." *Ibid*, p 183.

- 12 The historian David McDowall calls it a "grim irony" that the Kurds participated in the murder of the Armenians without knowing the Young Turks' plans for themselves. See McDowall, *Modern History of the Kurds*, p 105.
- 13 On the persecution of Hutu in Burundi, see René Lemarchand, *Burundi. Ethnic Conflict and Genocide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- 14 See, for example, the contributions in Ulrich Herbert, ed., *National Socialist Extermination Policies: Contemporary German Perspectives and Controversies* (New York: Berghahn, 1999).
- 15 Christian Gerlach, "Extremely violent societies: an alternative to the concept of genocide," *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol 8, No 4 (2006), pp 455–471, see especially p 464.
- 16 Dominik J. Schaller, "From the editor: judges and politicians as historians?," *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol 9, No 1 (2007), pp 1–4.
- 17 The label "first modern genocide" has no scientific value at all. It implies that all genocides before World War I, namely, colonial genocides, would be insignificant for a global history of modern genocide. See Jürgen Zimmerer, "Kolonialer Genozid? Vom Nutzen und Nachteil einer historischen Kategorie für eine Globalgeschichte des Völkermordes," in Dominik J. Schaller et al., eds., *Enteignet-Vertrieben-Ermordet. Beiträge zur Genozidforschung* (Zürich: Chronos Verlag, 2004), pp 109–128.
- 18 Roger W. Smith, for example, sees the murder of the Armenians as a paradigmatic case of genocide: "The Armenian Genocide is particularly instructive in that it is the prototype for much of the genocides in the twentieth century and the new millennium." Roger W. Smith, "The significance of the Armenian genocide after ninety years," *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, Vol 1, No 2 (2006), pp 1–IV. On the discussion of the comparison between the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust, see the contributions in Hans-Lukas Kieser and Dominik J. Schaller, eds, *The Armenian Genocide and the Shoah* (Zürich: Chronos Verlag, 2002).
- 19 Pro-Armenian associations and missionary societies in the USA managed to attract considerable attention for the fate of the Armenians already during the Hamidian massacres of 1894–96 and especially during World War I. On their lobby activities, see Peter Balakian, *The Burning Tigris. The Armenian Genocide and America's Response* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003); Jay Winter, ed., *America and the Armenian Genocide of 1915* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- 20 On how the Holocaust contributes to a universalistic morality, see Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005).
- 21 Henry Morgenthau, *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story*, reedited by Ara Sarafian (Ann Arbor, MI: Talderon Press, 2000), p 214.
- 22 See Matthias Bjørnlund's article in this issue. It is noteworthy that the Young Turks had resorted to massive violence against Christian communities before. Thousands of Greeks, Serbs and Bulgarians were killed in Macedonia between 1909 and 1911. These atrocities were, however, carried out in a less systematic way than the ones from 1914 onwards. The former US consul to Smyrna, George Horton, described these massacres as such in his report dating from 1926: "This persecution first displaced itself in the form of sporadic murders of alarming frequency all over Macedonia the victims being, in the beginning, notables of the various Christian communities. A favourite place for shooting these people was at their doorsteps at the moment of their return home. It became evident that the Turkish Government, in order to gain control of the territory, was bent upon the extermination of the non-Mussulman leaders. [...] From the extermination of notables, the program extended to people of less importance, who began to disappear." George Horton, *The Blight of Asia. An Account of the Systematic Extermination of Christian Populations by Mohammedans and of the Culpability of Certain Great Powers; with the True Story of the Burning of Smyrna*, reedited by Ara Sarafian (Reading: Talderon Press, 2003), pp 16–17.
- 23 This is one of the key points in Norman M. Naimark, *Fires of Hatred. Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).
- 24 In historiography, the fate of Christian co-victims of Armenians and Greeks has only recently been dealt with. See David Gaunt, *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors: Muslim-Christian Relations in Eastern Anatolia during World War I* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006); Hannibal Travis, "'Native Christians massacred': the Ottoman genocide of Assyrians during World War I," *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, Vol 1, No 3 (2006), pp 327–371; Tessa Hofmann, ed., *Verfolgung, Vertreibung und Vernichtung der Christen im Osmanischen Reich, 1912–1922* (Münster: Lit-Verlag, 2004).
- 25 Reshid's roots were Circassian. His family had been expelled from the Russian Caucasus. He was thus also a victim that became a perpetrator. On Reshid, see Hans-Lukas Kieser, "Dr. Mehmed Reshid (1873–1919): a political doctor," in Kieser and Schaller, *The Armenian Genocide and the Shoah*, pp 245–280.
- 26 Ambassador Hohenlohe-Langeburg to Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg, July 31, 1915, quoted in Johannes Lepsius, ed., *Deutschland und Armenien 1914–1918: Sammlung diplomatischer Aktenstücke* (Potsdam: Tempel-Verlag, 1919), document 126.

## INTRODUCTION

- 27 Assyrian lobby groups and organizations are far from being as successful as their Armenian counterparts. The following excerpts of a public letter to Sylvester Stallone published on the website of the Assyrian International News Agency (AINA) illustrate the Assyrians' frustration: "I have read that you are going to produce a film based on Franz Werfel's novel 'The Forty Days of Musa Dagh' which deals with the Armenian Genocide. [...] The purpose of my letter is to appeal to you Mr. Stallone to mention in your new film also the Genocide perpetrated against the Assyrian people. [...] Since the Genocides against the Assyrians and Armenians were carried out at the same time, it would be a sin not to include the sufferings of the Assyrians in your film." Available at <http://www.aina.org/guesteds/20070207115546.pdf> (accessed January 9, 2008).
- 28 Yair Auron, *The Banality of Indifference. Zionism and the Armenian Genocide* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2000), pp 59–99.
- 29 Hilmar Kaiser, "The Ottoman government and the end of Ottoman social formation, 1915–1917." The essay is published in the internet, available at <http://www.hist.net/kieser/agher/Essays/EssayKaiser.html> (accessed January 9, 2008).

# Seeing like a nation-state: Young Turk social engineering in Eastern Turkey, 1913–50

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## Introduction

“The twentieth century,” Anthony Giddens solemnly reminds us, “is a bloody and frightening one.”<sup>1</sup> Specifically, the first half of twentieth-century world history was marked by a tremendous body count resulting from wars and genocidal violence. Prosecuting these crimes in Nuremberg, Justice Robert H. Jackson provided a succinct historical summary of them: “No half-century ever witnessed slaughter on such a scale, such cruelties and inhumanities, such wholesale deportations of peoples into slavery, such annihilations of minorities.”<sup>2</sup> In a lucid article Ian Kershaw paraphrases this interpretation:

[H]owever pessimistically we look back on world history in recent decades, it is plain that the ultra-violence that characterised the first half of the century had no equivalent in the second half, though the later decades could still witness the horrific episodes of violence in, for example, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Khmer Rouge Cambodia or Rwanda. This first half of the century—or, more precisely, the years 1914 to 1950 that spanned the period from the beginning of the First World War to the end of the Second World War, embracing also its immediate aftermath, when high levels of violence against civilian populations with the resulting misery of millions continued—has indeed claim, more surely than any other period in history, to be labelled “the era of violence.” That is to say: in these four decades of the twentieth century, violence had *epochal* character; it determined the age.<sup>3</sup>

Micha Brumlik identifies three fundamental aspects of this “epochal character”: first, the industrial killing of non-combatants; second, the establishment of lawless enclaves embodied in concentration camps; and third, the politically motivated deportation and expulsion of indigenous peoples.<sup>4</sup> Götz Aly agrees with this idea and notes about deportations: “There was nothing taboo about the forcible resettlement of population groups and entire peoples in the first half of the twentieth century. [...] Resettlement programmes were routinely justified by reference to economic and ideological arguments.”<sup>5</sup> Although the period 1900–50 merits special attention for scholars interested in nationalist violence,

in general nationalist population policies constitute more than outright violence and include a broad range of possible political strategies.

The concept of social engineering provides us with a useful analytical tool that is broad but does not lapse into a catch-all category. It originates from late nineteenth-century discussions by sociologists on the application of scientism (most notably social science) in ordinary government population policies.<sup>6</sup> In short, social engineering encompasses the exercise of all possible state policies aimed at changing a given society. In the era of nationalism and nation-states it became tantamount to the enforced maximization of ethnic, religious, economic, cultural (in other words: *identity*) homogeneity by any means. Moreover, in the twentieth century social engineering acquired a decidedly calculated character, involving refined plans and calculating bureaucracies.<sup>7</sup> Most importantly, the exercise of these policies was always unidirectional: the political elite coerced the population as it saw fit. In situations of frustration, crisis, or war, coercion could easily gain in violence. As Amir Weiner has argued: "Whatever its ideological coloring, social engineering possessed a tremendous capacity for violence."<sup>8</sup>

States can apply several techniques of social or demographic engineering.<sup>9</sup> Laid out from the least violent to the most violent, first, it includes the manipulation of censuses. The twin principles of sovereignty and democracy, entrenched in the paradigm of nationalism, prescribe that being the ethnic majority guarantees political power. Nationalist elites therefore closely follow the ethnic composition of the population. The second strategy, closely connected to the first one, is natalism: government policies that are pro-birth and aimed at increasing a country's ethnic majority, often at the expense of minorities. A third technique is border alteration, which aims to achieve total overlap between ethnic and political borders. A fourth method of social engineering is forced assimilation. Nationalist regimes may endeavour to subject minorities to pressure to "become like the majority" in order to produce greater homogeneity. Many scholars interpret these policies as "ethnocide" or "cultural genocide."<sup>10</sup> Population exchanges to create mutually homogeneous societies, such as the ones between Greece and Turkey in 1923 or India and Pakistan in 1947, are a sixth strategy. Finally, deportation, ethnic cleansing, or in the most extreme case genocidal destruction, are the most violent (and least employed) of all the possible strategies of social engineering.

The leading question in this exercise is: how was Eastern Turkey molded by Young Turk social engineering?<sup>11</sup> In other words, this article addresses population politics in the broader Young Turk era (1913–50), which included all of the above techniques of social engineering against various minority populations. The focus will mostly lie in an account of the implementation of these nationalist population politics in the eastern provinces to exemplify these policies in detail. The article argues that a generation of traumatized Young Turk politicians launched and perpetuated this violent project of societal transformation in order to secure the existence of a future Turkish nation-state. It further advances the argument that a strong continuity of population politics can be observed between the CUP era (1913–18) and the Kemalist era (1919–50). Before turning to a brief overview

of the genesis of Young Turk social engineering, a synopsis of the literature in this field will be provided.

### **A review of the literature**

The Ottoman Empire and its successors, including the Turkish Republic, have not remained immune to Kershaw's "era of violence." Apart from the many wars, an incomplete list of mass violence in the Ottoman Empire would include: the 1909 Adana massacre, the violent expulsion of European Muslims especially after 1912, the 1915 deportation and genocide of Armenians and Syrians, the 1921 Koçgiri and Pontus massacres, the mass violence against Kurds from the 1925 Sheikh Said conflict to the 1938 Dersim massacre, the 1934 anti-Jewish pogrom in Thrace, all the way up to and including the 1955 pogrom against Greeks and Armenians in Istanbul. Sociologically speaking, one could interpret these events as constituents of the "dark side" of the Turkish process of nation-building, of which violence was a defining feature. Unlike violence in modern German history, Young Turk violence and social engineering remains remarkably under-researched, both in Ottoman-Turkish studies and in genocide studies in general.

Together, the violence and counter-violence cost millions of people from all walks of life their lives and livelihood. Listed one by one in this bookkeeping of violence, these campaigns may seem incidental and isolated events, sudden explosions neatly encapsulated in time and space. But a closer look reveals clear ideological, motivational, and organic links and interdependencies between them. Were it not for the fact that almost all of these episodes of mass violence took place under Young Turk rule, the breadth and difference between each singular event would seem to preclude any interconnections. Given the status quo of isolated case studies, contextualization seems a challenge. It is an aim of this article to call this into question by pulling these scattered events together in order to problematize them and to consider what can be posited about any possible bigger picture. Turkish-nationalist social engineering consisted of a broad scope of policies ranging from marginalization, isolation, incarceration, border alteration, deportation, forced assimilation, population exchange, to outright indiscriminate massacre, and in the most extreme case: fully fledged genocidal destruction. The fate of the victims depended on their perceived ethnic and political distance to the newly proclaimed Ottoman Muslim and Turkish national identity, as well as on the contingency of war or international politics. The nationalist mindset of Young Turk social engineers allowed them to disregard feedback from the population so that ethnicity was equated with loyalty. Thus, loyal Christian Armenian government employees were doomed to be excluded whereas tax-evading Muslim Turkish peasants were categorized into this new identity. Others, such as Muslim Kurds or Sephardic Jews were considered slightly more "Turkifiable" than others, albeit ambiguously. Much of this was carried out with little regard for proclaimed and real loyalties. Once these processes of persecution escalated, points of no return were reached fast enough to erase millions from their ancestral lands in just years.

What is the score so far of research on Young Turk social engineering? It is not widely contested that the establishment of the Turkish Republic was a watershed in the modern history of the Middle East, marking the turn of a multi-ethnic empire into a nation-state set upon homogenizing its population. Students of Young Turk social engineering have established that in Turkey, encompassing campaigns of thorough homogenization were carried out by a generation of politicians who managed to maintain power and persisted in implementing plans of demographic homogenization, carried out under the banner of nation-building. In what follows, I will summarize the main debates on Young Turk social engineering, utilizing key studies and seeking to patch them together to contribute to an integrated perspective of this small but burgeoning field.

On the historiographic level, Fatma Müge Göçek detects three discourses on Young Turk violence: an "Ottoman Investigative Narrative" (being the accounts of Ottoman citizens before 1923), a "Republican Defensive Narrative" (the nationalist master narrative denying all kinds of state-led violence), and a "Post-nationalist Critical Narrative" (comprised of critical intellectuals challenging the previous narrative and opening up new avenues of research).<sup>12</sup> One could perhaps add to this portrait the "Minority Memorial Narrative": the growing attempts (political and scholarly) of a plethora of community activists of various victimized peoples to document the violence perpetrated against their groups and popularize accounts thereof, which were silenced and were relegated to oblivion by official Turkish historiography. Had they not drawn attention to these historical sufferings, fewer scholars would have picked up on these signals and problematized them in academia. Beyond descriptive studies of the violence itself, Hamit Bozarslan has analysed minutely the language of Young Turk violence, periodizing broadly and cutting through the mystifying barrier of 1923. His article catalogued how the Young Turk elite apprehended the nature and meaning of its violent policies.<sup>13</sup>

In an early article Mark Levene argued that once the western ideology of nationalism percolated into Ottoman politics, it was only a matter of time before "Eastern Anatolia" became a laboratory for nationalist visions of the future. When the Young Turks gained the upper hand in the region, the violent process of nation formation they launched came to engulf a mosaic of victims.<sup>14</sup> Hilmar Kaiser deepened this notion and demonstrated in purely historical yet extremely detailed research that the treatment of the Armenians and Syrians, nothing short of genocide, and the deportation of Kurds and Greeks were integral parts of the CUP scheme of social engineering. Arguing that this scheme envisioned the cultural assimilation of Muslims and exclusion of non-Muslims, he drew a parallel with wartime Nazi policies in Eastern Europe by aptly characterizing the project as "Generalplan Ost 1915."<sup>15</sup> Aspects of Young Turk social engineering were catalogued by Fuat Dündar in his work on the forced resettlements of Muslims.<sup>16</sup> An authoritative and definitive study written by Hans-Lukas Kieser described many aspects and detailed histories of CUP social engineering. He rightly emphasized that the homogenizing efforts between 1913 and 1938 could be seen as nation-state policies on an imperial

scale.<sup>17</sup> In a later article Kieser made the persuasive argument that in the Young Turk era the notion of “modernity” became a discourse legitimizing the use of state violence.<sup>18</sup> These were the first instances in which the debate on Young Turk social engineering was taken seriously as an autonomous and legitimate field of study and expertise.

Periodization remains far from a settled issue. In an account of the Turkish nation-building process, Taner Akçam traced its key aspects and linked it to the forced Turkification of Anatolia up to the establishment of the Republic. According to this interpretation, the Armenian genocide was a constituent aspect, as well as the apex, of this long and at times very violent process.<sup>19</sup> Others, on the other hand, have periodized social engineering from 1923 on. In a massive volume describing anti-Jewish measures and policies of the Kemalist regime, Rifat Bali has pointed out that although the Ottoman Jews may never have been targeted genocidally, neither were they ever to be included in the Turkish nation. His study described how during the Kemalist era the Turkish Jews were targeted for linguistic assimilation and economic and administrative exclusion.<sup>20</sup> An alternative interpretation was offered by Ayhan Aktar, who wrote that no Muslim ethnic group was considered to be a minority. According to Aktar, the Kemalists excluded Armenians, Greeks, and Jews from society through economic Turkification, isolation, and expulsion, due to these groups being perceived as “non-Turkifiable” minorities.<sup>21</sup>

Some scholars have rightly pointed at the variegated nature of Young Turk social engineering, involving not only a human cost, but also the reorganization of space. In a recent article Erol Ülker wrote: “Turkification was a project of nation-building, aiming to keep the unity of the empire under the domination of a Turkish national core.” Mildly glossing over the genocidal persecution of Ottoman Armenians and Ottoman Syrians,<sup>22</sup> as well as the formative influence of these events for the infrastructure of the envisioned Turkified state, Ülker argued that the CUP had “Anatolia” incorporate “Kurdistan” as a form of nationalist geopolitics.<sup>23</sup> In a comprehensive analysis of Turkish-nationalist social engineering using the local example of Urfa, Kerem Öktem defined it as a double-edged sword, involving the exclusion of non-Turkish people but the nationalist incorporation of their space.<sup>24</sup> In his detailed study of the Armenian genocide, Donald Bloxham adds nuances and complicated the image of clear-cut categories of perpetrators and victims in the post-genocidal period. He too extended the chronological reach forwards, confronting a series of episodes of violent population politics in Eastern Turkey.<sup>25</sup> Utilizing Republican archival material, Soner Çağaptay traced the roots of nation formation in the Turkish Republic to the *millet* system with its established categories of people. According to him, potential Turks could only become Turks after a process of filtration, involving a full identity change.<sup>26</sup> Finally, in a recent article Nesim Şeker discussed the deportation of the Ottoman Armenians as a “radical shift in the management of ethnic conflict from an imperial tradition to one peculiar to nation-state formation” and recognized that only proactive decisions by political elites could bring forth massive processes such as the Armenian genocide.<sup>27</sup>

Were it not only for the fact that these works constitute a sophisticated and impressive corpus of research literature on the subject,<sup>28</sup> they should not be easily dismissed as drops in the ocean, especially considering the reluctance of scholars to work dedicatedly on these themes. These drops have managed to quench the thirst of students of Young Turk social engineering. One can synthesize from the previous that although research on this theme is developing rapidly, at present it still lacks many elements as well. Examples include: the positioning of the Armenian genocide within the larger framework of Young Turk social engineering, the economic motivation and consequences of the persecutions, the treatment and experiences of less well studied minorities, longitudinal perspectives of continuity between the CUP and Kemalism, and descriptive historical studies on specific locations or regions.

### **The genesis of Young Turk social engineering**

It is highly unlikely that the mass violence as it unfolded during World War I was prepared by conspiracy and meticulously planned before 1915. Rather it emerged from the unpredictable circumstances from December 1914 to April 1915. Nevertheless, well before the war, the CUP dreamt of building a strong, united society that was dominated by Ottoman Muslims. The radical wing of Turkish nationalists in the CUP believed that coercion, if not outright violence, could eventually help achieve their political visions for the future in ways that negotiations could not. In order to reconstruct some of the key processes and decisions that led to shaping wartime policies, it is important to understand three parallel developments that were in effect during the immediate years before the war. First, a profound crisis, emanating from the loss of the Balkan wars and threatening the very existence of the empire, not only deeply traumatized the Young Turks,<sup>29</sup> it also polarized relations among Ottoman political elites. The CUP leadership now steered away from political pluralism even more. From then on, only their vision was an acceptable trajectory for the Ottoman Empire and any opposition was met with harsh domestic repression and violence. Second, the Ottoman eastern provinces, which had become contested territory under the forces of both imperial competitions and various nationalisms, had to be "rewon" once and for all. This required both the production of new (nationalist) discourses and societal penetration by the CUP infrastructure. Third, having seized power in a coup d'état, the CUP was now in a position to ordain population politics by virtue of superior authority. It organized the conduct of detailed ethnographic research on almost all ethnic groups in the country and simultaneously initiated a policy of launching several trial balloons aiming at Turkification of many domains of Ottoman society.

The huge losses of the Balkan wars, the ensuing establishment and expansion of nation-states by formerly Ottoman subjects, and the persecution and ethnic cleansing of Ottoman Muslims in those regions, confirmed suspicions in the CUP that non-Muslim and in particular non-Turkish Ottomans could not be trusted. The conclusions the CUP drew from its analysis of the political predicament of the Ottoman minorities quickly turned very hostile. In the tense ambience of the

Ottoman parliament, the various (Turkish, Greek, Arab, Albanian, Armenian, Kurdish) politicians couldn't stand each other any longer and ignored, accused, cursed, provoked, or even threatened each other. Especially from the Balkan wars on, ethnic minority members of parliament often polemicized with CUP members about the laws of Turkification they continuously issued. Often these ethnic minority members supported each other in common solidarity during plenary debates against the CUP.<sup>30</sup> In this political battleground, the CUP kept emphasizing the victimization of the Ottoman Muslims in the Balkans and threatened discordant minorities with sanctions.

The internal colonization of the Ottoman eastern provinces by the Young Turks originated partly from the competition between the Great Powers for influence in the region. The CUP's fear for further loss of territory was only matched by its desire to ensure and maintain a firm and preferably permanent grip on the region.<sup>31</sup> After the loss of the Balkans the Young Turk press, aware of the existence of a virtual "Armenia" in the minds of Armenian nationalists and European diplomats, repeatedly warned the Great Powers to relinquish any ambitions slated to "occupy" or "cause turmoil" in the eastern provinces.<sup>32</sup> When the issue of the "Armenian reform plan" was brought to the arena of international politics in 1913, it induced a Pavlov's reflex in the Young Turk mind. The CUP saw Great Power interference in internal politics as a humiliating breach of Ottoman sovereignty, a harbinger of the doomsday scenario in which an independent Armenia would be established in the Ottoman eastern provinces. *Tanin*, the chief press organ of the CUP, wrote: "If there is a genuine effort for reform, a solution can be found that does not violate the honour and legal sovereignty of the Ottoman state. [...] Accepting European control runs counter to the basis, spirit, and purpose of [the Committee of] Union and Progress."<sup>33</sup>

CUP members had brainstormed about the notion of Turkishness and Turkification since the organization's inception.<sup>34</sup> At the party congresses in Salonica (1910, 1911) and Istanbul (1912, 1913) Turkish nationalism came to grow in support and influence as CUP members emphasized "national education" and a "national economy."<sup>35</sup> The resulting process of political polarization only exacerbated ethnic unmixing since "it did not take long for the non-Turkish parliamentarians to withdraw their support for the Committee and join the liberals."<sup>36</sup> Due to the secretive nature of the CUP and the sensitivity of the "nationality questions," critical decisions were taken behind closed doors. According to Halil Menteşe (1874–1948), chairman of the Ottoman parliament, Talaat stated to him in a meeting that "he was preparing to cleanse the country of treacherous elements."<sup>37</sup> The battle cry "Turkey for the Turks" came into use in this period.<sup>38</sup>

When the CUP seized power in a bloody coup on January 23, 1913, they set themselves the task of building a nation-state in the vast landscape of the Ottoman Empire, a territory populated by hundreds of different peoples belonging to a vast multitude of religious, linguistic, and ethnic groups. The formation of a new cabinet launched Talaat and Enver into power and enabled the CUP to gradually but resolutely introduce a campaign of Turkification on practically all domains of Ottoman society. It obliged all state organs (including all schools)