Revisiting the Armenian Genocide

by Guenter Lewy

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The debate over what happened to Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during World War I remains acrimonious ninety years after it began. Armenians say they were the victims of the first genocide of the twentieth century. Most Turks say Armenians died during intercommunal fighting and during a wartime relocation necessitated by security concerns because the Armenians sympathized with and many fought on the side of the enemy. For genocide scholars, the claims of the Armenians have become incontrovertible historical fact. But many historians, both in Turkey and the West, have questioned the appropriateness of the genocide label. [1]

The ramifications of the dispute are wide-reaching. The Armenians, encouraged by strong support in France, insist on a Turkish confession and apology as a prerequisite for Turkey's admission into the European Union. Ankara's relations with Yerevan remain frozen because of the dispute. Across the West, Armenian activists try politically to predetermine the historical debate by demanding various parliaments pass resolutions recognizing the Armenian genocide.

The key issue in this controversy is not the extent of Armenian suffering; both sides agree that several hundred thousand Christians perished during the deportation of the Armenians from Anatolia to the Syrian desert and elsewhere in 1915-16. [2] With little notice, the Ottoman government forced men, women, and children from their homes. Many died of starvation or disease during a harrowing trek over mountains and through deserts. Others were murdered.

Historians do not dispute these events although they may squabble over numbers and circumstances. Rather the key question in the debate concerns premeditation. Did the Young Turk regime organize the massacres that took place in 1916?

Most of those who maintain that Armenian deaths were premeditated and so constitute genocide base their argument on three pillars: the actions of Turkish military courts of 1919-20, which convicted officials of the Young Turk government of organizing massacres of Armenians, the role of the so-called "Special Organization" accused of carrying out the massacres, and the Memoirs
of Naim Bey[3] which contain alleged telegrams of Interior Minister Talât Pasha conveying the orders for the destruction of the Armenians. Yet when these events and the sources describing them are subjected to careful examination, they provide at most a shaky foundation from which to claim, let alone conclude, that the deaths of Armenians were premeditated.

The Turkish Courts-Martial of 1919-20

Following the Ottoman Empire's defeat in World War I, a new government formed and accused its predecessor Young Turk regime of serious crimes. These accusations led to the court-martia ling of the leadership of the Committee on Union and Progress, the party that had seized and held power since 1908, and other selected former officials. The charges included subversion of the constitution, wartime profiteering, and the massacres of both Greeks and Armenians.[4]

By all accounts, the chief reason for convening military tribunals was pressure from victorious Allied states, which insisted on retributions for the Armenian massacres. The Turks also hoped that by foisting blame on a few members of the Committee on Union and Progress, they might exculpate the rest of the Turkish nation and, thereby, receive more lenient treatment at the Paris peace conference.[5]

The most famous trial took place in Istanbul, but it was not the first. At least six regional courts convened in provincial cities where massacres had occurred, but due to inadequate documentation, the total number of courts is not known.[6] The first recorded tribunal began on February 5, 1919, in Yozgat, the province which includes Ankara, charging three Turkish officials, including the governor of the district, with mass murder and plunder of Armenian deportees. On April 8, the tribunal found two defendants guilty, and referred the third to a different court. Two days after they passed the verdict, local authorities hanged Mehmet Kemal, former kaymakam (governor) of Boğazliyan and Yozgat. A large demonstration organized by Committee on Union and Progress elements followed his funeral. The British high commissioner in Turkey reported popular perception "regard[ed] executions as necessary concessions to entente rather than as punishment justly meted out to criminals."[7]

The main trial began in Istanbul on April 28, 1919. Among the twelve defendants were members of the Committee on Union and Progress leadership and former ministers. Seven key figures, including Talât Pasha, minister of interior; Enver Pasha, minister of war; and Cemal Pasha, governor of Aleppo, had fled, and therefore, were tried in absentia. "Embedded in the indictment," writes Vahakn N. Dadrian, the best-known defender of the Armenian position, were "forty-two authenticated documents substantiating the charges therein, many bearing dates, identification of senders of the cipher telegrams and letters, and names of recipients."[8] Among these documents is the written deposition of General Vehib
Pasha, commander of the Turkish Third Army, who testified that "the murder and extermination of the Armenians and the plunder and robbery of their property is the result of decisions made by the central committee of İttihat ve Terakki [Committee on Union and Progress]."[9] The indictment quoted another document in which a high-ranking deportation official, Abdullah Nuri, relates how Talât Pasha told him that "the purpose of the deportation was destruction."[10] On July 22, the court-martial found several defendants guilty of subverting constitutionalism by force and found them responsible for massacres. Talât, Enver, Cemal, and Nazim Bey, a high Committee on Union and Progress official, were sentenced in absentia to death while others received lengthy prison sentences.[11]

Despite widespread hatred of the discredited Young Turk regime, the Turkish public was lukewarm to the trials of the Committee on Union and Progress leadership. On April 4, 1919, Lewis Heck, the U.S. high commissioner in Istanbul, reported that "it is popularly believed that many of [the trials] are made from motives of personal vengeance or at the instigation of the Entente authorities, especially the British."[12] Opposition to the trials increased after the Greek army occupied Smyrna (Izmir) on May 15, which led to an outburst of patriotic and nationalistic feeling.

Under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, a highly decorated Turkish officer, a nationalist movement emerged that would eventually overthrow the sultan’s government in Istanbul. From the beginning, the Kemalists criticized the sultan for his abject surrender to the Allies, and they increasingly expressed the fear that the trials were part of a plan to partition the Ottoman Empire. On August 11, 1920, the Kemalist government in Ankara ordered a stop to all court-martial proceedings; the resignation of the last Ottoman cabinet on October 17, 1920, marked the end of the trials.[13]

Armenian writers have praised the contribution of the military tribunals for their elucidation of historical truth, but such broad conclusions are problematic given both the procedures of the trials and questions over the reliability of their findings. The tribunals lacked the basic requirements of due process. Few authors familiar with Ottoman jurisprudence have a positive assessment, all the more so with regard to military courts. The Ottoman penal code did not acknowledge the right of cross-examination, and the role of the judge was far more important than in the Anglo-American tradition. The judge weighed the probative value of all evidence submitted during the preparatory phase and during the trial, and he questioned the accused.[14] At the 1919-20 trials, the presiding officer acted more like a prosecutor than an impartial judge. Ottoman rules of procedure also barred defense counsel access to pretrial investigatory files and from accompanying their clients to pretrial interrogations.[15] On May 6, 1919, at the third session of the main trial, defense counsel challenged the court's repeated references to the indictment as proven fact, but the court rejected the objection.[16] Throughout the trials, the court heard no witnesses, and the verdict
rested entirely on documents and testimony never subject to cross-examination. Heck expressed disapproval that the defendants in the Yozgat court were tried on the basis of "anonymous court material."[17]

Probably the most serious problem affecting the probative value of the 1919-20 military court proceedings is the loss of all their documentation. What is known of the sworn testimony and depositions is limited to that related secondhand in selected supplements of the official gazette of the Ottoman government, Takvim-i Vekayi, and press reports. What is not known is the accuracy of the transcription and whether the newspapers reprinted all or only part of texts entered as evidence.

According to Dadrian, "before being introduced as accusatory exhibits, each and every official document was authenticated by the competent staff personnel of the Interior Ministry who thereafter affixed on the top part of the document: 'it conforms to the original.'"[18] However, few historians would take period officials at their word without verification. The historical weight of the Nuremberg trials, for example, rests upon the sheer mass of original documentation. The historical significance of the Nuremberg verdicts would be undercut had the record of the trials been lost or not subject to outside review.

In the absence of complete original documents, historians examining the Armenian question have relied only on selected excerpts and quotations. For example, Dadrian related how the deposition of General Vehib Pasha, commander of the Turkish Third Army, described Behaeddin Şakir, one of the top Committee on Union and Progress leaders, as the man who "procured and engaged in the command zone of the Third Army, the butchers of human beings … He organized gallows birds as well as gendarmes and policemen with blood on their hand and blood in their eyes."[19] Parts of this deposition were included in the indictment of the main trial and in the verdict of the Harput trial,[20] but an indictment is not proof of guilt. The context of the quoted remarks has been lost. While the entire text of the deposition was allegedly read into the record of the Trabizond trial on March 29, 1919, the proceedings of this trial are not preserved in any source; only the verdict is reprinted in the official gazette.

Contemporary Turkish authors dismiss the military tribunals of 1919-20 as tools of Allied retribution.[21] At the time, the victorious Allies considered them a travesty of justice. The trials, British high commissioner S.A.G. Calthorpe wrote to London, are "proving to be a farce and injurious to our own prestige and to that of the Turkish government."[22] In the view of Commissioner John de Robeck, the tribunal was such a failure "that its findings cannot be held of any account at all."[23] When the British government considered holding trials of alleged Ottoman war criminals in Malta, it declined to use any evidence developed by the 1919-20 Ottoman tribunals.

The Role of the Teşkilat-i Mahsusa
Several of the courts-martial held in 1919-20 made references to the destructive role of a unit called Teşkilat-i Mahsus (Special Organization). Many proponents of the Armenian cause accept this accusation. Dadrian described the members of this unit as the main instrument used by the Committee on Union and Progress to carry out its plan to exterminate the Armenians. "Their mission was to deploy in remote areas of Turkey's interior and to ambush and destroy convoys of Armenian deportees,"[24] he wrote. The Special Organization's "principal duty was the execution of the Armenian genocide."[25]

The Special Organization, which developed between 1903 and 1907, only adopted its name in 1913. Under the direction of Enver Pasha and the command of many talented officers, the Special Organization functioned like a special forces outfit. Philip Stoddard, the author of the only full scholarly study of the group, called it "a significant unionist vehicle for dealing with both Arab separatism and Western imperialism." At its peak, it enrolled about 30,000 men. During World War I, the Ottoman command used it for special military operations in the Caucasus, Egypt, and Mesopotamia. In 1915, for example, Special Organization units seized key oases along the Ottoman line of advance against the Suez Canal. The regime also used the Special Organization to suppress "subversion" and "possible collaboration" with the external enemy. However, according to Stoddard, this activity targeted primarily indigenous nationalists in Syria and Lebanon. The Special Organization, he maintained, played no role in the Armenian deportations.[26]

Yet, the main tribunal's indictment accused the Special Organization of carrying out "criminal operations and activities" against the Armenians. According to Dadrian:

The Ittihadist [Unionist] leaders redeployed the brigand units for use on the home front internally, namely against the Armenians. Through a comprehensive sweep of the major cities, towns, and villages, containing large clusters of Armenian populations, the Special Organization units, with their commanding officers more or less intact, set to work to carry out Ittihad's blueprint of annihilation. [27]

Turkish as well as German civilian and military sources, Dadrian maintained, confirm this information, including the employment of convicts in Special Organization death squads. But Dadrian's references do not always prove his claims. While the Ottoman government released convicts during World War I in order to increase its manpower pool for military service, there is no evidence beyond the indictment of the main trial for the assertion that the Special Organization, with large numbers of convicts enrolled in its ranks, took the lead role in the massacres. Nor was the presence of convicts abnormal. Use of convicts for military duty in wartime had precedent including use by U.S. and British armies. During World War I, U.S. courts released almost 8,000 men convicted of serious offenses on condition of their induction into military service.[28]
Many of the allegations linking the Special Organization to massacres are based not directly on documents but rather on the sometimes questionable assumptions of those reading them. Dadrian has been among the most prominent scholars making assertions for which the original sources do not allow. He described a link between the Special Organization and the Armenian massacres, but Stange, the German officer who wrote the document in question, never actually mentioned the Special Organization but instead referred to "scum."[29] Nor is there any indication that Stange had any role in the Special Organization, as Dadrian asserted.[30] In view of the tension between Ottoman and German secret services, it would be an unlikely assignment.[31] More likely was that the German Foreign Ministry files were accurate when they described Stange as commanding a detachment of 2,000-3,000 mostly Georgian irregulars who had volunteered to fight the Russians.[32] Another German officer related that the Stange detachment included Armenians,[33] surely a curious fact in the case of a unit said to have been part of an apparatus for the implementation of the Armenian genocide. The question of who carried out the killings of the Armenian deportees is difficult to resolve conclusively. While it may be politically expedient to blame the Special Organization, more likely, the perpetrators were Kurdish tribesmen and corrupt policemen out for booty.[34]

Dadrian has taken similar liberties with a Turkish source that deals with the leading Special Organization official, Eşref Kuşçubası. At the outbreak of World War I, Eşref was director of Special Organization operations in Arabia, the Sinai, and North Africa. Captured while on a mission to Yemen in early 1917, the British military sent him to Malta where he remained until 1920. British officers interrogated Eşref, but he denied any involvement with the Armenian massacres. He died in 1964 at the age of 91.[35] Dadrian has argued that Eşref admitted participating in the massacres in an interview with the Turkish author Cemal Kutay.[36] Closer inspection, though, reveals Eşref made no such admission. The assertion was instead constructed by selective ellipses and inaccurate paraphrasing.[37] Likewise, despite claims to the contrary, while the indictment of the 1919 court-martial linked the Special Organization to the Armenian massacres, neither the trial's proceedings nor its verdict support the claim. Rather, defendants described the Special Organization's role in covert operations behind Russian lines.[38] Gwynne Dyer, one of the few Western scholars to have done research in the Ottoman military archives, has characterized as "gossip" the assertion that the Special Organization was complicit in the Armenian massacres.[39] The archive of the Turkish General Staff is said to contain ciphered telegrams to the Special Organization,[40] but these documents have not been subject to scholarly inquiry. Until new documents emerge, a link between the Special Organization and the Armenian massacres is nothing but uncorroborated assertion.

The Memoirs of Naim Bey
The third pillar upon which the charge of Armenian genocide rests is Aram Andonian's *Memoirs of Naim Bey*. Aram Andonian was an Armenian, employed as a military censor at the time of mobilization in 1914. After his April 1915 arrest and deportation from Istanbul, he made his way to Aleppo where he obtained a permit for temporary residence. After the British liberation of the city in October 1918, Andonian collected the testimonies of Armenian men, women, and children who had survived the deportations. As he relates the story, he also made contact with a Turkish official named Naim Bey, who had been the chief secretary of the deportations committee of Aleppo. Naim Bey handed over to Andonian his memoirs, which contained a large number of official documents, telegrams, and decrees, which, he stated, had passed through his hands during his term of office. Andonian translated these memoirs into Armenian. After some delay, they were published in Armenian, French, and English editions.[41]

The documents reproduced in Naim Bey's memoirs are the most damning evidence put forward to support the claim of genocide. Particularly incriminating are the telegrams of the wartime interior minister. If authentic, they provide proof that Talât Pasha gave explicit orders to kill all Turkish Armenians—men, women, and children. One telegram dated September 16, 1915, notes that the Committee on Union and Progress had

decided to destroy completely all the Armenians living in Turkey. Those who oppose this order and decision cannot remain on the official staff of the empire. An end must be put to their [the Armenians'] existence, however criminal the measure taken may be, and no regard must be paid to either age or sex nor to conscientious scruples.[42]

The utter ruthlessness of Talât Pasha is a recurring theme in *The Memoirs*. Such a demonization, though, represents an important change from the way many Armenians regarded Talât before 1915. On December 20, 1913, for example, British embassy official Louis Mallet reported the Armenians had confidence in Talât Pasha, "but fear that they may not always have to deal with a minister of the interior as well disposed as the present occupant of that post."[43] Similarly, the German missionary Liparit described Talât as a man "who over the last six years has acquired the reputation of a sincere adherent of Turkish-Armenian friendship."[44] Even the American head of the international Armenian relief effort in Istanbul recalled that Talât Pasha always "gave prompt attention to my requests, frequently greeting me as I called upon him in his office with the introductory remark: 'We are partners; what can I do for you today?'"[45] Talât Pasha may have turned into a vicious fiend, but the opinions of his contemporaries do not support this characterization.

There are many doubts as to the authenticity of the documents reproduced in Naim Bey's memoirs. Several Armenian scholars suggest that a German court authenticated five of the Talât Pasha telegrams during the 1921 trial of Soghomon Tehlirian, who assassinated Talât Pasha in Berlin on March 15,
However the stenographic record of the trial, published in 1921, shows that defense counsel von Gordon withdrew his motion to introduce the five telegrams into evidence before their authenticity could be verified.[47]

Two Turkish authors, Şinasi Orel and Süreyya Yuca, who undertook a detailed examination of the authenticity of the documents in the Andonian volume, suggest that the Armenians may have "purposely destroyed the 'originals,' in order to avoid the chance that one day the spuriousness of the 'documents' would be revealed."[48] Orel and Yuca argue that discrepancies between authentic Turkish documents and those reproduced in the Naim-Andonian book suggest the latter to be "crude forgeries."[49] In addition, the two authors could find no reference to Naim Bey in the official registers and cast doubt on his very existence.

When *The Memoirs* were published in 1920, Armenian activists described its author as an honest individual driven to make amends for his misdeeds. But according to a letter composed by Andonian in 1937, Naim Bey was addicted to alcohol and gambling, and the documents he provided were bought for money. To have "unveiled the truth about him," Andonian wrote, "would have served no purpose."[50] More likely, it would have undercut the very effectiveness of *The Memoirs*. Nobody would have believed the word of an alcoholic and gambler who might have manufactured the documents to obtain money.

The documents contained in *The Memoirs of Naim Bey* depict both the Young Turk leadership and the general Turkish public as ruthless and evil villains. These materials were to influence public opinion in the United States and Western Europe and to provide the Armenians lobbying at the Paris peace conference with ammunition to support their calls for independence.[51] That is why the Armenian National Union, formed under the leadership of the veteran Armenian statesman Boghos Nubar Pasha, purchased the documents and entrusted Andonian with bringing them to Europe. While telegrams from the Naim-Andonian book were included in a dispatch sent to London in March 1921[52] and also in the dossiers of the Malta detainees, the British government never made use of these telegrams. The law officers of the crown apparently regarded the Naim-Andonian book as another of the many forgeries that were flooding Istanbul at the time.

Turkish authors are not alone in their assessment that the Naim-Andonian documents are fakes. Dutch historian Erik Zürcher, writing in 1997, argued that the Andonian materials "have been shown to be forgeries."[53] British historian Andrew Mango speaks of "telegrams dubiously attributed to the Ottoman wartime minister of the interior, Talât Pasha."[54] It is ironic that lobbyists and policymakers seek to base a determination of genocide upon documents most historians and scholars dismiss at worst as forgeries and at best as unverifiable and problematic.
Conclusion

The three pillars of the Armenian claim to classify World War I deaths as genocide fail to substantiate the charge that the Young Turk regime intentionally organized the massacres. Other alleged evidence for a premeditated plan of annihilation fares no better.

Whether to apply the genocide label to the events that occurred almost one hundred years ago in the Ottoman Empire may be of minor consequence to many historians, but it remains of great political relevance. Both Armenian partisans and Turkish nationalists have staked claims and made their case by simplifying a complex historical reality and by ignoring crucial evidence that might yield a more nuanced picture. Professional scholars have based their positions on previous works, often unaware that these represented a bastardized interpretation of the original sources. With the political stakes high, both sides have sought to silence opponents and stymie a full debate. In one famous example, in 1995 a French court partially upheld a civil complaint brought by an Armenian group against eminent historian Bernard Lewis because they objected to a letter he had published in Le Monde on January 1, 1994, in which he had questioned the existence of a plan of extermination on the part of the Ottoman government.[55] Turkish leaders have applied diplomatic pressure and threats; the Armenian government has accused those who do not acknowledge that the massacres constituted genocide of being deniers who seek to appease the Turkish government. Some Turkish and Armenian historians have suggested recently that it is time to "step back from the was-it-genocide-or-not dialogue of the deaf, which only leads to mutual recrimination" and instead concentrate on empirically grounded historical research that seeks a common pool of firm knowledge.[56] Time will tell whether it will be possible to rescue history from nationalists who have plundered history to serve their own political ends.

Guenter Lewy is professor emeritus of political science, University of Massachusetts, and the author of The Armenian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey: A Disputed Genocide (University of Utah Press, 2005).

[2] Turkish authors such as Gürün speak of 300,000 Armenian deaths. The estimates of most Western scholars are far higher.
[16] Taner Akçam, ed., "The Proceedings of the Turkish Military Tribunal as Published in *Takvim-i Vekayi*," part 1, 3rd sess., pp. 24, 27. This mimeographed edition of the trial proceedings represents a German translation used by Taner Akçam and deposited by him at the Armenian Research Center of the University of Michigan-Dearborn.
[22] Calthorpe to Foreign Secretary, Aug. 1, 1919, Foreign Office, 371/4174/118377.


[38] Akçam, "The Proceedings of the Turkish Military Tribunal," part 1, especially 5th and 6th session of the main trial.


[49] Ibid., p. 145.


