

CRITICAL REVIEW / ELEŞTİREL İNCELEME

To cite this article: Khantamirova, İlağa “A Commentary Reviewing Robert Gerwarth’s “The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End””, *Review of Armenian Studies*, Issue 52 (2025): 177-184.

Received: 23.10.2025

Accepted: 24.11.2025

A COMMENTARY REVIEWING ROBERT GERWARTH’S “THE VANQUISHED: WHY THE FIRST WORLD WAR FAILED TO END”

(ROBERT GERWARTH’IN “MAĞLUPLAR: BİRİNCİ DÜNYA SAVAŞI NEDEN BİTMEDİ?” KİTABI ÜZERİNE ELEŞTİREL BİR DEĞERLENDİRME)

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Abstract: *This critical review examines Robert Gerwarth’s The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End, focusing on its explanation of why the 1918 armistice did not bring lasting peace to Europe. The commentary highlights the book’s strengths, including its wide use of multilingual archival sources and its persuasive synthesis of post-imperial violence, civil wars, and radical ideologies. At the same time, it evaluates the limitations of Gerwarth’s approach to the Ottoman/Turkish context, especially his reliance on a genocide framework without judicial grounding, the asymmetrical representation of Christian and Muslim suffering, and the limited engagement with Turkish archival materials and perspectives. The review argues that, while The Vanquished is a valuable contribution to the historiography of the post-First World War era, it should*

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DOI: 10.54842/ras.1829262

be read alongside studies that incorporate Ottoman and Turkish sources to achieve a more balanced understanding of the period.

Keywords: *Post–First World War violence, Defeated states, Ottoman/Turkish perspective, Genocide debate, Critical book review*

Öz: *Bu eleştirel inceleme, Robert Gerwarth'ın The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End adlı eserini, 1918 mütarekesinin Avrupa'da neden kalıcı bir barışa dönüşmediğini açıklama biçimi üzerinden değerlendirmektedir. Çalışma, eserin çok dilli arşiv kaynaklarını geniş biçimde kullanması ve imparatorlukların çöküşü sonrasında ortaya çıkan şiddet dalgaları, iç savaşlar ve radikal ideolojileri başarılı bir sentezle ele alması gibi güçlü yönlerini vurgulamaktadır. Bununla birlikte, Gerwarth'ın Osmanlı/Türk bağlamına yaklaşımının sınırlılıkları da tartışılmakta; özellikle yargı kararına dayanmayan bir “soykırım” çerçevesine yaslanması, Hristiyan ve Müslüman toplulukların yaşadığı acıların asimetrik biçimde sunulması ve Türk arşivleri ile perspektiflerine yeterince başvurmaması eleştirilmektedir. İnceleme, The Vanquished'in Birinci Dünya Savaşı sonrası döneme ilişkin literatüre önemli bir katkı sunduğunu, ancak dönemin daha dengeli bir şekilde anlaşılabilmesi için Osmanlı ve Türk kaynaklarını kullanan çalışmalarla birlikte okunması gerektiğini savunmaktadır.*

Anahtar Kelime: *Birinci Dünya Savaşı sonrası şiddet, Mağlup devletler, Osmanlı/Türk perspektifi, Soykırım tartışmaları, Eleştirel kitap incelemesi*

Robert Gerwarth's *The Vanquished* is a comprehensive study that examines why peace in post-World War I Europe failed to become a lasting victory. The author's primary aim is to explore the experiences of the populations of defeated states in the aftermath of the war and to reveal how Europe entered a chaotic, violence-ridden "peace" period.¹

The peace conferences held and the treaties signed in the aftermath of the war, contrary to expectations, failed to bring stability to Europe; instead, they opened the door to a period of great uncertainty and political collapse. In this context, Gerwarth focuses on the disintegration of the multiethnic empires—the Romanov, Habsburg, Hohenzollern, and Ottoman—and on the social and political transformations experienced by the peoples within these structures.

The author also examines how countries considered victors of the war, such as Italy and Greece, ultimately faced long-term failure and instability, thereby questioning the traditional meaning of "victory." The emergence of nation-states, along with the accompanying civil wars and ideological polarizations, is also explored in detail in the work.

In summary, Gerwarth analyzes the postwar period not merely as a process of reconstruction between victor and vanquished states but also as a transitional era in which new forms of violence emerged, fragile peace took shape, and radical ideologies were born. Gerwarth's central thesis is that the post-1918 peace settlements failed because the unresolved conflicts and power vacuums left by the collapse of the Romanov, Habsburg, Hohenzollern, and Ottoman empires generated new cycles of violence, radicalization, and instability that ultimately made the Second World War inevitable. This review assesses the analytical contribution and methodological rigor of Gerwarth's work, with particular attention to the balance and completeness of his treatment of post-war violence in Anatolia and the Caucasus, the precision of his legal and historical terminology (especially regarding the contested term 'genocide'), and the extent to which his archival base reflects the perspectives of all affected populations, including Turkish sources and narratives that remain underrepresented in Anglophone historiography.

The Vanquished is significant for its examination of the new order states sought to establish after the First World War, the way the war ended, the

¹ Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016)

transformations it brought about in the mental worlds of nations, and the new ideologies that emerged in its wake. The book explores in detail how defeated countries—such as Russia in certain respects—found themselves in the position of “victors,” the rise of new nation-states after the war, and the conditions that ultimately paved the way to the Second World War. By discussing the disintegration of empires that had played a central role in world politics until the early 20th century, and how this process gave birth to new ideas and forms of struggle among peoples, Gerwarth sheds light on the dynamics that shaped the postwar order.

“The statement that ‘many in the West believed that the First World War would above all be a conflict to end all wars and make the world safe for democracy’ essentially summarizes the core argument of the work. In reality, the opposite occurred: the unresolved issues brought to the fore by the war or the 1919–1920 treaties created a more dangerous power asymmetry compared to the pre-1914 period.” The most striking example of this is the emergence of radical ideologies such as Bolshevism and Fascism, whose influence would persist for years after the war. These two polarized political ideologies, which arose in the aftermath of the First World War, ultimately led to devastating consequences that affected the lives of millions.

The book examines the developments of the 20th century within the context of the First World War, showing how the war laid the foundations for a new world order and, in fact, foreshadowed another future conflict. In this respect, Gerwarth’s work offers a unique perspective that analyzes not only the past but also the dynamics that shaped the future.

The Vanquished also holds an essential place in studies of the post–First World War period due to its extensive use of literary and archival sources. The author consulted archives from numerous countries, including Austria, Bulgaria, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Serbia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, and conducted a comprehensive review of contemporary periodicals and existing scholarship. This approach enhances the work’s scholarly depth, reliability, and value for historical research.

In his work, Gerwarth generally strives to adopt a multidimensional approach. However, in some sections—particularly in narratives about the Turks—traces of bias can be observed. For example, while the chapters on Greek-

2 Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished* (United States: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), 11.

Turkish relations briefly describe the actions of the Greek army in Anatolia³, the book's opening chapter begins with accounts of the burning of İzmir by the Turks, the killing of Orthodox Metropolitan Chrysostomos, and the deaths of approximately thirty thousand Greeks and Armenians⁴. This emphasis has the potential to create a negative perception of the Turks from the very first pages of the work.

Similarly, when addressing the Maraş Events of January–February 1920, the author focuses solely on the violence suffered by the Armenians, noting that tens of thousands of Armenians were killed by the Turks. However, the complex historical context of these events also involved reciprocal acts of violence between both sides. In this respect, the work appears to adopt a limited perspective when recounting specific historical incidents.

Moreover, Gerwarth's work does not focus solely on the violence experienced by Christian populations; it also addresses massacres suffered by Muslim communities. For instance, the author references attacks carried out by Armenians in Erzurum, in which thousands of Muslims lost their lives, demonstrating his effort to maintain a balanced and multidimensional approach.⁵ However, certain expressions—such as describing Kars Fortress as an “Armenian fortress”—indicate that the author occasionally leans toward a particular perspective when conveying historical realities. While Gerwarth strives for objectivity, the work at times includes notably biased assessments.⁶

Another notable issue in *The Vanquished* is the frequent use of the Armenian genocide narrative, with Talat Pasha portrayed as one of the instigators of this genocide⁷.

Firstly, Gerwarth's designation of the events of 1915 as “genocide” has no legal basis. Genocide is a concept explicitly defined in international law, and the deaths of Armenians during the 1915 relocations due to harsh conditions do not meet the legal definition of genocide. Furthermore, assuming that the term “genocide,” which was formally adopted in 1948, can be retroactively applied to actions committed before the law's enactment is legally incorrect.

3 Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished* (United States: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), 232.

4 Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished* (United States: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), 2.

5 Justin McCarthy, *Death and Exile: The Ethnic Cleansing of Ottoman Muslims, 1821–1922* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1995)

6 McCarthy, Justin. *Death and Exile: The Ethnic Cleansing of Ottoman Muslims, 1821–1922*. Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1995

7 Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished* (United States: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), 37.

Gerwarth could have made his valuable study more balanced and objective by noting that the term “genocide” is a political and historical accusation against the modern Republic of Türkiye, that it has not been proven in international courts, and that it is not universally recognized.⁸

Moreover, as noted above, Gerwarth utilized archival and periodical sources from various countries in his study. However, his frequent use of the Armenian genocide narrative and assertions that Armenians and Greeks were victimized by Turks, without consulting archives or periodicals from Türkiye, allowed the work to be written in a way that largely overlooks the Turkish perspective and takes on an accusatory tone.

In conclusion, through in-depth research, the author examines the postwar history of the defeated states within the context of the First World War from a distinctive perspective and strives to approach the events impartially. However, accusatory narratives, such as the claims that Turks committed genocide against Armenians and massacres against Greeks, have cast a shadow over the objectivity of the study.

The Vanquished offers a significant contribution to the historiography of the post–First World War period. Its principal strengths lie in its narrative power, its extensive use of multilingual archival sources from eight countries, and its ambitious synthesis of the political and ideological transformations that shaped interwar Europe. Gerwarth successfully illuminates how the disintegration of the Romanov, Habsburg, Hohenzollern, and Ottoman empires gave rise to new nation-states, radical ideologies such as Bolshevism and Fascism, and cycles of violence that foreshadowed the Second World War. The work’s broad geographic and thematic scope makes it an essential resource for understanding why the post-1918 peace failed to bring stability.

However, the book has notable limitations that readers must consider critically. Gerwarth’s conceptual stretching of the term “genocide”—a legal category formally defined only in 1948—to events in 1915 lacks a foundation in international law and overlooks the absence of judicial determination. More fundamentally, the work’s treatment of violence is asymmetrical: while it documents suffering across multiple communities, including Muslims,

8 Guenter Lewy, *The Armenian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey: A Disputed Genocide* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005)

its narrative framing—particularly the opening chapter’s focus on Turkish actions in İzmir and the treatment of the Maraş Events—creates an imbalanced portrayal that emphasizes Christian victimization while marginalizing Turkish perspectives. The author’s failure to consult Turkish archives or periodicals compounds this problem, limiting the work’s claim to objectivity.

Overall, *The Vanquished* is a valuable and thought-provoking study for scholars and readers seeking to understand the collapse of empires, the rise of radical ideologies, and the cascading conflicts of the interwar period. However, it should be read critically about its treatment of the Ottoman-Turkish case and its use of contested legal and historical categories. Readers interested in a balanced account of post-war violence in Anatolia and the Caucasus will need to supplement this work with scholarship that incorporates Turkish sources and perspectives.

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