

The Armenian Genocide and the World

Guest Editor's Note
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For a hundred years the Armenian Genocide has been a highly contentious topic. Yet despite attempts by official and unofficial Turkish denialism to marginalize it, the subject has had a remarkable career in world history. And despite the continued attempts of Turkish denialism to provincialize the topic, it is far from being only a Turkish-Armenian topic: it is part of world history. A hundred years later, however, uncertainty still reigns—to such an extent that it hinders an integration of the Armenian Genocide, of such a seminal event in world history, into our histories, analyses, and narratives of the dark twentieth century. This must be counted as Turkish denialism's greatest success.

Even if one were willing to concede to the Turkish denialists that more research is necessary—and this flies in the face of a barrage of new research and landmark histories of the Armenian Genocide—that would not change the fact that since 1915 the Armenian Genocide has had a remarkable, lasting, and deep impact on the world. Already in the summer of 1915, the Entente had issued a warning to the Ottoman government. It was one of the first major instances in which the charge “crime against humanity” was used. In the further course of the war, the Armenian topic became a hotly contested propaganda topic between the two sides. This legacy, its birth in the midst of a fiery propaganda war, has never left the Armenian topic. In a way, when it comes to the Armenian Genocide, we are today still stuck in 1915 and in the propaganda war between the Entente and the Central Powers.

The Armenian Genocide immediately impacted the way warfare and atrocities were perceived. For example, Winston Churchill pondered the use of poison gas against Ottoman soldiers at Gallipoli, reasoning, *inter alia*, that because of what the Turks were doing to the Armenians, they had lost any entitlement to the adherence to civilized warfare.¹ The argument was meant to free Britain from moral obligations. Similarly, when Lord Bryce—who is prominently discussed in three articles in this volume—objected to the idea of bombing civilian targets during World War I, in an open letter to the *Times* in late 1915, he mentioned the Armenian Genocide as a warning about uncivilized warfare.² Poison-gas warfare and bombing campaigns directed at German cities were signs of a new kind of warfare, one that the twentieth century would have to deal with continuously. It is no coincidence that the Armenian Genocide would be mentioned when these were first discussed. The Armenian Genocide too represented something new in the history of warfare, in which the distinction between civilian and combatant had become almost meaningless. Furthermore, the Armenian Genocide marked the point in the twentieth century—perhaps even the true beginning of the twentieth century—when such violence, otherwise only colonial, came (back) to Europe. Unlike the genocide of the Herero and Nama people in German Southwest Africa a few years before, the target population was Christian and Caucasian; genocide had come to the doorsteps of Europe.

Repercussions of the Armenian Genocide have been felt around the world—at the time of the events, in their immediate aftermath, and ever since. When, for example, news of the Holocaust and of Auschwitz reached London and Washington, many feared that such spectacular news of mass murder and atrocities might be, or at least might be perceived as, Allied (or “special interest,” meaning Jewish) “atrocious propaganda.” This reflected the experience and memory of the atrocity propaganda from both sides during World War I. Here again, the Armenian Genocide was part of the story, indeed a crucial part.

When it comes to the international history of the Armenian Genocide, its role in the history of the United States is comparably well researched, and there is now a series of monographs on the topic. Some go so far as to argue that it was crucial in shaping American humanitarianism and ideas of humanitarian intervention for the twentieth century.³ Regarding the other major Western countries, there are still only a few studies. Germany, for example, represents a special case because it was allied

to the Ottoman Empire during the genocide. Given the new literature published during the centenary year of the Armenian Genocide, it was not necessary to discuss Germany in greater detail in this volume, though my contribution on Bryce sheds light on this important country.⁴ Michelle Tusan's contribution on Bryce in this issue demonstrates how the United Kingdom was also a crucial player in the international history of the Armenian Genocide. Tusan presents Bryce's Blue Book—the first collection of verifiable evidence of the systematic elimination of the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire. This body of evidence, collected and published during World War I, provided the foundation for the evidentiary standard by which the act of genocide is corroborated and judged by the international community. The uses and abuses of the Blue Book at that time, by the British government and the humanitarian movement in making the case for genocide, reveal the problematic legacy of the first efforts to catalog and document what the Allies labeled during World War I as “crimes against humanity.”

Oded Steinberg's article—the third contribution on Bryce—opens up broader perspectives on Lord Bryce and the Armenian topic. As is often either extremely apparent or, just as often, overlooked, the massacres of Armenians in the 1890s under Abdul Hamid II were crucial for how the Armenian Genocide would be discussed when it happened a mere two decades later. Indeed, the Hamidian massacres had become iconic even before the genocide. When, for example, a decade later, and a decade before the Armenian Genocide, the colonial horrors of the Belgian Congo, the Rubber Terror, were discussed in Europe, the Armenian massacres were often referred to in order to make a point about the barbarity of events in the Congo.⁵ The same is true for discussions of the anti-Semitic pogroms in tsarist Russia a decade before World War I.⁶

Lord Bryce's life and activities—much like those of his German counterpart, Johannes Lepsius—span both Armenian massacres. While Lepsius's work has been the subject of some scholarly attention, including under the auspices of the institute devoted to his life's work, the Lepsius House in Potsdam, Bryce remains fairly under-studied with respect to his Armenian work.⁷ Indeed, until his death in early 1922, Bryce continued to lobby for the Armenians, wrote letters to the *Times*, and was a prominent supporter of various events. He was present, for example, with one of Lord Gladstone's sons at a private screening in 1919 of *Auction of Souls*.⁸ Obituaries in 1922 discussed Bryce's life and work and conceded a hard fact that applied to both him and Lepsius—a fact that must have been painfully obvious to both in the post-war years: “And all his efforts could not save Armenia from destruction.”⁹

There are many other perspectives that deserve further investigation; we are still at the beginning of research on the international impact of the Armenian Genocide. What about France, for example, or neutral countries like Switzerland, which became a sort of safe haven for the dissemination of information on the Armenian Genocide during World War I and where German- and French-language newspapers published accounts and op-eds that could not be published in the press of the Central Powers. The contribution by **Péter Kránitz** in this volume shines a light on another national context of the Armenian Genocide: that of Hungary. As part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, it was also part of the alliance that included the Ottomans. In the aftermath of the genocide, Hungary went its own way, more (but not entirely) disconnected from the German-speaking lands and the prevalent discourses on the Armenians there. And here too, similarly to interwar Germany, the Armenian Genocide was not only discussed but often used as a warning in relation to growing anti-Semitism and against rash and brutal solutions to the “Jewish Question.”

As Israeli historian Yair Auron, for example, has shown in his books, the Armenian Genocide is deeply intertwined with Jewish history.¹⁰ One of the few interventions in the German parliament during World War I in relation to the Armenian Genocide was made by a Jewish parliamentarian and was related to Palestine. Oskar Cohn, of the Independent Social Democrats, asked the German chancellor a question, submitted in May 1917, about the deportation of Jewish residents in Palestine because of “military necessities.” He asked the chancellor if he was aware of this situation and whether he would use his influence with the Ottoman government “so that a repetition in Palestine of the Armenian Horrors is excluded with certainty.”¹¹ Cohn was referring to the events of 1915–16. In this volume, **Martina Berli** probes the Jewish dimension of the topic further in her analysis of the Zionist Organization’s leaders’ activities and knowledge of the Armenian Genocide during World War I.

Much more research will be needed to fully appreciate the impact of the Armenian Genocide on the world and on world history. But there is another dimension of its international role and impact that needs to be constantly surveyed and discussed: its life as a topic of inquiry and research, the history of its historiography. The last decades, especially, have seen important and continuing expansion of the field of Armenian Genocide studies. Our two contributions on the history of the topic offer an overview, and both take a critical look at what has been done so far. **Avi Kay’s** article is an in-depth examination of the psychological approach to the genocide. Drawing on his expertise in psychology and the Holocaust, he offers comparative

insights, maps out the last century, and tries to explain why we are still a long way from a deeper understanding of the events. In his overview of the historiography of the Armenian Genocide, **Bedross Der Matossian** looks at the broader trends of research. His article surveys what has been done, what questions remain open and pressing, and how we can proceed from here.

Rounding off the overviews provided by Kay and Der Matossian, the book review section offers further snapshots of what is happening in the field. All three reviews represent new contributions and the ongoing development of the field: **Nazan Maksudyan**'s review essay presents an overview of memoir publications, focusing on three in particular. Memoirs continue to be important not only because they have been published relatively late—that is, long after the genocide itself—but also because they symbolize a sort of renaissance (or rather *naissance*) of Armenian voices on the genocide. This connects to a point Der Matossian makes in his article: for a long time “Armenian historians have systematically avoided the use of Armenian sources to avoid having their scholarship labeled by international historians or Turkish scholars as biased.” Another review, written by **Erdal Kaynar**, looks at one of the seminal contributions in the category overview and synthesis—the book by Ronald Grigor Suny. Given that Suny is a historian of the Caucasus and the Soviet Union, his is a different and refreshing look at the topic. Finally, we feature a review by **Reşat Kasaba** of Lerna Ekmekçioğlu's book on the aftermath of the genocide and what continuing to live in Turkey meant for the surviving Armenians.

This volume also seeks to look beyond classic history. Two of our contributions are devoted to literature. **Nathalie Alyon** introduces the piece in the *doc-ument* section, as well as its author, **Nurcan Baysal**. It is a most topical piece, one that offers a view from the southeastern regions of Turkey; some areas there are under constant military curfew at the time of this writing. Baysal offers a Kurdish view on the Armenian Genocide. Here, once more, the Armenian Genocide takes on a role that goes beyond the historical and often too-narrowly defined Turkish-Armenian conflict. The other piece, by **Mikail Mamedov**, discusses a novel from Azerbaijan that deals with the Armenian Genocide as well as with the post-Soviet conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. On March 30, 2016, while this issue of *JLS* was being prepared, the author of the novel, Akram Aylisli, was arrested, precisely because of the novel and his views. The Armenian Genocide, in all its

dimensions, remains incredibly topical—in these days also, by the sheer congruence of its geography with present conflicts. Violence has returned to the very regions in which the Armenian Genocide was committed: military curfews in southeastern Turkey, civil war in Syria, the Yezidi minority under threat of annihilation by ISIS, and the destruction of the Armenian Genocide memorial by, again, ISIS, in Der Zor in 2014.

Notes

- 1 Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, vol. 3, *The Challenge of War, 1914-1916* (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College Press, 2008), 556.
- 2 Lord Bryce, “Letter to the Editors—The Policy of Air Raid Reprisals,” *Times* [London], October 18, 1915.
- 3 Jay Winter, ed., *America and the Armenian Genocide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Peter Balakian, *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America’s Response* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2004); Merrill D. Peterson, *“Starving Armenians”: America and the Armenian Genocide, 1915-1930 and After* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004); see also Keith David Watenpaugh’s recent contribution to the topic: *Bread from Stones: The Middle East and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015).
- 4 See, for example, Rolf Hosfeld, *Operation Nemesis: Die Türkei, Deutschland und der Völkermord an den Armeniern* [Operation Nemesis: Turkey, Germany and the Armenian Genocide] (Cologne: Kiepenheuer and Witsch, 2005); Jürgen Gottschlich, *Beihilfe zum Völkermord: Deutschlands Rolle bei der Vernichtung der Armenier* [Aiding genocide: Germany’s role in the annihilation of the Armenians] (Berlin: Ch. Links, 2015).
- 5 Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (London: Pan, 1999), 222.
- 6 Stefan Ihrig, *Justifying Genocide: Germany and the Armenians from Bismarck to Hitler* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 79–80.
- 7 See, for example, Rolf Hosfeld, ed., *Johannes Lepsius: Eine deutsche Ausnahme* [Johannes Lepsius: A German exception] (Göttingen, Germany: Wallstein, 2013), 126–159.
- 8 See “Turkish Atrocities on Film,” *Times* [London], October 30, 1919; “Pro-Bolshevist Turks—Lord Bryce’s Call to the Nation,” *Times* [London], March 5, 1920; Lord Bryce, “To the Editor of the Times: Armenia—The Retention of Batum—A Test of British Honour,” *Times* [London], June 22, 1920; “To the Editor of the Times—The Fate of Armenia,” *Times* [London], March 1, 1921.

- 9 Frederic Harrison, "Lord Bryce—A Life of Incessant Activity," *Times* [London], February 6, 1922.
- 10 Yair Auron, *The Banality of Indifference: Zionism and the Armenian Genocide* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2000); Yair Auron, *The Banality of Denial: Israel and the Armenian Genocide* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2003).
- 11 Aktenstücke, question no. 156, in *Verhandlungen des Reichstags: Anlagen zu den stenographischen Berichten* [Proceedings of the Reichstag: Addenda to the stenographic reports] (Berlin: Julius Sittenfeld, 1918), 1604. My translation.