Turkey's Killing Fields

A historian digs into state records to explain the Armenian genocide.

A SHAMEFUL ACT
The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility.
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Translated by Paul Beeson.
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By GARY J. BASS

In July 1915, the American ambassador to the Ottoman Empire sent Washington a harrowing report about the Turks' "systematic attempt to uproot peaceful Armenian populations." He described "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." A month later, the ambassador, Henry Morgenthau — the grandfather of the Manhattan district attorney, Robert M. Morgenthau — warned of an "attempt to exterminate a race."

The Young Turk nationalist campaign against the empire's Armenian subjects was far too enormous to be ignored at the time. But decades of government-backed denial have created what amounts to a taboo in Turkey today. Instead of admitting genocide, Turkish officials contend the Armenians were a dangerous fifth column, which included Russia and directed much of the deportations. (British officials considered the Armenians militarily useless and thus released government pressure.) Akcam argues that there was little real danger from the Armenian uprisings, which were directed in Russia and directed mainly against the deportations. (British officials considered the Armenians militarily useless and thus released government pressure.) Akcam allows that the evacuation of Armenians may have been justified by military necessity in areas where the Armenian revolutionaries were strong — but not throughout the empire.

The killings were a colossal undertaking. Paramilitaries and Interior Ministry guards, as well as Armenians on their own, while the Interior Ministry under Talat Pasha, who coordinated the campaign, arranged for the deportation of untold thousands more to the blazing Syrian deserts. Many of the deportees were massacred along the way, and those who survived were left without food, shelter or medicine, in what Akcam calls "deliberate extermination." Akcam cites Ottoman Interior Ministry papers that call for keeping Armenians to less than 5 or 10 percent of the population. A postwar Turkish investigation found that some 800,000 Armenians perished.

After the war, Britain pressured the defeated Ottoman government into setting up its own war crimes tribunals. Mustafa Kemal Ataturk himself, the founder of the present Turkish republic, once said that the Unionist leaders "should have been brought to account for the lives of millions of our Christian subjects ruthlessly driven on from their homes and massacred." Today, those who deny the genocide have to strike these trial records as mere victor's justice. Akcam uses the records in an important piece of research on Britain's imperialist ambitions and cultural biases.

This dense, measured and footnote-heavy book poses a stern challenge to modern Turkish polemics, and if there is any response to be made, it can be done only with additional primary research in the archival records. In 1919, a British general hoped the Ottoman war crimes trials would "dispel the fog of illusions prevailing throughout the country." Eighty-seven years later, the murk still lingers.