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BOOK REVIEW. MICHAEL M. GUNTER: ARMENIAN HISTORY AND THE QUESTION OF GENOCIDE. PALGRAVE MACMILLAN 2011

Abstract

Michael M Gunther, Professor of Political Science at Tennessee Technological University, a renowned expert of the Kurdish question and Armenian terrorism has recently set out to deal with the Armenian Turkish relations with a special attention to the issue of the Armenian genocide. [1] [2] He intends to shed light on the more than a century old enmity between the two nations on the Eastern frontier of NATO which due to its rather complex implications¹ might still pose a major security threat to Europe, not to mention the delicate setting that the overwhelmingly Muslim Turkey as a NATO member has a still unsettled dispute with a nation that is linked to Europe with several ties and has politically influential immigrant communities both in Western Europe and in the USA.

Michael M Gunther, a Tennessee Technological University-n a politikai tudományok professzora, aki nemzetközileg elismert szakértője a kurd kérdésnek, valamint az örmény terrorizmus kutatója nemrégiben jelentette meg új kötetét, mely a török-örmény kapcsolatokkal foglalkozik. A mű a téma kifejtése során különös figyelmet szentel az örmény népirtás problematikájának. A NATO keleti határán élő két nép közötti több mint egy évszázados ellenségeskedés részleteit igyekszik feldolgozni, mely a jelen korban is biztonsági kockázatot jelenthet Európára. Azt a kényes helyzetet nem is említve, hogy a többségében muszlim, NATO tag Törökország egy olyan országgal szemben áll többé-kevésbé nyílt konfliktusban, amely Európához ezer szállal kapcsolódik és politikailag befolyásos emigráns csoportokkal rendelkezik mind az USA-ban, mind Nyugat-Európában.

Keywords: *Turkish-Armenian conflict, holocaust, genocide, Armenian terrorism ~ török-örmény konfliktus, holokauszt, népirtás, örmény terrorizmus*

¹ Especially at the time of the writing of the present review, February, 2013, when the possibility of a conflict between the West and Iran, a neighbour of Turkey and Azerbaijan, cannot be excluded, which event can very easily revive hostile sentiments in the region.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the foreword of his book Gunther claims that since the issue of the massacres during WW I has been approached rather unilaterally by the international literature from the Armenian perspective he proposes to 'present objectively the Turkish point of view on this subject'. By doing so he hopes to establish a more balanced picture of the events, putting it in the context of Armenian terrorism in the second part of the 20th century, and to encourage the improvement of the Turco-Armenian affairs that has reached an important phase in 2009 by the signature of treaties concerning the establishment of mutual diplomatic relations and the creation of a historical commission to analyse their different versions of history.² [3]

2. WHAT IS GENOCIDE?

The term first was used by the Polish-born journalist Raphael Lemkin and acted as an American advisor during the Nuremberg Tribunal. In his work *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress* (1944), Lemkin suggested that the crucial element of genocide was: a criminal intent to destroy or to cripple permanently a human group. The acts are directed against groups as such, and individuals are selected for destruction only because they belong to these groups. [4] The conclusions of the above mentioned trials and the Nazi atrocities revealed after the war motivated the UN General Assembly of Resolution 96-I (December (1946) which deemed genocide to be punishable by international law and prepared the way for Resolution 260-III (December 1948), which approved the text of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, the first UN human rights treaty ratified by more than 130 countries (the US ratified it only in 1988).

The second article states that the definition of genocide is the following: 'any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.' [5] Nonetheless critics object that governments never disclose their intents openly to exterminate a group rather they tend to label their actions as some lawful steps in connection with the somehow 'problematic' group or simply attempt to reestablish 'law and order' 'breached' by the given community (Saddam Hussein applied chemical weapons against the Kurds in the 1980's in order to suppress their upheaval, the Turks fought the insurgent Armenians and their losses were simply war casualties during WWI, etc.). [6]

The first instance when the genocide convention was invoked before an international court took place in 1993 when Bosnia and Herzegovina expressed its concerns concerning the Yugoslav breach of the above convention. Later the UN convoked the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) for the clarification of atrocities during these events. The growing international attention in relation to the field is displayed by the fact that the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), adopted in 1998 in Rome by some 120 countries, entered into force in 2002 (It needs to be remarked though that the US, Russia and China was not amongst the participating countries.)

² It has to be noted that the treaty is still to be ratified by both parliaments. The Turkish government has made clear that ratification was not due until the question of Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan was not solved at the liking of the latter.

In the course of the twentieth century several events can be mentioned that, according to scholars qualify for being called a genocide somehow corresponding to the above mentioned criteria of genocide. Which are nonetheless sometimes debated being full scale genocides by others for diverse reasons. The unfortunately long list³ should start with the Herero and Namaqua Genocide in German South-West Africa (1902-1904) as the first in the line throughout such a bloodthirsty century; Armenian, Assyrian and Greek Genocides (1914-1923); the Soviet killings of Cossacks (1919-1920), the artificial famine in the Ukraine and Russia: the Holodomor (1932-33); the Nazi Holocaust of the Jews and the Roma (1938-1945); the Cambodian mass killings by the Khmer Rouge (1975-1979), the Rwandan civil war mass murders 1994, and the Ethnic cleansing in Srebrenica, Bosnia Herzegovina (1995)⁴. [7]

3. THE ORIGINS OF TURKISH-ARMENIAN ANIMOSITY

Gunther starts the history of the hostility by recounting the atrocities committed by Armenian terrorists against Turkish diplomats during the 1970's and 80's. It seems to be understandable from a scholar who intends to represent the Turkish viewpoint in the debate, nonetheless possibly not entirely appropriate since it does not necessarily take the reader closer to understanding the roots of the conflict.

During centuries Armenians lived peacefully within the frontiers of the Ottoman Empire, in a region which is declared to be the homeland of several nations and where Armenians settled approx. 2700 years ago, and formed more states on their own throughout history. [8] Although Armenians, like Christians and Jews, were relegated to a secondary position compared to Muslims, they enjoyed a relative freedom and, due to their well-known talent in trade, prosperity. In the 19th century Armenians feeling more and more oppressed by the Turkish rule and threatened by the depredations of the Kurds, Circassians or other nomadic tribes their growing number started to look on European Christians and as their protectors. [9] As a consequence some Armenians supported the Russians in the course of the three wars against Ottoman Turkey. In spite of the promises Article 61 of the San Stephano Treaty secured no actual guarantees to the Armenian cause and in the coming years the European powers simply sought to play off the Turks and Armenians against each other according to their own interests. [10] The aroused Armenians continued their aspirations eventually manifesting in the formation in 1887 of the Marxist Revolutionary Party, or Hunchaks (Bells), and in 1890 the more nationalistic Hai Heghapokhakan Dashnaktsutiu (Armenian Revolutionary Federation), or simply Dashnaks while as a response Sultan Abdul Hamid II organized a Kurdish cavalry called the Hamidiye, who by tradition were the inveterate enemies of the Armenians. In 1894 Armenians in the Sassum region rejected to pay the extortionate but customary taxes which were viewed as a rebellion by the emperor. The retaliations till 1896 resulted in the death of not less than 200 000 victims.

The next wave of atrocities occurred during WWI. Although Sultan Abdul Hamid II set off a technological modernization and also acted harshly against any attempts towards the disintegration of the empire he was not able to stop the process. In 1908 he was put down by

³ The list is obviously far from complete.

⁴ Robert Melson distinguishes four waves of ethnic conflicts and genocides: the two world wars, the Post-Colonial, and post-Communist eras. He believes the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust are the quintessence of the genre: 'a deliberate attempt was made by a government to destroy in part or in whole an ethno-religious community of ancient provenance that had existed as a segment of the government's own society.' Later he argues that the Armenian genocide rather than the Holocaust could serve as a prototype of mass murder in the past - Colonial third world as the involved minorities were territorial groups unlike the European Jews. He contends that only the Cambodian atrocities resembled to the Holocaust in the fact that it was aimed against various strata and segments of Cambodian society like the urban upper and middle classes and various ethnic communities like the Vietnamese.

the movement of the Young Turks who started their activities along the liberal and democratic principles of the 1876 constitution. [11] In spite of any hope for Western support for the modernization European powers and their allies took advantage of the Ottoman Empire which lost 40% of its territory and 20% of its population by 1911.

The Young Turks, and their political fraction, the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), concluded that the liberal experiment failed and turned towards pan-Turkish thoughts. They intended to establish a new Turk state, extending from Anatolia to the Chinese border that would be based on Turkish ethnicity and the Muslim principles.

The war started in 1914 and the newly nationalistic Turkish state entered it on the Axis side to establish the above mentioned empire at the expense of the arch enemy, the Russian empire. This context placed Armenians into an extremely dangerous situation because they could be blamed to be in a league with the Russians and plotting against Turkey to claim its heartland, Anatolia.

4. GENOCIDE?

The traditional Turkish and Armenian historiography become antagonistic at this point. Armenians and around 80% of scholars dealing with the field assert that the Turkish government premeditatedly, under the pretence of emergency deportations, decided to systematically liquidate the whole Armenian population of Anatolia. The deportees on their march from their homeland towards the region of Aleppo were raided upon by Kurdish and Turkish villagers as well as designated killing squads, Teshkilat-i Makhsusiyeh. Due to the atrocities and famine the death toll is estimated up to 1.5 million according to this view.

Until recently official Turkish historiography violently denied any act of genocide or even any atrocities. It has been claimed to be the consequence of unfortunate events, where Armenian insurgents, guerrillas or bandits rose against their lawful state, the atrocities on both sides took place in a war situation but since these occurred within the border of the Turkish Empire involving its citizens, the claims of genocide should be considered as hostile propaganda.

Gunther acknowledges the distance between the two views, admitting atrocities against Armenians⁵ also conceding that as a consequence they were practically wiped out of the region but questions the numbers mentioned and the premeditated nature of the events. He asserts that the Ottoman Empire, pressed by the outside enemy and internal hostility, acted in panic but its primary purpose was to defend its integrity not to initiate and execute genocide. Gunther argues further that the number of victims must be much lower, around 250-400 thousand who mostly fell victim to diseases and malnutrition rather than atrocities. Along this line he suggests that as a solution Turkey should accept some responsibility and as an act of contrition paying some financial compensation which – in his view—would placate persisting hostile sentiments.

In the following chapters the author defines genocide and tries to prove using the example of the Bosnian and Darfur massacres that the term is overused and applied rather to mire adversaries before the world. He asserts that the case of the Armenian massacre is similar, as no proof of premeditation can be found. Moreover, since it took place before the Genocide Resolution it ‘would constitute a legally untenable ex-post-facto proclamation’.

Further on in his book the author presents some secondary sources when trying to refute the claim of genocide. He attempts to establish that although the Armenian losses were painful, these were neither premeditated nor were they simply unilateral, but were rather encountered as a consequence of military activities on both sides.

⁵ He agrees with the official Turkish view that the Turks also suffered significant losses in the hostilities.

In the second part of the book Gunther presents how Armenians intended to persuade the world and blame Turkey for a ‘never committed genocide’ using their political influence mostly in the US and through terrorist activity in the 1970’s and 80’s. Although this approach of the facts seems rather unfortunate and one-sided these analyses, without their farfetched conclusions, might prove useful to a reader interested in such details.

5. CONCLUSION

With his book Gunter goes further than most scholars on the ‘Turkish side’, but the methodology used to clarify the issue unfortunately remains questionable. Without careful examination of contemporary, both Armenian and Turkish, primary sources⁶ the reasons and details of the events will remain undisclosed and open to doubt, thus allowing former ‘soccer diplomacy’ to continue. Without this step even the sheer number of victims will be disputed not to mention the questions of responsibility. Turkey as a NATO member, which aspires to join EU one day, will need to take a deep breath and face with this sad part of its own history in all honesty, as all other countries that somehow played a part in it, otherwise this issue will add to the several other questions that might pose a security risk to this region of the world. [12]

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⁶ Gunther fails to list any of these among his sources.