

Late Ottoman genocides: the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and Young Turkish population and extermination policies—introduction

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From 1899 to 1922, the Swiss deacon Jakob Künzler (1871–1949) headed a missionary hospital in Ourfa, an old city in South-Eastern Anatolia. During his time in the Eastern Provinces of the Ottoman Empire, Künzler became an important eyewitness to the Young Turks' project of large-scale ethnic cleansing and genocide. In October 1915, Künzler had to witness the destruction of the Armenian community in Ourfa when the desperate Armenian resistance against the deportation orders was bloodily suppressed by the Ottoman army.¹ Even before this event, the Swiss deacon was well aware of the Young Turks' policy of extermination. Since Ourfa was a significant regional crossroad, many convoys of Armenian deportees on their way to the Syrian desert passed the city. Künzler tried to relieve as much as possible the distress and pain of the Armenian deportees, who were in a deplorable condition. Furthermore, he made sure their fate was not forgotten. In his book *In the Land of Blood and Tears*, published in 1921 in Germany, Künzler described vividly his horrible experiences in Ourfa during World War I.²

As a missionary, Jakob Künzler was very much indebted emotionally to his Armenian coreligionists and felt open sympathy for them. Nevertheless, he understood that the fate of the Armenians was only part and parcel of a wider strategy of population policy by the Young Turkish government. In his above-mentioned report, Künzler stated: "The Young Turks did not only include Armenians and Kurds but also Arabs in their plan of extermination."³ This is a remarkable statement in two respects. First of all, Künzler talks about a policy of extermination and not only about resettlement, as some groups wanted to make the world believe then and now. Second, he did not turn a blind eye to the fate of Muslims like the Arabs and Kurds, but identified them as fellow victims of Christian groups such as the Armenians. In particular, the deportation of Kurds from Erzerum and Bitlis in the winter of 1916 made quite an impression

on him, as the following report about these deportations and their consequences shows:

No European newspaper has reported that the same Young Turks, who wanted to exterminate the Armenians, drove the Kurds who had been living in Upper Armenia from their house and home. Like the Armenians, the Kurds were accused of being unconfident elements that would join sides with the Russians. The deportation of the Kurds from the regions of Djabachdjur, Palu, Musch and from the Vilajets of Erzerum and Bitlis was carried out in the winter of 1916. About 300,000 Kurds had to wander southwards. First they were placed in Upper Mesopotamia, especially in the region of Ourfa, but also westward from Aintab and Marasch. Then in the summer of 1917, the transport of the Kurds to the Konya Plateau began. [...] The most horrible thing was that the deportations were carried out in the middle of the winter. When the deportees reached a Turkish village in the evening, the inhabitants were afraid and closed the doors of their homes. Thus, the poor Kurds had to stay outside in the rain and snow. The next morning, the villagers had to dig mass graves for those frozen to death. The suffering of the surviving Kurds who finally reached Mesopotamia was far from being over. [...] The winter of 1917/18 brought new hardship. Despite a good harvest, almost all of the deported Kurds fell victim to a terrible famine.⁴

As we can see from Künzler's statement, Kurds had to endure a very similar fate to that of the Armenians. Forcing them on death marches during the winter closely resembles the Armenian's marches, with a very similar outcome. The overall aim of the Young Turkish policy towards the Kurds was—according to Künzler—genocidal: “It was the Young Turks' intention not to let these Kurdish elements go back to their ancestral homeland. Instead, they should little by little be completely absorbed in Turkdom [... im Türkentume aufgehen].”⁵

Jakob Künzler's observation is of uttermost importance. It reveals that the Kurds were deeply affected by Young Turkish population and extermination policies and subject to social engineering already before the establishment of a Turkish nation state by Mustafa Kemal in 1922.⁶ The discussion of the question whether the deportation and forced assimilation of Kurds by the Young Turks has to be labelled as genocide or ethnocide is, at least from a historian's perspective, irrelevant since a clarification of this particularly legal and political issue depends on the definition of genocide one resorts to.⁷ It is, however, important to acknowledge that the Young Turkish leaders aimed at eliminating Kurdish identity by deporting them from their ancestral land and by dispersing them in small groups. The Young Turks partially implemented these plans during World War I: up to 700,000 Kurds were forcibly removed; half of the displaced perished.⁸

This important but often neglected fact has consequences for our understanding of the terrible fate of minorities in the late Ottoman Empire. It suggests that the fate of none of those groups, be they Christian as the Armenians, Assyrians or Greek, or be they Muslim as the Kurds, can be treated in isolation. And this leads us to a historiographical problem closely related to memory politics. In accounts and studies on the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the Armenian genocide, the Kurds are almost exclusively portrayed as bloodthirsty

and ruthless murderers.⁹ Indeed, it is true that Kurdish Hamidiya regiments had ravaged Armenian communities in the second half of the nineteenth century. In the Hamidian massacres of 1894–96, Kurds killed up to 100,000 Armenians and stole their victims' land.¹⁰ Finally, during the Young Turks' genocidal campaign against the Armenians of 1915–17, Kurdish chiefs and bands participated in massacres, raped Armenian women and benefited from extensive plundering. Nevertheless, it is necessary to note that Kurdish reactions to the persecution of the Armenians were manifold. Whereas many Kurdish tribes joined the Young Turks, some Kurdish groups like the Alevis from Dersim (today Tunceli) decided to oppose the government and gave refuge to Armenians.¹¹

Even more importantly, as shown above, Kurds fell victim to a similar treatment at the hands of the Young Turks as the Armenians and other Christian groups. This not only serves as a reminder of the unsettling fact that victims could become perpetrators, but also that perpetrators could turn victims. It is not only activists struggling for the international political and legal recognition of the Armenian genocide that have a lot of difficulty in recognizing that the Kurds, who excelled in the murder of the Armenians, fell themselves victim to Young Turkish population and extermination policies, but also historians, and especially genocide scholars, working on the violent breakup of the Ottoman Empire generally.¹² This is partly due to a problem inherent to the concept of genocide, in as much as the original legal idea of genocide implies a rigid dichotomy between perpetrators and victims. Social reality, however, is much more complex: victims can become perpetrators and vice versa. There are many examples of this in history: many of the Hutu who participated in the Rwandan genocide of 1994, for example, had been expelled from Burundi, where the ruling Tutsi regime waged genocidal campaigns against the Hutu population in 1972 and 1988.¹³

Another problem arises in historical practice: the concentration on a single victim group. Mainly due to public perception of the Holocaust, genocide is commonly understood as a highly ideological crime against a single group of people. This hinders the identification of synchronic similarities and overall strategies.

Due to its deficiencies, some historians plea for the abandonment of the traditional idea of genocide or its replacement through alternative conceptions. Christian Gerlach, one of the pre-eminent voices in this discussion, claims that "extremely violent societies" like the ones in the Late Ottoman Empire or in Nazi Germany are characterized by mass violence against numerous political, religious or ethnic groups instead of only one. A new generation of historians working on World War II and the German war of extermination in Eastern Europe have taken this into account and shown that the Nazis' "struggle for Lebensraum" was not only directed against the Jews—though they held an outstanding position as ultimate arch enemies in Hitler's ideology—but also affected Poles, Russians, Roma and several other groups.¹⁴

In the case of the Ottoman Empire this has not yet been done sufficiently. The reasons for this are manifold. As Gerlach—amongst others—asserts, most genocide scholars still prefer focusing on one victim group in isolation in order to make this group's fate appear more exclusive and consequently more meaningful.

This approach has thus to be regarded as a contribution to the creation and strengthening of group identity.¹⁵

This observation is consistent with the current state of research on mass violence in Anatolia during World War I. The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire is in both historiography and public memory almost solely associated with the murder of the Armenians. Although the Turkish government still denies that the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire fell victim to systematic murder, the extermination of the Armenians is far from being a “forgotten genocide.” No book on the history of genocide can omit the case of the Armenians. In Switzerland and France, the public denial of this event can be a criminal act.¹⁶ The Armenian tragedy has not only entered the realm of collective global memory but also counts as the “first modern genocide.”¹⁷ Moreover, the belief is widely held that the murder of the Armenians is causally connected with the Nazi genocide against the Jews. The intention that lies behind the linking of these two genocides is obvious: as a straight precursor to the Holocaust, the Armenian genocide would gain even more significance.¹⁸ To sum up: Armenian lobby groups, human rights organizations and genocide scholars sympathizing with the Armenian struggle for justice and reparations have been rather successful in the global “competition among victims” (Jean-Michel Chaumont) for international recognition and moral capital.¹⁹ Like the Holocaust, the Armenian genocide has become a universal symbol for evil as such.²⁰

Unfortunately, achieving the global remembrance of the genocide against the Armenians seems to have downplayed the fate of all other minority groups in the Ottoman Empire that suffered from ethnic cleansing and mass murder at the hands of the Young Turks.

The one-sided association of the Armenian genocide with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire is a relatively new phenomenon. In the postwar period, Western observers were well aware that the Young Turks’ policy of extermination was multifaceted. Henry Morgenthau, who served as US ambassador in Constantinople until 1916, for example, stated in his memoirs: “The Armenians are not the only subject people in Turkey which have suffered from this policy of making Turkey exclusively the country of the Turks. The story which I have told about the Armenians I could also tell with certain modifications about the Greeks and the Syrians. Indeed, the Greeks were the first victims of this nationalizing idea.”²¹

Morgenthau was right when he emphasized that the Young Turks leaders’ systematic policy of violent turkification was first targeted against the Greeks. Even before the outbreak of World War I, more than 100,000 Ottoman Greeks were expelled from the Aegean and Thrace to create living space for Muslim refugees who had themselves been brutally driven away from Crete and the Balkans.²² Hundred-thousands of Greeks were deported from the coastal region to the interior due to alleged strategic reasons during the war. Finally, the anti-Greek campaign of the Young Turks found its continuation in Mustafa Kemal’s expulsion of the Ottoman Greeks. The burning of Smyrna and the slaughter of its Christian inhabitants in 1922 marked the symbolic end of Greek presence in Turkey. The euphemistically called “population transfer” between Turkey and Greece turned out to

be nothing else than large-scale ethnic cleansing that was internationally approved. This sort of population policy became an influential model for solving minority questions in the twentieth century.²³

Whereas politicians of the great powers and Western civil societies were well aware of the destruction of the Armenian and Greek communities in the Ottoman Empire, the persecution of smaller Christian minority groups has remained more or less unknown.²⁴ Since the Assyrians were more vulnerable due to the lack of an international lobby and an external nation state, the Young Turks did not perceive them as dangerous as the Armenians and the Greeks. Thus, Young Turk extermination policy against them was less systematic. Massacres against Assyrians were often the result of initiatives by local government and party officials like Mehmed Reshid in Diarbekir.²⁵ When German consuls learned about Reshid's actions they informed their superiors in Constantinople and Berlin. Ambassador Hohenlohe-Langenburg let the German chancellor know: "Since the beginning of this month, the vali of Diarbekir, Reshid Bey, has begun the systematic annihilation of the Christian population in his district, without distinguishing between race and religious denomination."²⁶ German and US diplomats' correspondence and reports by missionaries document the dimension of the mass murder against the Assyrians. Nevertheless, the suffering of the Assyrians is largely forgotten internationally and not recognized as genocide, which embitters the descendants of the victims.²⁷

The genocidal quality of the murderous campaigns against Greeks and Assyrians is obvious. Historians who realize that the Young Turks' population and extermination policies have to be analysed together and understood as an entity are therefore often tempted to speak of a "Christian genocide." This approach, however, is insofar inadequate as it ignores the Young Turks' massive violence against non-Christians. As already mentioned above, Kurds suffered from deportations and death marches and forced turkification. Furthermore, the Young Turks' hostile attitude towards Zionism resulted in the expulsion of several thousand Jews from Palestine. Cemal Pasha, member of the Young Turk triumvirate, had originally planned to deport the bulk of Palestine's Jewish population but German and US diplomatic interventions forced him to abandon this idea.²⁸ Other groups like the Jews from Zakho (in northern Iraq), Druzes from Hauran (the south western region of present-day Syria) and Iranian Shiites in Mesopotamia were also subjected to forced relocations and sporadic massacres.

The Young Turks' overall aim was a demographic reorganization of the Ottoman Empire. All deportations were planned and supervised by the "Directorate for the Settlement of Tribes and Immigrants" that belonged to the Ottoman Ministry of the Interior. A relatively small number of government administrators were thus chiefly involved in the coordination of the murder and expulsion of Armenians, Greeks, Assyrians and other minority groups.²⁹ Therefore, the isolated study and emphasis of a single group's victimhood during the collapse of the Ottoman Empire fails to really understand Young Turks' motives and aims or its grand design.

As part of memory politics, the diverse victim groups' fates are still dealt with mainly in the context of their own national histories. And since Armenian, Assyrian, Greek and Kurdish national histories are mainly concerned with their own groups' fate, the wider context is largely ignored, i.e. the interrelations and links between different murderous campaigns led by the Young Turks remain undiscovered. Moreover, the insights won from the concentration on particular groups are lost for a wider historical scholarship as most Kurds won't study the Greek's national history and vice versa, to name just one example.

To assess the knowledge on these groups and to overcome a national historical approach is the aim of this thematic issue of the *Journal of Genocide Research*. It will contribute to our understanding of the Young Turks' population and extermination policies in all its complexities and help to bring the forgotten victims' stories "back" into genocide scholarship. It will also help to shed new light on the last years of the Ottoman Empire.

Notes and References

- 1 The Ottoman campaign against the Armenians in Ourfa was led by Eberhard Count Wolffskeel Von Reichenberg. The historian Hilmar Kaiser has pointed out that Wolffskeel's role was insofar exceptional, as he seemed to be the only German officer serving in the Ottoman army who directly participated in massacres against Armenians. On the events in Ourfa in October 1915, see Eberhard Count Wolffskeel Von Reichenberg, *Zeitoun, Mousa Dagh, Ourfa: Letters on the Armenian Genocide*, edited and introduced by Hilmar Kaiser (Princeton, NJ: Talderon Press, 2001), pp 20–29.
- 2 Jakob Künzler, *Im Lande des Blutes und der Tränen. Erlebnisse in Mesopotamien während des Weltkrieges (1914–1918)* (Potsdam: Tempel-Verlag, 1921).
- 3 Jakob Künzler, *Im Lande des Blutes und der Tränen. Erlebnisse in Mesopotamien während des Weltkrieges (1914–1918)*, edited and introduced by Hans-Lukas Kieser (Zürich: Chronos Verlag, 1999), p 103.
- 4 Künzler, *Im Lande*, p 101f. On Künzler's relationship with the Kurds, see Hans-Lukas Kieser, "'Birader Yakup', ein 'Arzt ohne Grenzen' in Urfa, und seine Wahlverwandtschaft mit den Kurden (1899–1922)," *Kurdische Studien*, Vol 1, No 1 (2001), pp 91–120.
- 5 *Ibid*, p 102.
- 6 On Young Turk social engineering in Eastern Turkey from 1913 to 1950, see Uğur Ümit Üngör's article in this issue.
- 7 Mark Levene claims that the overt genocidal motivation of the Young Turks is hard to prove in the case of the Kurds due to insufficient documentation. Mark Levene, "Creating a modern 'zone of genocide': the impact of nation- and state-formation on Eastern Anatolia, 1878–1923," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, Vol 12, No 3 (1998), pp 393–433. David McDowall states that the Young Turkish leadership has never advertised its plan of forced assimilation. See David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1996), p 105.
- 8 McDowall, *Modern History of the Kurds*, p 105f.
- 9 On the perception of the Kurds as brutal murderers of the Anatolian Christians in German literature until 1945, see Dominik J. Schaller, "'Armenische Krämer' und 'kurdische Mordbrenner': Armenisch-kurdische Beziehungen und ihre Wahrnehmung in Deutschland bis in die 1940er Jahre," in *Kurdische Studien*, Vol 3, Nos 1–2 (2003), pp 5–32.
- 10 Jelle Verheij, "Die armenischen Massaker von 1894–1896. Anatomie und Hintergründe einer Krise," in: Hans-Lukas Kieser, ed., *Die armenische Frage und die Schweiz (1896–1923)* (Zürich: Chronos-Verlag, 1999), pp 69–129. Donald Bloxham, *The Great Game of Genocide. Imperialism, Nationalism, and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp 51–57.
- 11 On the rescue of Armenians by Alevis, see the report by the US missionary Riggs: Henry H. Riggs, *Days of Tragedy in Armenia. Personal Experiences in Harpoot, 1915–1917*, edited and introduced by Ara Sarafian (Ann Arbor, MI: Gomidas, 1997), pp 108–117. The Kurds of the Dersim had to pay a high price for their courage. Riggs noted in his report: "One distressing incident which followed the uprising of the Kurds in the Dersim was the effort on the part of the Turkish government to terrorize those Kurds by treating them as they had treaded the Armenians." *Ibid*, p 183.

- 12 The historian David McDowall calls it a “grim irony” that the Kurds participated in the murder of the Armenians without knowing the Young Turks’ plans for themselves. See McDowall, *Modern History of the Kurds*, p 105.
- 13 On the persecution of Hutu in Burundi, see René Lemarchand, *Burundi. Ethnic Conflict and Genocide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- 14 See, for example, the contributions in Ulrich Herbert, ed., *National Socialist Extermination Policies: Contemporary German Perspectives and Controversies* (New York: Berghahn, 1999).
- 15 Christian Gerlach, “Extremely violent societies: an alternative to the concept of genocide,” *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol 8, No 4 (2006), pp 455–471, see especially p 464.
- 16 Dominik J. Schaller, “From the editor: judges and politicians as historians?,” *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol 9, No 1 (2007), pp 1–4.
- 17 The label “first modern genocide” has no scientific value at all. It implies that all genocides before World War I, namely, colonial genocides, would be insignificant for a global history of modern genocide. See Jürgen Zimmerer, “Kolonialer Genozid? Vom Nutzen und Nachteil einer historischen Kategorie für eine Globalgeschichte des Völkermordes,” in Dominik J. Schaller et al., eds., *Enteignet-Vertrieben-Ermordet. Beiträge zur Genozidforschung* (Zürich: Chronos Verlag, 2004), pp 109–128.
- 18 Roger W. Smith, for example, sees the murder of the Armenians as a paradigmatic case of genocide: “The Armenian Genocide is particularly instructive in that it is the prototype for much of the genocides in the twentieth century and the new millennium.” Roger W. Smith, “The significance of the Armenian genocide after ninety years,” *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, Vol 1, No 2 (2006), pp I–IV. On the discussion of the comparison between the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust, see the contributions in Hans-Lukas Kieser and Dominik J. Schaller, eds., *The Armenian Genocide and the Shoah* (Zürich: Chronos Verlag, 2002).
- 19 Pro-Armenian associations and missionary societies in the USA managed to attract considerable attention for the fate of the Armenians already during the Hamidian massacres of 1894–96 and especially during World War I. On their lobby activities, see Peter Balakian, *The Burning Tigris. The Armenian Genocide and America’s Response* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003); Jay Winter, ed., *America and the Armenian Genocide of 1915* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- 20 On how the Holocaust contributes to a universalistic morality, see Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005).
- 21 Henry Morgenthau, *Ambassador Morgenthau’s Story*, reedited by Ara Sarafian (Ann Arbor, MI: Talderon Press, 2000), p 214.
- 22 See Matthias Bjørnlund’s article in this issue. It is noteworthy that the Young Turks had resorted to massive violence against Christian communities before. Thousands of Greeks, Serbs and Bulgarians were killed in Macedonia between 1909 and 1911. These atrocities were, however, carried out in a less systematic way than the ones from 1914 onwards. The former US consul to Smyrna, George Horton, described these massacres as such in his report dating from 1926: “This persecution first displaced itself in the form of sporadic murders of alarming frequency all over Macedonia the victims being, in the beginning, notables of the various Christian communities. A favourite place for shooting these people was at their doorsteps at the moment of their return home. It became evident that the Turkish Government, in order to gain control of the territory, was bent upon the extermination of the non-Mussulman leaders. [...] From the extermination of notables, the program extended to people of less importance, who began to disappear.” George Horton, *The Blight of Asia. An Account of the Systematic Extermination of Christian Populations by Mohammedans and of the Culpability of Certain Great Powers; with the True Story of the Burning of Smyrna*, reedited by Ara Sarafian (Reading: Talderon Press, 2003), pp 16–17.
- 23 This is one of the key points in Norman M. Naimark, *Fires of Hatred. Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).
- 24 In historiography, the fate of Christian co-victims of Armenians and Greeks has only recently been dealt with. See David Gaunt, *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors: Muslim–Christian Relations in Eastern Anatolia during World War I* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006); Hannibal Travis, “‘Native Christians massacred’: the Ottoman genocide of Assyrians during World War I,” *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, Vol 1, No 3 (2006), pp 327–371; Tessa Hofmann, ed., *Verfolgung, Vertreibung und Vernichtung der Christen im Osmanischen Reich, 1912–1922* (Münster: Lit-Verlag, 2004).
- 25 Reshid’s roots were Circassian. His family had been expelled from the Russian Caucasus. He was thus also a victim that became a perpetrator. On Reshid, see Hans-Lukas Kieser, “Dr. Mehmed Reshid (1873–1919): a political doctor,” in Kieser and Schaller, *The Armenian Genocide and the Shoah*, pp 245–280.
- 26 Ambassador Hohenlohe-Langeburg to Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg, July 31, 1915, quoted in Johannes Lepsius, ed., *Deutschland und Armenien 1914–1918: Sammlung diplomatischer Aktenstücke* (Potsdam: Tempel-Verlag, 1919), document 126.

- 27 Assyrian lobby groups and organizations are far from being as successful as their Armenian counterparts. The following excerpts of a public letter to Sylvester Stallone published on the website of the Assyrian International News Agency (AINA) illustrate the Assyrians' frustration: "I have read that you are going to produce a film based on Franz Werfel's novel 'The Forty Days of Musa Dagh' which deals with the Armenian Genocide. [...] The purpose of my letter is to appeal to you Mr. Stallone to mention in your new film also the Genocide perpetrated against the Assyrian people. [...] Since the Genocides against the Assyrians and Armenians were carried out at the same time, it would be a sin not to include the sufferings of the Assyrians in your film." Available at <http://www.aina.org/guesteds/20070207115546.pdf> (accessed January 9, 2008).
- 28 Yair Auron, *The Banality of Indifference. Zionism and the Armenian Genocide* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2000), pp 59–99.
- 29 Hilmar Kaiser, "The Ottoman government and the end of Ottoman social formation, 1915–1917." The essay is published in the internet, available at <http://www.hist.net/kieser/agher/Essays/EssayKaiser.html> (accessed January 9, 2008).