NOTES FROM THE BATTLEFIELD KNOWN AS 'HISTORY'

('TARİH' OLARAK BİLİNEN SAVAŞ ALANINDAN NOTLAR)

Prof. Dr. Jeremy SALT
Department of Political Science
Bilkent University

Abstract: *That history is a battlefield of ideas, facts and interpretation is a truth every historian worthy of the description knows. In this article I raise some issues related to my own academic involvement in the history of the 'Armenian question'. It would be incorrect to say that there is a 'debate' over this issue. Debate implies genuine engagement in the search for truth but in Europe, the US, Australia and numerous other countries around the world the truth is apparently known to people who have little or no knowledge of late Ottoman history. History is thus brought to a dead stop: when the truth is known, debate becomes pointless and even offensive – why would anyone want to challenge the truth when it is so manifestly the truth? The point here is that the mainstream narrative is not the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. It is more a mixture of truths, half truths, lies, exaggerations and omissions that would significantly shape perceptions were they are ever allowed into the mainstream. This short article examines, from a personal perspective, some of the issues that have taken the author's attention.*

Keywords: *History, Turkish-Armenian relations*

Öz: *Tarihin bir fikirler, gerçekler ve yorumlar savaşı olduğu, bu tanıma layık tüm tarihçiler için bir hakikattir. Bu makalede 'Ermeni sorunu'nu tarihine ilişkin kendi akademik ilgim ile alakalı bazı konuları tartışmaktayım. Bu konu üzerinde bir 'tartışma' olduğunu söylemek hatalı olacaktır. Tartışma gerçek için hakiki bir araştırmaya girişmek anlamına gelmektedir ancak Avrupa, ABD, Avustralya ve dünya üzerindeki birçok farklı ülkede gerçek öyle görünüyor ki geç Osmanlı tarihi ile ilgili çok az veya neredeyse hiç bilgisi olmayan insanlarca bilinmektedir. Nitekim tarih tam olarak çıkmaz bir sokağa girmiştir: gerçek bilindiğinde tartışma anlamını kaybetmekte hatta saldırgan bir hal alabilmektedir – kim gerçek aşikarsa o gerçeği sorgulamak ister? Burada önemli olan nokta şudu;, ana akım söylem hakikat, yalnızca*

hakikat ve açıkça hakikat değildir. Bu daha ziyade, ana akım içerisine girmesine izin verildiği takdirde algıları gözle görülür biçimde şekillendiren, gerçeklerin, yarı gerçeklerin, yalanların, abartıların ve ihmallerin bir karışımıdır. Bu kısa makale, kişisel bir perspektiften, yazarın dikkatini çeken konuların bazılarını incelemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Tarih, Türk-Ermeni İlişkileri*

In the mid to late 1970s I was hunting around for a PhD topic at the University of Melbourne. My first choice was the Hijaz Railway, built to carry Muslim pilgrims safely to the holy cities, ending the centuries in which they had suffered and died from exhaustion or disease as they made their way to their destination across land and sea. But the Hijaz Railway research project came to naught when my request for access to the Ottoman archives was rejected on the basis that the Hijaz Railway was still a security matter.

Looking for another topic I rooted around in the university's microfilm collection and came across records from the US Legation in Constantinople dealing with the unfolding of the 'Armenian question'. This was research material in abundance and I knew that here I had the makings of a thesis. Eventually it boiled down to a study of the role of foreign governments and missionaries in the affairs of Ottoman Christians and especially the Armenians during the late 19th century. I was very much on my own because no one in my department knew much about my topic but I soldiered on and four years later the thesis was sent off to the examiners. It was passed and with some modifications eventually published as a book, *Imperialism, Evangelism and the Ottoman Armenians 1878-1896* (Frank Cass, London, 1993). The first date marks the Congress of Berlin, where the 'Armenian Question' was created as a subset of the 'Eastern Question': the second date marks the high point of turmoil in the eastern Anatolian provinces as two decades of pressure over 'reforms' for the Armenians ended in chaos and social breakdown.

Much of my work then and later focused on the involvement of US missionaries in the affairs of Armenians and other Christians. I found it hard to feel much sympathy for them. Many lived in the Ottoman Empire for decades but remained as hostile to Islam, the Ottoman government and the sultan and as indifferent to the concerns of Muslims as the day they arrived. They caused a lot of problems through their inability to see any truth other than their own. This attitude extended beyond Islam to the eastern churches, whose 'corrupted' doctrines they regarded as a bad Christian example for

the Muslims they hoped one day to convert. Over decades they antagonized the patriarchs of the eastern churches, the sultan and his ministers and even their own diplomatic representatives. The government regarded them with suspicion even while being obliged to grant them permission to open their schools and bookstores. Their understanding of religious freedom was very different from that of the sultan and his ministers. Open proselytism was inflammatory and they had to deal with the consequences: they could not allow freedom of religion when it seemed to amount to the freedom to annoy other people in the profession of their faith. One could not approach Muslims with the message that Christianity was a more perfect religion than Islam without causing trouble.

So locked up were they in their world of one truth that missionaries did not seem to realize this. While depending on the Ottoman government they prayed for its downfall. They were hardly disinterested observers yet it was their letters home and the articles they wrote for newspapers that shaped understanding of the 'Armenian question'. Christians had lived safely and securely under Ottoman rule from the conquest of Constantinople onwards. If there was an explanation for the chaos of the 1890s surely it lay in conditions and circumstances of the time but for the missionaries – not all but for many if not most – and their supporters back home in Britain or the US the core explanation lay in Islam and what the missionaries and their supporters agreed were the evils of 'Muhammadan government'.

Christians had lived safely and securely under Ottoman rule from the conquest of Constantinople onwards.

All my research was done in Australia but by the time the book came out I had visited Turkey for the first time. I landed on a winter's evening and took a taxi into Sultanahmet. It was a horrible evening. Thick smog hung over the entire city (this was in the days when the main source of heating was cheap coal). I took a room in a cheap hotel, long since disappeared off the map and not before time. The walls were painted green. The bed was narrow and the hand basin cracked. Was this really the romantic city of everyone's dreams?

The next day a friend of a friend in Australia took me to Boğaziçi University, Robert College of old. The missionaries had chosen well. The campus remains a lush enclave where the students gather on the grass in spring and watch the ships coming and going along the Bosporus below. The white judas trees turn pink and the nightingales sing in the gardens. The rector very kindly asked me if I would like to stay for the duration of my stay in Istanbul and before I left I was asked whether I would be interested

in returning to teach the following year. I did return and thus began a long connection with Turkey.

Although my teaching and research interest remained the modern history of the Arab I had now developed an interest in the Armenian issue. I retained a strong interest in the Sultan Abdulhamit, a ruler whose place in history still waits proper analysis free of the bias and clichés that still surround him up to the present day. In my readings I discovered a man of great complexity, frugal, hard-working and fully committed to the well-being of the empire and his people. Somehow he had to find a way of maintaining the state as a functioning enterprise at a time of financial collapse, large-scale internal disorder and continuing external pressure. The strain almost broke him: in his early 30s when he inherited the empire, photographs taken two decades later show a bent and prematurely aged man.

I retained a strong interest in the Sultan Abdulhamit, a ruler whose place in history still waits proper analysis free of the bias and clichés that still surround him up to the present day.

I did not realize the viciousness of the debate over the Armenians until I had unwittingly joined it. When my book appeared it was attacked by Christopher Walker, a shrill advocate for the Armenian nationalist cause and a man who was not deterred by never having met me from seeking to impugn my character in his 'review' – no more, really, than an opportunity for him to cut down the enemy. In 2008 the University of California Press published a second book, *The Unmaking of the Middle East. A History of Western Disorder in Arab Lands*. Up till this time I had not dealt with the fate of the Armenians during the First World War but in this book I did raise some aspects of the war critical to context and balance. The war was a catastrophe for Muslims and Christians alike as well as anyone else who lived in the Ottoman Empire or was caught up in the war as it spread into the Caucasus and northwest Persia. The *tehcir* (relocation) of the Armenians was a specific event, but Muslims died from the same mixture of causes throughout the war as the Armenians - massacre, malnutrition disease and exposure. Yet to this day they are present in the western narrative only as the perpetrators of violence against Armenians. Armenians were the perpetrators of large-scale violence yet are present in the same narrative only as victims.

The notion of a centrally organized attack on the Armenians with the intention of wiping them out – the core of the argument made by such writers as Vakahn Dadrian and Taner Akçam - raises the question of who had power in eastern Anatolia. Was it just the government in Istanbul or was

power and authority distributed more widely? As there was no change in structures of society and administration from the late 19th century until the outbreak of the war, understanding what happened in this region during the war also involves understanding where power lay when it broke out. One assumption which has to be scotched immediately is the notion of a central government that decided everything and controlled everything. Centralized authority was not imposed over eastern Anatolia until well into the 20th century, but this is only one of the many assumptions that have to be questioned.

Abdulhamit is routinely described as an 'absolutist', which no doubt he was for the intellectuals and the politically engaged in the cities of the west, but in the east his authority was far from absolute. In the 1820s Sultan Mehmet II set out to centralize his authority. He broke the power of the tribes in the eastern provinces but was beset by other pressing problems and died in any case before he could complete what he had started. The old ways soon reasserted themselves. Abdulhamit was no less interested in a strong central authority but his problem was that he did not have the means to create such an authority across the empire. It had suffered a fresh series of terrible blows by the time he came into his inheritance: the Crimean War, war with Russia again in 1877-78 and financial collapse. Huge swathes of territory – much of it very fertile land – along with population and a valuable part of the taxation base. Even by the time the sultan inherited, the empire was effectively bankrupt, a state of affairs which was ratified in the Decree of Muharrem on 1881. The Hungarian orientalist Arminius Vambery writes of visiting Yildiz Palace and seeing the tradesmen and artisans gathered there in the forlorn hope of finally being paid for work done. There was little money to run the government let alone to introduce reforms and the infrastructural projects needed to pull the eastern Anatolian provinces into the modern world.

Outside the governor's konak in the town real authority in the eastern provinces lay with tribal chiefs and sheikhs. Military garrisons were few and far between. There were insufficient soldiers to maintain order and no made roads for them to march along to get where they wanted. There were no railways (partly because of Russian objections) and almost nothing in the way of communications except the telegraph linking the capital to government offices in the towns and a postal service dependent on the vagaries of the weather. In winter, mountains were impenetrable and remote valleys and villages cut off by snow. To maintain his own authority Abdulhamit had no option but to put in place what was effectively a social contract with Kurdish and other tribal leaders. The basic understanding was that if they acknowledged his sovereign authority, he would acknowledge

their traditional authority. Cooperation and cooption and not confrontation were what he sought. On this basis the tribal leaders enjoyed a broad remit of power, but the balance was always a fine one and when the powers (with Britain in the lead) interfered by trying to impose 'reforms' on the eastern provinces it was disrupted.

These 'reforms' were not at all the reforms the sultan had in mind, which were aimed at strengthening the empire across the board. British-led 'reforms' (a word the sultan refused to use, referring only to 'changes') were initially aimed at establishing some kind of 'protectorate' over the Armenians, who had by this stage had become a touchstone of relations between Britain and Russia. Fearing that the Russians would use the Anatolian Christians as they were understood to have used the Balkans Christians – as the pretext for war in 1877 – the British sought to strengthen their strategic interests behind the screen of 'reforms' for the Armenians. The original idea was to send British inspectors to the east but this fell apart very quickly once it was realized that there were not nearly enough competent people with the necessary language skills and knowledge of local conditions to take on this responsibility. Still, the pressure for 'reforms' was maintained across two decades.

Had all the 'reforms' been successfully implemented the groundwork would have been laid for Armenian autonomy in provinces which were more than 80 per cent Muslim.

From the moment Armenian concerns were turned into a 'question', the revolutionary committees took their cue and began fomenting turmoil with the intention of maintaining the involvement of the powers. Had all the 'reforms' been successfully implemented the groundwork would have been laid for Armenian autonomy in provinces which were more than 80 per cent Muslim. This region was known by the sultan and the Kurdish tribal leaders as 'Kurdistan' and not 'Turkish Armenia', the name bestowed upon it by missionaries, 'humanitarians', the press and government ministers on both sides of the Atlantic. The sultan, his ministers and the Kurds were immediately alerted. The pressure applied by the British government over these 'reforms' was deeply destabilizing. It had no means of compelling the sultan to accept its 'reforms', yet at the same time it had no fallback plan. The threats it made were empty. Russia had no intention of going any further than persuasion and Britain could not act alone. All that happened was a steady aggravation of the situation and a worsening of relationships between Muslims and the Christian protégés of the powers and the missionaries.

Even if he did rely on 'djurnalcis' (spies), the sultan has to be given credit for understanding his people and his empire better than European governments and missionaries. He knew where their interference was leading but when their meddling, their 'reforms' and their indulgence of the Armenian revolutionary committees ended in the chaos of the 1890s, it was the sultan who was blamed. He was accused of orchestrating the whole affair and of planning the extermination of Christians. The lack of evidence has been no deterrent to generations of 'historians' determined to maintain the accusation. Thus was born the myth of the Red Sultan – Gladstone's Abdul the Damned - the spider spinning his web in the depths of Yildiz Palace. Even after more than a century this twisted, distorted, self-serving caricature of history prevails. The powers and the revolutionary committees are all conveniently let off the hook. The sultan himself remains totally demonized, wrenched out of history and turned into a permanent Punch caricature.

Temporarily the 'Armenian question' died down. It flared up again in 1904 (fresh rebellion at Sasun) and in 1909 (upheaval and massacres in Adana) before the First World War ushered in the collapse of three empires, Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian and Russian. The war was followed by the haggling over the spoils. It was a time of betrayal and promises unfulfilled. Of the commitments made by the British during the war, the Arabs never got the independent state they thought they had been promised. Greece rather than Italy was allowed to take possession of Izmir. France had to be satisfied with a share of the oil of Mosul: the province itself was placed inside the mandate for Iraq, which meant placing it in British hands. With the exception of the Zionists, the smaller players got nothing: both Assyrian and Armenian Christians felt cheated and deceived.

While much has been written in the western narrative about the partition of Arab lands, far less is generally known about the fate of Anatolia as decided at the Paris 'peace' conference in 1919. What the British had in mind was an enlarged Greek state in the west (under their tutelage) and an Armenian state in the east (perhaps under French tutelage but preferably not). Eventually these plans broke on the rock of Turkish resistance. The national struggle against the French and the Armenians in the southeast is virtually a blank spot in the mainstream western narrative. Largely missing also is what Arnold Toynbee called the 'war of extermination' launched by a Greek army after it was landed at Izmir from allied warships. Having slashed, burned and slaughtered their way inland, the Greeks were pushed back to the sea. Toynbee lists their crimes – again virtually absent in the western narrative - and paid for it by having the Greek endowment of his professorship in London withdrawn. All that western histories seem to

know of this history is the burning of Izmir, which invariably is blamed on 'the Turks' although there is no clear proof of who lit it, if in fact it did not start accidentally.

Threading its way through this saga from 1914 until the 1920s is the fate of the Armenians. The general consequences of the *tehcir* (the 'relocation') are well known although the detail remains controversial. Armenians suffered terribly yet what has yet to be brought into the picture is that Armenians were the perpetrators as well as the victims of large-scale violence. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that this was a war of annihilation, a war of armies and a secondary war involving massacre and counter-massacre by civilians. The end result was massive depopulation of Muslims and Christians in the eastern Anatolian provinces as well as every patch of territory where the war had been fought. The suffering of civilians was terrible. The war ended with starvation across the Ottoman lands and all the neighboring lands where it had been fought. The precise death toll is not known but probably stands at between two and three million (probably closer to the latter). Of this number about 2.5 million were Muslims. They have no place in the narrative at all except as the perpetrators of violence against Christians. Although the fate of the Armenians has been polarized between Armenians and 'the Turks', Kurds were also deeply involved as perpetrators and victims. A large number of them were amongst the Muslims who died during the Russian/Armenian occupation in the east. When the Russians and then the Armenians finally withdrew, they left behind a charnel house. Cities and towns were ruined and strewn with bodies.

The war ended with starvation across the Ottoman lands and all the neighboring lands where it had been fought. The precise death toll is not known but probably stands at between two and three million (probably closer to the latter). Of this number about 2.5 million were Muslims.

Some years ago a group of Turkish academics and journalists put their signatures to a document expressing their sorrow at the crimes committed by their forefathers against the Armenians. This was a commendable act but it needed to be complemented by a request that the Armenians express the same kind of remorse for the crimes committed by their forefathers. By drawing attention to one set of crimes and ignoring another, those who signed the petition were reinforcing what is a false narrative but outside Turkey they were seen as 'good' Turks prepared to challenge what is supposed to be the official line. The paramount examples of the 'good' Turk are the novelist Orhan Pamuk and the erstwhile 'historian' Taner Akçam. Pamuk had not previously shown any particular interest in the Armenian

issue until he spoke out in 2005 but Akçam has been inside it for decades. His books basically amount to a prosecutor's brief. They lack context and balance and are characterized by serious errors of fact and interpretation as well as omissions or the downplaying of important material that would stand in the way of the line he strives to develop. In a brief review, a young historian, Erman Şahin, has already picked up many of his transgressions. The sources Akçam uses are often questionable if not downright fraudulent (i.e. the forgeries known as the Andonian 'papers' and the equally discredited 'ten commandments' supposedly issued by the Committee of Union and Progress government early in 1915). Critical material played down includes the large-scale massacre of Muslims by Armenians in and around the city of Van in April-May, 1915: of the killings that occurred across the east during the Russian/Armenian occupation, he has very little to say. He dwells on the postwar kangaroo court tribunals set up during the British occupation of Istanbul but does not touch on the far more important courts-martial set up in 1915/16 to prosecute the perpetrators of crimes against the Armenians. These would surely give readers pause for thought.

Furthermore, Akçam says that Atatürk 'condemned the genocide' when he cannot have done so, seeing that he died in 1938 and the word was not coined until the early 1940s. He also claims that members of the CUP met early in 1915 and decided to annihilate the Armenians but he does not provide any evidence that they took any such decision. His arguments are based on supposition. His claim that members of the CUP government took a decision to wipe out the Armenians is based on it being 'very likely' that they did. This then slides into 'the' decision for 'the' genocide. No one picks him up for the slippery use of language. To make such an accusation stick the historian would normally be obliged to come up with something tangible - a date, a place, a name and some account of the proceedings. Akçam provides none of this, and yet is lavishly praised for writing 'definitive' histories of the wartime fate of the Armenians. The emperor has no clothes but publishers and reviewers don't seem to notice.

Every age has its cultural taboos and in this age questioning of the standard Armenian narrative is not allowed. A parallel would be the history of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians as it stood about four decades ago. Anyone who then argued that the Palestinians had a case was accused of being anti-semitic. The same class of pseudo-liberals and faux leftists who would not touch the Palestine question until it was safe to do so now go along with the standard Armenian narrative. No matter how strong the arguments placed before them they will not publish anything that can be categorized as 'denial' – a word which should have no place in scholarship and whose use is indicative of propaganda being passed off as history.

These liberals may believe in the truth of the standard account - they may not - but they certainly know that to challenge it and even to be associated with someone who challenges it is to risk the career death sentence of 'denialist'. They block the counter-narrative from the journals and newspapers they edit and read while swinging the doors wide open for the repetition of the old fictions and clichés. Almost no one is going to challenge them because not enough people know enough about Ottoman history to know any better.

This game no doubt will be played out for some time yet, but serious historians who do what they are supposed to do and follow the trail where it leads irrespective of the personal consequences are going to run up against facts that get in the way of the standard Armenian narrative. There is no way this narrative can be maintained except by stifling inconvenient facts or by dressing up supposition and conjecture as fact or by repeating the lies born of forged documents.

The genocide resolution passed by the US House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee in 2010 was a disgrace to that assembly. It bore the imprint not of knowledge or truths honestly held but of political correctness and the influence of the Armenian lobby.

The incorporation of the standard account into parliamentary resolutions is risible. The genocide resolution passed by the US House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee in 2010 was a disgrace to that assembly. It bore the imprint not of knowledge or truths honestly held but of political correctness and the influence of the Armenian lobby. The passage of similar resolutions by parliaments as far away as South Australia surely raises the basic question in any mind capable of thinking clearly on this subject: what can South Australian lawyers and fruit farmers possibly know of late Ottoman history beyond what they have been told or what they have read in books written by 'historians' of the caliber of Vakahn Dadrian and his Turkish protégé Taner Akçam?

The central issue here is not the version of history written by Dadrian or Akçam. Let the latter enjoy his moment of fame as the only good Turk. History will catch up with him sooner or later. The real issue is the state of mainstream western culture and the endless repetition of exaggerations and lies in books and academic journals. They are beyond challenge or refutation because with a few exceptions neither is ever allowed. Not only is the gate firmly bolted against the insertion of a counter-narrative (with some exceptions that prove no rule) but publishers, editors and peer reviewers do not seem to notice the errors, the omissions and the lack of balance and context they are letting through the slips.

Yes, history is a battleground but it seems to me that only when all those involved in this issue emotionally, historically and politically (often too deeply to be capable of any objectivity) acknowledge the crimes committed by their forefathers will there be any hope of it being resolved to anyone's satisfaction. It is not just the Turks but Armenians, Kurds and others who have to own up. To the extent that it has been turned into a political football, the Armenian issue has been demeaned. The fighting over numbers and who did what to whom is tawdry and undignified, inviting an endless round of accusation and counter accusation that will never be settled historically whatever the advances made politically. On this basis the issue can go nowhere. The dead, separated from each other in their Christian and Muslim graves but joined in the terrible suffering they experienced, have no voice but one has to wonder what they would make of the way they are being made to die all over again on the battlefield of history.