The Destruction of Ottoman Armenians: A Narrative of a General History of Violence

Hans-Lukas Kieser*
University of Zurich

This article explores and describes the destruction of the Ottoman Armenian population in the context of modern global history. It comprehends both the large massacres of fall 1895 and the genocide of 1915–16. In order to contextualize the anti-Armenian violence, it compares it with other attempts to severely curtail or destroy ethnic or religious groups since the late eighteenth century. In its comparisons, this article emphasizes one main argument that was repeatedly proffered for the use of mass violence: the removal of an existential security threat. ‘Self-defence’ in extreme situations is a main argument for resorting to extreme violence. However, which collective identity, which ‘self’, is then to be defended and empowered? The question is not banal.

In the Ottoman case, identity shifts and redefinitions of the early twentieth century mattered decisively. After a last Empire-wide revival in the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, a common Ottoman identity lost its compelling appeal after multiple interior and exterior setbacks had struck the Ottoman Empire in the months and years following the 1908 revolution. Leading Young Turks who had lost their homes in the Balkans shifted towards a post-Ottoman collective self-redefinition as an ethnic Turkish nation in Anatolia to which they believed Christians were not assimilable. The Young Turk Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) at the reins of imperial power since 1913 combined in fact the igniting forces of ethnic nationalism, social revolution, and of Islamist jihad against other Ottomans, in particular Armenian Christians, whom they feared as political and economic rivals. They excluded them from a common future in Asia Minor. At the same time, they still pursued dreams of imperial restoration and expansion. In 1914, the CUP set in motion a drastic de-Christianization of the post-Ottoman world.

* Hans-Lukas Kieser is Titularprofessor of Modern History at the University of Zurich and an Australian Research Council Future Fellow at the Centre for the History of Violence, University of Newcastle (NSW). He is the author of Nearest East (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), Türklüğe İhtida [Conversion to Turkdom] (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2008), and Der verpasste Friede [Squandered Peace] (Zurich: Chronos, 2000), and the editor of Turkey Beyond Nationalism (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006).
Generations who personally experience extreme violence tend to consider the manifestation or irruption of extreme violence irrational, unexplainable, and unprecedented. Later generations must challenge such notions in order to fathom the logics of violence. In our case, the securitarian and nationalist logic of violence stand in the foreground; they went hand in hand with a mix of late Ottoman Muslim nationalism and a new ethnic Turkish/pan-Turkish nationalism. This logic ‘justified’ destroying potential rivals in an exclusive struggle for a future on a land they had lived on side by side for centuries.

**Approaching the Armenian Genocide: Preliminaries**

This article understands targeted mass violence in modern history to be, in the actors’ self-concept, the prevention of a danger for the existence, security, and sovereignty of the nation, nation-state, or group-based empire. This at least is the case when the actors perpetrating violence, who are the focus of this article, begin to implement violent measures. Once started, violence risks developing logics of its own and becoming an end in itself. This development, however, reveals again even more strongly the weak and dark elements of the self-concept. The repeatedly used sentence, ‘If we would not have killed them they would have killed us, or brought disaster upon us’, obeys the logics of Social Darwinism.

‘Prevention’ depends on how leading group members conceive themselves and their collective future. In our case, Young Turks were influenced by the strong current of Turkism since the early 1910s. The situation was marked by defeat in the First Balkan War of 1912–13 against nominally Christian nations in addition to a late Ottoman background of multiple defeats and territorial losses since the late eighteenth century. Already a decade before the Republic of Turkey was founded, many Turkists strongly embraced Asia Minor as the core or ‘promised land’ (Tekinalp 1937:19–28) of Turkish-speaking Muslims – a last safe haven within the Ottoman Empire to be built up as a modern ‘Turkish home’ (Türk Yurdu) (Kieser 2008:109–14). Most of the leading Young Turks came from the Balkans and had lost their homes. Angst – marked not only by defeat and the fear of losing even a hoped-for new existence but also mixed with impulsions of revenge – was a strong factor for the readiness to use inhumane coercion and extreme violence. Still, without particular historical contingencies, in our case the First World War, the road from premeditation and readiness to implementing mass murder was far from open to the Young Turks.

The powerful imbroglio of partly irrational, partly well-based angst mixed with revanchism makes instances of extreme violence including genocide historically challenging topics if we want to understand and explain them both intrinsically and from a detached historical angle. Collective self-defence is rational and universally accepted by law. The definition of the ‘self’ matters decisively for the understanding of self-defence. It is even an ultimate crux. The recourse to varying forms of violence qua ‘defence’ depends largely on this definition and on the consequences it entails.

Violent self-defence deserves this meaning as long as it is humbly restricted to the vital needs of humans. The same is true for a ‘revolutionary’ violence that can
be accepted as a self-defence if a group is permanently deprived from its vital needs by rulers who enjoy much better positions, and thus is denied in its elementary humanity. Not only for the members of Armenian self-defence units, but also for foreign observers, this was true in the case of many rural Armenians in the late-Ottoman eastern provinces who were harassed, robbed, or killed by local Muslim leaders and left unprotected by the authorities. This restrictive formulation of acceptable violence may legitimate movements of liberation, but it is far from the illuminating and self-constituting quality that Frantz Fanon (1968) has attributed to a violence that oppressed people should embrace. Violence in the name of self-defence becomes irrational and unacceptable if it is confused with claims that belong to an inflated self, be it imperial, irredentist, racially superior, or religiously exalted. It then transgresses the boundaries of self-defence.

Repeatedly addressed, but still particularly intriguing, probably not yet convincingly fathomed in their modern impact, are the genocide commands in the parts of the Bible traditionally called the books of Moses. These terrifying commands should save ancient nascent Israel from detrimental native aliens in the land Kanaan that were considered outsiders of the own ‘tribe’, impure in matters of belief, and a military threat. These sentences in Numbers 31 and Deuteronomy 20 should not be dismissed as part of an old story, too well known to be dwelt upon and of which similar stories abound in all religious traditions (cf. Bauer 2002:19–20). They are, on the contrary, to be taken seriously as sources of experiences and concepts related to a power- and nation-building that, in fact, had been progressive and lawful in its time. These commands stand today still prominent and (rightly because revealingly) uncensored in books that Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike claim as holy. In contrast to many branches of dominant scholarship in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, younger generations of scholars of humanities and social sciences had in recent times again to learn that religion matters in particular with regard to the Middle East. Religion had not been sufficiently fathomed in its meaning, power, and impact by former modern scholarship.

As self-evident as we (may) accept that all humans are created equal, is that the commands in Numbers and Deuteronomy must explicitly, including theologically, be revoked – lest we translate them into modern Social Darwinism and take the latter for granted. Those proponents of Enlightenment, revolution, and human progress who had believed that modern times had overcome ancient barbarities perpetrated because people had adhered to outdated creeds had fundamentally erred: with the era of the World Wars not only a declared Europe-wide ‘moratorium on the Sermon on the Mount’ (as Max J. Metzger and Kurt Tucholsky had put it) and with this again ‘Old Testament patterns’ of expulsion and extermination became valid, but even law itself, also in the old sense of the books of Moses, lost its meaning as a protector of, if minimal, human dignity (Kieser 2012:118). Vulgar Social Darwinism reigned in decisive moments of Greater Europe during the era of the World Wars, thus impacting upon those who looked up to Europe as a model, as did Turkey. Current Holocaust and Genocide Studies or approaches of a modern History of Violence cannot come to terms with the words of Numbers and Deuteronomy without normatively introducing human rights and cancelling the moratorium on the Sermon on the Mount. The latter – for example, ‘Blessed are
the meek for they will inherit the earth’ – stands as a utopian standard for the equality and dignity of all humans, in particular of those deprived.

Except for some colonial massacres, there is no attempt at the destruction of a whole ethno-religious group in modern history without attempts to justify, for oneself and for others, the mass violence as a measure of defence for the security and salvation of the own group of people, for its future and its existential political project on land not to be shared. In other words, without the argument that the own group had to be preserved from becoming the irreversible victim of a history that already had victimized it several times before. The Young Turks, whose Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) reigned in 1913–18, are a case in point with regard to a discourse of Ottoman victimization since the eighteenth century and European global dominance. The same is true for Hutu leaders in the late colonial/postcolonial context of the second half of the twentieth century in Africa. After having defined the Tutsi ‘as a privileged alien settler presence’, because they had been favoured by colonial power in contrast to Hutus, they fought and killed them as aliens who threatened the native Hutus’ national home Rwanda (Mamdani 2001:14). As early as 1913, Young Turk propaganda began to show Ottoman Christians and Jews as a comprador bourgeoisie who, thanks to its international relations, exploited the true Turkish-Muslim owners of the country (Kieser 2011b:394).

German National Socialists after World War I complained in the midst of the material and mental misery of post-World War I that Germany had been unjustly spoliating from its deserved standing in Europe, from worldwide recognition (Weltgeltung) and from historical zones of settlement in eastern Europe. They accused adversaries inside and outside of Germany, first of all Communists and Jews, of destroying German power and identity in this sense. The threat by the Bolsheviks was real, both from the interior and the exterior, but overstated by the Nazis. The Nazis exalted Germany’s world historical vocation, replaced the Bible with biologist and Social Darwinist ideas of German election, and committed themselves to a fundamentally flawed self-concept laid down in Adolf Hitler’s Mein Kampf. They admired the successful Turkish military and diplomatic struggle against the victors of World War I and believed the extermination of interior enemies to be unavoidable in order to achieve a radical nation-building and to prevent Germany from becoming a second Armenia.²

Overstated in the form of biased arguments, myths, obsessions, or paranoia, the arguments of actors of extreme violence contain grains of truths mixed with exaggeration. The exaggeration has to do with an exalted worldview in whose centre gravitates the own group. It is, however, not easy but needs a holistic approach to distinguish honestly between real concerns of security and those concerns that are the result of unrealistic self-concepts and misled worldviews.

The Late Ottoman Background and the Massacres of 1895

The government of Sultan Abdulhamid II (r. 1876–1909) did not kill but prepared the ground, enabling the murder of a hundred thousand Armenians in merely a few weeks in the autumn of 1895, twenty years before the genocide of 1915. How could it come to this murderous social earthquake that shocked Europe in the midst of the
Belle Époque, when peace seemingly reigned in Europe and the Middle East at that time?

The Ottoman Empire, a dynastic, patrilineal Muslim state which had adopted Sunni Hanefi Islam in the sixteenth century, ruled over an ethnically and religiously diverse population in the Balkans, Asia Minor, Iraq, Syria, the Arab Peninsula, and North Africa. Its large communities of Christians and small groups of Jews enjoyed the status of autonomous millet (communities or ‘nations’). These communities were called ‘minorities’ in Western terminology, as well as in the Lausanne Treaty of 1923 that laid down the post-Ottoman order of the Middle East. However, since there was no clear majority in the Ottoman world in ethno-religious terms, the term ‘population group’ suits better. Non-Sunni groups without millet status were tolerated in the late Ottoman era, but marginalized; they included the Alevi of Anatolia, the Yazidis of Northern and the Shiites of Southern Iraq, the Alawites of Syria, and particular Alevi groups in the mountains of Dersim (eastern Anatolia), which were partly autonomous up to 1937.

Ottoman Reform in the mid-nineteenth century called for equality for all subjects of the Ottoman Empire. Conservative Muslim circles were strongly opposed to such equality. Ottoman reform (Tanzimat) endorsed also and for the first time codified millet autonomy, which was a-territorial and concerned civil matters. The Reform Edict of 1856 combined equality with institutionalized diversity. It corroborated legal equality and obliged the millet to constitute themselves as quasi-democratic entities with a constitution (nizâmnâme) and an elected assembly. This concerned the Rûm millet (of Greek-Orthodox creed) including Greek-, Arab-, and Turkish-speakers, the Armenian millet, the Protestant millet composed mostly of Armenians, the Catholic millet, as well as the Jewish millet. The Nestorian Syriacs (Asuri) – tribes living in the southern part of the eastern provinces whose patriarch did not reside in the capital – as well as other Syriac Christians (Sûryani) were not full partners in these reforms. The coexistence of legal equality with ethno-religious plurality or diversity, warranting a-territorial autonomy to the non-Muslim millet, remained largely utopian.

Many Sunnis, who were members of the ruling imperial class, feared they would become the reforms’ losers. They included Muslim refugees (muhacir) from the Caucasus and the Balkans as well as Kurds in the eastern provinces from whom the centralizing state of the second quarter of the nineteenth century had taken away centuries-old regional autonomies. Some Alevi tribes near Dersim on the other side tried to become members of the Protestant millet, thus escaping their social marginality and, like the Christian millet, connecting with missionary and diplomatic representatives of Great Britain and the United States (Kieser 2000:54–163).

Conflicts in the Balkans and the consequent Ottoman-Russian War of 1877–78 led to dramatic territorial losses of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans, the Caucasus, and of Cyprus, all sealed at the Berlin Congress in 1878. As a consequence, Sultan Abdulhamid II considered the political principles of the preceding reform period a failure, suspended the Ottoman constitution of 1876, and implemented policies designed to empower the (Sunni) Muslims and assimilate the Alevis, Yazidis, and Shiites. The Empire increasingly considered Asia Minor its core land, given the territorial losses of previous decades.
When the reforms for Armenians stipulated in Article 61 of the Berlin Treaty failed to appear, educated young Armenians founded revolutionary parties. The programme of the Armenian party then most committed to revolutionary action, the Hntchaks, advocated an independent socialist Armenia for all inhabitants in the predominantly Kurdo-Armenian eastern provinces. The Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) or Dashnak Party, which prevailed after the 1890s, pushed for an Armenian future within a reformed Ottoman state. Both championed rural armed self-defence and activism informed by socialist and nationalist revolutionary ideas and directed against Ottoman authorities and Armenian notables.

The 1895 massacres of approximately one hundred thousand, mostly male, Armenians in Asia Minor in the eastern region, took place against this background, and as a reaction to a reform plan finally initiated by European diplomacy on the basis of the Berlin Treaty and signed in Istanbul on 17 October 1895. Regional bands as well as neighbours organized in the local mosques killed their fellow countrymen efficiently with primitive weapons. Kurds and other local Muslims seized Armenian land and property, leading to the notorious Kurdo-Armenian agrarian question (Kieser 2011a).

Was it a massacre or an inter-ethnic civil war marked by asymmetrical power relations in which the state mostly sided with the stronger, armed Muslim side? Since most victims were not armed and could not defend themselves, but depended on law and order to be provided by the state, there can be no question of an armed civil struggle. Only in a limited number of occasions did a number of armed Armenians try to defend themselves – for example, in Diyarbekir, the centre of one of the eastern provinces, where nearly two hundred Muslims died on 3 November 1895. A leading local group co-responsible for the carnage of probably more than one thousand Christians the same day in Diyarbekir sent a day later, on 4 November 1895, a telegram to Sultan Abdulhamid:

We also want justice. The intention of the Armenian traitors is to break the holy bond between Muslims of this region [of Diyarbekir], people who are the bravest and most loyal subjects of the State and the Grand Caliphate. We cannot tolerate such actions. Like our grandfathers before us, our principal task is to work for the glory of the Caliphate and to augment its population. This is the road upon which we will travel, to death. If we remain silent, then we will surely be crushed between the rightful scolding of our grandchildren and the curses of our grandfathers. From every corner of the world, the hopes and tender gazes of more than 150 million Muslims are focused upon us. Let Allah, his Prophet and the Caliph bare witness that we shall not refrain from sacrificing our own lives and those of our spouses and children for the sake of the task before us . . . We proclaim unanimously that we will spoil, with our blood, the lines and the pages of the privileges, which will be given to the Armenians.

(Verheij 2012:125–26)

The Diyarbekir group saw reforms not only as ‘privileges’ given to those who traditionally had no say in political affairs (equality and security for non-Muslims, implemented by the central state under European pressure), but declared them
also, in the upper part of the telegram, to be an effort to separate the eastern provinces from the empire in order to grant them to the Armenians. The authors knew that this was based only on rumours, as they wrote in an introductory sentence. Nevertheless, they based their argumentation, their indignation, their threat against the Armenians, and, implicitly, their justification for the carnage of the previous day on this understanding. Without disguising social envy, they stigmatized the Armenians as privileged and prosperous because they were supported by ‘malicious foreigners’ and profited from benefits contrary to Islamic law. Again, they justified implicitly the murder and spoliation of Armenians. They saw reforms as an attack against a Muslim-Ottoman self-concept based on myths of regional Ottoman history.

Six years before the massacres of 1895, Muslim students in Istanbul had founded a secret revolutionary network in opposition to Abdulhamid, soon to be called the CUP. It aimed, as its members repeatedly said, to save the Ottoman state, to restore the constitution of 1876, and to re-institute the parliament. Finally allied to other members of the opposition, first of all to the ARF, these Young Turks staged the revolution of July 1908. Ottoman citizens rallied to the revolution and re-elected a parliament. At that stage, reform-oriented groups and populations as diverse as the Young Turks (including the centralist CUP as well as more federalist liberals), the Armenians, the Zionist Yishuv, and American missionaries all hoped that a constitutional Ottoman Empire would frame the future of the Middle East and the Armenian massacres of the mid-1890s would be an event from a bygone dark era.

The Armenians were largely seen as the element most loyal to the constitution and to the CUP – as long as the CUP behaved constitutionally. However, as external and internal tensions increased, 1908 was followed by boycott movements and press campaigns against Ottoman Christians. Among young and educated Turkish-speaking Muslims and in the cohort of Young Turk activists in the early 1910s, a new ideology of radical, though not yet violent, Turkism loomed large. Acquainted with defeat and loss since the Italian usurpation of Ottoman Libya in 1911, and then by the Balkan wars, Young Turk activists saw the outbreak of World War I as an opportunity to forge a new deal internally and externally.

The CUP established dictatorial power as the result of a putsch of January 1913 and marginalized any political alternative, in particular the liberal group of Prince Sabahaddin who advocated a decentralized empire and private, not state-led, initiative in economy and culture. The Ottoman reform programme of 1908 had depended on cooperation between the ARF and the CUP and, in particular, the establishment of security and the solution of the agrarian question in the eastern provinces (Kalogian 2011; Kieser 2011a). As this did not transpire, the ARF announced the end of its alliance with the CUP in August 1912. At the end of the same year, Armenian representatives contacted foreign diplomats to press again for reforms (Koptas 2007). Like Abdulhamid’s government two decades before, the Committee government finally signed a reform plan, on 8 February 1914, and like Abdulhamid, it resented these reforms. It viewed Asia Minor as the Muslim and Turkish core of the Ottoman Empire, this even more so as Macedonia had been lost during the Balkan Wars. Anatolia was therefore the last refuge for Turkish-speaking Muslim muhacir from the Balkans and the Caucasus.
The reform plan divided the eastern provinces into northern and southern parts; put them under the control of two European inspectors, to be selected from neutral countries; prescribed publication of laws and official pronouncements in local languages; provided for an adequate proportion of Muslims and Christians in councils and police; and transformed the Hamidiye, an irregular Kurdish cavalry, into cavalry reserves. CUP members had signalled to Armenian representatives that by broaching the issue of reform internationally, they had crossed a red line with regard to a common future. The sovereignty of the state was a taboo issue—even if the state was manifestly dysfunctional with regard to the challenges of security, law, and order it faced in its eastern provinces.

‘Solving’ the Armenian Problem during Total War

At the forefront of CUP politics on the eve of the First World War were the effects of the Balkan Wars. The CUP now considered the Rûm to be a disloyal element close to the nominally Christian enemies and even more close after Greece had conquered the islands Chios and Mytilene during the Balkan Wars. The CUP began to conceive of the Rûm villages and towns at the Aegean coast as places where hundreds of thousands of muhacir from the Balkans could be settled. The CUP’s demographic policy considered Turkish-speaking Muslims to be the most reliable core element of a future Turkey and believed that other Muslim groups, if sufficiently dispersed among Turks, could be assimilated.

In the spring of 1914, after steps towards population exchanges in agreement with its Greek and Bulgarian neighbours in the Balkans, the CUP began to implement an agenda of anti-Christian demographic engineering on the Ottoman western coast. The paramilitaries of its newly founded Special Organization expelled some two hundred thousand Rûm from the Aegean littoral. When, on 6 July, the Ottoman parliament discussed the expulsions, Talat, minister of interior and leading member of the CUP’s central committee, emphasized the need to settle the Muslim refugees of the Balkans in those emptied villages (Dündar 2010:78–79). At this decisive moment when the Ottoman future was at stake and still a certain freedom of expression reigned in the parliament, the Rûm deputies were left alone to face an authoritarian government and other deputies who questioned or belittled the expulsion and forceful expropriation, not willing to listen to the Rûm CUP deputy Emanuel Emanuelidis’ plea for rule of law. A year later, in the spring and summer of 1915, the parliament was closed and public opinion completely censured.

The international crisis of July 1914 saved the regime from a possible war with Greece and diplomatic backlash against the expulsion. Allied with the Ottoman Empire since 2 August 1914 and eager to win over neutral Greece, Germany insisted that its Ottoman ally henceforth avoid acts of violence against Rûm. Approximately three hundred thousand Rûm were removed from different coastal regions to the interior in the course of the First World War, beginning in February 1915, and while some of the deportees suffered violent attacks, they were neither systematically massacred nor sent into the desert (Akçam 2012:97–123). Under the shield of its alliance with Germany and in the shadow of the war, the Young
Turk regime began to implement its domestic agenda. On 6 August 1914, the German ambassador in Istanbul, Wangenheim, accepted six new Ottoman proposals, among them ‘a small correction of her [Turkey’s] eastern border which shall place Turkey into direct contact with the Moslems of Russia’ (Trumpener 1968:28). The main Armenian settlement area was located between the Turkish-speaking Muslims in Asia Minor and the Caucasus, both in the Ottoman and the Russian Empires.

Strong pan-Turkist and pan-Islamist propaganda began to appear in the Ottoman press in early August 1914, which alienated and intimidated the non-Muslims (Köroğlu 2007; Tekin Alp 1915). At the same time, the regime started to make plans for joint hostilities with Russia. The CUP invited the ARF to lead an anti-Russian guerrilla war in the Caucasus, aimed at preparing a future Ottoman conquest. However, the ARF balked at these plans, which would have set the Caucasian Armenians at risk of retaliation, and stated that all Armenians should remain loyal to the country in which they lived. Ottoman attempts at insurrection and sabotage in the Russian Caucasus without the ARF began in August 1914 (Kévorkian 2006:221, 274–82).

Although the degree and impact of pan-Turkism are still discussed, it is beyond debate that the CUP’s main ideologist, Ziya Gökalp, a member of the CUP’s central committee, was an explicit pan-Turkist. Together with other authors, he propagated the conquest of the Caucasus and the ‘liberation’ of Russia’s ‘Turks’ (Muslims). Since the eve of World War I, the prominent figures of the CUP sponsored organized Turkism and declared to be themselves members of the Türk Yurdu/Türk Ocagı movement (Kieser 2008:251). Many CUP members and army officers were ‘excited pan-Turkists’ as, for example, Rahmi Apak, a Kemalist politician, confessed. He himself had joined as a young officer the élite division created in autumn 1914 for pan-Turkist conquest (Rahmi Apak 1988:95). The Austrian military attaché Joseph Pomiankowski, a travel companion of Ottoman War Minister Enver Pasha and experienced observer of Ottoman affairs, corroborated the vigour of pan-Turkism, and thus the unrealistic exaltation of many Young Turks in 1914–15 and again in 1918 (Pomiankowski 1927:29–30, 99–100, 333, 364–68).

Although the Empire officially entered the war only in November, in August 1914, the Ottoman army began to mobilize and requisition to an unprecedented degree. Requisitions hit non-Muslims in the eastern provinces particularly hard (Kieser 2000:331, 335–36, 445). Ottoman troops, together with Kurdish tribal forces, attacked Persian Urmia, 110 kilometres east of Hakkâri in the province of Van, while Christians on the Ottoman and the Iranian sides of the frontier looked to Russia for protection. Beginning in August 1914, Russia built up a local Iranian Christian militia based on Christian Armeno-Syriac solidarity (Gaunt 2011:249).

During the first days of 1915, the Ottoman campaign against Russian Caucasus failed catastrophically in the snowy mountains of Sarıkamış near Kars. At least half of the 120,000 soldiers perished. Epidemics began to spread among the survivors and throughout the whole region. In early 1915, smaller campaigns with irregular forces led by Enver’s brother-in-law Jevdet and Enver’s uncle General Halil in Northern Persia harmed Armenian and Syriac villages, but again failed in
their military objectives. The Ottoman forces were decisively defeated in the battle of Dilman in mid-April. General Andranik Ozanian’s Armenian volunteer brigade in the Russian army participated in the battle (Kévorkian 2006:285). As a consequence of these defeats at Sarıkamış and Dilman, the pan-Turkist dream, which had spurred the mobilization in August 1914, turned to trauma in the winter and spring of 1915.

The long eastern front was brutalized and religiously polarized. Irregulars and regulars, militias and forces of self-defence were engaged in low-intensity warfare that took a heavy toll on civilians. Many Armenians fled to Russian Armenia, among them several thousand young Armenians who became volunteers in the Russian army. Christians, where possible, tried to rely on Russian help. Best known is the Russian relief of the Armenians in Van in mid-May 1915. Beginning on 20 April, after massacres in Armenian villages and the murder of Armenian individuals from Van, Armenian activists had resisted Jevdet’s repression. Once relieved, they mistreated and killed Muslim civilians, thereby contributing to large numbers fleeing (Kieser 2000:448–53). The failed Ottoman campaigns and the chaotic situation at the long eastern front infuriated CUP leaders and made the local Armenian and Syriac Christians an easy target for the propaganda of jihad (Gaunt 2006:63).

Committee policies radicalized in the context of a general brutalization of war in the spring of 1915 and began to then converge on a comprehensive anti-Armenian policy. Minister of the Interior Talat coordinated the developing policy in three main phases: first, the arrest of Armenian political, religious, and intellectual leaders in April and May 1915; second, from late spring to autumn, the removal of the Armenian population of Anatolia and European Turkey to camps in the Syrian desert east of Aleppo, excluding Armenian men in eastern Anatolia who were systematically massacred on the spot; and third and finally, the starvation to death of most of those in the camps and the final massacre of those who still survived (Akçam 2012:158–93).

In two seminal ciphered telegrams of 24 April to the provincial governors and to the army, with reference to Van and a few other places, Talat defined the situation in Asia Minor as that of a general Armenian rebellion; of Armenians helping the enemy’s war efforts; and of revolutionary committees that had long since wished to establish Armenian self-determination and now believed they could achieve it as a result of the war (Akçam 2012:186–87; T.C. Genelkurmay Başkanlığı 2005:424–25). Provincial and military authorities, and in particular special CUP commissaries sent to the provinces, henceforth spread propaganda throughout Anatolia of treacherous Armenian neighbours who stabbed Muslims in the back. During the night of 24–25 April, security forces began to arrest Armenian elites throughout Anatolia, starting with Istanbul, and to question, torture, and murder most of them. Various Ottoman army sources in the spring of 1915 from the provinces certainly do not support the claim of a general uprising, although there were instances of sabotage and some resistance to oppression as well as many desertions of both Muslims and non-Muslims. On the same day, 24 April, a telegram from Talat to Jemal Pasha, military governor of Syria, announced that henceforth Armenians should be deported not to Konya, as had been the limited
case of the Armenians expelled from Cilician Zeytun in March, but to northern Syria (Directorate of Ottoman Archives 1995:26).

A provisional law of 27 May – the parliament had been closed on 13 March – allowed repression and mass deportation if national security were at issue. The law served as legal cover for a comprehensive policy of removal. Although it did not limit Armenian removal to clearly defined zones, and although the Entente publicly warned the Ottoman authorities of future punishment for crimes against humanity on 24 May, German officials still did not anticipate or counter the risk of an Empire-wide extermination of Armenians. On the contrary, their approval was a decisive breakthrough for a regime which a few months previously had found itself strictly bound to implement, jointly backed by Germany, a monitored coexistence of Christians and Muslims, Armenians, Syriacs, Kurds, and Turks in eastern Asia Minor as planned in the Reform Agreement of February 1914.7

The removal of the Armenians from eastern Asia Minor mainly took place from May to September, and from western Anatolia and the province of Edirne in Thrace from July to October 1915. In eastern Anatolia, men and boys were mostly massacred on the spot; those in the army were separated into unarmed labour battalions and also killed. At the Dardanelles and in Arabia, Armenian soldiers continued to fight in the Ottoman army. In the west, men were also forcibly removed and some of the deportees went by train. Women and children from central and eastern Asia Minor endured starvation, mass rape, and enslavement on their marches. In certain places, in particular the province of Diyarbekir under Governor Dr Mehmed Reşid, removal amounted to the massacre of men, women, and children. Reşid treated all Christians in a similarly murderous manner.

As early as 26 October 1914, Talat had ordered the governor of Van to remove the Christian Syriac population in Hakkâri near the Persian border. He considered this population unreliable, and wanted to disperse it among a Muslim majority in western provinces. He could not, however, implement this early policy of removal and dispersal in autumn 1914,8 and did not transform it into a general policy of removal-cum-extermination as in the case of the Armenians. In June 1915, the regime nevertheless applied a policy of destruction against the Syriac enclave in Hakkâri and also against villages near Midyat that reacted against Reşid’s anti-Christian extermination. In the case of the region of Hakkâri, two thirds of about one hundred thousand Syriacs perished, while the others managed to escape to Russian-held territory (Gaunt 2006:188; Kévorkian 2006:463). Most Christians, Armenians and Syriac, were massacred in or removed from the eastern provinces beginning in the spring of 1915.

Several hundred thousand destitute Armenian deportees arrived in Syria in the summer and fall of 1915. Most of them were not resettled, as had been promised, but isolated in camps and starved to death according to rules that their local or regional demographic proportion must not exceed a few per cent (Akcım 2012:242–63; Dündar 2010:113–19). Those who nevertheless survived were massacred in 1916. Only recently have scholars published witness accounts of the extreme horror of this second phase of the genocide and studies on limited efforts to help the victims (Andonian 2007; Kaiser 2002). The major group of survivors in
Syria were 100,000–150,000 Armenians who the CUP triumvir Jemal Pasha settled in southern Syria, converting them to Islam (Kévorkian 2006:832–39).

Abolishing Ottomanism, Engineering a Türk Yurdu

The destruction of the Ottoman Armenian community was symbolically completed in August 1916, when the Armenian Nizânmâne of 1863 was entirely revised, the Armenian Assembly abolished, and the Patriarchate’s residence transferred to Jerusalem. As a result of the genocide and these changes, the 1856 Tanzimat reform principle of equality cum diversity, including a-territorial democratic millet autonomy, had died; ‘Ottomanity’ was dead; and Ottomanism could no longer serve as a viable modern principle as it had vigorously done after the Revolution of 1908. In contrast to the massacres in the 1890s, conversion only warranted survival in 1915–16 if the Ministry of Interior permitted it as an exception. Conversion of religious identity and confession of faith was secondary to the latter’s demographic rationale; or, as the governor of Trabzon put it at the beginning of July 1915, ‘an Armenian converted to Islam will be expelled as a Muslim Armenian.’ This policy was a break with Muslim imperial tradition.

Beside ‘Jemal’s Armenians’, few deportees had been able to escape. Most important was the earlier escape to Erzincan and Erzurum, occupied by the Russian army in 1916. Thousands of Armenians had found refuge among the Alevi in mountainous Dersim in 1915 and were able to cross the Russian lines in 1916. Others had fled beyond the Eastern front and returned with the advancing Russian army, which retreated after the October Revolution in November 1917. Unable to stop the return of Young Turkish rule, Armenian militias on the retreat committed massacres against Muslims, including the Alevi population, which did not support them then in that region (Ahmed Refik (1994 [1919]:47–82; Hovannisian 1971:20–25; Kieser 2000:396).

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk of 3 March 1918 allowed for the re-launch of pan-Turkist schemes and raised the spectre of further Armenian extermination. Russia lost a huge part of her western empire to Germany, but also, as in Article 4, the north-eastern corner of Asia Minor that it had acquired in the Berlin Treaty in 1878. The German Foreign Office confirmed in June 1918 the advance of Ottoman troops far beyond the agreement of Brest-Litovsk. More than a million people were in danger according to Matthias Erzberger, a leader of the democratic opposition in the Reichstag (Matthias 1959:410). Only the resolution of the war on the other fronts prevented a further Ottoman advance in the Caucasus.

The most reliable of the widely varying figures for the death toll is that a half or more of the nearly two million Ottoman Armenians alive in 1914 were killed in 1915–16. An important contribution to the discussion on the extent of the killings was the publication in 2008 of Talat’s notebook, complete with demographic figures. Talat considered the Ottoman Armenian population in pre-1915 Asia Minor to be 1.5 million, of which he claimed to have removed more than 1.1 million; a small number remained, often Islamized; others fled before being removed, most of them to the Caucasus. According to the statistics of the Armenian
Patriarchate, the Ottoman Armenian prewar population numbered slightly more than two million (Bardakç 2008:109; Kévorkian 2010:57).

**Conclusion**

The Christians of Ottoman Greater Syria were never targeted in a way that could be compared to the Christians of Asia Minor, in particular the Armenians. In 1914, the Armenians – a religiously and linguistically distinctive group since antiquity – had projected their future in native Asia Minor which the Turkist movement claimed as Türk Yurdu (Turkish national home). The CUP war regime not only endorsed this claim and made it exclusive in 1915, but was also eager to use the abundant Armenian assets to build up an exclusive Turkish-Muslim economy in Asia Minor.

The CUP fought the war in 1914–18 both externally and, in contrast to Europe, internally. It pursued chimeric expansive goals towards the Caucasus, Egypt, and the Balkans. Overstretched, disillusioned, and frustrated with regard to the latter goals, it led the struggle for the Türk Yurdu much more aggressively, exclusively, and destructively than it would have done in times of peace. It pursued a genocidal policy that concentrated on Asia Minor and purposed unrestricted state sovereignty and a national home for Muslim Turks. The new situation of total war made possible a radical demographic engineering and an unprecedented destruction of Ottoman Christians, first of all Armenians.

In their propaganda and in a national historiography that began in the 1910s – not only after 1919 or after 1923 – Turkish authors belittle this destruction. They emphasize on the contrary the victimization and injustices Muslims suffered since the eighteenth century and in particular during the First Balkan War. They may concede tragic consequences, but nevertheless depict the policy embraced by the war regime as unavoidable and necessary for self-defence in an extreme situation, at the same time blaming the Armenians for their lack of full support for the CUP regime’s war effort. This historiography not only fails the criterion of a scholarship bound to the ethos of truth and humanity, but also lacks a frank analysis of the CUP’s critical shift from an inclusive constitutional Ottomanism to a Turkish Muslim nationalism mixed with pan-Turkism and Islamism. This aggressive mix of ideologies fundamentally changed the character of the Ottoman state. From late summer 1914 it excluded non-Muslims from the ‘self’ or identity that the war propaganda claimed to defend and to empower.

What the one side claimed to be self-defence, proved for the victims to be extreme aggression. It was the removal and extermination of members belonging to the same state, despite an ethno-religious affiliation that differed from the demographic majority. The contemporary experience of such destruction gave Raphael Lemkin, a pioneer of genocide studies and of the 1948 U.N. Genocide Convention, a strong impulse to develop his concept.

The destruction of the Ottoman Armenians turned out to be a horrific but successful model for ‘solving’ the issue of minorities during the twentieth century up to the Balkan wars of the 1990s. This was due to the latter’s nationalistic rationale and linked to a policy of expulsion of Rûm, which was condoned by
Western diplomacy at the Near East Conference at Lausanne in 1923, when diplomacy signed a ‘population exchange’ that was already realized to a large extent by expulsion. After the first wave of expulsion in the late spring of 1914, the large majority, nearly 1.5 million of Ottoman Rûm were expelled from Anatolia towards the end of the war of 1919–22. In this war for Asia Minor, the Muslims led by Turkish nationalist officers and former CUP members prevailed against the Greek army supported by the British.

The population exchange agreed on in the 1923 Lausanne Treaty accomplished Asia Minor’s demographic de-Christianization. In a low-profile long-term process, this development continued during the twentieth century.

Notes
1 This article ties in with former studies of mine and uses parts of them, notably Kieser (2011a), Kieser and Schaller (2014), Bloxham and Kieser (2014), and Kieser (forthcoming).
2 Hitler himself made this negative identification with Armenians in late December 1922 in an interview in Munich: ‘Either the German people will become a people like the Armenians, or there will be a bloody conflict [against the Jews]’ (Hitler 1980:775, translated in Joseph 2006:157).
5 For example, in Eskişehir, see Ahmed Refik (1994 [1919]:28–46); in Urfa, see Künzler (2007:16, 21).

References


