

BOOK REVIEWS

(KİTAP TAHLİLLERİ)

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“LEGISLATING REALITY AND POLITICIZING HISTORY: CONTEXTUALIZING ARMENIAN CLAIMS OF GENOCIDE”

“GERÇEĞİ YASALAŞTIRMA VE TARİHİ SİYASİLEŞTİRME:
ERMENİ SOYKIRIM İDDİALARININ ÇERÇEVELENDİRİLMESİ”

Author: Brendon J. Cannon

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The book *Legislating Reality and Politicizing History: Contextualizing Armenian Claims of Genocide*, authored by Dr. Brendon J. Cannon, aims to provide the reader with an understanding of the evolution of the Armenian campaign to have the 1915 events recognized as genocide and the accusations made towards Turkey in connection to this campaign.

The introduction of the book, written by Professor Michael Gunter, draws attention to the frequent misuse of the term “genocide” by claimed experts and laymen alike. It should be noted here that this frequent (intentional or not) misuse of this term causes confusions in the discussions regarding the already complicated and tragic set of events known as 1915 events that claimed the lives of both Turks and Armenians in great numbers and caused much suffering. As way to counter such misuse, the introduction provides the legal definition of genocide outlined in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (or, more shortly, the 1948 Genocide Convention). The official, legal definition of

“genocide” is as follows, “acts committee with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.” Besides this definition, Gunter reminds the reader that there is no official document that shows that Ottoman Empire intended to exterminate the Armenians. Herewith, the Armenian campaign possesses no evidence to demonstrate the “intent to destroy” that is necessary to prove that an event constitutes “genocide” (pp. 15-16). As a way to clear the above-mentioned confusions, Gunter recommends Cannon’s book as a guide to understanding what happened in 1915 and how the Armenians conceptualize and carry out their campaign.

This is also the primary importance of the book; it informs the reader about crucial terms such as genocide, the dispute over what the 1915 events entail, and what kind of identity Armenians have constructed over time and how this effects their behavior.

Besides the introduction part, the book is broken down into 10 chapters and a conclusion part. Throughout the book, Dr. Cannon aims to highlight several concepts that come up in relation to the term genocide, such crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, trauma, memory, and time collapse (the sense of experiencing a painful past event as if it happened just yesterday). Dr. Cannon also delves into other wide-ranging but related subjects, such as the historical framework regarding the Ottoman Empire and the Armenians, the building of Armenians identity throughout time, nationalistic desires, and idea of self-determination, how Ottoman Armenians were convinced that they would win their independence with the aid of the Russian Empire, and how the Ottoman Empire was struggling against the Great Powers of Great Britain, France and Russia in a time when the Ottoman Empire was gradually disintegrating with the emergence of the nation-states.

Like in the case of other people in other multiethnic empires, the emergence and spread of nationalism effected Armenians as well, and in their case, Armenians started to form a type of identity to define themselves over stories of wrongdoings of the past perpetrated against Armenians. According to the Armenians, the Ottoman Empire was the source of all these wrongdoings and thus the target of these related of accusations. The formation of this new nationalistic and grievance-driven identity (as opposed to being considered the *millet-i sadıka*, the loyal people, of the Ottoman Empire until the transformation of their identity) was helped by the level of literacy and education amongst Ottoman Armenians, as they were amongst the most literate and educated people among the rest of the population of the Ottoman Empire. High literacy rate and education gave Armenians the chance to express themselves in written (and thus potentially permanent) sources like memoirs

(p. 151). This thus allowed them the chance to transfer their memoirs (and thus their grievance-driven identity) from generation to generation, no matter the fact that these memoirs were not necessarily congruent with what actually transpired in the past.

The main issue considered by Dr. Cannon in his book is related to the Armenians' claims of genocide and their efforts to have this recognized as such. Especially in the first two chapters, Cannon emphasizes that Armenians have developed a necessity to identify themselves as being a people subjected to genocide. This identity also serves as a useful tool for gaining political capital and as a way for especially diaspora Armenians to position themselves in the world (p. 29). Despite the religious, linguistic, political, and geographic divisions and variations amongst the diaspora Armenians, the author notes that they are nevertheless united in their belief that they as a people have been subjected to genocide. This belief also creates a profound sense of a malign "Other" (Turks) in the eyes of Armenians and a perpetual sense of victimization against Turkey and the Turkish people. In short, the idea of surviving a genocide has created a common enemy for the Armenians. Diaspora Armenians have thus become indoctrinated to identify Turks as the enemy, which helps explain the wave of terrorism starting in the 1970s perpetuated by extremist Armenian groups against Turkish diplomats and service people and their family members.

In the fourth and fifth chapters, Dr. Cannon focuses on the Armenian's campaign regarding their genocide allegations. The author combines the formation of Armenian identity and the Diaspora's political activism. The chosen trauma of 1915 is used to identify who the Armenians are today. Since 1915 until today, the indoctrination caused amongst Armenians have cause a sense of time-collapse amongst the Armenians. This means that many modern-day Armenians experience the stories regarding the alleged genocide as if it occurred yesterday, meaning such stories elicit a profound emotional response from them. Tied to this, modern-day Armenians have built their minds upon genocide allegations and are driven to promoting their sense victimization as much as possible in various countries they live in such as the United States, France, and Australia (p. 229). Dr. Cannon underlines that the propaganda activities on the recognition of the alleged genocide is helped by the financial resources under the disposal of the Armenian diaspora. These financial resources mean that diaspora Armenians are capable of funding the production of large-scale movies to influence public opinion or funding numerous research projects into the 1915 events that will highlight Armenians' point of view.

There is an important point that the author highlights that can be tied to this; the usage of the term ‘genocide’ is now popularly used to denote any massacre or conflict that resulted in the death of a large group of people. In essence, the popular usage of the term ‘genocide’ has deviated significantly from its official definition as outlined in the 1948 Genocide Convention. In line with this deviation, the 1915 events have come to be likened to the Holocaust, even though they are two very different events that occurred in different contexts. Dr. Cannon discusses the necessary elements for act to be considered and how the 1915 events can be properly assessed in light of the 1948 Genocide Convention (p. 325).

The Armenian campaign over the recognition of the alleged genocide has resulted in notable success in certain countries, especially the ones in Europe. Through intense lobbying, diaspora Armenians have succeeded having resolutions passed in various parliaments regarding their genocide allegations. Though these resolutions are non-binding, non-legal political statements made by parliaments and can be compared to someone simply expressing their opinion on a disputed subject, such parliament resolution nevertheless raise awareness about the Armenian campaign and thus potentially influence public opinion. This results in Turkey being confronted with accusations of being a genocide-perpetrating country. According to Dr. Cannon, through such resolutions, while one’s honor and dignity is seemingly protected (Armenians), the other’s (Turks) honor and dignity is damaged by the other’s accusations (pp. 350-351). As a result of the Armenian campaign, the genocide allegations have come to be considered as historical facts in the public opinion of certain countries, and causes people to overlook the fact that it distorts historical events or intensely politicizes the related dispute, or that the it attempts to circumvent the legal and official definition of “genocide”, thereby diluting its meaning and significance. Therefore, Dr. Cannon, noting the current circumstance, expresses that the reconciliation between Turks and Armenians and a resolution to this dispute seems like a weak possibility.

One saddening omission from this otherwise detailed and informative book is an index. Due to the number of concepts covered and the nature the dispute surrounding the 1915 events, an index would have been very helpful for the uninitiated readers who wish to go back to the specific aspects of the book. Hopefully, a second edition for this book will rectify this omission.