“Are There Any Children for Sale?”: Genocide and the Transfer of Armenian Children (1915–1922)

KEITH DAVID WATENPAUGH

The forced transfer of children from one group to another is considered an element of the crime of genocide, yet this subject has attracted little scholarly attention. Using the history of the mass transfer of Armenian children during the Armenian Genocide of 1915–1922 as a case, this article argues that the study of child transfer and recovery is critical to both the history of human rights and a more sophisticated understanding of genocide, including the forms of genocide accompanying the colonial encounter. The experience of transferred children and their recovery or loss can help better clarify the historical relationship between the concepts of the rights of the child and individual human and minority rights as these have evolved before and immediately after World War II. Moreover, this article also contends that it is important to characterize child transfer as genocide, as opposed to colonial assimilation or acculturation as a feature of modernization, when explaining the broader social impact of mass violence, forced migration, and cultural destruction on victim/survivor and perpetrator communities.

Introduction

Few Armenian intellectuals of the Ottoman Empire survived the extrajudicial murder, deportations, and exile of the 1915 Genocide. Among those who did was Yervant Odian (1865–1926). Odian, a journalist and satirist, published a serialized memoir of his ordeal shortly after the end of the war in the Istanbul Armenian-language newspaper, Zhamanag (Odian 1919/2009). Entitled Anidzyal Dariner, 1914–1919 [Accursed Years], this remarkable first-person account of surviving genocide is comparable to the writings of Primo Levi in its scope and reflective nature. Unique to Odian’s chronicle, however, was the particular attention he paid to the fate of the Armenian adolescent girls and children whom he encountered during his internal exile in the Ottoman Empire’s Levantine provinces. He described at length Ottoman policies that placed these young people in Turkish households, and the widespread practice of Ottoman military officers and other officials of seizing girls, in particular, to serve as domestic and sexual slaves in their entourages. Indeed, Odian,

Keith David Watenpaugh is a historian of the Modern Middle East. He directs the Human Rights Initiative at the University of California Davis, and codirects the University of California Human Rights Collaboration with Alison Brysk and Gershon Shafir. He is author of Being Modern in the Middle East (Princeton, 2006). His articles have appeared in various journals, including the American Historical Review, the International Journal of Middle East Studies, and Social History. Watenpaugh is a former Senior Fellow in International Peace at the US Institute of Peace and was recently awarded the American Council of Learned Societies Fellowship. He is completing his second book, “Bread from Stones”: The Middle East and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism, which will be published by the University of California Press.

Address correspondence to Keith David Watenpaugh, Professor, University of California Davis, Human Rights Initiative, One Shields Avenue, Davis, CA 95616, USA. E-mail: kwatenpaugh@ucdavis.edu
was among the first Ottoman Armenian intellectuals to identify the large-scale transfer of children and trafficking of young women as not simply an unintended consequence of genocide but rather as a central element of it. It was one of the crimes that constituted what is to Armenians, the Medz Yeghern, the Great Crime.

Although concentrated primarily in Eastern Anatolia, and constituting a significant religious and linguistic minority throughout the Ottoman Empire, Armenians had been woven into the fabric of Ottoman society as bureaucrats, intellectuals, artists, and businessmen, though the vast majority was made up of small land-owning farmers and peasants. During the genocide entire villages, cities, and vast swaths of the countryside were emptied of their Armenian inhabitants; the women and children were internally displaced, often to poorly supplied camps; the men were either killed at the outset or conscripted into forced labor battalions and executed sometime later. Many of the displaced were sent to the deserts of Syria, where they were subjected, by plan, to plunder, starvation, kidnapping, enslavement, rape, and murder.

The consensus among historians of the Modern Middle East holds that at the time of World War I, the Ottoman Empire, led by a military junta of modernizing nationalists—known in the West as the Young Turks—sought to reduce the percentage of ethnic Armenians in several provinces of the Ottoman Empire where they were the majority or plurality to single digits (Dündar 2010; Kévorkian 2011; Akçam 2012). The Young Turks reasoned that were Armenians no longer concentrated in significant numbers—or should they be eliminated altogether—in those particular provinces, calls for Armenian autonomy would become a nonissue after the war and the integrity of the Ottoman state no longer threatened by the possibility of international intervention on their behalf (Bloxham 2005; Dündar 2010). Subsidiary motives included the destruction of the emerging and relatively successful Armenian middle class to make way for a national Turkish middle class. The confiscation of Armenian land and wealth benefitted the Ottoman State and that emerging middle class (Üngör and Polatel 2011). Likewise the displacement of Armenians provided opportunities to resettle the vast numbers of Turkic and Muslim refugees fleeing the Russian Empire and Balkans (Watenpaugh 2006). The fact that Armenians were a vulnerable religious minority in the empire played a role; however, questions of “race” did not have the prominence they would have in the Holocaust (Üngör 2011).

Odian was caught up in a state-organized liquidation of intellectuals and had been deported from Istanbul to Aleppo in what is now Syria in the early summer of 1915. Though his personal financial resources enabled him to spend the first days of his exile in the city in the relative comfort of a hotel, the local military police ordered him to remove himself to a prison camp in a nearby field known as Sabil. The Sabil camp was temporary and the bulk of its inhabitants faced transfer to the desert in the region of Dayr al-Zor, where most would later perish. A few with skills were sent to work as slave laborers in Ottoman state factories being established in the Syrian cities of Homs and Hama.

It was in the camp at Sabil that Odian first encountered a form of child transfer unprecedented in its horror: the sale of children by their own desperate parents. Amidst accounts of disease, starvation, and unremitting hardship in the camp, he described the daily visits of “Arab, Turkish and Jewish women [who] would come from Aleppo in carriages and start going from one tent to another asking, ‘Are there any children for sale (‘Satılık çocuk var mı?’)?’” (Odian 2009: 99). Odian writes that, while wealthy families rejected outright these inquiries, poorer families under duress did sell their children for derisory sums, sometimes after the purchaser promised to return the child if the internally displaced family survived or persuading them they were going to die as it was, why not let at least the little ones survive?
The women [from Aleppo] would put one or two meciyates in the husband’s hand and, putting the child in a carriage, mother would cry, regret what they did, and wish to run after the carriage, but it would already have left. I saw a woman go mad a few hours after selling her two children. Others fell into a sort of lethargic, stupid state, silent, their gaze distant, sitting for hours on the ground. You’d think that their feelings and consciousness were dead; they’d become animal-like. Thousands of boys and girls were sold in Sabil in this way to Arabs, Turks and Jews from Aleppo. The small children of about 7–10 years old were usually considered to be valuable, especially the girls. (Odián 2009: 99–100)

“The sale of children” for Odián constituted a complete moral collapse in the face of genocide itself; it was “the most terrifying side of the dreadful crime of deportation. It’s impossible to imagine that humanity could sink any lower” (Odián 2009: 99–100). The sale of children was not unique to the camp in Sabil and happened elsewhere during the deportations, including episodes where children were auctioned (Akçam 2012).

Elsewhere in his memoir, Odián acknowledges: “To be honest, these children [those taken by non-Armenian households] for the most part, were better cared [for] and received better food and were happier than those who were with their poor parents [in exile]” (2009: 120). As an example, he writes of an Ottoman official, one Selim Effendi he met in Hama somewhat later, “who, being childless, had adopted a little [Armenian] girl. Both husband and wife idolized the little one. Once when the little girl became ill, they brought a doctor . . . from Aleppo and, according to his own statement, spent over 100 liras to provide for her recovery” (Odián 2009: 120). Indeed, Armenian oral histories and memoirs from the time are replete with accounts of instances of generosity towards child survivors, though generally these accounts are by Armenians who rejoined the Armenian community after the war and following large-scale efforts at humanitarian rescue (Miller and Miller 1993). On the other hand, recorded first-person accounts of transferred children who later escaped also show that most faced precarious circumstances of exploitation, unpaid hard labor, forced conversion, and unremitting physical and sexual abuse. Despite an emerging literature in Turkey by the grandchildren of transferred Armenians, little is known of those who were integrated into Muslim households (Altunay and Çetin 2009). Odián’s horror at the sight of Armenian children being sold and his clearly painful admission that, for the children themselves, sale-under-duress or extralegal adoption could mean survival, if not something more, is among the most complex dilemmas at the center of the history of the forced transfer of children, an element of the crime of genocide and human rights.

This article argues that the history of the phenomenon of the forced transfer of children during civil conflicts—like the Armenian Genocide—is critical to the broader understanding of genocide as a modern social phenomenon. Moreover, this history helps clarify the conceptual origins of the historical relationship between the rights of the child and individual human and minority rights as these have evolved before and immediately after World War II. The case of the Armenian Genocide, where the whole range of the kinds of transfer and recovery took place that would be repeated throughout the twentieth century as the articles by Wolf (this issue), Dooley (this issue), and Lazzara (this issue) show, lends itself well to this task. Children were sold, bought and stolen during episodes of mass killing and forced migration; they were placed in state-run orphanages, converted to Islam and the boys circumcised; they faced organized foster placement—often in the homes of those responsible for the deaths of their parents—and loss of inheritance rights; and after the war were affected by national and international efforts at repatriation and rehabilitation.
Indeed interwar efforts on behalf of Armenian children were significant in scale and reach and helped to shape thinking not just about genocide but also the value of humanitarian assistance to children in postconflict settings (Watenpaugh 2010; Zahra 2011).

Critically, this article locates the historical discussion of child transfer in the field of human rights history as point of departure for understanding the twentieth-century elaboration of child-centered human rights practices and norms, including ideas about the “best interest of the child.” Tracing this history is important inasmuch as historically, the interests of the child, as an individual being, have been the subsidiary concern, where the rights of the “family,” “nation,” “race,” and “people”—as each concept has been constructed with time—have been preeminent. Seeing the child as an individual and as a component of the nation (and race) is likewise important in understanding how child transfer has figured in the development of the theory (in both the legal and historical sense) of genocide. The need for this historical element has become more acute as debates about the treatment of indigenous children encountering settler colonialism has been conceptualized in the framework of genocide; and equally as a corrective to the doubt some human rights theorists and historians have placed on the utility and value of the entire notion of “cultural genocide” with its paralethal elements like child transfer and mass rape (Power 1999; Ignatieff 2001).

This doubt is in part a manifestation of an anxiety about acknowledging an element of genocide that is not exclusively about mass killing. How is the forced transfer of children genocide, the argument could be proposed, if the Ottoman Empire only targeted adult Armenians but was willing to preserve the lives of Armenian children through humanitarian adoption? Moreover, is it still genocide if what is lost through forced child transfer is a form of cultural identity but not life itself?

For Odian and others like the Armenian feminist intellectual, Zabel Yessayan, this dilemma was not understood as a rights formulation, but rather one of survival in extremis, where the loss of the transferred children was an act victimizing both children and parents, as well as an element in the intentional destruction of what they considered the Armenian nation by the Ottoman Empire (Yessayan 1919; Tachjian 2009). It is difficult to underestimate the importance that the history of transfer, transformation through loss of identity, and recovery of Armenian children has had on the formation of modern Armenian identity, especially in its Diaspora. The Armenian community itself is today, to a significant extent, a community of descendents of children who faced their own forced transfer or loss of their immediate family, known collectively as the Vorber, the “orphans.” How is that story understood and explained within families and the community; what did it mean for the rebuilding of social structures and social networks; in particular what did it mean to be an Armenian woman or child after the genocide are profound, far-reaching and multigenerational questions that arise from this aspect of genocide. And equally, how does this shape modern conceptions of Turkish identity as more and more contemporary Turks, who call themselves the Torunlar, the “grandchildren,” confront the reality that their grandmothers had been transferred Armenian girls, taken during the genocide that lay foundations of their modern state—a state that emphasizes the homogeneity of Turkish identity and denies that the Armenian Genocide even occurred?

Indeed, after the war, Odian sought to answer these questions as he led efforts to recover children and support the work of orphanages to rebuild the Armenian community, but also as a way to reclaim his own humanity (Tsarukian, 1985). And in a preemptive rejection of Adorno’s maxim about the impossibility of poetry after Auschwitz, he describes in his memoir how on the first day he returned from exile to Istanbul, sat at his desk and resumed his writing.
Child Transfer and Genocide

The layers of debate about the historical meaning and definition of forced transfer of children and genocide inform how the phenomenon is discussed in human rights history. Those questions were also present in the elaboration of the crime of genocide (and the historical theory of genocide) during the drafting of the United Nation’s Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide [CPPG] of 1948. Genocide scholars tend to dismiss the CPPG as an inadequate or perhaps merely incomplete definition of the phenomenon (Kuper 1983). Chief among their objections is the fact that in the final versions of the convention accepted by the UN, the concept of cultural genocide is excluded almost entirely. The only aspect of cultural genocide that remains in the international treaty is the forced transfer of children. This inclusion poses a question: What is it about child transfer that led to its retention, with almost no objection, while the other aspects of cultural genocide as proposed by Raphael Lemkin (1900–1959) were jettisoned, altogether?

At the outset, it is important to recall that as understood by Lemkin, genocide was less about the individual human rights of the victims of genocide but rather the collective rights of a nation. Equally, he conceived genocide as not merely the extermination of the individuals of the nation but rather as the nation’s destruction through physical, biological, cultural, political, and cultural means (Lemkin 1944). Axis Rule in Occupied Europe, where Lemkin first unfolded his theory of genocide, does not enumerate the forced transfer of children as a technique of genocide; indeed, the specific effects of genocide on children are little discussed in the volume, the exception being accounts of the legal and social Germanization of the children of German soldiers and women in occupied areas (Lemkin 1944). Instead, the phenomenon of the forced transfer of children, though clearly implicit in other elements of his early ideas about cultural genocide, was only elaborated in later discussions amongst UN experts advising the ad hoc committee drafting the genocide convention in 1947.

The other experts advising the UN Secretariat, including Henri Donnedieu de Vabres (1880–1952) and Vespasian Pella (1897–1960) considered cultural genocide “an undue extension of the notion of genocide and amounted to reconstituting the former [League of Nations-era] protection of minorities (which was based on other conceptions) under cover of the term of genocide” (Abtahi and Web 2008: 1:234). Fresh in the minds of legal scholars like Pella, a Romanian jurist who would be among the leading proponents of the International Criminal Court, and Vabres, a French international lawyer who had been a judge at Nuremberg, were the patchwork of articles in the various “minority treaties” of the interwar period that guaranteed language and educational rights to ethnic groups in Europe (Mazower 1997; Weitz 2008). The emerging postwar consensus about the “minority treaties” was that they had, on the one hand, been unable to protect minorities and, on the other, were abused by the Nazis on behalf of German populations scattered throughout Eastern and Central Europe. It is even possible that the French and Romanian jurists saw their own states’ efforts at language assimilation and acculturation, like those used on the Bretons and Hungarians, as possibly falling under the definition of cultural genocide and were hard pressed to conceive those efforts in a genocidal framework.

In general, the focus of Pella and Vabres on the interwar treaty régime was a purposeful misunderstanding of Lemkin’s position on the role of the destruction of culture as genocide. Indeed, as Lemkin argued before the UN Secretariat, cultural genocide is distinct from the kinds of measures national states often took to suppress the speaking and teaching of minority languages or the use of minority languages in law courts. Instead, what he envisioned
was “a policy which by drastic methods, aimed at the rapid and complete disappearance of the cultural, moral and religious life of a group of human beings” (Abtahi and Web 2008: 1:235). Clearly, his argument drew less from the failures of interwar diplomacy and more from the historical experience of the Holocaust, the occupation of Poland, and indeed from earlier genocides, including that of the Ottoman Armenians. Hence, his focus is on the liquidation of intellectuals, the whole-scale destruction of libraries, desecration of holy sites, and the debasement of language—all of which were in evidence during the Armenian Genocide. One is struck, when reading Lemkin’s defense of cultural genocide at the UN, how at odds he was with other international lawyers of the time, signaling perhaps the degree to which the whole concept of cultural genocide was problematic to the victors of World War II, especially those that possessed restive overseas colonies. It also indicates an important historiographical correction in the intellectual genealogy of human rights in that how little the actual history of the Holocaust or other genocides were integrated by those other than Lemkin into the deliberations leading to the establishment of the CPPG (cf. Duranti 2012). Moreover, it is a stark reminder of how “minority” rights were excluded not only from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights but also were disregarded in the formulation of the crime of genocide (Morsink 1999).

As noted above, the “Forced transfer of children to another human group” was the only portion of cultural genocide where Lemkin was in agreement with Pella and Vabres. The Secretariat was told that what was genocidal about transfer was “The separation of children from their parents results in forcing upon the former at an impressionable and receptive age a culture and mentality different from their parents’. This process tends to bring about the disappearance of the group as a cultural unit in a relatively short time” (Abtahi and Web 2008: 1:235). What is important to emphasize is that, in the experts’ discussion, the question of the child’s right to identity or other categories of rights is not at issue but rather what that child means to his natal group. The UN does not record the bases for the agreement amongst the legal scholars noting only that “The experts were agreed that his point should be covered by the Convention on genocide, but their agreement did not go further than that” (Abtahi and Web 2008: 1:235).

It may have been that the transfer of children had already acquired a kind of legal precedence; it was listed among the crimes against humanity designated specifically as genocide during the RuSHA (Rasse-und Siedlungshauptamt-SS) Trial (October 20, 1947—March 10, 1948) also known as The United States of America vs. Ulrich Greifelt, et al. This trial brought to light Nazi policies for ethnic purification in Eastern Europe, including the transfer of children from parts of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union deemed as “racially valuable”—meaning some kind of German ancestry or that they possessed “Aryan characteristics” (Heinemann 2004).

As the proposed convention moved from the Secretariat to the ad hoc committee, again, cultural genocide was excluded, with the exception of the transfer of children. A broad consensus emerged around including forced child transfer and with little debate—or discussion of its history—it became part of the convention. The European and North American members of the ad hoc committee supporting child transfer had the particular case of the Nazi’s RuSHA operations and similar ones in mind when acceding to the convention. The measure was also strongly supported by the Middle Eastern delegations—Syria in particular—and Greece. The Greek delegation made reference to the early modern Ottoman practice of devîrme, where in lieu of taxes Christian boys from the Balkans and Anatolia were taken by the Ottoman State to be raised as slave soldiers and bureaucrats. The Turkish delegation objected to this characterization.
It was through a South American delegation’s intervention on the question that an alternative and broader understanding of the forced transfer of children as genocide emerged. Whereas the European and American understanding of forced child transfer emphasized race and racial reorganization, the discussion, in particular by Venezuela’s representative, the international lawyer and author Victor M. Pérez Peroza (1898–1969), was unique in the way it explicitly connected alleged humanitarian treatment of children with the possibility of genocide—describing a situation that obtained not just in the case of the Ottoman Armenians but also in the treatment of children during the colonial encounter and even by aggressively modernizing and centralizing states:

[A] group could be destroyed although the individual members of it continued to live normally without having suffered physical harm. . . . the forced transfer of children to a group where they would be given an education different from that of their own group, and would have new customs, a new religion and probably a new language, was in practice tantamount to the destruction of their group, whose future depended on that generation of children. Such transfer might be made from a group with a low standard of civilization and living in conditions both unhealthy and primitive, to a highly civilized group as members of which the children would suffer no physical harm, and would indeed enjoy an existence which was materially much better; in such cases there would be no question of mass murder, mutilation, torture or malnutrition; yet if the intent of the transfer were the destruction of the group, a crime of genocide would undoubtedly have been committed. (Abtahi and Web 2008: 2:1504)

Critically, the Venezuelan delegate’s conceptualization of transfer as an act of genocide in the immediate postwar period is that it indicates that genocide may have occurred even when the act of forced transfer is done in the “interest of the child” or for the “sake of the child” as determined by state interest or by the more nebulous concept of “standards of civilization.” Moreover, the kind of transfer outlined in this case, which is clearly drawn from his experience with indigenous peoples of the Amazon region of Venezuela (including the Yanomamö) was quite distinct from the specific incidents indicated by the RuSHA trials, which dominated Euro-American understandings of transfer. In the case of RuSHA, the transfer of children was a manifestation of the unique pathology of the Nazi’s pseudo-scientific eugenics program. Pérez Peroza’s interpretation of the concept was much less specific and described instead a larger category of action that extended the reach of genocide beyond the limited frame of Nazi-controlled Europe to whole categories of state-society interaction. The space between Pérez Peroza’s broad characterization of what forms of child transfer constitute genocide with the limited understandings of others negotiating the CPPG indicates the complex and overlapping human rights questions inherent to this issue. His description did not prevail at the time but has become a cornerstone in debates about the cultural genocide of indigenous peoples. Still, this distance gives some hint as to why the transfer of children was so readily accepted as genocide even though the definition of transfer had been left so ambiguous (van Krieken 2004).

That ambiguity in definition still cannot explain the level of support for the inclusion of child transfer in the crime of genocide, especially from states so antagonistic to the concept of cultural genocide like the United States and Great Britain. Part of this explanation may be found in the larger social meaning of children and their protection during conflict. Children, of course, constitute the ultimate innocent victim of adult war and violence, though, in the
case of transfer, what constitutes the victim is often unclear. The stealing of children is a perennial, almost primordial anxiety: It serves as the basis for ancient literary tropes and is found in fairy tales and even at the center of anti-Semitic Blood Libel; likewise, the raising of children by others without the knowledge of their “true parents”—sometimes with disastrous consequences for the adoptive or biological parents—features in the stories of Moses and Oedipus.

While twentieth-century episodes of the taking of children encapsulates these primordial fears, the transfer of children during genocide is, like genocide itself, a problem of modernity. Whereas, in the past individual children or even large groups of children could be taken and enslaved as servants of an empire as occurred in the devşirme or, in the case of African children in the Atlantic slave trade, as agricultural and domestic labor in the Americas. While the process of enslavement was accompanied by horrible violence and led to immense misery and exploitation, the loss to their natal society of these children, as painful as it certainly was to their parents and communities, was not so complete as to eliminate those communities in their entirety nor was there any particular intent on the part of those taking the children to do so. Only in modernity could such a complete destruction be contemplated, carried out and more importantly deemed necessary. The style of child transfer described by the theory of genocide is an immense political project; equally great are the requisite bureaucratic measures needed to facilitate it in practice.

Yet, the convergence of support around including the forced transfer of children at the time of the drafting of the CPPG has less to do with ancient fears; rather, it is evidence of how modern conceptions of the role of children in national culture and the preservation of race were being integrated into how children should be treated during conflict. At the same time, it is evidence of a rudimentary formulation of the rights of the child to among other things an identity; less in evidence are any residual concerns about the rights of minorities, and even less so the rights of indigenous peoples. In other words, the value of children, not just to their parents but also to states, nations, peoples, and races, had become so pronounced that their protection as members of a human group overwhelmed objections towards this particular kind of cultural genocide as forming a basis for international law; this importance required the articulation of new and particular legal injunctions because of the lack of viable protections under existing legal structures or minority rights treaties. Yet, perhaps the most persuasive answer is that the transfer of children transcends cultural genocide and encompasses biological dimensions inasmuch as the way race and biology were blended in the legal imagination of scholars at midcentury (cf. van Krieken 2004). In other words, at the time of the passage of the CPPG, forced child transfer was conceived as akin to biological genocide and as a kind of delayed form of mass killing.

The Transfer and Recovery of Children in the Armenian Genocide

The modernity of child transfer during genocide, as well as the way it transects the questions of culture and biology was evident in the events of the Armenian Genocide. Moreover, the treatment of children is fundamental to understanding the full impact of the genocide on Ottoman society and the survivor communities of that genocide. That said, this episode of child transfer also had less-modern dimensions, including the way Ottoman state policies were grafted onto preexisting intercommunal practices during conflict, including the taking of booty in the form of female children and adolescents, as well as domestic practices related to household formation (Maksudyan 2008). Moreover, children in Ottoman society were a form of real wealth. They constituted not just potential adult labor but also were integrated as children into household and communal economies. They produced wealth
for their families through bride price or dowries, inheritances, and as a source of care and comfort in the old age of their parents. The reality that children were a form of wealth or at least property alters somewhat the assertion that the transfer of children is solely an issue of culture. Nevertheless, the seeming ad hoc or “traditional” appearance of child transfer during the genocide should not overshadow the fact that the transfer of Ottoman Armenian children through various means was a concerted policy of the state—or as an ineluctable byproduct of those policies—and linked to the destruction of the Armenians.

Among the most evocative sources for understanding the nature of child transfer during the genocide are found amongst the records of the Aleppo Rescue Home—a kind of refugee collection and resettlement center established first by the American Near East Relief in 1918 and then administered by the nascent League of Nations and the Nansen Commission for Refugees—housed at the UN archives in Geneva. At the archive, there are several notebooks containing over two thousand individual intake surveys of Armenian women, children, and young men who were rescued or, more often, rescued themselves from Turkish, Bedouin, or Kurdish households into which they had been sold, traded, taken or given away during the period.

Each page in the notebooks includes a photograph taken at the time of admission to the home and as much biographical data as the young person could remember: father’s name, mother’s name, place of origin, and age. As seen Figure 1 is the case of Lütfiyye Bilemjian, the daughter of Adour and Mariam from ʿAintab, now Gaziantep in Turkey. Six years old at the time of the deportations, she and her family were forcibly displaced to the Syrian deserts and were attacked by Chechen irregulars en route to Dayr al-Zur. Her mother, father, and one of her brothers were killed. She was seized by a Chechen as booty who sold her to a Kurd who then resold her to a wealthy Turk, one Mahmud Pasha, who sent her to his house, where she remained for 11 years. In 1926, she escaped across what had become the international border between Syria and Turkey and reached Aleppo. In Aleppo, one of her surviving brothers was found. In this case, how she was treated in those 11 years is not described (Archives of the League of Nations 1926: 1010). The remaining histories echo her story with unremitting consistency: The children and young people arriving in Aleppo told of deportations, separations, mass extrajudicial killings, and repeated rape, followed by years of unpaid servitude as agricultural workers or domestic servants, servile concubines, unconsenting wives, and involuntary mothers. Both collectively and individually, these stories are a remarkable contribution to the global literature of witness, as well a unique source for understanding the bitter years of the First World War and its aftermath through the eyes of some of its youngest and most vulnerable participants.

Though several thousand children and young adults passed through the rescue home in Aleppo and similar facilities in Istanbul, the vast majority of children in these circumstances remained in Muslim households. Described euphemistically as kılıç artığı (“remnants of the sword”), these children eventually became mothers and grandmothers. Two million contemporary Turks may have at least one Armenian grandparent, although the costs of revealing Armenian ancestry in public are potentially so high as to preclude the possibility of arriving at an accurate number.

In addition to the ad hoc seizure and sale of children with impunity by Ottoman authorities or individual Muslims, the Ottoman state instituted policies to collect Armenian orphans, or children separated from their families, and either house them in orphanages or place them in foster homes. For example, a policy announced throughout the zones of deportation in April of 1916 authorized the military to distribute Armenian orphans in central Anatolia to the wealthy for education and assimilation, and others to Muslim villagers who would receive a government stipend equivalent to a few dollars a month to
care for them (Akçam 2012). In his memoirs, the architect of the genocide, Talat Pasha, records that in one province by 1917, of approximately ten thousand Armenian orphans, some six thousand had been distributed to Muslim families (Dündar 2010). At war’s end, Western aid officials and the Armenian ecclesiastical leadership estimated that the numbers of non-Muslim children housed in Ottoman State orphanages or in Muslim households was at least sixty thousand (Watenpaugh 2010).

All major cities of the Ottoman Empire had orphanages. A standard element of late-Ottoman social policy was to convert orphans in its care to Sunni Islam, the religion of the empire—similar to practices in Europe or North America (Maksudyan 2009). During the genocide, the scope of these orphanages expanded so much so that it is important to distinguish these from the limited use of prewar state orphanages or those run by Christian missionaries. To draw a close analogy, wartime Ottoman orphanages resembled American Indian boarding schools where Armenian, other Christian minorities, and non-Turkish Muslim children (primarily Kurds) were acculturated into the dominant group, and, indeed, there was a great deal of support for them from the upper echelons of Ottoman society who perceived these schools as merciful, charitable, and modernizing. Exemplary because it was one of the few orphanages liberated by the Allies and the scope of its action was brought under international scrutiny was the children’s home at Ayn Tura near Beirut, which was

administered for a brief period by Halide Edip Adıvar, the leading Turkish feminist of her day. Indeed, in her memoirs, Halide Edip saw her role at the orphanage as a manifestation of a “civilizing mission” and that religious conversion to Islam was a secondary consideration. The children in that orphanage—among whom were also Kurds—were to emerge as modern citizens whose Armenian and Kurdish identities were no longer an impediment to complete membership in the new national Turkish community. This was accomplished through forms of coercion and unremitting physical abuse: Children were given Muslim names, falsified birth records, the speaking and reading of Armenian were grounds for beatings, and no attempts were made to reunify children with living relatives (Adıvar 1926).

Critically, the history of the orphanage at Ayn Tura—which was reproduced at orphanages throughout the empire—most resembles the kind of child-transfer-as-genocide identified by Pérez Perosa. Indeed, what was happening in the Ottoman Empire parallels historically contemporaneous programs for enculturation of indigenous children in North America and Australasia—justified also by appeals to civilization and the best interest of the child and accompanied by régimes of abuse, emotional torture, and coercive language policies.

However, the takeover of Ayn Tura and other similar orphanages by the American Near East Relief in 1918 did not necessarily mean the integration of Armenian orphans into Armenian survivor communities. And with the takeover of many of these orphanages by the American Near East Relief, including Ayn Tura in 1918, the reentry of Armenian orphans into Armenian survivor society was also at risk. Indeed, the American agenda was not necessarily in line with Armenian expectations of restoration but rather with an American desire to turn Armenian orphans into a vanguard for a “New Near East,” as the title of the organization’s journal suggests, constituting thereby a potential double loss to the Armenian community as these children became wards of the Americans (Barton 1930). Nevertheless, distinct from the treatment of the children during the war, American humanitarian workers cooperated with Armenian community leaders to teach the children Armenian, to identify living relatives, and to organize the orphans into social and sports clubs and groups that eased their transition into adulthood.

As Ottoman authority melted away in the Levant, the British Army turned over of the orphanage to the care of American relief officials affiliated with the American University in Beirut. Their initial assessment provides a window into children’s resistance to transfer, perhaps the least well-understood part of this element of the crime of genocide. In a 1918 report, the President of the American University in Beirut, Bayard Dodge explained that as soon as the management of Ayn Tura was placed in the hands of one Dr. Crawford, “Immediately the Armenian children asserted their rights. They refused to use their Turkish names and they brought out Armenian books, which they had hidden away in secret places during the Turkish régime” (Archives-American University of Beirut 1919: 13, emphasis added). The agency of children was also in evidence during the period of rescue after the war, as described in the case of Lütfiye Bilemdjian and others like her, who despite being taken at a fairly young age, as teenagers or young adults, embarked upon dangerous escapes and border crossings in the hopes of rejoining their families and the Armenian community. The oral histories of Turkish grandchildren of transferred Armenians also indicate that this resistance took other forms. This included telling their descendants the truth of their origins but also holding onto distinctive domestic Christian religious and culinary practices despite their public adherence to coerced conversion to Islam (Altınay and Çetin 2009). This points to how important the future study of children during genocide should reconsider the concepts of children’s resilience and resistance.
Conclusion

The transfer of children—for various reasons and with differing techniques—as a historical problem has generally been ignored in the study of genocide and the genealogy of human rights. In part, this lacuna is a product of the (rightful) preponderance of emphasis in the study of genocide placed on the role of mass killing. Still, the taking, selling, transfer, and identity shifting of children has been a historical constant throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and not just during genocide but in civil conflicts and the colonial encounter on several continents. What the Armenian case shows is how an exclusive focus on mass killing bereft of the other elements of social destruction like transfer encompassed by genocide cannot explain either the full horror of what happened or its lasting impact on survivor and perpetrator communities. Any agenda for future research on genocide must re-center children—as more than just young victims of murder but also as the embodiment of social capital, culture, and belonging, and as tools for perpetrator social engineering and objects of intense interest in the rebuilding of diasporan and survivor communities.

Clearly, the study of child transfer has broad implications for understanding the cultural and social dimensions of conflict, especially as those intersect with genocide; and expanding the historical ambit of genocide to more fully embrace what children—and their families—have faced, and how their individual and collective rights have been violated has the potential to bring about more effective programs of restorative justice and projects for peace and reconciliation.

References


