The Great Game of Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism, and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians by Donald Bloxham

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The Massacres of Ottoman Armenians and the Writing of Ottoman History


In the late 1960s (when I entered graduate studies), there was an elephant in the room of Ottoman studies—the slaughter of the Ottoman Armenians in 1915.1 This subject continued to be taboo for a long time to come. To the best of my knowledge, no one ever suggested that the so-called “Armenian question” not be studied. Rather, a heavy aura of self-censorship hung over Ottoman history writing. Other topics—as diverse as religious identities, or the Kurds, or labor history—were also off limits. The Armenians were not alone as subjects of scholarly neglect and avoidance, nor as victims of state-sanctioned violence and discrimination within the Ottoman Empire.

As Ottomanists remained largely silent, other writers were offering Armenians’ points of view, using both the oral testimony of Armenian survivors or the records of European and American diplomats and missionaries who witnessed, at greater and lesser distances, the atrocities of 1915. Journals, memoirs, and village reconstructions appeared in relatively substantial numbers and presented, usually in anger or sorrow, the stories of the victims, and sometimes their communities, before their disappearance. Much of this work was initially by Armenians in the first generation of their diaspora and more recently by scholars who often, but not always, were Armenian-Americans.2

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1 I define Ottoman studies as the examination of the Ottoman historical record through the use of a multitude of sources, always including a significant body of Ottoman-language materials.

2 Bloxham quotes many of these sources. Some village studies have appeared in English.
In the 1980s, another body of writing began to emerge, in both Turkish and English, using Ottoman sources, with titles like *Documents on Ottoman Armenians*. It quickly became evident that the authors were not writing critical history but polemics that moved along two fronts. Many of their works were directly sponsored and published by the Turkish government and offered either English or modern Turkish translations and sometimes reproductions of Ottoman documents. Overall, these translations were intended to demonstrate that after the Ottoman government ordered the deportation of the Armenians from the eastern Anatolian war zones in the spring of 1915, the regime went to considerable trouble to protect the lives and properties of its departing subjects. More or less simultaneously, a second body of Ottomanist literature appeared. These studies added to the account that the years from 1911 to 1922 witnessed a terrible bloodletting for all Ottoman subjects and that Muslims died in greater numbers than did Christians during the conflagrations.

After the long lapse of serious Ottomanist scholarship on the Armenian question, it now appears that the Ottomanist wall of silence is crumbling. In 1998, for example, the *Armenian Forum* published articles by several Ottomanists, as well as Armenian specialists, in which the scholars actually talked to, instead of past, one another; they sought to engage in constructive dialogues on the massacres and not simply to speak to their own constituencies. A remarkable set of events, perhaps even a permanent break in the wall, occurred in late 2005. A Turkish university managed to hold a two-day conference exploring the events of 1915. The Turkish government had blocked several earlier efforts. This time, however, despite official intimidation and public harassment, Turkish historians and other Turkish academics debated and discussed this once-forbidden subject.

Such is the backdrop for a discussion of Bloxham’s *The Great Game of Genocide*. Although the book has many faults and short-
comings, it is intellectually honest and makes important contributions to shattering the taboos that still prevail. The author has strong biases, but readers will detect the presence of a scholar struggling with complex political, economic, and moral issues.

From this reviewer’s perspective—as expressed in The Ottoman Empire (Cambridge, 2000)—Ottoman civil and military personnel in 1915 committed mass murders of Armenian subjects, persons whom they were sworn and bound to protect and defend. As I wrote in the second edition to my book, however, debate that centers around the term genocide may degenerate into semantics and deflect scholars from the real task at hand, to understand better the nature of the 1915 events.

My concern about the term genocide is partly a reflection of the current state of debate among Ottomanists and the reluctance of both these professional historians and the Turkish government to consider the fate of the Armenians. These politics mean that use of genocide creates more heat than light and does not seem to promote dispassionate inquiry. Moreover, genocide evokes implicit comparisons with the Nazi past, which precludes a full understanding of the parameters of the Ottoman events. Nonetheless, I use the term in the context of this review. Although it may provoke anger among some of my Ottomanist colleagues, to do otherwise in this essay runs the risk of suggesting denial of the massive and systematic atrocities that the Ottoman state and some of its military and general populace committed against the Armenians. Indeed, as I state in the second edition, accumulating evidence is indicating that the killings were centrally planned by Ottoman government officials and systematically carried out by their underlings. Bloxham sometimes offers inadequate evidence to buttress his arguments concerning the central planning of the massacres. For example, he documents a spring 1915 decision to deport “all of the Armenians” from an area in western Anatolia by citing a Berlin newspaper, Berliner Tageblatt, of 4 May 1916 (78, n. 88). Citing a secondary source dated a year after an event is not presenting sufficient historical evidence and does not make a convincing case.

Nonetheless, what happened to the Armenians readily

6 For more persuasive documentation, see Taner Akçam, From Empire to Republic: Turkish Nationalism and the Armenian Genocide (New York, 2004). 145.
satisfies the U.N. definition of genocide. Furthermore, Bloxham is correct to say, “The 1915–16 genocide was a one-sided destruction of a largely defenceless community by the agents of a sovereign state” (99). Leaving aside any reservations about using the term genocide, which did not become part of the international lexicon until after World War II, to describe events during World War I, the question remains: How do we frame discussions of the systematic widespread slaughters that have occurred in the past?

The Armenians had coexisted in relative peace for most of the period during which they were under Ottoman administration. The Armenian massacres of the mid-1890s, 1909, and World War I were not the inevitable outcome of preexisting primordial divides but were historically contingent events. What caused them?

Bloxham’s book is divided into two parts. In the first, he surveys late Ottoman history and the genocide (he has no qualms about using this term coined in the late 1930s). He then devotes slightly more than half of his work to exploring the complicity of the Great Powers in the perpetration of the Ottoman atrocities of 1915 and in supporting the denials of the Turkish Republic following the elimination of the Ottoman Empire. Bloxham offers a study of imperialism in the Near and Middle East and its consequences for the peoples of the region. Toward the end of the book, he summarizes his own contribution as “the sorry history of the manipulated aspirations of supplicant peoples by the Great Powers” (225). Bloxham describes his goal as “an analysis of the way that the Armenian question continued periodically and tragically to intersect with the greater imperial and military policies of the powers” (133). The book is much stronger in Parts II and III, in which he discusses the involvement of the Great Powers and presents considerable original research. The earlier chapters in Part I are weaker, at least partly because Bloxham did not utilize much of the new scholarship on Ottoman history that would have provided him with richer insights into the structure of Ottoman society and the state.7

7 For the new scholarship, see Beshara Doumani, Rediscovering Palestine: Merchants and Peasants in Jabal Nablus, 1700–1900 (Berkeley, 1995); Dina Khoury, State and Provincial Society in the Ottoman Empire: Mısır, 1540–1834 (New York, 1997); Usama Makdisi, The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History and Violence in Nineteenth Century Ottoman Lebanon (Berkeley, 2000); Eugene L. Rogan, Frontiers of the State in the Late Ottoman Empire: Transjordan, 1850–1921 (New York, 1999); Kemal Karpat, The Politicization of Islam: Reconstructing Identity, Faith, and Community in the Late Ottoman State (New York, 2001); Akçam, From Empire to Republic.
Bloxham does not consult Ottoman archival sources. In fact, he uses few Turkish secondary ones. Thus, his is not an Ottomanist tract according to the definition given above—that is, a study that uses Ottoman-language sources in significant measure. His is always the externalist view, events as seen from the outside by Europeans and Americans. He does not offer much insight about developments in the nineteenth century from an Ottoman point of view, whether domestic or international politics or the massacres themselves. In this sense, his book resembles Fromkin’s *A Peace to End All Peace*, which, despite the praise of many historians, is deeply troubling for its nearly complete dependence on non-Ottoman sources for its analysis of the end of the Ottoman Empire. But, in Bloxham’s defense, his goal is not to examine the events of 1915 for their own sake, but to trace the complicity of the Great Powers in them and in their subsequent cover-up. But his willingness to use the Turkish government’s compilations of Ottoman documents is fraught with peril, since it seems to validate the academic legitimacy of material that is no less problematical than the German White, French Yellow, British Blue, and the other colored “books” that the various Great Powers assembled to demonstrate their innocence regarding the outbreak of World War I.

Bloxham relies heavily on a host of German, Austro-Hungarian, French, British, and U.S. primary and secondary sources. However, he does not give a sufficient narrative of the unfolding of the 1915 genocide. Since many people, among them Ottomanists, deny its reality, and many others do not know the details but often only the polemics, Bloxham might have offered a summary of the events themselves.

Bloxham’s exoneration of Imperial Germany from any particular wrongdoing in the slaughter and its aftermath is persuasive. He is right not to transfer onto the Wilhelmine Reich the sins of the Third. By dividing responsibility equally among the Germans, Austro-Hungarians, British, French, and Americans, he drives home the point that if the Great Powers, as a group, had acted differently, the horrors of 1915 might have been averted. He shows how the particular alignments in 1914—Britain, France, and Rus-

8 David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace: The End of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East* (London, 2000).

sia versus Germany and Austria-Hungary—created a favorable atmosphere for bigots within the Ottoman government to gain influence over key parts of the state apparatus (66). Imperialism had specific effects on Ottoman political decision making.

Bloxham also makes clear that the United States—the imperialist power of our own age—follows, for raison d’etat, the same strategy of conveniently looking the other way that its imperial predecessors established in the Middle East. Indeed, for much of the history of the Turkish Republic, U.S. businessmen, diplomats, and politicians have remained silent about the events of 1915, favoring the new nation-state for its stabilizing role. “American diplomats also swiftly learned that there was no political capital to be made in the Armenian cause” (24). Later, the Cold War and Turkey’s role as a crucial U.S. ally perpetuated the pattern. Even the American Protestant missionaries who had worked among the Ottoman Armenians were caught up in the new politics. The Near East Mission, in an April 1948 report, wrote of its own role in the Cold War as “a bulwark against Communism.”10 Indeed, Bloxham is sharply critical of America’s distancing itself from the Armenian cause. He entitles a chapter of his book “The USA: From Non-intervention to Non-recognition,” and he rebukes Congress for its annual refusal to commemorate the Armenian Genocide.

In common with many Ottomanists and non-specialists alike, Bloxham consistently betrays a careless use of the terms Turk and Turkish when referring to the Ottoman state or some of its Muslim subjects. In this regard, he has plenty of company. For example, in a richly detailed and important recent book on his years of reporting about the Middle East, Fisk includes a powerful and disturbing chapter about the Armenian massacres that often parallels Bloxham’s arguments. Although its title—“The First Holocaust”—is neither illuminating nor helpful, since it focuses attention on comparisons with the Nazis rather than analyses of the specificities of 1915, the chapter itself offers substantial, and effective, eyewitness testimony, much of it from interviews that Fisk gathered from aged Armenian survivors during the early 1990s. Unfortunately, however, Fisk proceeds as if the Ottoman Empire scarcely existed;

he almost always—anachronistically—substitutes Turk or Turkish for the historically accurate term Ottoman.11

Bloxham, by contrast, clearly knows better, but he too very often writes Turkish when he means Ottoman. Within the space of a single paragraph, he refers to “Turkish suspicion” and “Ottoman troops,” and, even worse, in two consecutive sentences, he wavers from “the Ottoman army” to “the Turkish armies” (84, 100). That he is aware of the difference between Ottomans and Turks is clear from the various points at which he specifically distinguishes them (say, 62, 106). But too often, frequently on the same page, he slips back and forth.

Thus do Bloxham, Fisk, and many others create confusion around a key issue. Who committed the deportations and slaughters? On a moral plane, does the elision of Turk and Ottoman mean that modern-day Turks are liable for the sins of the Ottomans? On the historical plane, were the killers Ottoman officials bent on saving the state in a wartime crisis, or were they Turkish chauvinists or racists bent on purging the land of its non-Turkish populations? Bloxham seems to believe the latter to be the case (94, 135). In one of his milder formulations, he argues that the military commanders of the early Turkish Republic were as “equally nationalistic” as officers of the late Empire. But this characterization of the Ottoman officers as Turkish nationalists is too simplistic and unfair. Many of these officers remained loyal Ottomanists until the elimination of the Empire.

Thus, even though, at many junctures, Bloxham labors to establish historical contingency, his narrative has an air of inevitability about it. He rushes to judgment too hastily about the ideological bent of the late Ottoman civil and military leadership, fully ignoring and thus summarily dismissing the opposing position (58–59). Considerable scholarship, based on Ottoman archival sources and other materials, suggests that most of the Ottoman leadership during the final decade of the Empire’s existence remained committed to an ideology and system in which Ottoman subjects would, or should, be loyal to the state.12 These works explicitly reject the notion of a pervasive Turkish nationalism or

12 See, for example, Hasan Kayal, Arabs and Young Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism and Nationalism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908–1918 (Berkeley, 1997).
Pan-Turkic movement, arguing instead for the persistence of Ottomanism well after the events of 1915. Indeed, some of them maintain that Ottoman Muslim nationalism caught up in the crisis of saving the state during wartime precipitated the slaughter. Bloxham certainly has the right to disagree with these contentions, but he needs to acknowledge and debate them, lest he fall into the same trap as those who deny the genocide altogether, content to ignore evidence against their own cherished positions. The connection between Ottoman and Republican Turkish policies toward Armenians richly deserves further study, but Bloxham’s elisions of Ottoman and Turkish by no means serve to promote such a project.

Also problematical is Bloxham’s oversimplified assessment of the policies that Sultan Abdulhamid (1876–1909) directed toward Ottoman Muslims (46–48, 55). Bloxham is determined to portray this ruler as a proto-Islamist, whereas much of the recent Ottomanist literature presents him primarily as a monarchist intent on propping up his legitimacy. Abdulhamid’s instruments of legitimation included charitable donations, rebuilding the tombs of earlier Ottoman sultans, and appeals to fellow Muslims. Bloxham ignores the first two and stresses the third, thereby gravitating to those aspects of the Sultan’s rule that reinforce pre-existing notions of Ottoman brutality toward the Armenians instead of exploring late Ottoman methods of statecraft. Abdulhamid hardly deserves to be cleared from any guilt in the massacres that took place on his watch; in fact, research links him with the Armenian massacres of 1895 in Istanbul. But the effect of Bloxham’s one-dimensional portrait of him is to shortchange our understanding of a complex ruler. It is no less a blight on Bloxham’s otherwise compelling analyses and insights as is his careless conflation of Ottomans and Turks. Such a gap in the Ottoman context is the equivalent of studying Rwanda-Burundi during the 1990s only from the

perspective of the U.N. and the U.S., but not of the actual participants in the tragedy.

Given its focus on the foreign policy of the Great Powers, the book is sufficiently documented. One confusing note, however, occurs at a key point in Bloxham’s discussion of a meeting in an eastern Anatolian town at which prominent government leaders “agitated for an immediate massacre” of certain Ottoman Armenians. Bloxham reports the meeting as taking place on April 18, 1915, but the footnote cites an April 15, 1915, source for it. Elsewhere in the same footnote, Bloxham cites an April 22, 1915, source for a different matter, the passage of irregular troops (83 n. 142). Either one of the dates relating to the meeting is a typographical error, or the April 22 source is the one that actually documents the meeting. Such an error should not have crept into the final manuscript; it will only give credence to those who wish to deny and invalidate the author’s arguments—more the pity, given the moral integrity in Bloxham’s treatment of a subject over which actual blood and not merely scholars’ ink has been spilt.16

Bloxham’s contributions are many. He calls for a “normalization [his stress] of the study of state-sponsored mass murder... that... emerges... often piecemeal, informed by ideology but according to shifts in circumstances” (69). He criticizes the Eurocentric bias among many critics of these Ottoman events who neglect imperial Germany’s slaughter of the Herero and Nama peoples in Southwest Africa. Similarly, the silence surrounding the 1880s Czarist massacres of Muslim Circassians (who would later themselves slaughter Armenians) and the killings of Ottoman Muslims either by Ottoman Christian subjects of the sultan or by the newly independent states in the former Ottoman Balkans is untenable. A double racism appears to be at work. Observers are willing to condemn atrocities by the Ottomans against Armenians, but, as Bloxham says, they seem to worry less when the victims are those not like us, in this case the Herero peoples or Muslims during the final Ottoman decades.

To his credit, Bloxham also places the denials of the republican Turkish state in the eighty years since its formation in historical context. He notes that Turkey’s leaders feared that “the atten-

16 I refer also to the assassination of many Turkish diplomats by Armenians during the 1980s.
tion of the outside world on matters Armenian” simply would be a pretext for interfering in internal Turkish affairs or making claims on Turkish territory (111). These republican Turkish concerns are not dissimilar to those of certain Ottoman leaders that Armenian nationalist claims, coupled with Russian imperial ambitions, would lead to the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire.

Bloxham’s assessment of the positions that the Great Power individually espoused is particularly strong. Austria-Hungary, another empire struggling with its late nineteenth-century multi-ethnicity, behaved cautiously toward the Armenians. Britain, however, opportunistically “adopted publicity of the massacres” as a means of wooing U.S. “public opinion against the Central Powers” at a point when the American entry into the war was uncertain (128). Bloxham also offers a thoughtful, multifaceted explanation of why the post–World War I trials “to punish Ottoman leaders for crimes against humanity” fell apart (163). The Great Powers’ postwar politics and the lack of legal mechanisms available “for the prosecution of a state’s mass murder of its own civilians” combined to limit the possibility of a full examination of the wartime massacres (163).

Near the end of the study, Bloxham is able to draw only a gloomy conclusion from his research: “If there is a concrete policy implication from this book, it is not for Ankara but for the Armenian diaspora, whose lobbyists should stop putting hope in the agenda of the USA and the major European states” (225).

The recent works by Bloxham and Fisk, among others, illustrate a long-standing pattern in the scholarship concerning 1915 and its aftermath. Ottomanists (like me) have long surrendered academic study of this vital topic to those unable or unwilling to use the Ottoman archives and other Ottoman-language sources, failing to take their rightful responsibility to perform the proper research. Oddly, Ottomanists fall into a camp of either silence or denial—both of which are forms of complicity. Those who have the linguistic and paleographic tools to unlock the truth must not leave the matter for others to debate and resolve. How can we expect Bloxham and Fisk to write accurately about the role of Ottomans (not Turks) in the deaths of so many Armenians when Ottomanists provide no guidance, no leadership, and no scholarship?
Bloxham’s book is a worthy addition to a mounting literature that seeks, through critical scholarship, to discuss the horrors of the past and their legacies for the living. The best hope is that it will stimulate Ottomanists to engage the issues that he has raised and encourage the dialogue that has begun to emerge between heretofore sharply divided legatees and their supporters.