

1915: ARMENIAN GENOCIDE IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE OR A TRAGIC PAGE IN THE HISTORY OF THE TWO NATIONS?

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The 'Russian Political Encyclopedia' (ROSSPEN) publishing house has published a book by the well-known American political scientist, professor emeritus of Political Science at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, Guenter Lewy, titled 'The Armenian Issue in the Ottoman Empire: Myths and Reality'. This book is a translation of a book that was published in the US by the University of Utah Press in 2005 under the title 'The Armenian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey: A Disputed Genocide'. The book caused a great resonance in both academia and the civic society of Armenia and Turkey.

There are heaps of books on the subject of the Armenian Genocide in the Ottoman Empire, collections of documents from various archives around the world the UK, the US, Germany, France, Russia, and, of course, Turkey. However, more than 100 years after the events of 1915, the debate among scientists has not calmed down, but on the contrary is gaining momentum. This is primarily due to the politicization of the issue its discussion by the parliaments of several countries and their recognition of the events of 1915 as genocide.

The Armenian issue is one of the tools of political pressure on Turkey and the Turkish government on a range of important issues. The last action in this direction was the German parliament's resolution of June 2, 2016, according to which the mass massacres of the Armenian population in the Ottoman Empire in 1915-1916 are classified as genocide. It is noteworthy that the Bundestag held a meeting to consider this issue against the background of the aggravation of relations between Turkey and the European Union, in particular Germany, on the issue of migrants from the Middle East trying to

reach Europe via Turkey's territory.

Now two opposed and even hostile camps have clearly formed among the global scientific community on the Armenian issue in the Ottoman Empire. The first one is the Armenian camp of historians, considering the events of 1915 to be a fixed fact of genocide and therefore a closed topic. The second is the Turkish camp of historians, which considers the resettlement of Armenians from the front zone deep into the territory of the empire to have been caused by the uprisings and mass demonstrations of the Armenian population against the central government, as well as the support for the offensive of the Russian army in the Caucasus by Armenian armed formations at the beginning of the First World War.

Historians of both camps sometimes simplify the complex historical reality, moving away from the principle of historicism, which requires study and analysis of the events, considering the specific historical circumstances as a whole. Guenter Lewy made a correct observation, "both sides make their case by simplifying the complex historical reality and by ignoring crucial evidence that would yield a more nuanced picture. Professional historians in both camps copy uncritically from previous works, without subjecting it to criticism, when a reinvestigation of the sources is called for. Both parties use heavy-handed tactics to advance their cause and silence a full debate of the issues".[1]

However, the historiographical study of this issue, as well as the research of the author, give us reason to conclude that it was the Armenian historians who are prone to distort historical facts and seek to indulge in wishful thinking.

Recognized by the world scientific community as an expert on genocide issues, Guenter Lewy does not belong to any of the above-mentioned camps of researchers. To achieve the most impartial research on the issue the author did a great job in the archives of the countries which were involved in the First World War the archives of the German Foreign Office in Berlin, the National Archives in London and the National Archives in Washington. Lewy recognized that these sources not only helped him to find new facts, but, more importantly, helped to reveal a picture that is radically different from the versions emerging from the conclusions of the two warring sides. A careful examination and reconciliation of a vast array of primary sources led the author to the conclusion that representatives of the two camps of historians have used these materials selectively, citing only those points that came under their interpretation of the events. "Unlike most of those who have written on the subject of the Armenian massacres and who are partisans of one side or the other, I have no particular axe to grind. My purpose is not to put forth yet another one-sided account of the deportations and mass killings... My aim has been to deal with this emotion-laden subject without political preconceptions and to carry out a critical analysis of the two historiographies".[2]

Guenter Lewy's book consists of four parts. The author begins his study with a reference to a historical situation. After the collapse of the last independent Armenian state the Kingdom of Cilicia Armenians had come under the control of the Ottoman Empire. There was the millet system in the the multinational Ottoman Empire, under which each religious community was subordinate to a chief pastor: the Muslims to a Khalif, the

Orthodox to the Patriarch of Constantinople, Jews to a Hahambaşı (Chief Rabbi), and the Armenian population to the Catholicos. The millet system, instituted by Sultan Mohammed II (Mehmet Fatih) after his conquest of Constantinople in May 1453, was an institution of self-government for minority religious communities in the Empire. In this system, the Armenians stand out for their special loyalty and allegiance to the empire's central government. The authorities were favorable to the Armenians, calling them "the loyal community" ("millet-i sadıka" or "tebe-i sadıka"). However, as the author correctly noted, after the Russian-Turkish war of 1877-1878 everything changed. The Treaty of San Stefano, signed on March 3, 1878, as well as the Treaty of Berlin of July 13, 1878, obliged the Sublime Porte "to carry out, without further delay, the ameliorations and reforms demanded by local requirements in the provinces inhabited by the Armenians, and to guarantee their security against the Kurds and Circassians".[3]

Under the terms of the Treaty of Berlin, the Ottoman Government had to report periodically to the Western powers on the measures taken for this purpose. Russia and the Western countries, Britain in the first place, providing protection to the Armenians and supporting their struggle against the Sublime Porte, wanted to exacerbate the disease of "the sick man of Europe", and thus bring it to an end.

Lewy writes that the Armenian leaders were not satisfied with the terms of the Treaty of Berlin on a par with the peoples of the Balkans, they wanted to get the right to establish their own state. In this context, the statement of Archbishop Mugrdich Khrimian, who had gone to Berlin with a petition about the requirements of the Armenian population in the Ottoman Empire, is quite remarkable. Upon returning to Istanbul from the Berlin Congress, he said during a sermon in the Armenian Cathedral that he arrived in Berlin with a piece of paper, while the other small nations Bulgarians, Serbians, and Montenegrins had come with iron spoons. And when the European powers placed on the table of the conference a "Dish of Liberty," the others were able to scoop into the delicious dish and take out a portion for themselves. In fact, Archbishop Khrimian's famous sermon was a not-so-subtle appeal for the use of arms. The Hunchakian Social Democratic Party, organized in 1887 by a group of Armenian students in Geneva, as well as the unification of all the revolutionary forces in a new organization in June 1890 in Tiflis, which resulted in the creation of a new party, named 'the Armenian Revolutionary Federation' ('Dashnaktsuthiun'), became the guides of the idea. Along with a nationwide uprising, they considered political terror to be one of the most important means of achieving their goals. From mid-1890 the first unrest among the Armenian population of the empire began, which led to the tragic events in the near future.

Guenter Lewy, being an unbiased researcher, carries out a critical analysis of both rival Turkish and Armenian in the second part of the book. This is perhaps the most interesting, the most important part of the study, in which the author thoroughly analyzes all the basic tenets of the evidentiary works of Armenian historians on the Armenian Genocide. The author emphasizes that the most common perception among Armenian scholars is that the decision by the Ottoman government, managed by the Committee of Ittihad ve Terakki, on the resettlement of the Armenians from a war zone deep into the country was a well-organized state plan to exterminate the Armenian

population of the empire, despite the fact that the war was considered to be a cover for a long-planned genocide.

The main elements of the evidentiary basis of the Armenian version's researchers are the Turanism ideology as Turkish nationalism, the role of the poet and teacher Ziya Gökalp, the "Ten Commandments" of the CUP committee, the Secret CUP meeting of February 1915, Aram Andonian's 'The Memoirs of Naim Bey', the proceedings of the military tribunals of 1919-1920 in British-occupied Istanbul. Guenter Lewy carefully and thoroughly explores each postulate of the Armenian researchers' evidentiary basis, reveals their inconsistency due to the absence of the original documents, their doubtfulness and unreliability.

For any and all Armenian historians, and a number of Western scholars adhering to the Armenian version, one of the important elements of evidence of the genocidal policy of the official authorities of the Ottoman Empire were 'The Memoirs of Naim Bey', published by a former military censor at the time of mobilization in Istanbul, Aram Andonian, in London and Paris in 1920, while its Armenian version appeared in Boston in 1921. This edition contains the text of alleged telegrams and letters from the Minister of Internal Affairs of the Ottoman government, Talaat Pasha. The edition contains only a few photocopies of telegrams, and the text of other telegrams was narrated by Naim Bey, who allegedly had been the chief secretary of the deportations committee in 1915-1916 in Aleppo, and by Aram Andonian. Guenter Lewy notes that there are serious differences between all of these editions, and most importantly he is perplexed by the disappearance of the original documents submitted by Naim Bey to Aram Andonian, confirming the alleged involvement of the Sublime Porte's senior management in the Armenian massacres.

In the early 1980s, two Turkish researchers Sinasi Orel and Sureyya Yuca subjected the documents published by Aram Andonian to detailed textological, lexical and stylistic analysis and found that the so-called 'Talat Pasha Telegrams' are crude forgeries. They explain the disappearance of these important documents from the Bibliotheque Nubar in Paris (the main library of the Armenian General Benevolent Union) by the fact that the Armenians deliberately destroyed the 'originals' in order to avoid the chance that one day the spuriousness of the 'documents' would be revealed.[4]

As a result of a comprehensive analysis of 'The Talat Pasha Telegrams', Turkish researchers were able to demonstrate that they are fake, and they also discovered that none of the state structures of the Ottoman Government mention the name of Naim Bey, who could have been in a position to have access to such secret documents as the telegrams of Interior Minister Talat Pasha. In fact, Aram Andonian's 'The Memoirs of Naim Bey' are nothing more than a version of 'The Protocols of the Elders of Zion'. Guenter Lewy's thorough study and analysis of Aram Andonian's 'The Memoirs of Naim Bey' leads him to the conclusion that this book is not a historical work, but rather propaganda.

The proceedings of the military tribunals of 1919-1920, which were established after the defeat of Turkey in the First World War and the landing of British troops in Istanbul under the terms of the armistice of Mudros signed on October 30, 1918, have become another

important evidentiary basis for the Armenian version of genocide. However, for several reasons the author suggests not to exaggerate the value of the findings of these tribunals, calling their objectivity and the impartiality of the judges into question. Firstly, the military tribunals were set up under pressure from the Entente after the landing of British troops in Istanbul and worked under their close supervision. Secondly, the procedural law governing the activities of the military tribunals had significant drawbacks. The Ottoman justice system did not include an interview with witnesses, did not give the defendants the right to access the pre-trial investigation records at tribunals, and yet the role of the judge was more important than in the Anglo-Saxon judicial system. In this context, the author claims that the judges behaved more like prosecutors, rather than as impartial arbiters of justice. In addition, none of the testimonies, written depositions or documents put forth by the prosecution were subjected to cross-examination by the defense, which makes it impossible to consider these materials as conclusive proof. That is why the British authorities themselves were suspicious of the decisions of these tribunals and did not use them against the Malta detainees. To illustrate the British authorities' attitude towards the tribunals in Istanbul, Guenter Lewy refers to the letter of the British high commissioner Calthorpe, which was sent to London on August 1, 1919, in which he wrote that the trials were proving to be a farce and injurious to the prestige of Britain, as well as to that of the Turkish government. [5]

According to Guenter Lewy, the loss of all of the original documentation leave the findings of the military tribunals of 1919-1920 unsupported by credible evidence. "The findings of the Nuremberg tribunals that judged the Nazi war criminals after the Second World War have become an invaluable historical source because they were based on thousands of original Nazi documents that everyone can consult in the archives of the Federal Republic of Germany. By contrast, not a single original Turkish government document used by the Turkish tribunals has been preserved," the author writes. [6]

According to the Turkish version of the events of 1915-1916, the government didn't have any plan to exterminate the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire. The law on the deportation of the Armenians (Sevk ve İskân Kanunu) was the result of the betrayal and cooperation of the Armenian population of the country with the Russian troops fighting the Ottoman Empire on the Caucasus front, a full-scale rebellion organized by Armenian Dashnaks in the east of the empire in the face of the Russian threat and accompanied by massacres of the Muslim population.

Armenia's political parties considered the beginning of the First World War and the Ottoman Empire's participation in it to be the most appropriate factor for its long-standing idea of □□□□□□□□□ an Armenian state on the territory of the eastern vilayets of the empire. Article 6 of the program of the Hunchak party stated that the time for a general revolution would be when a foreign power attacks the Ottoman Empire externally to implement the set goals. In turn, the Armenian factor was a powerful weapon in the Entente's hands against the Ottoman Empire. Russia pinned its hopes on the role of the Armenians in a successful outcome of the war on the Caucasian front against Turkey. Tsar Nicholas II during his visit to Tbilisi met with Catholicos Gevorg V in November 1914 and promised him that "the Armenian question will be resolved in accordance with Armenian

expectations at the end of the war, during the peace talks." [7]

This was an important trigger to action of the Armenian population for not only Russia, but also for Turkey. At the beginning of the war the Russian government provided 242,000 rubles to arm and prepare the Ottoman Armenians to undertake revolts in the rear of the Turkish army. [8]

The decisive factor in the decision by the Ottoman government to deport the Armenians was the rebellion in the city of Van, located on the Armenian-Russian border, where Armenians comprised less than half the population. At the end of 1914, the local authorities determined that there was an underground supply of Russian weapons to the Armenian population of the city. The first insurrection began in March 1915, and on April 20 the Armenians, under the leadership of the Dashnak leader Aram Manoukian, went on the offensive, gendarmerie posts were attacked, telegraph lines were cut and Muslim villagers were slaughtered. It was a real massacre of Van's Muslim population. In response, on April 24, 1915, the Ottoman government issued an order to close the offices of Armenian political parties in Istanbul and other large cities and detain their leaders. According to Lewy, the Van rebellion was a blow to the back of the Ottoman Empire, since on April 25, 1915 the British and ANZAC began landing on the Gallipoli Peninsula and started the land phase of the Dardanelles Campaign, on which outcome the fate of the Ottoman Empire depended. A small Turkish garrison, which had been diverted to Van to suppress the rebellion, could not resist the onslaught of the Russian army and Armenian volunteer detachments. On May 17 the Turkish garrison had to retreat and on May 20 Russian-Armenian units, followed a little later by Russian troops under the command of General A.M. Nikolaev, entered Van. The jubilant Armenians enthusiastically welcomed the Russian troops and offered the general the keys to the city. In return, the Russian military authorities appointed Aram Manoukian, the head of the Armenian defense committee, as governor of the region. The US researcher Justin McCarthy writes that "the Armenian revolt in Van province was a pivotal component of the disaster of war in the Ottoman East." [9]

The daughter of the great Russian writer Leo Tolstoy, Alexandra Lvovna, who was a nurse on the Caucasus front and entered Van with the Russian troops, was a direct witness to the atrocities committed by the Armenians against Muslims in the city. "The feud between the Turks and the Armenians had lasted for centuries. There was cruelty on both sides, but here in Van we watched the inhuman cruelty of the Armenians. It was said that the Armenians cut off women's breasts, twisted and broke their legs, arms, and I personally witnessed the victims of this brutal cruelty," [10] she recalled in her memoirs.

The Van uprising was the last straw for the Ottoman government against the Armenian population of the empire. This incident pushed it to an extreme decision □□□ adopt the law on the deportation of the Armenians on May 27, 1915. Guenter Lewy writes: "For the Turks, however, the fact that the Armenian rebellion had succeeded with the help of the invading Russians served as final proof that the Armenians were in league with Turkey's enemies; they were traitors against whom any retribution would be fully justified". [11]

In the third chapter the author examines and individually analyzes the most important

sources on the subject the Turkish, German and US archives, the British documents, the reports of diplomatic services and missionaries, the testimony of Armenian survivors exposes all the sources to criticism, gives them a comprehensive description and reconstructs the tragic events of 1915 on this basis. To understand the full picture, in the first place the author restores the background of the deportation of the Armenians, which covers the period from April 24 to May 27, 1915, when the parliament passed the law on the deportation. Lewy deals extensively with the law on the deportation, cites its full text, parses the 15 government regulations of May 30 on the implementation of the deportation law, which actually placed responsibility on the local authorities for the organization and implementation of the deportation of the Armenians, protection of their lives and property, the provision of accommodation and food to those deported.

Another set of thirty-four regulations issued on June 10 dealt with the land and property of the deported Armenians. "The regulations of May 30 and June 10 gave the deportation law a modicum of fairness, but hardly any of these rules were implemented; and the actual course of the deportations and resettlement bore little resemblance to the procedures outlined in the law," the author writes [12].

Outlining the progress of the resettlement of Armenians from Erzerum, Harput, Trabzon and from other regions, the author recreates the real picture of the dramatic events, and points to the fact that practically all of the known massacres were carried out in eastern and central areas of Anatolia inhabited by Kurds or in places of resettlement populated by Circassians. There were no massacres in Cilicia or in Syria south of Aleppo or in Palestine. Therefore, the author notes that "most of the references to the killers by contemporary witnesses involve Kurds, Circassians, brigands, irregulars, and the gendarmes accompanying the convoys. None of the observers on the scene mentions the Special Organization, which the courts-martial of 1919-20, Dadrian, and a few other authors contend was the agent of the state-sponsored exterminatory process."[13]

In the concluding, fourth chapter of the book Guenter Lewy focuses on the key aspect of the Armenian issue: whether the Young Turk regime deliberately set out to destroy the Armenians and on the issue of responsibility for the large loss of life that took place. On the basis of the cross-checking of the primary sources and critical analysis of the historiography, the author states that there is no authentic documentary evidence that could prove Turkey's central government was to blame for the mass killings of 1915-1916, and without it the Armenian side's version is based on materials of dubious authenticity, such as Aram Andonian's 'The Memoirs of Naim Bey' or copies of the alleged documents used by the Turkish military tribunals of 1919-1920. Profoundly analyzing many aspects of the Ottoman government's policy of the deportation of the Armenians, the author casts doubt on the reliability of the Armenian version that this event was a real premeditated plan to exterminate the Armenians. Military actions on two fronts on the Eastern against Russia and the Western against the British and ANZAC the lack of a mechanism for the implementation of the deportation law, a primitive transport system, food shortages and dreadful sanitary conditions contributed to numerous losses among the deported Armenians. "It is impossible to ignore the horrors to which the Armenians were subjected, but it is important to see these terrible events in their proper historical context. The order

for the deportation of the Armenian community was issued at a time of great insecurity, not to say panic, which made any calm calculation of possible consequences difficult and unlikely," [14] the author concludes.

Guenter Lewy's work can be described, without exaggeration, as a fundamental and unique research into the Armenian issue in the Ottoman Empire. The inability of the author to read the documents from the Russian and Turkish archives does not diminish the importance of this book in any case, and this fact had no effect on the objective findings of the author. The release of this book by the influential 'Russian Political Encyclopedia' (ROSSPEN) publishing house provided an opportunity for researchers and a wide range of Russian readers, as well as the Russian-speaking audience in the Baltic States and the CIS countries, to look at the highly politicized Armenian issue in the Ottoman Empire from another, impartial perspective.

[1] Guenter Lewy. 'The Armenian Issue in the Ottoman Empire: Myths and Reality'. Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2016, p. 6.

[2] Guenter Lewy. Op. cit. p. 6.

[3] The collection of agreements between Russia and other states. 1856-1917. Moscow, 1952, p. 169, 205.

[4] Şinasi Orel, Süreyya Yuca. The Talat Pasha "telegrams": Historical fact or Armenian fiction? Nicosia, 1986. p.23.

[5] Guenter Lewy. Op. cit. p. 84.

[6] Guenter Lewy. Op. cit. p. 74.

[7] International relations in the era of imperialism: Documents from the archives of the Tsarist and Provisional governments of 1878-1917. Series 3: 1914-1917. Moscow; Gospolitizdat, 1935, p. 456.

[8] Jamil Hasanli. Armenian volunteers on the Caucasian Front (1914-1916) // The Caucasus and Globalization. Volume 8, Issue. 3-4, 2014, p. 208.

[9] Justin McCarthy. The Armenian Rebellion in Van. Utah University Press, 2006, p. 2016.

[10] Aleksandra Tolstaya. The daughter. Moscow, 2001, p. 54.

[11] Guenter Lewy. Op. cit. p. 99.

[12] Guenter Lewy. Op. cit. p. 155.

[13] Guenter Lewy. Op. cit. p. 217.

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