

“For the resolution of the Armenian problem it is necessary to establish a joint historical commission with a full access to all archives.”

Edward J. Erickson

Professor of Military History, Marine Corps University

Interview: Habibe Isik

Could you set a brief framework of the Ottoman- Armenian relations before the WW1 period?

Ottoman-Armenian relations were difficult after 1878 when the Treaty of Berlin dictated that the Ottoman institute Armenian reforms. This contributed to the rise of the Armenian Revolutionary Committees whose objective was independence or, failing that, autonomy. Revolutionary Committees were not something special to the Ottoman Empire or even to the oppressive multinational empires of the time; they also appeared in democracies. The rebellions organized, planned and carried out by the committees changed their source of inspiration from reaction to oppressions into ideological and national identities, after which the nature of rebellions changed in Europe in the mid-nineteenth century.

How did Armenian problem arise? What were their demands and goals? Did they achieve their goals and demands?

The Armenians were one of a number of Ottoman minorities who desired independence. Other minorities seeking independence included the Arabs, the Kurds and the Lebanese Christians. The Armenian revolutionary Committees were committed to using terrorism and violence to achieve their goals.

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Is it true to say that there was a real Armenian rebellion of Armenians? If exists, what are the internal and international dynamics of that rebellion?

There was no large-scale Armenian rebellion in 1915. However, some Armenians, notably the intelligentsia and the professional class, were members of the Armenian Revolutionary Committees. Some extreme members of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (the most violent and dangerous Armenian committee) conspired with the Allies to start a rebellion in support of the Russian attacks. These Armenian Revolutionary Committees convened worldwide congresses, declared manifestos and declarations after 1892. They secretly set up and trained military units within the Ottoman Empire. These committees rooted and centered outside also founded apparently peaceful and corresponding committees within the Empire. These legal committees were acting freely and consisted of well known persons of local communities such as teachers, priests, tradesmen and city mayors. These inner committees were encouraging nationalism and exalting military actions presented as personal defense against oppression. Thus Armenian committees developed a bilateral organization which contained both legal political organizations and secret armed military cells at the same time. This evolutionary Armenian structure became a model for the other rebellious ethnic groups in the Empire in building their own organizations.

How did these ethnic rebellions affect the Ottomans?

The breaking out of the ethnic rebellions caused two serious results on the Ottomans. The first result was that the activities of the committees that lasted for twenty years in the Balkans and the East Anatolia engaged the Ottoman military in the meantime. The rebellion of the committees became a source of worry and continued so until the last periods of the Empire. The main concern and the focus of almost all Ottoman Army officers showed a change from the conventional war toward an unconventional warfare. The second and perhaps a more serious result was the change that happened in the Ottoman understanding concerning the nature of rebellions, which was evident from the Ottomans' military responds. The rise of revolutionary committees in the Balkan and Anatolian cities caused radical changes in the Ottomans' conduct and management of the rebellions.

Could you explain the goals and activities of the Armenian committees in the eastern of cities Ottoman Empire?

The goal of the committees in 1915 was to assist the Allies in winning the war and then, later on after peace was declared, to declare an independent Armenian republic.

What were the activities of the Armenian committees when the WW1 broke out and what were the Ottomans' opinion of them?

The years between 1912 and 1914 became a period of military disaster for the Ottomans when the war broke out in the fall of 1912. The fail of the suppression operations against the rebellions in the borders and the loss of Libya to Italians and the other consecutive defeats in 1912 enabled the CUP (the Community of Union and Progress) to take control of the power. As the General war broke out in Europe, the Ottomans began to consider the increasingly hardening nationalism of Armenian Committees as a serious threat against the security of the Empire.

A short period after the beginning of the war rumors spread that Armenians collaborating with Bulgarians massacred Muslims near Kavalla. The Dashnaks started to deny the allegations by saying that there were no Armenians in the list of accused people and by publishing the witness and the telegrams sent by the survivors of the Ottoman units indicating that Armenians had no role in the massacre.

The defeats in the Balkan wars prepared the conditions for the CUP to come to power, which created a fear among the Armenian committees. Even though among Armenians there were clearly different opinions like either supporting evolutionary actions or remaining loyal to the Government, there was also an evident general unanimity among Armenians for more armament of committees and re-consolidation of their strongholds with more armed militia.

Could you explain the ideological factors that constituted the structure of Armenian Committees?

Many committee members were socialists and some were Marxists. It is difficult to generalize their ideology, but it is fair to say, that many accepted the need for terrorism and violence as legitimate means to achieve their goals.

Why Ottoman Empire has decided to relocation of Armenians? For Ottoman Empire, fighting with scarce resources during WW1, isn't it a risky decision?

Yes, however, because the army was heavily engaged in fighting the Allies on the war fronts, the Ottoman government had few choices.

The decision of relocating Armenians began with the sending of population at certain localities, but mounted to a campaign of regional relocation that covered six provinces in May 1915 and became an extended reaction to Armenian rebellions. As I said before there was not-

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hing that the Ottomans could do other than that. A large scale military intervention including the use of force as exercised between 1890 and 1912 was no longer possible. Western type of relocation of population was of use for the Spanish, the Americans and the English. Therefore it is quite understandable why the Ottomans did not incline to use a counter-rebellion policy by using their military sources at the minimum level to deal with the Armenian rebellions. In 1915 the relocation was an effective strategy for the Ottomans born out of weakness rather than strength.

Was relocation policy a necessity for the Ottomans in the WW1 on the grounds of national security?

Yes it was a necessity from the Ottoman Government's point of view of the happening events. In fact the revolutionary Armenian committees were a direct threat to the logistic lines used for the provision of supplies to the ottoman armies fighting in three fronts. Especially the failure in providing the required supplies to the Ottoman army in contact with the Russian armies in the East Anatolia would conclude with a military defeat of the Ottoman Empire. With the eventual decision of relocation, the Ottoman Empire survived and could fight until the end of 1918.

Why relocation policy is just enforced to the Armenians living in the Eastern side of the Empire?

The 'Lines of Communications' (roads and transportation networks) necessary to supply the Ottoman Third Army, then fighting the Russians, with food, ammunition, and fodder, ran directly through many cities and areas inhabited by Ottoman Armenians. The relocations removed the Armenians in those areas that threatened these lines of communications. Armenians elsewhere, particularly in the west, were not relocated en masse.

It has been historically registered that the Ottoman government's relocation policies toward Armenian people have been determined according to certain provinces that were considered as battle ground and carried special interests in terms of military and national security. Similarly documents have demonstrated that the Ottoman Government had not considered all Ottoman Armenians as "internal enemy" but to the contrary it was quite aware of the fact that many Ottoman Armenians were loyal citizens.

Does Union and Progress Party or any other group in management segments of Ottoman Empire have a real tendency to eradicate Armenians? What do you say about the Armenian genocide claims?

There is no conclusive and authentic evidence to day which proves that the CUP intended to eradicate the Armenians. Such evidence may exist somewhere, but to date, it has not surfaced.

In your book, you have explained different opinions about relocation of Armenians. Can you briefly mention that? What do you think about that issue?

There are a number of opinions about why the Armenians were relocated. I believe the reason was military. Others believe that the CUP intended to eradicate the Armenians, other believe that the CUP wanted to engage in 'population engineering' to change the demographic composition of eastern Anatolia.

At that time, was there any other way to sustain the security of Ottoman Empire except the relocation policy? How do you evaluate that policy in regard to the human rights?

This is a good question and I don't think there was another way. The CUP could not wait until an actual rebellion broke out. This is like waiting for a cancer to metastasize. Regarding human rights, the Ottoman government attempted to insure the well-being and protection of the relocated persons, but failed.

Bediuzzaman Said Nursî, as an Islamic scholar who has fought against Armenians at the eastern front during WW1, has stated in some of his books that Ottoman relief and prosperity is linked to the friendship with Armenians. At the same time, he sympathized with the rights that are given to the Armenians during the second constitutionalist period and states Armenians should have the same rights as the Muslims. How do you evaluate his vision and opinions in regards to the today's Turkish-Armenians relations?

There is no question that the Armenians were an important part of the Ottoman economy, as were the Jews, and keeping them intact as full partners in the war effort would have helped the Ottomans more than relocating them. Granting them full citizenship rights in the second constitutionalist period might have been possible. However, when the CUP seized control, it is hard to imagine that they were willing to create an inclusive society within which minorities were politically represented.

What have been the results of the relocation?

The results were very important. Just as it happened in the American, British and Spanish experiences the number of the people relocated exceeded in a very short time the capacity for which the government could

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care for. Camps built for the relocated Ottoman Armenians along the valleys of the Euphrates unintentionally transformed into death camps disrepute with malnutrition, diseases, and negligence. What worsened the situation were the attacks and slaughtering took place without any provocations while the relocated Armenians were moving along the routes towards. Probably these dreadful events were the undesirable conclusions of the governmental policies and military strategies designed to remove “the inner enemies” for the national security.

What are your suggestions to Turkey which has accused to the genocide claims?

The Turkish government should ignore it and continue to advocate the establishment of a joint historical commission to fully expose all archives and establish a set agreed upon facts.

What are your suggestions for solving that problem?

Nothing will solve this problem will solve this problem except the passage of time. It will take several more generations for historians to interpret these events and several more generations for the Armenian Diaspora to forget the past.

