

The First Holocaust

Robert Fisk

This is the first of two instalments from Robert Fisk's most compelling book, The Great War for Civilisation: The Conquest of the Middle East (Harper Perennial £9.99). It is reprinted here with grateful acknowledgements to the author for his kind permission to do so. A second part will appear in Spokesman 94.

Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo
Shovel them under and let me work –

I am the grass; I cover all.

And pile them high at Gettysburg

And pile them high at Ypres and Verdun.

Shovel them under and let me work.

Two years, ten years, and passengers ask the
conductor:

What place is this?

Where are we now?

I am the grass,

Let me work.

CARL SANDBURG, 'Grass'

The hill of Margada is steep and littered with volcanic stones, a place of piercing bright light and shadows high above the eastern Syrian desert. It is cold on the summit and the winter rains have cut fissures into the mud between the rocks, brown canyons of earth that creep down to the base of the hill. Far below, the waters of the Habur slink between grey, treeless banks, twisting through dark sand dunes, a river of black secrets. You do not need to know what happened at Margada to find something evil in this place. Like the forests of eastern Poland, the Hill of Margada is a place of eradicated memory, although the local Syrian police constable, a man of bright cheeks and generous moustache, had heard that something terrible happened here long before he was born.

It was the *Independent's* photographer, Isabel Ellsen, who found the dreadful evidence. Climbing down the crack cut into the hill by the rain, she brushed her hand against the brown earth and found herself looking at a skull, its cranium dark brown, its teeth still shiny. To its left a backbone protruded through the mud. When I scraped away the earth on the other side of the crevasse, an entire skeleton was revealed, and then another, and a third, so closely packed that the bones had become tangled among each

other. Every few inches of mud would reveal a femur, a skull, a set of teeth, fibula and sockets, squeezed together, as tightly packed as they had been on the day they died in terror in 1915, roped together to drown in their thousands.

Exposed to the air, the bones became soft and claylike and flaked away in our hands, the last mortal remains of an entire race of people disappearing as swiftly as their Turkish oppressors would have wished us to forget them. As many as 50,000 Armenians were murdered in this little killing field, and it took a minute or two before Ellsen and I fully comprehended that we were standing in a mass grave. For Margada and the Syrian desert around it – like thousands of villages in what was Turkish Armenia – are the Auschwitz of the Armenian people, the place of the world's first, forgotten, Holocaust.

The parallel with Auschwitz is no idle one. Turkey's reign of terror against the Armenian people was an attempt to destroy the Armenian race. The Armenian death toll was almost a million and a half. While the Turks spoke publicly of the need to 'resettle' their Armenian population – as the Germans were to speak later of the Jews of Europe – the true intentions of the Turkish government were quite specific. On 15 September 1915, for example – and a carbon of this document exists – the Turkish interior minister, Talaat Pasha, cabled an instruction to his prefect in Aleppo. 'You have already been informed that the Government ... has decided to destroy completely all the indicated persons living in Turkey ... Their existence must be terminated, however tragic the measures taken may be, and no regard must be paid to either age or sex, or to any scruples of conscience.'

Was this not exactly what Himmler told his SS murderers in 1941? Here on the hill of Margada we were now standing among what was left of the 'indicated persons'. And Boghos Dakessian, who along with his five-year-old nephew Hagop had driven up to the Habur with us from the Syrian town of Deir es-Zour, knew all about those 'tragic measures'. 'The Turks brought whole families up here to kill them. It went on for days. They would tie them together in lines, men, children, women, most of them starving and sick, many naked. Then they would push them off the hill into the river and shoot one of them. The dead body would then carry the others down and drown them. It was cheap that way. It cost only one bullet.'

Dakessian knelt beside the small ravine and, with a car key, gently prised the earth from another skull. If this seems morbid, even obscene, it must be remembered that the Armenian people have lived with this for nine decades – and that the evidence of evil outweighs sensitivity. When he had scraped the earth from the eye sockets and the teeth, Dakessian handed the skull to little Hagop, who stood in the ditch, smiling, unaware of the meaning of death. 'I have told him what happened here,' Dakessian says. 'He must learn to understand.' Hagop was named after his great-grandfather – Boghos Dakessian's grandfather – who was himself a victim of the first Holocaust of the twentieth century, beheaded by a Turkish gendarme in the town of Marash in 1915.

In Beirut back in 1992, in the Armenian home for the blind – where the last survivors had lived with their memories through the agony of Lebanon's sixteen-

year civil war, I would discover Zakar Berberian, in a room devoid of light, a single electric bar vainly struggling with the frosty interior. The 89-year-old Armenian cowered in an old coat, staring intently at his visitors with sightless eyes. Within ten years Zakar Berberian – like almost all those who gave me their testimony of genocide – was dead. But here is his story, just as he told it to me:

I was twelve years old in 1915 and lived in Balajik on the Euphrates. I had four brothers. My father was a barber. What I saw on the day the Turkish gendarmes came to our village I will never forget. I had not yet lost my eyesight. There was a market place in Balajik which had been burned down and there were stones and building bricks on the ground. I saw with my own eyes what happened. The men were ordered to leave the village – they were taken away and never seen again. The women and children were told to go to the old market. The soldiers came then and in front of the mothers, they picked up each child – maybe the child was six or seven or eight – and they threw them up in the air and let them drop on the old stones. If they survived, the Turkish soldiers picked them up again by their feet and beat their brains out on the stones. They did all this, you see? In front of their mothers. I have never heard such screaming ... From our barber's shop, I saw all these scenes. The Turkish soldiers were in uniform and they had the gendarmerie of the government with them. Of course, the mothers could do nothing when their children were killed like this. They just shouted and cried. One of the children was in our school. They found his school book in his pocket which showed he had the highest marks in class. They beat his brains out. The Turks tied one of my friends by his feet to the tail of a horse and dragged him out of the village until he died.

There was a Turkish officer who used to come to our shop. He sheltered my brother who had deserted from the army but he said we must all flee, so we left Balajik for the town of Asma. We survived then because my father changed his religion. He agreed to become a Muslim. But both my father and my mother got sick. I think it was cholera. They died and I was also sick and like a dead person. The deportations went on and I should have died but a Turk gave me food to survive.

Berberian was eventually taken to a children's orphanage.

They gave me a bath but the water was dirty. There had been children in the same bath who had glaucoma. So I bathed in the water and I too went blind. I have seen nothing since. I have waited ever since for my sight to be given back to me. But I know why I went blind. It was not the bath. It was because my father changed his religion. God took his revenge on me because we forsook him.

Perhaps it was because of his age that Berberian betrayed no emotion in his voice. He would never see again. His eyes were missing, a pale green skin covering what should have been his pupils.

So terrible was the year 1915 in the Armenian lands of Turkey and in the deserts of northern Syria and so cruel were the Turkish authorities of the time that it is necessary to remember that Muslims sometimes risked their lives for the doomed Armenian Christians. In almost every interview I concluded with the elderly, blind Armenians who survived their people's genocide, there were stories of individual Turks who, driven by religion or common humanity, disobeyed the quasi-fascist laws of the Young Turk rulers in Constantinople and sheltered

Armenians in their homes, treating Armenian Christian orphans as members of their own Muslim families. The Turkish governor of Deir es-Zour, Ali Suad Bey, was so kind to the Armenian refugees – he set up orphanages for the children – that he was recalled to Constantinople and replaced by Zeki Bey, who turned the town into a concentration camp.

The story of the Armenian genocide is one of almost unrelieved horror at the hands of Turkish soldiers and policemen who enthusiastically carried out their government's orders to exterminate a race of Christian people in the Middle East. In 1915, Ottoman Turkey was at war with the Allies and claimed that its Armenian population – already subjected to persecution in the 1894-6 massacres – was supporting Turkey's Christian enemies. At least 200,000 Armenians from Russian Armenia were indeed fighting in the Tsarist army. In Beirut, Levon Isahakian – blind but alert at an incredible 105 years old – still bore the scar of a German cavalry sabre on his head, received when he was a Tsarist infantryman in Poland in 1915. In the chaos of the Bolshevik revolution two years later, he made his way home; he trudged across Russia on foot to Nagorno-Karabakh, sought refuge in Iran, was imprisoned by the British in Baghdad and finally walked all the way to Aleppo, where he found the starving remnants of his own Armenian people. He had been spared. But thousands of Armenians had also been serving in the Ottoman forces; they would not be so lucky. The Turks alleged that Armenians had given assistance to Allied naval fleets in the Mediterranean, although no proof of this was ever produced.

The reality was that a Young Turk movement – officially the 'Committee of Union and Progress' – had effectively taken control of the corrupt Ottoman empire from Sultan Abdul Hamid. Originally a liberal party to which many Armenians gave their support, it acquired a nationalistic, racist, pan-Turkic creed which espoused a Turkish-speaking Muslim nation stretching from Ankara to Baku – a dream that was briefly achieved in 1918 but which is today physically prevented only by the existence of the post-Soviet Armenian republic. The Christian Armenians of Asia Minor, a mixture of Persian, Roman and Byzantine blood, swiftly became disillusioned with the new rulers of the Turkish empire.¹

Encouraged by their victory over the Allies at the Dardanelles, the Turks fell upon the Armenians with the same fury as the Nazis were to turn upon the Jews of Europe two decades later. Aware of his own disastrous role in the Allied campaign against Turkey, Winston Churchill was to write in *The Aftermath* – a volume almost as forgotten today as the Armenians themselves – that 'it may well be that the British attack on the Gallipoli Peninsula stimulated the merciless fury of the Turkish government.' Certainly, the Turkish victory at the Dardanelles over the British and Australian armies – Private Charles Dickens, who peeled Maude's proclamation from the wall in Baghdad, was there, and so was Frank Wills, the man my father refused to execute in 1919 – gave a new and ruthless self-confidence to the Turkish regime. It chose 24 April 1915 – for ever afterwards commemorated as the day of Armenian genocide – to arrest and murder all the leading Armenian intellectuals of Constantinople. They followed this pogrom with the wholesale and systematic destruction of the Armenian race in Turkey.

Armenian soldiers in the Ottoman army had already been disbanded and converted into labour battalions by the spring of 1915. In the Armenian home for the blind in Beirut, 91-year-old Nevert Srouirian held out a photograph of her father, a magnificent, handsome man in a Turkish army uniform. Nevert was almost deaf when I met her in 1992. ‘My father was a wonderful man, very intelligent,’ she shouted at me in a high-pitched voice. ‘When the Turks came for our family in 1915, he put his old uniform back on and my mother sewed on badges to pretend he had high rank. He wore the four medals he had won as a soldier. Dressed like this, he took us all to the railway station at Konya and put us on a train and we were saved. But he stayed behind. The Turks discovered what he had done. They executed him.’

In every town and village, all Armenian men were led away by the police, executed by firing squad and thrown into mass graves or rivers. Mayreni Kaloustian was eighty-eight when I met her, a frail creature with her head tied in a cloth, who physically shook as she told her story in the Beirut blind home, an account of such pathos that one of the young Armenian nursing staff broke down in tears as she listened to it.

I come from Mush. When the snow melted each year, we planted rye. My father, Manouk Tarouian, and my brother worked in the fields. Then the Turkish soldiers came. It was 1915. They put all the men from the village, about a thousand, in a stable and next morning they took them from Mush – all my male relatives, my cousins and brothers. My father was among them. The Turks said: ‘The government needs you.’ They took them like cattle. We don’t know where they took them. We saw them go. Everybody was in a kind of shock. My mother Khatoun found out what happened. There was a place near Mush where three rivers come together and pass under one bridge. It is a huge place of water and sand. My mother went there in the morning and saw hundreds of our men lined up on the bridge, face to face. Then the soldiers shot at them from both sides. She said the Armenians ‘fell on top of each other like straw’. The Turks took the clothes and valuables off the bodies and then they took the bodies by the hands and feet and threw them into the water. All day they lined up the men from Mush like this and it went on until nightfall. When my mother returned to us, she said: ‘We should return to the river and throw ourselves in.’

What Mayreni was describing was no isolated war crime. It was a routine. At the Kemakh Gorge, Kurds and troops of the Turkish 86th Cavalry Brigade butchered more than 20,000 women and children. At Bitlis, the Turks drowned more than 900 women in the Tigris river. So great was the slaughter near the town of Erzinjan that the thousands of corpses in the Euphrates formed a barrage that forced the river to change course for a hundred metres.

The American ambassador to Constantinople, Henry Morgenthau, himself a Jew, described what happened next in a telegram to the US State Department:

Reports from widely scattered districts indicate systematic attempt to uproot peaceful Armenian populations and through arbitrary arrests, terrible tortures, wholesale expulsions and deportations from one end of the Empire to the other accompanied by frequent instances of rape, pillage, and murder, turning into massacre, to bring destruction and

destitution on them. These measures are not in response to popular or fanatical demand but are purely arbitrary and directed from Constantinople in the name of military necessity, often in districts where no military operations are likely to take place.

Mayreni Kaloustian, along with her mother Khatoun, her sisters Megad, Dilabar, Heriko and Arzoun and her two youngest brothers Drjivan and Feryad, set off on the death march from Mush the day after the men were murdered at the river.

First we travelled in carts hauled by bulls. Then we had to walk for so many weeks. There were thousands of us. We begged food and water. It was hot. We walked from the spring and we did not stop until St Jacob's Day, in December. I was only twelve and one day I lost my mother. I did not see her again. We went to Sivas. Then the Russians came, the army of the Tsar, and they reached Mush and blew up the bridge where my father was killed. We tried to go back to Mush but the Russians were defeated. Then my brothers and sisters and I all caught cholera. They died except for Arzoun and myself. I lost her, too. I was taken to an orphanage. You can never know what our life was like. The Turks let the bandits do what they wanted. The Kurds were allowed to kidnap the beautiful girls. I remember they took them away on horses, slung over the saddles. They took children. The Turks made us pay for water.

It is now largely forgotten that the Turks encouraged one of their Muslim ethnic groups to join them in this slaughter. Thus tens of thousands of Armenians were massacred – amid scenes of rape and mass pillage – by the Kurds, the very people upon whom Saddam Hussein would attempt genocide just over sixty years later. On the banks of the Habur river not far from Margada, Armenian women were sold to Kurds and Arab Muslims. Survivors related that the men paid 20 piastres for virgins but only 5 piastres for children or women who had already been raped. The older women, many of them carrying babies, were driven into the river to drown.

In 1992, 160 kilometres south of Margada, in a hamlet of clay huts 30 kilometres from the Iraqi frontier – so close that in 1991 the Syrian villagers could watch Saddam's Scud missiles trailing fire as they were launched into the night skies above their homes – I found old Serpouhi Papazian, survivor of the Armenian genocide, widow of an Arab Muslim who rescued her at Deir es-Zour. A stick-like woman of enormous energy, with bright eyes and no teeth, she thought she was a hundred years old – she was in fact ninety-two – but there could be no doubting her story.

I come from Takirda, twelve hours by horse from Istanbul. I was fifteen at the time. The Turks drove us from our home and all my family were put on a filthy ship that brought us from Konya to the coast and then we went to Aleppo – my mother Renouhi and my father Tatios, my aunt Azzaz and my sisters Hartoui and Yeva. They beat us and starved us. At Aleppo, my mother and Auntie Azzaz died of sickness. They made us walk all the way to Deir es-Zour in the summer heat. We were kept in a camp there by the Turks. Every day, the Turks came and took thousands of Armenians from there to the north. My father heard terrible stories of families being murdered together so he tattooed our initials in the Armenian alphabet on our wrists so that we could find each other later.

Tattooed identities. The grim parallels with another genocide did not occur to old Serpouhi Papazian. She was rescued by an Arab boy and, like so many of the Armenian women who sought refuge with non-Turkish Muslims, she converted to Islam. Only later did she hear what happened to the rest of her family.

The Turks sent them all north into the desert. They tied them together with many other people. My father and my sisters were tied together, Yeva and Hartoui by their wrists. Then they took them to a hill at a place called Margada where there were many bodies. They threw them into the mud of the river and shot one of them – I don't know which – and so they all drowned there together.

Ten years after the Armenian Holocaust, Serpouhi returned to the hill at Margada to try to find the remains of her father and sisters. 'All I found in 1925 were heaps of bones and skulls,' she said. 'They had been eaten by wild animals and dogs. I don't even know why you bother to come here with your notebook and take down what I say.' And Boghos Dakessian, in a bleak moment among the place of skulls on Margada hill, said much the same thing. One of the skulls he was holding collapsed into dust in his hands. 'Don't say "pity them",' he told us. 'It is over for them. It is finished.' Serpouhi remembered the river running beside the hill – but Isabel Ellsen and I had at first found no trace of bones along the banks of the Habur river. It was only when we climbed the hill above the main road to Deir es-Zour – almost 2 kilometres from the water – to survey the landscape, that we made out, faintly below us, the banks of a long-dried-up river. The Habur had changed its course over the previous seventy-five years and had moved more than a kilometre eastward. That is when Isabel found the skulls. We were standing on the hill where Yeva and Hartoui were murdered with their father. And it occurred to me that, just as the Euphrates had changed course after its waters became clogged with bodies, so here too the Habur's waters might have become choked with human remains and moved to the east. Somewhere in the soft clay of Margada, the bodies of Yeva and Hartoui lie to this day.

But the Armenian killing fields are spread wide over the Syrian desert. Eighty kilometres to the north, east of the village of Shedadi, lies another little Auschwitz, a cave into which Turkish troops drove thousands of Armenian men during the deportations. Boghos Dakessian and I found it quite easily in the middle of what is now a Syrian oilfield. Part of the cave has long since collapsed, but it was still possible to crawl into the mouth of the rock and worm our way with the aid of a cigarette lighter into its ominous interior. It stretched for over a kilometre underground. 'They killed about five thousand of our people here,' Dakessian said with a statistician's annoyance at such imprecision. 'They stuffed them in the cave and then started a bonfire here at the mouth and filled the cave with smoke. They were asphyxiated. They all coughed till they died.'

It took several seconds before the historical meaning of all this became apparent. Up here, in the cold, dry desert, the Turks turned this crack in the earth's crust into the twentieth century's first gas chamber. The principles of technological genocide began here in the Syrian desert, at the tiny mouth of this

innocent cave, in a natural chamber in the rock.

There are other parallels. Enver Pasha, the Turkish war minister,² told Morgenthau that the Armenians were being sent to ‘new quarters’, just as the Nazis later claimed that the Jews of Europe were being sent east for ‘resettlement’. Armenian churches were burned like the synagogues of Nazi Europe. The Armenians died on what the Turks called ‘caravans’ or ‘convoys’, just as the Jews of Europe were sent on ‘transports’ to the death camps. In southern Turkey, the Turks did sometimes use railway cattle wagons to herd Armenian men to their mass graves. The Kurds played the same role of executioners for the Turks that Lithuanians and Ukrainians and Croatians would later assume for the Nazis. The Turks even formed a ‘Special Organisation’ – *Teshkilat-i Makhsusiye* – to carry out exterminations, an Ottoman predecessor to Hitler’s *Einsatzgruppen*, the German ‘Special Action Groups’.

Armenian scholars have compiled a map of their people’s persecution every bit as detailed as the maps of Europe that show the railway routes to Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka, Dachau and the other Nazi camps. The Armenians in Sivas were driven to Malatya, from Malatya to Aleppo; or from Mush to Diyarbakir to Ras ul-Ain or – via Mardin – to Mosul and Kirkuk. It is a flow chart of suffering, some of the ‘convoys’ of humiliation and grief driven 150 kilometres south from Marash to Aleppo, then another 300 kilometres east to Deir es-Zour and then north – back in the direction of Turkey for another 150 kilometres up the Habur river and past the hill of Margada. Armenians were deported from the Black Sea coast and from European Turkey to the Syrian desert, some of them moved all the way south to Palestine.

What was at once apparent about this ethnic atrocity was not just its scale – perhaps two hundred thousand Armenians had been slaughtered two decades earlier – but the systematic nature of the Holocaust. A policy of race murder had been devised in wartime by senior statesmen who controlled, as one historian phrased it, the ‘machinery of violence, both formal and informal’. Like the Jews of Europe, many Armenians were highly educated; they were lawyers, civil servants, businessmen, journalists. Unlike the Jewish Holocaust, however, the world knew of the Turkish genocide almost as soon as it began. Viscount James Bryce and the young Arnold Toynbee were commissioned to prepare a report for the British government in 1915, and their work, *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire 1915-1916* – 700 pages of eyewitness accounts of the massacres – was to become not only a formative history of the slaughter but the first serious attempt to deal with crimes against humanity. Much of the testimony came from American missionaries in Turkey – the ‘non-governmental organisations’ of the era – and from Italian, Danish, Swedish, Greek, US and German diplomats and records.³

US diplomats were among the first to record the Armenian Holocaust – and among the bravest eyewitnesses – and their accounts in State Department archives remain among the most unimpeachable testimonies of the Armenians’ fate. Leslie Davis, the 38-year-old former lawyer who was American consul in Harput, has left us a terrifying account of his own horseback journeys through the dead lands

of Armenia. Around Lake Goeljuk and in the space of just twenty-four hours, he saw ‘the remains of not less than ten thousand Armenians’. He found corpses piled on rocks at the foot of cliffs, corpses in the water and in the sand, corpses filling up huge ravines; ‘nearly all the women lay flat on their backs and showed signs of barbarous mutilation by bayonets of the gendarmes ...’ On one of his excursions, Davis came across a dying Armenian woman. When she was offered bread, she ‘cried out that she wanted to die’. An Armenian college teacher called Donabed Lulejian who was rescued by Davis passed through a village littered with the bodies of men, women and children, and wrote an essay of pain and dignity – a ‘benediction’, in the words of the Armenian historian Peter Balakian:

At least a handful of earth for these slain bodies, for these whitened bones! A handful of earth, at least, for these unclaimed dead ...

We dislike to fancy the bodies of our dear ones worm-ridden; their eyes, their lovely eyes, filled with worms; their cheeks, their kiss-deserving cheeks, mildewed; their pomegranate-like lips food for reptiles.

But here they are in the mountains, unburied and forlorn, attacked by worms and scorpions, the eyes bare, the faces horrible amid a loathsome stench, like the odour of the slaughter-house ...

There are women with breasts uncovered and limbs bare. A handful of earth to shield their honour! ... Give, God, the handful of earth requested of Thee.

Germans, too, bore witness to the massacres because officers of the Kaiser’s army had been seconded to Turkey to help reorganise the Ottoman military. Armin Wegner, a German nurse and a second lieutenant in the retinue of Field Marshal von der Goltz, disobeyed orders by taking hundreds of photographs of Armenian victims in the camps at Ras al-Ain, Rakka, Aleppo and Deir es-Zour. Today these fearful pictures of the dead and dying comprise the core of witness images. The Germans were also involved in building Turkey’s railway system and saw with their own eyes the first use of cattle trucks for human deportation, men packed ninety to a wagon – the same average the Germans achieved in their transports to the Nazi death camps – on the Anatolian and Baghdad railways. Franz Gunther, a Deutsche Bank representative in Constantinople – the bank was financing the Turkish railway projects – sent a photograph of a deportation train to one of his directors as an example of the Ottoman government’s ‘bestial cruelty’.

Across the world – and especially in the United States – newspapers gave immense prominence to the genocide. From the start, the *New York Times* distinguished itself with near daily coverage of the slaughter, rape, dispossession and extermination of the Armenians. Its first reports appeared in the paper in November 1914. ‘Erzerum fanatics slay Christians,’ ran a headline on 29 November. Ambassador Morgenthau’s representations to the Turkish government were published on 28 April 1915, under the words ‘Appeal to Turkey to stop massacres’. By 4 October, the *New York Times* was headlining ‘Horrors done in Armenia’ above a long dispatch containing details of atrocities, of torture, deportations and child-killing. On 7 October the paper’s headline ran ‘800,000 Armenians counted destroyed ... 10,000 drowned at once’. Morgenthau’s memoranda and Bryce’s speeches to the House of Lords were given huge coverage. *The Nation* carried a series of powerful editorials, calling upon Berlin

– the United States still being a neutral in the war – to stop the killings by its Turkish ally. Narratives of the mass murders were still being published in the *New York Times* in June 1919, almost eight months after the war ended; ‘Armenian girls tell of massacres’, read the paper’s headline on 1 June. Even in the Canadian city of Halifax, the local paper carried almost weekly reports on the genocide. A volume containing dispatches on the destruction of the Armenians which appeared in the *Halifax Herald* runs to 352 pages.

Rarely have ethnic cleansing and genocidal killings been given publicity on this scale. British diplomats across the Middle East were themselves receiving first-hand accounts of the massacres. In the former Ottoman city of Basra, Gertrude Bell, who would later be Britain’s ‘Oriental Secretary’ in Baghdad, was filing an intelligence report on the outrages received from a captured Turkish soldier.

The battalion left Aleppo on 3 February and reached Ras al-Ain in twelve hours ... some 12,000 Armenians were concentrated under the guardianship of some hundreds of Kurds ... These Kurds were called gendarmes, but in reality mere butchers; bands of them were publicly ordered to take parties of Armenians, of both sexes, to various destinations, but had secret instructions to destroy the males, children and old women ... One of these gendarmes confessed to killing 100 Armenian men himself ... the empty desert cisterns and caves were also filled with corpses ... The Turkish officers of the battalion were horrified by the sights they saw, and the regimental chaplain (a Muslim divine) on coming across a number of bodies prayed that the divine punishment of these crimes should be averted from Muslims, and by way of expiation, himself worked at digging three graves ... No man can ever think of a woman’s body except as a matter of horror, instead of attraction, after Ras al-Ain.

Even after the United States entered the war, its diplomats continued to compile reports on the atrocities. J. B. Jackson, formerly the American consul in Aleppo, wrote in July 1915 of a group of more than 1,000 women and children from Harput who were handed over to Kurds:

who rode among them, selecting the best-looking women, girls and children ... Before carrying off those finally selected and subdued, they stripped most of the remaining women of their clothes, thereby forcing them to continue the rest of their journey in a nude condition. I was told by eyewitnesses to this outrage that over 300 women arrived at Ras al-Ain ... entirely naked, their hair flowing in the air like wild beasts, and after traveling six days afoot in the burning sun ... some of them personally came to the Consulate [in Aleppo] and exhibited their bodies to me, burned to the color of a green olive, the skin peeling off in great blotches, and many of them carrying gashes on the head and wounds on the body ...

The Armenian Holocaust was recorded, too, in countless private letters and diaries – some of them still unpublished – written by Europeans who found themselves in Ottoman northern Syria and southern Turkey. Here, for example, is an extract from a long account written by Cyril Barter, a British businessman who was sent out of Iraq to Aleppo under Turkish guard in 1915:

I may tell you that two days south of Deir [es-Zour] we met the first fringe of Armenian refugees, and for the next three months I was seeing them continually. To attempt to describe their plight would be impossible. In a few words, there were no men of between sixteen and sixty among them, they had all been massacred on leaving their homes, and these, the remainder, old men, women and children were dying like flies from starvation and disease, having been on the road from their villages to this, the bare desert, with no means of subsistence, for anything from three to six months ... It was a nightmare to me for a long time afterwards.

Barter would later submit a report to the Bryce Commission – which originally printed it anonymously – in which he recorded how carts would be taken through Aleppo for newly dead Armenians, the bodies ‘thrown into them as one would throw a sack of coal’. Barter, too, would be a witness to the railway deportations, describing how Turks would drive Armenians from their places of refuge and ‘hustle them down to the railway station, pack them into the trucks like cattle and forward them to Damascus and different towns in the Hidjaz’.

A British prisoner of war in Turkey, Lieutenant E. H. Jones, was to recall the fate of the Armenians of Yozgat, where he himself was held in a POW camp. ‘The butchery had taken place in a valley some dozen miles outside the town,’ he wrote. ‘Amongst our sentries were men who had slain men, women, and children till their arms were too tired to strike. They boasted of it amongst themselves. And yet, in many ways, they were pleasant enough fellows.’ As late as 1923, an Irish schoolboy, John de Courcy Ireland, the future nautical writer and historian, would visit Castel Gandolfo outside Rome, where he would see Armenian refugee children, ‘dark, fascinating to look at but very quiet in spite of the disorder in which they swarmed’.

As the survivors of the Armenian Holocaust have died, so their children have taken up their story. A number of Armenians not only escaped death in the 1915 deportations but were confronted by a second massacre in the Greek-held Turkish city of Smyrna – now Izmir – in 1922. ‘My father, Sarkis, not only survived the Syrian desert but barely made it out of Smyrna alive,’ his daughter Ellen Sarkisian Chesnut wrote to me.

... he and two friends came to Smyrna just when Attaturk [*sic*] and his men had taken it over. Arrested and taken to a massacre railway yard with several hundred Greeks and Armenians, they were subjected to rounds and rounds of machine gun fire. He survived the onslaught because he fainted. Later he was not so lucky when with fixed bayonets the Turkish soldiers repeatedly stabbed the dead and dying. Wounded badly on his forehead and leg, he nevertheless got up and made for the quay.

Ahead of him he saw two young girls trembling with fright and dazed by what they had seen. He could not leave them there. He grabbed ahold of their hands and the three of them ran for their lives. What they saw on the quay would stay with my father for the rest of his days. Tens of thousands of people crammed together in terror, with the flames of the dying city drawing ever closer. And yet ... there was no help forthcoming from the British, French and American warships. But, in the distance, my dad saw that another ship was taking people on board. The three of them would have to jump into the water and swim for it. They did and were rescued by Italian sailors.

The first writer to call the Armenian genocide a holocaust was Winston Churchill, including in a list of Turkish wartime atrocities the ‘massacring [of] uncounted thousands of helpless Armenians, men, women and children together, whole districts blotted out in one administrative holocaust ... beyond human redress’. For Churchill:

the clearance of the race from Asia Minor was about as complete as such an act could be ... There is no reasonable doubt that this crime was planned and executed for political reasons. The opportunity presented itself for clearing Turkish soil of a Christian race opposed to all Turkish ambitions, cherishing national ambitions that could be satisfied only at the expense of Turkey, and planted geographically between Turkish and Caucasian Moslems.

Acknowledging that British and American interest in the ‘infamous’ massacre of the Armenians ‘was lighted by the lamps of religion, philanthropy and politics’, Churchill said that the atrocities ‘stirred the ire of simple and chivalrous men and women spread widely about the English-speaking world’.

But there were other, less chivalrous men whose interest in the Armenian Holocaust – gleaned at first hand – would prove to be a useful experience in a new and brutal Europe. Franz von Papen, for example, was chief of staff of the Fourth Turkish Army during the 1914-18 war and served as Hitler’s vice chancellor in 1933. During the Second World War, he was the Third Reich’s ambassador to Turkey. Another German who knew the intimate details of the Armenian genocide was Lieutenant General Hans von Seeckt, who was chief of the Ottoman General Staff in 1917. He laid the groundwork for the *Wehrmacht* in the 1920s and was honoured by Hitler with a state funeral on his death in 1936. Much more sinister was the identity of a young German called Rudolf Hoess, who joined the German forces in Turkey as a teenager. In 1940 he was appointed commandant of Auschwitz, and he became deputy inspector of all Nazi concentration camps at SS headquarters in 1944.

In a work of remarkable scholarship, the Armenian historian Vahakn Dadrian identified Max Erwin von Scheubner-Richter as one of the most effective Nazi mentors. Scheubner-Richter was German vice-consul in Erzerum and witnessed Turkish massacres of Armenians in Bitlis province, writing a long report on the killings for the German chancellor. In all, he submitted to Berlin fifteen reports on the deportations and mass killings, stating in his last message that with the exception of a few hundred thousand survivors, the Armenians of Turkey had been exterminated (*ausgerottet*). He described the methods by which the Turks concealed their plans for the genocide, the techniques used to entrap Armenians, the use of criminal gangs, and even made a reference to the Armenians as ‘these “Jews of the Orient” who are wily businessmen’. Scheubner-Richter met Hitler only five years later and would become one of his closest advisers, running a series of racist editorials in a Munich newspaper which called for a ‘ruthless and relentless’ campaign against Jews so that Germany should be ‘cleansed’. When Hitler staged his attempted coup against the Bavarian government, Scheubner-Richter linked arms with Hitler as they marched through the streets and was shot

in the heart and killed instantly by a police bullet.

We do not know how much Hitler learned of the Armenian Holocaust from his friend, but he was certainly aware of its details, referring to the genocide first in 1924 when he said that Armenians were the victims of cowardice. Then in August 1939 he asked his rhetorical and infamous question of his generals – in relation to Poles – ‘Who after all is today speaking of the destruction of the Armenians?’ There have been repeated attempts – especially by Turkey – to pretend that Hitler never made such a remark but Dadrian has found five separate versions of the question, four of them identical; two were filed in German High Command archives. Furthermore, German historians have discovered that Hitler made an almost identical comment in a 1931 interview with a German newspaper editor, saying that ‘everywhere people are awaiting a new world order. We intend to introduce a great resettlement policy ... remember the extermination of the Armenians.’ And there came another fateful reference to the century’s first genocide when Hitler was demanding that the Jews of Hungary be deported; he ended a tirade to Admiral Horthy, the Hungarian regent, in 1943 with a remark about ‘the downfall of a people who were once so proud – the Persians, who now lead a pitiful existence as Armenians’.

Historical research into the identity of Germans who witnessed the destruction of the Armenians and their later role in Hitler’s war is continuing. Some Armenian slave labourers – male and female – spent their last months working to complete a section of the German-run Baghdad railway and were briefly protected by their German supervisors. But other German nationals watched the Armenians die – and did nothing.⁴ What was so chilling about Hitler’s question to his generals, however, was not just his comparison – the whole world knew the details of the Turkish destruction of its Armenian population – but his equally important knowledge that the perpetrators of these war crimes were rewarded with impunity.

In the immediate aftermath of the First World War, Turkish courts martial were held to punish those responsible and Turkish parliamentarians confessed to crimes against humanity. A Turkish military tribunal, unprecedented in Ottoman history, produced government records that were used as evidence at the trial. One exchange over the telegraph had a Nazi ring to it. An official says of the Armenians: ‘They were dispatched to their ultimate destination.’ A second voice asks: ‘Meaning what?’ And the reply comes back: ‘Meaning massacred. Killed.’ Three minor officials were hanged. The triumvirate itself – Jemal, Enver and Talaat – was sentenced to death *in absentia*.

But the Turkish courts lacked the political will to continue, and the Western allies, who had boldly promised a trial of the major Turkish war criminals – the Armenian mass killings were described as ‘crimes against humanity’ in an Allied warning to the Ottoman government in May 1915 – lacked the interest to compel them to do so. Indeed, what was to come – the systematic attempt, which continues to this day, to deny that the mass killings were ever perpetrated – is almost as frightening as the powerlessness of the Allies who should have prosecuted those who devised the Armenian genocide. Talaat Pasha, the former interior minister, was assassinated in Berlin by an Armenian whose family had died in the genocide. Soghomon

Tehlirian's trial and subsequent acquittal in 1921 meant that details of the Armenian Holocaust were widely known to the German public. Franz Werfel, the German-Jewish novelist, wrote a prophetic warning of the next Holocaust in his account of Armenian resistance to the Turkish killers, *Forty Days of Musa Dagh*. He lectured across Germany in 1933, only to be denounced by the Nazi newspaper *Das Schwarze Korps* as a propagandist of 'alleged Turkish horrors perpetrated against the Armenians'. The same paper – and here was another disturbing link between the Armenian Holocaust and the Jewish Holocaust still to come – condemned 'America's Armenian Jews for promoting in the USA the sale of Werfel's book'.

Already, the century's first genocide was being 'disappeared'. Winston Churchill continued to emphasise its reality. In 1933, the same year that Werfel toured Germany, Churchill wrote that:

the Armenian people emerged from the Great War scattered, extirpated in many districts, and reduced through massacre, losses of war and enforced deportations adopted as an easy system of killing ... the Armenians and their tribulations were well known throughout England and the United States ... Their persecutors and tyrants had been laid low by war or revolution. The greatest nations in the hour of their victory were their friends, and would see them righted.

But the Armenians would be betrayed. The archives tell a bitter story of weakness and impotence and false promises. Here, for example, is Clause 1d of the Treaty of Sèvres between the Allied and Ottoman governments of 10 August 1920:

Turkey recognised Armenia as an independent state, and consented to accept President [Woodrow] Wilson's arbitration with regard to the boundary between the two states.

And here is Article 64 of the same treaty:

If within one year ... the Kurdish peoples shall address themselves to the Council of the League of Nations in such a manner as to show the majority of the population of these areas desires independence from Turkey, and if the Council ... recommends that it should be granted to them, Turkey hereby agrees to execute such a recommendation and to renounce all rights and title over these areas.

Wilson's Fourteen Points were the United States' first attempt at a 'new world order' and included honourable demands. Point Five insisted upon:

a free, open-minded and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims ... the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined.

And Point Twelve clearly referred to the Armenians and the Kurds:

The Turkish portions of the present Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure sovereignty, but the other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development ...

Wilson did subsequently award the Armenian republic large areas of modern-day Turkey – including the provinces of Erzerum and Van – but the Turks and the Bolsheviks together destroyed it before the end of December 1920. Unlike a later president, however, Wilson was in no position to send a ‘desert storm’ and drive out these armies and prevent yet another massacre of Armenians. The Kurds, who had been among the cruellest perpetrators of the Armenian genocide, were equally doomed. Enthusiasm for a British-protected Kurdish state that would act as a buffer between Turkey, Iran and Iraq was extinguished when Britain decided to win over Arab opinion in Iraq by including Kurdish areas in the state and when it became obvious that the emerging Soviet Union might benefit from the creation of a puppet Kurdish state.

American isolationism meant that the Armenians were to be abandoned. The Turks attacked a French army in Cilicia, drove them out of Marash and massacred another fifty thousand Armenians who believed they were living under French protection. A further massacre occurred in Yerevan. Of the Treaty of Lausanne, which registered the final peace between Turkey and the Great Powers, Churchill was to write: ‘history will search in vain for the word “Armenia”.’

Yet it is important to remember that the one country which – in the immediate aftermath of my father’s war – chose a truly democratic alternative to the Middle East was the United States of America. I am not just referring to the Fourteen Points, in themselves a powerful argument for democratic development. In a speech to Congress, Wilson stated that ‘people are not to be bartered about from sovereignty to sovereignty as if they were chattels or pawns in a game’. US diplomats and missionaries spread across the old Ottoman empire argued eloquently that the Arabs of the empire should be set up – without Turkey – as one ‘modern Arab nation’, as they called it, to develop and progress in the world. Another powerful argument came from the King-Crane commission, set up under Wilson, which sailed to the Middle East to actually ask the peoples of the region what they wanted.

It was not Wilson’s fault that illness and an increasingly isolationist American public caused a withdrawal from world affairs by the United States. In retrospect, however, that withdrawal – at a time when America was nonpartisan in the Middle East – was one of the great tragedies of our time. We Europeans took over the area. And we failed. When the United States reentered the region a quarter of a century later, it did so for oil and, shortly thereafter, as an almost unquestioning supporter and funder of Israel.

Lord Bryce, whose report on the Armenian genocide had done so much to enlighten public opinion, lamented in a lecture tour of the United States in 1922 that Allied failure to enforce the disarmament of the Turkish army had led the Turks to recover ‘their old arrogance’. And in a most enigmatic phrase, he suggested there was more than war-weariness behind the Allied refusal to provide restitution to the Armenians. ‘Why the Turkish Government, which had in 1915 massacred a million of its Christian subjects ... why after these crimes that Government should have been treated by the Allies with such extraordinary leniency

– these are mysteries the explanation whereof is probably known to some of you as it is to me,’ he said. ‘But the secret is one which, as Herodotus says of some of those tales which he heard from the priests in Egypt, is too sacred for me to mention.’ The Armenians, Bryce said, had suffered more than any other peoples in the 1914-18 war and had been ‘most cruelly abandoned’.

What was the secret of which Bryce claimed privileged knowledge? Was this a mere rhetorical flourish to explain the Allies’ postwar irresolution? Or did he think that Britain and France wanted Turkey as an ally in the face of the newly created Bolshevik state that might soon threaten the oilfields of the Middle East? In Transcaucasia, British troops initially opposed the Bolsheviks – ‘smelling the oil of Baku’, as one observer of the time put it - and for a short time preserved the independence of Georgia, Azerbaijan and a truncated Armenian state. But when Britain withdrew its troops in 1920, the three nations fell to the Soviet Union. In Turkestan, where we were interested in preventing Germany from gaining access to cotton supplies, British forces actually fought the Russians with the assistance of Enver Pasha’s Turkish supporters, an odd exchange of alliances, since Tsarist Russia had been an ally of Britain until the 1917 Revolution.

In just one corner of their former Turkish homeland, the Armenians clung on; in the province of Alexandretta and the now broken fortress of Musa Dagh, 20 kilometres west of Antioch, whose people had withstood the siege about which Werfel wrote his novel. Alexandretta fell under French colonial rule in the far north of Syria and so, in 1918, many thousands of Armenians returned to their gutted homes. But to understand this largely forgotten betrayal, the reader must travel to Aanjar, a small town of sorrow that blushes roses around its homes. From the roadside, smothering the front doors, all the way up Father Ashod Karakashian’s garden, there is a stream of pink and crimson to mock the suffering of the Armenians who built this town on the malarial marshes of eastern Lebanon in 1939. They are proud people, holders now of Lebanese passports, but holders, too, of one of the darkest secrets of the Armenian past: for they were ‘cleansed’ from their homeland twice in a century, first in 1915, then in 1939. If they blame the Turks for both evictions, they blame the French as well. And Hitler. Mostly they blame the French.

Father Karakashian’s sister Viktoria was just ten in 1939, but she remembers her family’s second disaster, a miniature genocide compared to the one in 1915, but nonetheless terrible. ‘The French army escorted us all the way,’ she said. ‘But we were dying. My brother Varoujan was only a year or two old, but I saw him die in my mother’s lap in the truck. Like many of us, he had malaria. The French didn’t seem to know what to do with us. They took us first for forty days to Abassid in Syria. Then they put us on ships for seven days. We landed at Tripoli [in northern Lebanon] and the French put us on a cattle train to Rayak. From Rayak, they brought us to Aanjar and here we remained.’

Like most of the Armenians of Aanjar, Father Karakashian and his sister were born in Musa Dagh, the Armenian fortress town which is now in south-eastern Turkey and which held out for forty days against overwhelming odds during the

genocide. Rescued by French and British warships, the Armenians of Musa Dagh were cared for in Egypt, then sent back to their home town with the French army after the 1914-18 war. And there they lived, in part of the French mandate of Syria, until 1939, when the French government – in a desperate attempt to persuade Turkey to join the Allies against Hitler – ‘gave’ Musa Dagh and the large city of Alexandretta back to the Turks.

The Karakashian children were born after the 1915 Holocaust, but many of their neighbours have no parents or grandparents. Even when they arrived in Aanjar – which was then in the French mandate of ‘Greater Lebanon’ – they continued to suffer. ‘There were plagues of mosquitoes and this place was a wilderness,’ Father Karakashian says. ‘The French gave each man 25 Lebanese pounds to break the rocks and build homes for themselves. But many people caught malaria and died.’ In the first two years of their ordeal – in 1940, when most of Europe was at war – the Armenians of Aanjar lost a thousand men and women to malaria. Their crumbling gravestones still lie to the north of the town.

The walls of Saint Paul’s church in Aanjar are covered with photographs of the Armenian tragedy. One – taken in 1915 – shows the survivors of the Musa Dagh siege climbing desperately onto the deck of an Allied warship. Another shows French officers welcoming Armenian dignitaries back to Alexandretta, along with several men of the French army’s ‘Armenian Brigade’. In the 1930s, they built a memorial to the siege – it has since been destroyed by the Turks – and when they were forced to leave yet again before the Second World War, the Armenians took their dead, Serb-style, with them. The corpses of eighteen of the ‘martyrs’ of the 1915 battle – whose bodies had been left untouched by the Turks until the French came with the Armenians in 1918 – were stuffed on to trucks in 1939 together with the refugees, and brought to Aanjar along with the living. They rest now in a marble sarcophagus next to Saint Paul’s church. ‘In eternal memory,’ it says in Armenian on the marble.

But memory has been softened for the people of Aanjar. ‘In the first ten years after leaving Alexandretta, the people – there were six thousand deportees who came here – wanted to go back,’ Father Karakashian said. ‘Then after the Second World War, a lot of our people emigrated to South America. Now we don’t want to return. But I went back last year for a holiday. Yes, there is a tiny Armenian community left in our former bit of Turkey around Musa Dagh, thirty families, and they’ve just renovated the Armenian church. The Turks there are polite to us. I think they know what happened and they respect us because they know they are on our land.’

The shame of France’s surrender of the *sanjak* (provincial district) of Alexandretta – including Musa Dagh – is one of the largely untold stories of the Second World War. Fearing that Turkey would join the German Axis as it had in the 1914-18 war, France agreed to a referendum in Alexandretta so that the Armenian and Turkish inhabitants could choose their nationality. The Turks trucked tens of thousands of people into the *sanjak* for the referendum, and naturally the ‘people’ voted to be part of Turkey. ‘The French government made

the decision to give the place to Turkey and of course the Armenians realised they couldn't live there any more and requested from the French government that they be taken away and given new homes,' the priest says. 'They wanted to be rid of the Turks. So they left. The French made an agreement in their own interests. I blame the French.' So the *sanjak* of Alexandretta became the Turkish province of Hatay, and the city of Alexandretta became Iskenderun. And the final irony was that Turkey did join the Allied side against Hitler – but only in the last days of the European conflict, when Hitler was about to commit suicide in his Berlin bunker and the Reich was in ashes. The sacrifice of Alexandretta was for nothing.

Nor have its ghosts departed. In 1998, the Turkish prime minister Mesut Yılmaz launched a warning against the Syrians who were assisting the communist Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) guerrillas operating across the border. He chose a ceremony to mark the French handover of Alexandretta to announce that 'those who have their eyes fixed on Turkish territory are suffering from blindness – not even a square centimetre of this country will be taken from it.' Yet Alexandretta had been Armenian. So much for the Treaty of Sèvres.

The world is full of bigger and smaller genocides, some of which we know of from massive testimony and others to which we have blinded ourselves as surely as the Armenian refugee children lost their sight in the vile baths of the refugee homes to which they were taken in 1916. Mark Levene has written extensively about one of the lesser-known genocides – hands up, readers of this book, if you already know of it – when in 1933 the army of the nascent Iraqi state launched an exterminatory attack on members of the Assyrian community. Near the city of Dahuk, the soldiers massacred the entire population of a village called Summayl. The few surviving women were later gang-raped, and Kurds, who formed the predominant ethnic group in the region, joined in the mass killings – in some cases, no doubt, the very same Kurds who had looted and slaughtered the Armenians just across the Turkish border eighteen years earlier. This all happened in British-run Iraq and the local administrative inspector, a Colonel R. S. Stafford, reported to London that Iraqi officers had decided upon the killings with a view to the Assyrians being 'as far as possible ... exterminated'. These Assyrians had been driven from Turkey after genocidal attacks on their villages, had sought sanctuary in Persia, and were then taken by the British to live near Mosul in what would be the new Iraqi state.

Levene has traced this pattern of confrontation with the Iraqi state all the way from 1933 to the Assyrian killings in Saddam's *Anfal* campaign of 1988. But even after the initial massacres, the British stifled an inquiry at the League of Nations by suggesting that it could lead to the collapse of King Feisal's regime, and promptly offered their bombs to the new Iraqi air force for their anti-Assyrian campaign – after the initial killings. The British also warned that a public inquiry might incite 'an outbreak of xenophobia directed at foreigners' – something they only succeeded in doing seventy years later ...

References

1. The Armenians, descended from ancient Urartu, became the first Christian nation when their king Drtad converted from paganism in AD 301, and had to defend their faith against the Persians, who were Zoroastrian before becoming Muslim, and then the Arabs. The Turks arrived from central Asia in the eleventh century. Armenia and Greece were both Christian nations within the Ottoman empire.
2. When Enver held the city of Edirne during the calamitous Balkan wars, thousands of babies were named after the future mass murderer; Enver Hoxha, the mad dictator of Albania, was one, Anwar Sadat, the sane dictator of Egypt, another.
3. The powerful Anglo-Armenian Association lobby group had been founded by Lord Bryce in 1890 and maintained constant pressure on the British government to ensure equal rights for Armenians within the Ottoman Empire. A special supplement to the *Anglo-Armenian Gazette* of April 1895, in the possession of the author, contains a harrowing account of the massacre of Armenians at Sasun, a tub-thumping message of support from Lord Gladstone – ‘mere words, coming from the Turk, are not worth the breath spent in uttering them’ – and a demand for a European-officered gendarmerie to protect ‘Armenian Christians’. Their religion, rather than their minority status in the empire, was clearly the spur to British sentiment.
4. At a conference in Beirut in 2001, Professor Wolfgang Wippermann of the Free University of Berlin introduced evidence that many German officers witnessed the Armenian Massacres without intervening or helping the victims.