

Armenians and the Allies in Cilicia, 1914–1923

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It is interesting that well into the 21st century two books written by Turkish authors belonging to the historiography of the Armenian Genocide should be so vastly different in argument. Whereas Uğur Ümit Üngör and Mehmet Polatel have produced a starkly realistic and thoroughly researched account in *Confiscation and Destruction: The Young Turk Seizure of Armenian Property* with Continuum in 2011, acknowledging that what occurred to the Ottoman Armenians in 1915 and 1916 was undoubtedly a genocide, Yücel Güçlü in his *Armenians and the Allies in Cilicia, 1914–1923* with University of Utah Press (published only a year earlier) has produced a methodologically flawed account that rejects the label of genocide for the very same events.

This has much to do with the authors themselves. Whereas Üngör is an academic and Polatel an aspiring one, Güçlü is first counsellor of the Turkish Embassy in Washington D.C., and therefore not an academic, but a member of the Turkish Foreign Affairs Department, which has since its inception propagated the view that what befell the Ottoman Armenians was not a genocide. So clearly Güçlü carries on his shoulders some very heavy baggage as a member of a Turkish government department, while Üngör and Polatel have no ties to the Turkish state.

A further factor to account for this is that the Utah Series in Turkish and Islamic Studies specialises in publishing works which reject the label of genocide for what occurred against the Ottoman Armenians in 1915 and 1916. So Güçlü's book belongs to a long line of books which take a similar view: Guenty Lewy's account rejects the label of genocide because in his opinion what befell the Ottoman Armenians was not the same as what befell the Jews in the Holocaust; while Justin McCarthy's work claims that the Armenians

came out second best because they were the weaker of the two groups in what was an ethno-religious struggle, thus shifting the onus of responsibility equally onto the Armenians themselves.

Such views do not hold up when tested by the hard and cold facts, as numerous historians from various backgrounds acknowledge that the Ottoman government attempted to destroy the Ottoman Armenians, either through direct or indirect death, or through conversion, because some Armenians living near the Russo-Ottoman border joined the Russian army. This telling quote from Üngör and Polatel says much: 'What made the massacres genocidal is that the killings targeted the abstract category of group identity, in that all Armenians, loyal or disloyal, were deported and massacred'.⁽¹⁾ On 12 May 2012 the Genocide Education Project hosted a presentation by Dr Ugur Ümit Üngör, who is an Assistant Professor in the Department of History and Art History at the University of Utrecht, where he expanded on the quote I have selected above, by showing in a most lucid lecture (available on You Tube) that the genocide did not merely involve the processes of deportation and massacres, but a whole range of destruction processes, eight in total, which were sometimes sequential and sometimes overlapping. Ugur Ümit Üngör listed these processes as follows: persecution, namely of civil servants, who were removed from their positions by the end of 1914; decapitation of Armenian elites (political, religious, economic, intellectuals), which started on 24 April 1915; deportation of the general Armenian population which began soon thereafter; expropriation of Armenian properties, which was legalised; mass murder, under the government established 'special organisation'; forced assimilation of mostly teenage girls and children, which was an assault on cultural identity; enforced famine for those sent to the desert; and finally the destruction of material culture, particularly of religious buildings. I would add to this a ninth process, and that is the very swift move to deny that what was happening was organised by the Ottoman government and at the same time to shift responsibility onto the Armenians themselves. Güçlü's account belongs to this last process.

Güçlü begins by establishing that the Armenian Genocide is contested, but fails to say by whom it is contested and why. He refers to the Armenian Genocide as the 'Armenian tragedy', and the Ottoman 'relocations', and attempts to turn the Armenian victims into the perpetrators of their own victimhood. This is a very sad reflection of the denial of certain Turks of the official Ottoman policies to eradicate the Armenians from the Ottoman Empire, which Üngör and Polatel, as well as numerous other authors (including other Turks, such as Taner Akcam), have firmly established was the case. At every turn, using selective archival sources, almost always without any historical context, Güçlü attempts to blame the Armenians for forcing the Ottoman government into 'relocating' them, or more appropriately, into destroying them.

Güçlü also claims that he was denied access to Armenian archives, while Turkish archives were free for all to use. I cannot comment on the freedom of Armenian archives, although I was not denied access to the Nubarian Library in Paris. I can also say that I was given access to the Prime Minister's Office Ottoman Archives (BOA), Istanbul. But it is not true to say that *all* the Turkish archives are open, because the Turkish General Staff Military History and Strategic Studies Directorate Archives (ATASE), in Ankara, are not open to researchers unless they undergo and pass a Turkish military security check which can take up to two months. This is something that researchers do not encounter at other archives. This check is invasive of a person's personal freedom and I did not wish to subject my family to it, even though this may mean that I will never get access to the necessary archival material on my research areas, namely the Armenian Legion and on Cyprus during the Great War. This present review was due for publication a year ago, but I delayed it while I visited Istanbul as a Visiting Professor at Bogazici University in the hope that I could obtain access to the ATASE files I needed to continue my work.

Güçlü's book should have been the definitive account of the Armenian Legion, since the title suggested that it would explore the relationship between the British and the French on the one side, and the Armenians on the other, in relation to Cilicia. The Armenian Legion, initially called the Legion of the East, was formed in the autumn of 1916 by attempting to recruit Armenian survivors of the genocide (the nucleus of the Legion were the survivors of the Musa Dagh resistance, a story made famous in Franz Werfel's fictional 1933 account, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*), Armenian prisoners of war held by the British in India, and Armenians in the diaspora, especially in the United States. Güçlü mentions the Legion, and claims that its

formation must be understood within the context of a longstanding attempt by the British, the French and the Armenians to destroy the Ottoman Empire. As part of justifying his denial of an Ottoman genocide of Armenians, he claimed that the Ottoman decision to ‘relocate’ the Armenians was based on intelligence which found that the British and French were planning a landing at Alexandretta with Armenian support, even though no such landing took place, and the British rejected Armenian assistance. On the contrary the Legion was formed after many proposals to form such a Legion were rejected by the British, the French and even by Armenian political elites, during various periods throughout 1915 and early 1916. In reality the Legion was formed only after the Sykes-Picot Agreement was signed in May 1916, which had assigned Cilicia and areas surrounding it, where there was a significant Armenian population, to be under direct French control after the war. Therefore, the Armenian Legion became the agent of French imperialism, while the idea was sold to the Armenian political elites as the opportunity to obtain a safe homeland under French control, not, as later claimed by Güçlü, an independent state.[\(2\)](#)

Güçlü implies that the desire of Armenian elites for a safe and secure homeland, which they aimed for under French ‘protection’, was somehow illegitimate and unjust. In the areas assigned to France by the Sykes-Picot Agreement, Armenians composed of at least 30 per cent of the population, usually on par with the Kurdish population, with the Turkish and Greek populations following. It may seem harsh, but the eastern provinces of the Ottoman Empire, where this demographic pattern mostly existed, should have been divided between the three main demographic groups, and a population exchange carried out. But the Turkish nationalist forces of Kemal Attaturk were against the cession of any Ottoman territory to the Armenians, let alone to the Kurds, and so the new Armenian state was formed solely from Russian Armenia. Güçlü argues that the Armenians received their just deserts: expulsion and no territory to form a safe and secure homeland, and no compensation either. For this he blames their failed alliance with the British and the French, who were too weak and lacked the motivation to follow through with their promises to the Armenians.

Finally, Güçlü fails to explore the process by which the Turkish nationalist forces ethnically cleansed Cilicia after the defeat and withdrawal of the French forces in 1922. For many Armenians this meant becoming a refugee for the second time in a matter of years. Many of these people settled in the French mandates of Hatay, Syria and Lebanon, and the British possession of Cyprus. This process of forced migration is not explored by the author.

I cannot recommend this book for a variety of reasons. Methodologically it takes a flawed approach, having begun with the rejection of the label of genocide, and at every turn blaming the Armenians (and the Allies) for what befell them, and also highlighting Armenian violence (in the aftermath of the armistice), while playing down Ottoman government-sponsored violence. The author has not exhausted the archives in Britain and France, as there is a great many more documents for the war years in particular, on the Armenian ‘Question’ and on the Armenian Legion.

Notes

1. Ugur Ümit Üngör and Mehmet Polatel, *Confiscation and Destruction: The Young Turk Seizure of Armenian Property* (London, 2011), p. 165.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. On the formation of the Armenian Legion see my forthcoming article, Andrekos Varnava, ‘The British, an Armenian legion, and deliberations on where to attack the Ottoman Empire, November 1914–April 1915: imperialism first, the war second’, *Historical Research*, forthcoming in 2014.[Back to \(2\)](#)

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[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/63845>