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**REVIEW ESSAY:
REINFORCING AN UNBALANCED
NARRATIVE**

**(İNCELEME:
DENGELENMEMİŞ BİR ANLATIYI
TAKVİYE ETMEK)**

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Author: Yiğit Akın

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Civilians always come second (at best) when histories of war are being written. Only recently have books begun to appear that deal with the immense suffering of Ottoman civilians during the First World War. *A Land of Aching Hearts* by Leila Fawaz Tarazi, focussing on Syria, is one such study and Ryan Gingeras' *Sorrowful Shores*, which looks at ethnic and social conflict along the shores of the

southern Marmara, another. Now a Turkish scholar, Yiğit Akın, has made his own contribution to the short list. The details he gives of the general effects of the World War I on the civilian population of the Ottoman Empire, Muslim and Christian, are extremely valuable.

This was a total war for the Ottoman Empire. Having just pulled through the Balkan wars, it was soon plunged into another one with the attack on Russian shipping and shore installations in the Black Sea, carried out by Admiral Souchon with the authority of the Ottoman War Minister, Enver Paşa. The Empire was not ready for war and was in no condition to fight it at the military or civilian level. Britain and France had empires and colonial troops to fill the battlefields. The Ottoman Empire was also an empire, but a greatly shrunken one, and totally dependent on its own resources, especially following the blockade of the Black Sea and Mediterranean coasts by allied fleets. With the army fighting a war on several fronts, the demand for manpower and for war material – down to clothing for the troops but including stock animals, all forms of transport and food - drove the civilian population to the limits of its existence.

With the war launched, the first task was mobilisation, not just of the men of fighting age but of those on the home front who had to see that the war was necessary, moral and worthwhile. The departure of young men for the front was naturally a heart-breaking personal experience for families, apart from the practical problems arising from the loss of their labor in the village or on the farm.

As the author shows, some of the affected families were not convinced by the arguments for war. He refers to one episode when an angry woman in Malatya responded to shouts of “Long live the sultan!” with “Down with the sultan! Those who left [for the front] never returned. He wiped out people.” Partly to avoid public demonstrations of anger, some convoys left at night, when martial law kept people inside. (p.58)

As described by the author, the conditions into which the young conscripts were thrust were shocking. They were inadequately housed and clothed and often had march long distances to the front because of the lack of other means of transport. Food supplies were often inadequate, or even non-existent, with soldiers reaching one food station only to be refused supplies and told to move on to the next supply point. Pay was always in arrears (p.84).

Suffering on the home front was scarcely less intense and might have been even worse, than life for the soldiers, considering that the rudiments of the social state hardly existed in many parts of the empire. Not surprising, as it is true of all wars, women and children were prime victims of the war as it affected the civilian population. Requisitioning reduced life in town, village and on the farm to subsistence level. As one army officer remarked, the mobilizing army was an “insatiable giant” (p.113). Laws sanctioned what the state needed to take to keep the war going, covering all forms of transport, draft animals, farm produce, coal, food, down to caviar and champagne, and clothing, down to stockings, petticoats and children’s shoes, items which were scarcely needed on the front and can be regarded as outright plunder by corrupt officials. “Brigandage” and “banditry” were words used even by government officials to describe the process (p.116).

Within a short time of war being declared food shortages were affecting life across the empire. Shortages, of course, meant continually rising prices and hoarding by merchants, while the drain of manpower reduced the level of agricultural production, in a continuing downward spiral of downward misery. It was not just merchants but peasants who resisted the demands of the requisition agents, hiding their grain or taking it into a region where prices were not regulated by law. (p.135).

In his chapter “In the home: wives and mothers,” the author deals with the multiple burdens imposed on women, at once practical, to run the house or farm and family in the absence of the male, and simultaneously moral, as a support for the war effort. As he writes, the majority of women felt the impact of war in their personal and social lives: “Virtually everywhere through the empire they had to work much longer and harder, doing conscripted men’s work on top of domestic chores such as cooking, cleaning and taking care of children and the elderly which they already ‘naturally’ had to deal with” (p.145). In the countryside many villages had been drained entirely of their young male population, leaving only boys or elderly men to help women with their daily chores.

Many women who had never left the village were now compelled to take produce to the local market, or even to Istanbul and try to sell it where and as they could: the author refers to peasant women trying to sell fruit at train stations in Istanbul. Elsewhere women and children carried military materiel to the front. Thus the war was transgressing “socio-economic and cultural” norms by the behaviour it was forcing

on women (p.147), as it did in other countries at war, but perhaps with a more pronounced effect in the Ottoman Empire. Some women resented the demands being made of them and complained bitterly to the government.

Violence and compulsion by local administrators, assault by deserters, the arbitrary behaviour of soldiers, sometimes forcing women out of their houses and beating them when they refused to hand over farm animals (p.149) were also among the burdens women had to bear. Further degradation came in the form of sexual services provided to local officials to secure their small monthly allowance: in some parts of the empire the struggle for survival drove some women into prostitution. The payment of state benefits in always depreciating paper currency, which merchants would often refuse to accept, was another theme in this struggle.

The author could perhaps have devoted even more space to daily conditions on the home front, including the terrible suffering in Syria caused by the convection of four intersecting currents, the war, unusually dry weather, the worst locust plague in living memory and the allied naval blockade. Hundreds of thousands of people died in Syria alone and the war still stands in Syrian and Lebanese memory as a time of terrible tribulation.

There are some anomalies in how the author describes the suffering of different groups of people. For example, he describes the Balkan war (1912-13) as “tragic,” not what it clearly was, the ethnic cleansing of the Muslim population, the phrase he uses when referring to the *tehcir* (relocation) of the Armenians. Some details are given of the atrocities committed against Muslims by Balkan soldiers and civilians but not enough to convey the horror of what was done and to explain the fury of the reprisals taken against Ottoman Greeks along the Aegean coast. The author uses the word “migration” to describe the expulsion or flight “under deplorable conditions” (p. 10) of hundreds of thousands of Muslims from their Balkan villages in 1912-13. “Migration” is surely the wrong word to describe the panicked exodus of Muslim refugees and “deplorable” is somewhat insufficient to describe the mass deaths on the road from cholera, typhus, exposure or hunger, the mass burials and the struggle to keep the survivors alive in mosques and government buildings converted into makeshift clinics.

The author refers to a “substantial demographic engineering campaign” directed against the Greek Ottoman population in 1914 (p.45). First of

all, the use of such a phrase as “demographic engineering” puts pre-modern events into a modern context and thus can distort the reality in the reader’s mind. He then refers to a “calculated, centrally planned and orchestrated policy of terror” carried out against the Greek population (p.45) without providing the evidence to back up such a sweeping claim. In fact, much of the violence was clearly the spontaneous reaction of Muslims infuriated by the terrible tales they were hearing of Muslim suffering at the hands of Balkan armies and the bandit gangs following in their wake and taking deflected revenge against local Greeks.

There is enough evidence to raise questions about the allegation of a “centrally planned campaign of terror.” Some of it comes from a source that was deeply hostile to the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) government, the British Foreign Office. In British documents¹ Talat Paşa, the Interior Minister, was said to be doing his best to control the situation. He visited the Aegean coast and was described in these sources as acting with great energy in trying to stamp out communal disorder. Muslim refugees were being settled far from Christian villages and proclamations were put up warning troublemakers of execution if caught. Local authorities persuaded many Greeks not to leave their homes.

The author refers to a systematic Ottoman “policy” of unmixing the Greek and Muslim population (p.165). In fact, the “unmixing” of the population was in the first place the inevitable consequence of a war of premeditated aggression launched by the Balkan states. Muslim refugees flooded into Istanbul or sought refuge on the Aegean coast and armed gangs struck back against a close but vulnerable target, the local Greek population. The Greek and Ottoman governments both soon realized that communal relations had been so badly damaged a population exchange was probably the only solution.

With regard to the pre-war plan for Armenian “reform” initiated by Russia, the author writes that the powers neither intended to partition the Ottoman Empire “nor to carve out a national homeland for the Armenians” (p.48). In fact, the powers had been engaged in the piecemeal partition of the empire since early in the 19th century. Most of the Greek mainland had gone in the 1820s, much of the Balkans was taken away in the Congress of Berlin (1878) and Egypt was occupied by Britain in 1882. In the 1880s, Britain had supported a “reform” plan

¹ Interested readers can find these references in Bilal Simşir, ed., *Ege Sorunu [Aegean Question] Documents* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1989), vol. II, 1913-1914.

which certainly would have led to Armenian autonomy had it ever been implemented. The sultan and his ministers, not to speak of Kurdish tribal chieftains in the eastern provinces, all regarded British interference as being aimed at turning 'Kurdistan' into 'Armenia.' At the very least, what the British wanted was an Armenian administrative enclave in the east which clearly would have set the stage for demands for autonomy. Contrary to the interpretation put on the 1913 "reform" plan by the author (p. 48), the Ottoman government had good reasons just on the basis of past experience to regard the powers as having intentions damaging to its interests.

The author refers to "policies" and a process of demographic engineering that he claims included the "annihilation" of the Armenians. (p. 9 and p.50). He suggests that war provided the context for what the CUP had already decided it wanted to do. "Fearing that the Armenians living in Ottoman territories might collaborate with the Russian enemy and organize a rebellion that would jeopardize the Ottoman war effort," he writes, "the government in 1915 decided to deport [sic.] them to the provinces of Der Zor and Mosul" (p.9). Eventually this fear of collaboration led to policies that were "more comprehensive in scope, total in intent and future-oriented in outlook" (p.10).

All of these claims need deconstructing. The author refers to "exaggerated perceptions" (p. 166), the defection of a "few" revolutionaries (p. 166) and "isolated incidents of Armenian disobedience" (p. 167), but nowhere does he make any attempt to examine whether Ottoman fears were justified. Through the use of such phrases, he seriously understates the nature of the problems facing the Ottoman general staff by the middle of 1915. Its perceptions were very different from Yiğit Akın's. It did not regard its fears as "exaggerated" and neither would it have described Armenian sabotage of the war effort from behind the lines and attacks on Muslim villages merely as "disobedience."

The author writes that the Ottoman government entered the war understanding that "demographic realities on the ground could determine outcomes on the battlefield" (p.165). In fact, as the Balkan wars had just shown, it could just as easily be the other way around. The attack by the Balkan states reshaped demographic realities on the ground and there is a clear argument that it was the same in the First World War. The decision to "relocate" the Armenians in May, 1915, was organically linked to the shattering defeat suffered by the Ottoman Third Army at

Sarikamis early in the year, It was responsible for the security and defence of north-eastern Anatolia, yet in its gravely weakened state could provide neither. Attacks on Muslim villages and army supply routes by Armenian armed bands culminated in the Van uprising or what the author calls Armenian “resistance” (p. 167). He does not give any detail of what followed as the “resisting” Armenians slaughtered Muslims out of hand in the town and villages around the nearby lake.² Van was then handed over to the Russians, and placed under Russian administration from the Caucasus. In similar circumstances, no military command in the world could regard these developments anything other than a grave threat.

Having allowed the Armenian committees to operate without hindrance up till then, the government closed them down across the country after the Van rebellion. The crackdown on April 24 was followed a month later by the decision to remove the Armenian population from war zones. Was this “demographic engineering” as the author claims or a decision taken out of military necessity?

Research by the military historian Edward Erickson makes it plain that the Ottomans believed that Armenian uprisings and sabotage of the war effort from behind the lines threatened the entire war effort. In particular, the loss of Van in May, 1915, Erickson writes, “ruptured the entire Ottoman strategic posture in southeast Anatolia.”³ Van was the trigger for the mass relocation of Armenians to end “what the Ottoman government believed was an existential threat to the Ottoman state.”⁴

Military necessity” was thus not a pretext, in Erickson’s view, but a conclusion born of battlefield analysis by the Ottoman general staff. Its solution was to deprive armed gangs of civilian cover. The same solution had been taken by the British during the Boer War, by the Spaniards in Cuba and by the Americans in the Philippines and other examples were soon to follow.

As events were to show, the task of moving such a mass of people in any kind of orderly fashion proved beyond the capacity of the Ottoman government. The contradiction between what the military said had to be

2 Justin McCarthy, Esat Arslan, Cemalettin Taşkıran and Ömer Turan, *The Armenian Rebellion at Van* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2006), “Destruction and Murder in Van,” pp. 233-57.

3 Edward J. Erickson, *Ottomans and Armenians. A Study in Counterinsurgency* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 169.

4 Ibid., p.214.

done and what the government was incapable of doing was to end in a humanitarian disaster for the Armenian civilian population. The alternative explanation, of course, is that the Ottoman government knew it was sending the Armenians to their death and had in fact taken a decision early in 1915 to wipe them out, as claimed by Taner Akçam.⁵ There is no credible evidence to support such an accusation.

Once the relocation decision had been taken, the Armenians had to be sent south because there was no other direction in which they could be moved. On the road they were vulnerable to mistreatment by guards or corrupt or negligent officials and attack by tribal groups. Arguably, had the author paid attention to the scale of Armenian attacks on Muslims before the *tehcir* was ordered, the reader would be better placed to understand that revenge for the killing of Muslims at Van and elsewhere must have been one of the motives for attacks on the Armenian convoys. Many Armenians were massacred as a result of the relocation. The author claims “hundreds of thousands” (p.50) but without providing any data by way of proof. Many others died from exposure, malnutrition and disease. It is not known now and never will be how many Armenians were massacred and how many Armenians died from other causes but the numbers were certainly very great in both categories.

Yiğit Akın’s claim of a centrally controlled operation – “micro-management” as he writes (p. 170) – of the *tehcir* is at variance with the administrative shambles that it clearly was as well as what history tells us about the late Ottoman Empire. The ramshackle nature of Ottoman provincial administration had been noted by every traveller passing through the eastern provinces – the crucible of the Armenian question – in the 19th century and conditions in this region had not changed when the war broke out. Centralised government authority was not to be imposed on this region for decades. Against a background of almost complete infrastructural underdevelopment, material as well as social, was it really possible to “micro-manage” the relocation, even if that was the government’s intention?

The author claims that the authorities turned a “blind eye” to atrocities committed against the Armenians (p.164). This is simply not true. There are numerous accounts of massacres of Armenians in the Ottoman documents, followed by instructions to arrest the perpetrators and prevent the recurrence of such crimes. In late 1915 three commissions of inquiry were established to inquire into the crimes reported to have been committed. Their findings resulted in the court-martial of more

5 Taner Akcam, *A Shameful Act. The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility* (London: Constable, 2007), pp.162-64.

than 1600 individuals, including soldiers, members of the *Teşkilat i-Mahsusa* (Special Organization) and high-ranking provincial officials. Many were jailed and more than 60 were sentenced to death.⁶

The author claims there was a fundamental difference in the violence suffered by Muslim refugees and Armenian “deportees” (a word he continually uses, incorrectly, as no Armenian was ever moved beyond the borders of the Ottoman Empire). He claims that while the Armenians were the victims of “systematic and sustained atrocities,” attacks on Muslims were “mostly sporadic and uncoordinated” (p.164). In fact, every attack, whether on Armenian Christian villagers or Muslim Turks and Kurds, was usually systematic in some way. Armenian attacks might have been “sporadic” but they were sustained during the whole course of the war and resulted in many atrocities. The Russian advance in early 1915 was followed by the large-scale slaughter of Muslims in north-eastern Anatolia. In attacks around Lake Van in April, armed Armenian bands, apparently with some Cossack support, moved very systematically from one village to another, murdering as they went. During the Russian occupation of north-eastern Anatolia, Armenians shocked even Russian commanders with the ferocity of their violence. The slaughter of Muslims in towns and villages was widespread and large-scale. These attacks appear to have had the intention of killing or driving away as many Muslims as possible, ahead of the anticipated establishment of Armenian autonomy or statehood in a region in which about 80 per cent of the population was Muslim. The collapse of the Russian war effort in 1917 dealt Armenian aspirations a lethal blow.

Criminality is part of all wars. The suffering of the Armenians was appalling and the Ottoman government has to be held responsible for the consequences of the decisions it took even if it could not foresee what the consequences of these decisions would be. This, of course, is the crux of the Armenian case against the Ottoman government: either it specifically ordered the destruction of the Armenians or it knew what was going to happen to them.

This was a total war in which battlefield outcomes were dictating government decisions that could not actually be carried out as planned. The government insisted that the relocated Armenians be fed and accommodated when there was not sufficient food for the army or the civilian population and nowhere to house the Armenians when they were on the move. It insisted that their illnesses be treated when there weren't

6 Sarıınay, Yusuf, “The Relocation (Tehcir) of Armenians and the Trials of 1915-16,” *Middle East Critique*, vol. 20, No. 3, Fall, 2011: pp. 299-315.

the hospitals, clinics and pharmacies to attend to their health needs. It insisted that they be protected when there was a severe manpower shortage at the front, with only small numbers of soldiers or *jandarma* available to guard the convoys.

Once relocated, the Armenians were resettled in small numbers away from railway lines. In line with the argument for military necessity, this was clearly a security precaution. There is no doubt that the Ottoman government did engage in elements of “demographic engineering” by separating Kurdish refugees from their tribal elders and resettling Kurdish refugees in districts far from their traditional homeland.⁷ In the late imperial period, the resettlement and “sedentarization” of tribal groups was a policy goal of many governments, including France in its African colonies. The uprooting of Kurds during the war was an opportunity which the Ottoman government seems to have exploited to bring about demographic change.

Muslims were also resettled in houses belonging to Armenians who had been relocated. Given the vast number of refugees moving across the empire, this was a practical wartime measure even if it is also to be put into the category of “demographic engineering.”

The chaos that accompanied the final collapse of the empire and the titanic struggle of the Turkish national movement to survive against invading foreign armies submerged all of these issues. By 1923 a national state had to be established and a society organized. There was to be no return of lost Armenian property or restitution for what had been lost any more than there was to be return or restitution for the vast amount of Muslim property destroyed by Russian and Armenian forces.

Akın has written a very worthwhile book when it comes to the suffering of the general Ottoman population. On the fate of the Armenians, however, he cleaves closely to the line followed by Taner Akçam, Fatma Müge Göcek and other partisan writers on the Armenian side of the fence. Of course, histories should not have fences, but on the Armenian question it seems that they do. While interpretations and statistics are naturally contested, the absence of Muslim victims of Armenian violence except in the most nominal way, in Yiğit Akın’s book as well as others, seriously distorts the course of events. Unfortunately, on this issue, the author reinforces an unbalanced mainstream narrative instead of challenging it.

7 See Akın, “The Refugee Crisis and Demographic Engineering,” pp.176-80.