

WHO IS JUSTIFIED TO TALK ABOUT THE SO CALLED 'ARMENIAN GENOCIDE'

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Distortion of the past events is unavoidable in most cases simply because what happened in the past is widely depended on the writings of some insiders and statesmen, who are themselves directed by feelings and concerns. If historians comment on these writings with further preferences in their minds, the outcome is inevitably one-sided account of these events. Thus, rather than to explain truthfully the past to illuminate the now and future of us, the history is sometimes used in the hands of some as a tool of propaganda to manipulate the present and future world affairs for specific interests and purposes.

This seems to be fully justified by a recent book of Professor Howard Ball on war crimes issue. He is a professor of political science and university scholar at the University of Vermont (the USA). He is the author of twenty previous books, including 'A Defiant Life: Thurgood Marshall and the Persistence of Racism in America'; 'Hugo Black: Cold Steel Warrior'; and 'Justice Downwind: America's Atomic Testing Program in the 1950s'.

One of his recent works is published in 1999 under the title of 'Prosecuting War Crimes and Genocide, the Twentieth-Century Experience'.¹ The book gives an extensive account of the past and present as well as future status of international humanitarian law to the satisfaction of anyone who is to comprehend the rules and principles of warring since 1864.

Chapter I is titled as 'War Crimes and Genocide: 1899-1939'. It is certainly possible to trace back the origins of the laws and customs of war to the ancient times. He rightly emphasizes, however, that subjecting the war affairs to the constraints of legality is a fairly new phenomenon, which emerged in 1864. In explaining how the laws and customs of war have been developed and

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¹ Howard Ball, *Prosecuting War Crimes and Genocide, the Twentieth-Century Experience*, (Kansas: The University Press Kansas, 1999).

expanded even to cover internal conflicts in our time, he frequently refers to the horrors and miseries of wars as well as the reasons why wars have gradually become more destructive and costly especially on civilians and civil life.

Quite mysteriously, however, one particular emphasis in the review stands out so distinctively that an inevitable question comes to mind whether there is any particular reason for so much emphasis. Especially when he deals with the First World War, he pronounces the words 'Turkey' and 'Armenian Genocide' as many times as the words 'Germany' and 'German war crimes' despite the fact that it was Germans who were no doubt responsible for initiating the war itself and many atrocities committed. In most places, Germany and Turkey are referred to in the same sentences when it comes to reveal the war crimes of the First World War. Let us take his following observation as an example among many:

'The demand for war crimes trials grew out of alleged German and other Central Powers' violations of the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907... Consequently, some of the victorious Allies (France, Great Britain, and Belgium), full of hatred toward Germany and its Central Power allies for their cruel behavior during the war (especially Turkey, whose Young Turk leaders ordered the mass deportation and genocide of over a million Turkish-Armenian Christians), included the demand for war crimes tribunals in the postwar diplomatic discussions that would lead to peace treaties formally ending the hostilities.'(p. 19)

In the context of the above observation, there is a bold expression of a professor of political science on what happened between the Turks and the Armenians. It is obviously too bold for a non-historian. Widely known to almost entire Turkish people at the present time that, let alone the issue of genocide, simply the number of the Turkish-Armenians who died during the war is full of controversies among the prominent historians.² It should be very difficult to comprehend why a non-historian could easily speak of a figure 'a million Turkish-Armenian Christians' without indicating even a source, which this figure originates from.

² Salahi R. Sonyel, *Turkey's Struggle for Liberation and the Armenians* (Ankara: SAM Papers, 2001), pp. 44-45; Yavuz Özgüldür, Ali Güler; Suat Akgül and Mesut Köroğlu, *Her Yönüyle Ermeni Sorunu (The Armenian Issue with All Aspects)*, (Ankara: KHO Yayınları, 2001), pp. 48-115; Azmi Süslü, Fahrettin Kırzioğlu, Refet Yinanç, Yusuf Hallaçoğlu, *Türk Tarihinde Ermeniler (Armenians in the Turkish History)* (Kars: Kars Kafkas Üniversitesi Rektörlüğü, Yayın No.2, 1995).

It is equally difficult to understand why Professor Ball uses with ease the term 'genocide' to describe the deaths of the Ottoman Armenians although he should have known, as a commentator on war crimes, that killings during the war between two sides does not necessarily amount to genocide.³

Professor Ball does not suffice with these already unfounded observations about the events between the Turks and the Turkish-Armenian while he is dealing with development of the international laws of war. He devotes a particular section to 'Armenian Genocide' under the heading 'Genocide'.

Some describes the twentieth century as 'the century of genocide' with which Professor Ball starts by repeating in this section. He gives 'examples' to illustrate this assertion:

'...(T)he attempted destruction of the native Herero in 1904 in South-West Africa (now central Africa), where in over two years, 10,000 German soldiers killed 70,000 of the 80,000 members of that Bantu tribe; the Nazi slaughter of over 6 million European Jews, as well as the Nazi genocide committed against Gypsies, Poles, and Russians in 1939-1945; the Cambodian 'killing fields' genocide, when between 1975 and 1979, almost 2 million of the 8 million people in Cambodia were killed by the Khmer Rouge under the leadership of Pol Pot; events that took place in Bosnia in the early to mid 1990s,...the machete genocide of the Tutsi in Rwanda, where over 800,000 Tutsi were slaughtered by the Hutu in there months in 1994...' (p. 26)

Skipping the events in which more people died such as Cambodian events, he gets into the details of a single case, the Turkish-Armenian issue. According to him, 'Armenian Genocide' is the first major genocide of the twentieth-century, which is 'forgotten' by many. He says, Turkish forces slaughtered estimated 1 million Turkish Armenians during and after the War. Moreover, '...there had been decades of cruel persecution by the Muslim Turks against Christian Armenian minority. There were massacres of Armenians by Turks in 1894-1896 and 1909 (with more than

³ For the reasons of Armenian deaths such as clashes during the Armenian rebellions, starvation, cold and other similar war-time conditions, see, Stanford Shaw and Ezel Kural Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, Vol 2, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 315-316. The fact that hundreds of thousands of Turks were killed by the Armenian bands during the War is another aspect, which is totally disregarded. For such killings, see, Justin McCarthy, *Death and Exile: The Ethnic Cleansing of Ottoman Muslims, 1821-1922*, (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1996), pp. 179 ff.

200,000 killed).’ He concludes that ‘between 1915 and 1923, the Armenian population of Anatolia and historic West Armenia was eliminated’.

To be able to make such a hugely, if proven, destructive observations about the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire and their treatment before and during the First World War, how many sources, do you think, he should have consulted? The answer is: just one. Even worse, this single consulted source is a book written by an Armenian author whose name is Vahakn N. Dadrian. His work is titled as ‘The History of the Armenian Genocide: Ethnic Conflict from the Balkans to Anatolia to the Caucasians’.⁴

Although Professor Ball devotes a particular attention to the alleged ‘Armenian Genocide’ in his study, there is certainly a huge lack of a reasonable and objective analysis of the events between the Turks and the Turkish Armenians as it is widely noted in the studies made by some prominent historians that the Armenians were in a very satisfactory situation in terms of rights and privileges as a minority group within the Ottoman system.⁵ They enjoyed religious, cultural and educational privileges attributed to them. The Armenian Patriarchy itself was established by the Ottoman Sultan Mehmet II (the Conqueror) in 1461 in Istanbul. The dates which are given as occasion in which 200,000 Turkish Armenians were allegedly killed are in fact the dates the Turkish Armenians rebelled against the Ottoman Turks for independence by the support of the western powers such as the Great Britain, France and Russia.

To the dissatisfaction of almost all the Turkish historians, he argues without a reasonable proof that Turks saw the Armenians as ‘infidels and less than human’.⁶ He gives certain incredibly misleading reasons why the Armenians were hated by the Turks. These include ‘their religious faith, their acceptance of western notion of ‘progress’; their habit of sending their children to schools

⁴ Vahakn N. Dadrian, *The history of the Armenian Genocide: Ethnic Conflict from the Balkans to Anatolia to the Caucasians*, (Providence, R.I.: Berghahn Books, 1995, 1997)

⁵ Salahi R. Sonyel, *Turkey’s Struggle for Liberation and the Armenians*, pp. 9-18; Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis (eds). *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: the Functioning of a Plural Society*, vol. 1, *the Central Lands* (New York: 1982), p. 23; İsmet Binark, *Archive Documents about Atrocities and Genocide Inflicted Upon Turks by Armenians*, (Ankara, TBMM Yayınları, 2002).

⁶ p. 26. He also refers to a letter written by an Ottoman Turkish soldier to his mother during the war which allegedly says “We killed 1,200 Armenians, all of them food for the dogs”. Again, he refers to Dadrian’s study as the source.

run by Armenians and European missionaries and sending them to European for university training...'.

Such observations are at total variance with clear facts that even some of the Ottoman ministries were from the Armenian community and they had, unlike the Jews in the German society, a very high statue in the commercial and administrative life of the Empire. Moreover, rather than being disturbed by their religious faith, the Ottomans attributed a wide range of religious and other freedoms to non-Muslims including the Armenians.

Professor Ball frequently points to the treatment of the Jews by the Germans such as exclusion of them from the economic and administrative life as a milestone to the persecution of the Jews by the Germans. But, he clearly fails to comprehend that nothing similar to this occurred in the Ottoman Empire as the Armenians, as has just noted, were dominant in the commercial life and administration of the Ottoman Empire as a minority group. No effort on be half of the Ottomans is noted to exclude the Armenians from their integration in such activities.

When he deals with the events during the First World War, he engages into even more unrealistic and distorted story-telling approach to the issue. According to him, Turks acted 'under the guise of national security and military necessity' to eradicate their Armenian subordinates by deporting them to the 'Mesopotamian deserts'. He notes that Armenian civilians were used as road laborers, 'pack animals' and 'bayonet target practice for Turkish soldiers'.⁸

Other than starvation and privation, he alleges that deaths were result of killings, which were carried out by special units, which Turks had established for this specific purpose. He argues fairly straightforward that 'this genocide of over a million Armenians was the national policy of the Young Turks, openly implemented with a bureaucratic organization and centralized planning to ensure that the deportation ad executions went smoothly'. According to him, Minister Talat established 'with the full knowledge of the parliament

⁷ For the reasons why the alleged Armenian genocide cannot be similar to the Jews Holocaust during the World War I, see, İbrahim Kaya, "Soykırım Kavramı ve Ermeni İddiaları: Karşılaştırmalı Hukuksal ve Siyasi Boyut", ("The Concept of Genocide and the Armenian Allegations: A Comparative Analysis of Legal and Political Aspects) içinde, Geçmişten Günümüze Ermeni Sorunu Paneli (İstanbul: Haliç Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2002), s. 8, 9;

⁸ p. 28.

and military authorities, a special killing unit called the Special Organization⁹ When making these observations, he fails again to reflect a related significant fact that many members of the Parliament were from the minorities including the Armenians and thus the Parliament could not led implementation of such a 'policy'.¹⁰

When describing the relocation ('deportation' according to him) of the Armenians, he goes too far and says that 'no provisions were made to feed and house them' during the movement.¹¹ Again a hugely important fact is disregarded that many safeguards were provided by the regulations enacted over the relocation of the Armenians living in the war zones. Even in the trials that were conducted by the Ottoman courts on this issue after the War, these regulations were based on to convict those who had caused some deaths by violating these regulations.

In order to support his above arguments, he refers to the paragraphs from the dairies of the officials and ambassadors of some States. In this context, he refers to the observations of U.S. Ambassador Henry Morgenthau and the report of Arnold Toynbee who was requested by the British Government to prepare a report on the issue.

For instance, he argues that Talat said to U.S. Ambassador that

'I request that you would get the American life insurance companies to send us a complete list of their Armenian policy holders. They are practically all dead and have left no heirs to collect the money.'

It does, in any sense, not seem to be reasonable to depend on words of the Ambassador of the United State a government-paid reporter of the Great Britain which were both enemies of the Ottomans during the War and trying to use Armenians to achieve the American and British goals over the Ottoman Empire.¹²

⁹ p. 28.

¹⁰ In the Parliament which was established according to the Second Constitution of the Ottoman Empire in 1908, there were 14 Armenian-origin members of the Parliament out of 259 members. Only 144 members were of Turkish origin. See, Yavuz Özgüldür, Ali Güler; Suat Akgül and Mesut Köroğlu, *Her Yönüyle Ermeni Sorunu (The Armenian Issue with All Aspects)*, p. 38.

¹¹ p. 28

¹² For such activities, see, Sydney Whitman, *Turkish Memories* (London: 1914), see especially p. 13; Aubrey Herbert. *Ben Kendim: A Record of Eastern Travel* (London: 1924), p. 146; Salahi R. Sonyel. *The Ottoman Armenian: Victims of Great Power Policy* (Oxford: 1987); A.P. Vartoogian *Armenian Ordeal* (New York, 1896), p. 37.

Moreover, there is an obvious lack of logic behind such observation as there could be no reason why a minister of the Ottoman Empire should make these 'confessions' to ambassador of an enemy country.

It is, in the final account, no different from using the words of the world's greatest evil, Hitler, to prove that an 'Armenian genocide' occurred during the First World War. Professor Ball argues that during the Second World War, Hitler had said that 'Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians'. Is Hitler a better historian than anybody so that we should trust his words to know that there really accrued an 'Armenian genocide' during the World War I?

Whether the people and statesmen who were allegedly responsible for the 'genocide of Armenians' were ever tried and convicted, he says that 'in March 1919, the new Turkish government 'eager to mollify the Allies had arrested a huge group of prominent wartime Ottoman leaders....They went on trial in April 1919 before a special Turkish court martial. But the Court's first death sentence brought mobs into the streets' and quickly ended any further prosecutions of the indicted Turks'.

Once again, he does not reflect the full picture in order most probably to distort the facts and insult on a nation for reasons, which are not fully known to us. There were trials of many Ottoman officials for their failure to implement the regulation over the relocation and prevent the deaths of many Armenians during their journey.¹³ On the other hand, many Ottoman officials were arrested by the British forces and taken to the island of Malta to stand trial for the alleged crimes of war and genocide. However, the trials could not even be initiated due to the 'lack of sufficient evidences for the alleged crimes'.¹⁴

The observations in the present review article shows that Professor Ball acts with a clear bad faith for whatever reason in an examination of the events between the Ottomans and the Ottoman Armenians. He continuously ignores many valuable studies on the

¹³ For instance, the Governors of some provinces such as Boğazlıyan, Bayburt, (Kemal Bey and Nusret Bey) were sentenced to death by court marshals of the Ottoman Empire for the reason that he failed to observe the regulations enacted to protect those to be relocated. See, Yavuz Özgüldür, Ali Güler; Suat Akgül and Mesut Köroğlu, *Her Yönüyle Ermeni Sorunu (The Armenian Issue with All Aspects)*, p. 245, 246.

¹⁴ Bilal N. Şimşir, *Malta Sürgünleri (Maltase Exiles)* (Ankara: Bilgi Yayınevi)

events that show completely different account of the issue from that of Professor Ball. If his study does not need to be so detailed to consult many sources on this particular issue, it should have at least indicate that the issue of 'Armenian genocide' is not a settled matter but full of controversies as there are many studies, other than that of a particular Armenian historian Vahank N. Dadrian, pointing to completely different results and facts.

Moreover, if Professor Ball felt a need to exaggerate the events of the past to prove the necessity of an international criminal jurisdiction, it cannot be justification to accuse a nation of once leaders of the Ottoman Empire with a crime of genocide, which is truly a shameful and disgusting crime, or crime of crimes. In fact it would be sufficient to note that there occurred many deaths during the First World War on be half of both the Turks and the Armenians and these do not necessarily mean a genocide committed by either side. It may simply be war crimes of other kind as there is no certain proof that the Ottomans acted with an aim to eradicate the Armenians in the Anatolia, which is an essential element of a crime of genocide.¹⁵ Quite contrarily, there are plenty of proofs that they simply tried to prevent the Armenians by sending them away from the war zones, from assisting the enemy Russians and from killing many unprotected Turkish civilians behind the war fronts, a solution which inevitably caused many deaths due to the conditions of war.

All these should indicate clearly that non-historians should not feel so free to make definite observations on a highly controversial and sensitive historical matter.¹⁶ Otherwise, the aim in this could not possibly be regarded as an objective analysis of the past but a purposeful and propagandized writing.¹⁷

¹⁵ Article 2 of the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide provides as follows: "In the present Convention, genocide means 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."

¹⁶ Justin McCarthy, professor of history at the Louisville University, suggests that the history of the Ottoman Armenians should be left to the historians to decide. Justin McCarthy, "Let the Historians Decide". *Ermeni Araştırmaları* (Armenian Studies), vol. 2, (2001), pp. 113-130.

¹⁷ How the alleged "Armenian genocide" and other Armenian claims are supported by various means of propaganda, see, Sedat Laçiner and Şenol Kantarcı, *Ermeni Propagandasının Bir Aracı Olarak Sanat, (Art as a Means of Armenian Propaganda)* (Ankara: Ermeni Araştırmaları Enstitüsü, 2002).