

Benny Morris and Dror Ze'evi, *The Thirty-Year Genocide: Turkey's Destruction of Its Christian Minorities, 1894-1924*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019. 656 pp., Photographs.

Reviewed by Alexander Kitroeff

This is a major study on the history of the Christian minorities before and during the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the early twentieth century. It argues that the last thirty years in the life of the Ottoman Empire witnessed a series of attacks on the Armenians, the Greeks and a smaller group, the Assyrians that amounted to a pattern of premeditated genocidal actions motivated both by extremist versions of nationalism and Islamism. In doing so, this book broadens the terms of the debate that surround the fate of the Christians during the rise of Turkish nationalism in the period that led to the establishment of the modern Republic of Turkey in what was left of the Ottoman domains.

Until now discussions revolved around the actual numbers of Christians that lost their lives and whether the figures and extent of the losses meant they had suffered a genocide or "merely" ethnic cleansing; whether or not those minorities through their disloyal behavior bore some of the responsibility for what happened to them and whether they themselves had victimized their fellow Ottoman Muslims. There were also questions about the motivations of the Turkish perpetrators. Were they directed by the nationalist leadership or was the violence enacted by undisciplined irregulars and, finally, whether the driving force was ethnic hatred or religious fanatics?

The Thirty Year Genocide provides an answer to all of these questions that historians and many others are debating and it also goes much further. Not only do the two authors argue that the fate of the Christian minorities at the time the Ottoman Empire collapsed in the 1920s right after World War I was the result of a planned genocide fueled primarily by religious intolerance but also that it was a long-drawn out and systematic process that dated back to the 1890s, when the first massacres of Armenians occurred. They suggest, in other words, that there existed an overall pattern of genocidal actions against the Christian minorities that lasted thirty years. As the authors explain in their

introduction, they began to investigate whether or not the Armenians suffered a genocide in 1915-16 and found that the evidence supporting that was "incontrovertible" but they also realized that it was connected with the experiences of the other Christian minorities, the Greeks and the Assyrians. in a bigger story that had a much wider time span. That story, they write in their introduction, was "a protracted history of violence" and that "one has to look at Turkish behavior before and after World War I in order to understand what happened." It was an era in which the Ottoman Sultan was succeeded by the "Committee of Union and Progress" which is known as the "Young Turks" who were replaced after World War I by the nationalists led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Under each of those governments, the authors assert, "Muslim Turks – including the political leaders and everyday citizens – came to see Asia Minor's Christian communities as a danger to their state's survival and resolved to be rid of this danger." Towards that purpose, "the Turks turned variously to tools of steady oppression, mass murder, attrition, expulsion, and forced conversion" and as a result, "by 1924 they had cleansed Asia Minor of its four million-odd Christians." (page 3).

The two authors who have arrived at this much more comprehensive understanding of the fate of the Ottoman Christians, are two Israeli historians, Benny Morris and Dror Ze'evi. Morris is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Middle Eastern Studies at Ben Gurion University and has published books on the history of the Zionist-Arab conflict. Ze'evi is a professor at the same department and university who has published books on Ottoman and Middle Eastern history. While Israel-based scholars have a longstanding engagement with Ottoman history, Morris and Ze'evi's engagement with the history of the Christian minorities at the end of the Ottoman era is especially welcome. This particular topic is being addressed by historians other than those of Armenian, Greek, or Turkish origin and this particular book not only continues that trend and also helps move this topic away from being a national or regional historiographical issue and towards placing it at the center of the concerns of the field of Genocide Studies that emerged in the 1990s.

Morris and Ze'evi have structured their account chronologically, a way that helps them present what they see as a pattern of cumulative actions taken against the Armenians, the Assyrians and the Greeks – "the Turkish project" in their words. There are three parts to this book. The first part covers the massacres of 1894-1896 under Sultan Abdülhamit, the second part addresses the rise of Turkish nationalism that affected Armenians and Greeks and culminated in the Armenian Genocide of 1915 and the third the destruction of the Greeks, the Assyrians and the remaining Armenians. Alongside the chronological thread there is a geographical one, in which the authors treat the fate of the Christians during a particular period according to specific regions. They do so in a systematic way going from town to town or region to region until they cover the entire Ottoman domains. Their thoroughness, both in covering each place and presenting all the

available information makes this book somewhat of a reference work. Future scholars engaging in further research on either one of the Christian minorities or one of the particular Ottoman regions will benefit by using the information in this book as a foundation.

In gathering the data they present, the authors have made the strategic decision to rely primarily on contemporary edicts, reports and correspondence produced by government officials, diplomats and foreign observers ranging from military officers to missionaries. They note that many of the official Ottoman and Turkish records are not open to researchers, something which in itself suggests the authorities have something to hide, but nonetheless they believe there is more than enough evidence to support their claim of a long-term pattern of deliberate elimination of the Christian minorities in the Ottoman Empire. The official publications the authors gained access to were in the prime minister's Ottoman archives, the Library of Congress, the United States National Archives and other collections in the United States, the United Kingdom's Foreign Office and the archives of St. Antony's College Middle East Center in Oxford, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Defense Ministry in France and archival collections in Australia, Austria, and Germany. They also studied all available collections of published official documents.

Their research in these archives lasted for ten years. No one is going to fault them for not engaging in a thorough processing of all the relevant historical sources. By the same token, they read carefully along and in between the lines of each document. They were well aware of the possible biases of the authors of various reports, noting the phil-Hellenism of George Horton, the U.S. Consul in Smyrna, the anti-Greek sentiments of Mark Bristol, the commander of the United States fleet that was sent to Ottoman Empire in 1919, and of the British academic Arnold Toynbee. The authors are especially scathing about Bristol's insensitivity towards Turkish violence and the inaccuracy of Toynbee's critique of the Greeks.

Each of the three parts of this book which corresponds to the three phases of the thirty-year genocide, the Armenian massacres in the 1890s, the Armenian genocide of 1915-1916, and the post-World War I, begin with a chapter devoted to the historical context that framed the events that followed. Those chapters also establish both a connection between each of those phases of genocidal actions as well as a connection between the treatment of the Armenians and the Greeks, reiterating the view of the authors that the violence against the Christians was part of a premediated pattern of genocide. For example, the chapter that precedes the second part which is about the Armenian genocide of 1915-1916 discusses the nationalism that the ruling Young Turk governments fostered in the wake of the Ottoman Empire's defeat and territorial losses in the Balkan Wars of 1912-13. The government settled thousands of Muslims expelled from the lands the Ottomans forfeited in areas such as the Asia Minor Aegean coast where the inhabitants were mostly ethnic Greeks. It was a deliberate move designed to put

pressure on the Greeks, who were also targeted by means of an economic boycott and even worse, violence and forced expulsion. This policy towards the Greeks was different to that towards the Armenians in terms of the means employed but similar in that it aimed to eliminate their presence and prefaced the more direct actions against the Greeks between 1919 and 1922.

The chapters that follow the one that sets the historical context describe the violence suffered by the Christians in gruesome detail, though in a matter-of-fact way and relying on official reports. These sections of the book are difficult to get through not only because of the meticulous cataloguing of the violence inflicted on the Christians but also because of the frighteningly wide range of acts as well as the fact that no one was spared, in fact young children and adolescents, especially girls and older women appear to have fared the worst although all ages suffered terribly. The killing, the raping, the maiming Christians suffered along with the burning of their houses, shops and of course their churches, and the death marches they were forced to undertake have been well-documented elsewhere. But Morris and Ze'evi's thoroughness, their use of official documents along with the chronological focus on separate regions makes their accounts especially helpful in understanding the organized nature of those acts as well as the organization and planning that led to them.

The authors also contextualize the violence inflicted on the Christians in several important ways. They discuss the motives and argue there was an Islamic anti-Christian bias throughout the thirty-year period they examine. In this they differ from others who have suggested that the violence was fueled by different motivations at different times, as for example religious intolerance early on, the behavior of the Christians themselves, the actions of the Great Powers or the requirements of a Turkish nationalist agenda. Morris and Ze'evi acknowledge that those motivations did come into play. For example, they detail the atrocities committed by the Greek army in Asia Minor between 1919 and 1922 although they are careful to note several of the relevant reports are either unconfirmed or greatly exaggerated and, in any case, do not compare to the more extensive Turkish actions. Notwithstanding those various motivations, they assert that the violence against the Armenians, Greeks and Assyrians was due to the presence of a consistent and persistent anti-Christian sentiment from the 1890s through the 1920s. The Islamic Turks simply regarded the Christian presence as incompatible with the future nation they envisioned.

In that sense, the authors go on to argue, despite the many differences there were similarities as well as a fundamental parallel between the genocide of the Christians and the Jewish Holocaust. In their words "much as the Nazis saw the Jew as both an external enemy, controlling both Anglo-American capitalism and Soviet Bolshevism, and an internal enemy, polluting German blood and culture, so the Turks saw the Christians as both the external threat and the subversive internal enemy." (p. 502)

This is a weighty study, and at the same time a book that anyone interested in the fate of the Christians in the final decades of the Ottoman Empire should read. It speaks to the specialist, and demonstrates the value of using official documents, it is useful to undergraduates because it is a model of how to examine events in their proper historical context. And it will have a great appeal to general readers because of its clarity and its force of argument.

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