

International Conference

Zurich, 28 – 31th October

Ottoman Cataclysm: Total War, Genocide and Distant Futures in the Middle East (1915 – 1917)

Seyhan Bayraktar, San Francisco

Thomas Schmutz, Newcastle

Seyhan.Bayraktar@foeg.uzh.ch

thomas.schmutz@gmx.ch

The symposium was held in Zurich and consisted of seven panels and three roundtables including the screening of a documentary. A group of internationally renowned historians discussed the demise of the Ottoman Empire, a turning point in the history of the Middle East and Europe, taking its ethnic, religious and social fabric in the 1910s into consideration. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire was also a period of massive destruction, human suffering, and squandered opportunities for peace. The conference discussed current debates on World War I in the Ottoman world and the possible impacts of the revisionist historiography on the history-writing of wider Europe and the Middle East.

In his keynote lecture DONALD BLOXHAM (Edinburgh) put the Armenian genocide into a broader geopolitical context – what he calls a “greater Europe” or “western Eurasia” – of conflict and mass murder. This period is linked across time and space in terms of extreme violence in states established in the wake of Ottoman collapse. He focused on ethno-religious violence from the “eastern crisis” of 1875-8 to the present, considering in turn the violent expulsion of Muslims from the Balkans, the murder of Christians in the Ottoman Empire, and then the murder of Jews across Christian Europe under Nazi influence. The final part of his lecture was devoted to considering American-led intervention in post-Ottoman spaces.

Panel 1

The first panel focused on historiographical issues on the Ottoman World War I. MUSTAFA AKSAKAL (Georgetown) argued that some of the key topics at the center of current research were already raised in the first accounts of contemporary writers. Aksakal concluded that this awareness was in striking contrast to the silence with regard to the fate of the Armenians. NAZAN MAKSUDYAN (Istanbul) presented new approaches in social history. The interest in the non-military and non-lethal aspects of the First World War has led to an opening of new research fields. One important emerging area of analysis are surviving children as primary witnesses of the war. ELISABETH THOMPSON (Columbia) talked about the new scholarship on Arab historiography and revealed a shift in the scholarly approaches from the level of the political elites to the level “of those who experienced” it. Thompson also criticized the widespread notion of Arab history as a shift away from Ottoman loyalty to Arab Nationalism and argued that Arab political articulation of the period was decidedly inclusive as the debates surrounding the Damascus Conference of 1920 would show.

Panel 2

EROL KÖROĞLU (Istanbul) talked about the role of the triumph of Gallipoli in Turkey's nationalist history writing and how popular literature developed it into a vehicle of nationalist propaganda. In contrast to the under-representation of WWI in Turkish collective memory of modern Turkey, the Gallipoli War has played an exceptionally important role as the harbinger of the Turkish Independence War. DANIEL SEGESSER (Bern) added a transnational perspective of the commemoration of Gallipoli. By analyzing monuments, places and streets names, he pointed to the crucial role of this narrative in Australia and New Zealand. In contrast, India, France and Britain have no similar use of this narrative in their collective memory.

Panel 3a

PETER HOLQUIST (Philadelphia) explained the impact of Russian strategy and policies on the Caucasus front. He stressed that there is also a Russian "cataclysm". Holquist argued that Russia did not orchestrate a unique master plan for the conduct of war in the Caucasus but practiced rather "ad hoc" policies when occupying Eastern Anatolia. Russian military officials were sensitive to the ethnic problems in the occupied regions, but had to adapt to the social reality of the war. RAYMOND KÉVORKIAN (Paris) focused on the geographical aspects of the deportation of the Armenians. He emphasized the role of statistical information and data about the deportations. Although there are many micro-historical analyses, historians fear oversimplifying the events by summarizing the data. We should combine this data to the big picture.

Panel 3b

Panel 3b called for a new history with regard to Ottoman resistance towards genocidal policy. MEHMET POLATEL's (Istanbul) key issue was the murdering of Armenians and seizure of their properties in the Bitlis region during the genocide. In this region, where most of the Christian inhabitants were killed on site, the Ottoman government collaborated with local actors including tribal leaders and sheiks due to its lack of capacity in the region. Local actors had relative autonomy in carrying out the genocidal policy of the CUP. This observation was shared by HILMAR KAISER (Phnom Penh) with his case study of the Angora province. There, resistance against the extermination of Armenians in the summer of 1915 was comparably broad based. Top civil and military officials worked for the survival of Armenians as did urban notables and Muslim clerics in a rural area. Although they adhered to divergent political, legal, and religious concepts, they agreed that the CUP was acting outside of the law.

Panel 3c

NAMIK KEMAL DİNÇ (Istanbul) who has conducted a major oral history project in Diyarbakir, talked about how vividly the Armenian genocide is remembered and how it has been transmitted through four generations. Dinc stressed that this living memory stands in striking contrast to the fact that 1915 genocide has been silenced and side-lined in Kurdish historiography and politics. He argued that an actor-centred approach would not only reveal actual perpetratorship and responsibility but also continuities in terms of dominance and suppression of the local Kurdish population after 1915 themselves. TALİN SUCİYAN (Munich) also touched on the issue of silence and asked whether survivors can speak at all when they are not heard. She pointed to the existence of post-genocide Armenian sources that were written by survivors between the 1920s and 1940s and the negligence of historians of Ottoman history to take these accounts into consideration. Suciyan named the various efforts of Armenians to deal with the aftermath of the genocide, and to survive culturally, in a denying society.

Roundtable 1 focused on new debates in the research of the Armenian genocide. The discussants stressed that the Armenian genocide has undergone a process of normalization in the intellectual debate. It can be discussed independently from real-political sensitiveness and power struggles. This led to new research questions such as the connections and differences between the Armenian genocide and the Shoah – as MARGARET LAVINIA ANDERSON (Berkeley) stressed – as well as the continuities in terms of German officers involved in both acts of mass crimes. STEFAN IHRIG (Jerusalem) argued that the new Turkish state and Atatürk were highly respected and perceived as a role-model along “völkisch” lines by high ranking Nazi actors.

Panel 4

Segesser opened the legal perspective. He elaborated the fact that the crimes committed in the Ottoman Empire during the First World War were not the focus of Western jurists, since cases in France and Belgium were much closer to the horizon of their experience and included victims of Western armies. After the war, it was Germany was the focus of important war trials. Segesser explained the special treatment of the Ottoman Empire with the unique history of international law and unequal treaties.

VALENTINA CALZOLARI (Geneva) talked about the literary responses to the Armenian genocide. Calzolari stressed that the act of writing was a means of resilience. The immediate literary responses did not pose the question of why genocide happened, but the fact *that* it happened and *how* it happened. Staying alive meant the burden to bear witness to the event and the duty to disclose it.

Panel 5

YUVAL BEN BASSAT (Haifa) talked about enciphered telegrams. They allow us to examine some of the most controversial issues in the national historiographies of the Levant, in particular the Jewish and Arab narratives. Ben Bassat analyzed the relationship between Cemal Pasha and the Jewish community. As a case study, the cities of Jaffa and Gaza show the internal communication of the Ottoman army and the crisis management of Cemal facing the British advancement. DOTAN HALEVY (New York) underlined Ben Bassat's statement that Cemal remains controversial. Zionist correspondence regarding the evacuation of the two cities were constantly checkered with the fear of an “Armenian Fate”. Despite the fact that Cemal became more sensitive in March 1917, his treatment of the Ottoman Jews was guided by military and not political reasoning.

Panel 6

This panel dealt with high-ranking perpetrators of the Armenian genocide. OZAN OZAVCI (Paris) analysed how Djavid Pasha referred to the annihilation politics in his diaries. Although he condemned the murder of the Armenians, he remained silent and inactive. UĞUR ÜNGÖR (Amsterdam) talked about Şükrü Kaya and his role in the Turkish Republic's state-building process. He argued that Kaya's involvement in the Armenian genocide and his later role in the suppression of Kurds in the Republican era show how violence was used as a source of statecraft. HANS-LUKAS KIESER (Zurich) concentrated on Talat Pasha, the top architect of the genocide. Kieser's approach to Talat Pasha considered both his interaction with the imperial Komitajis and Germany. JAN ERIK ZÜRCHER (Leiden) revisited the question of continuity at the leadership level between the Unionists and the Kemalist Republic by analyzing the biographies and the intricate professional and personal relationship of key perpetrators such as Şükrü Kaya, Abdulhalik Renda, Kazım Özalp and Tahsin Uzer.

Roundtable 2 consisted of a book discussion about *World War I and the End of the Ottomans* (I.B. Tauris, 2015). The actors, the focus on the years of “cataclysm” and the contextualization of this book within the series of publications of the centenary lay in the center of the interest. The aim of the book is not only to focus on a short period of radicalization that changed the Middle East but also on the often forgotten dimension of mass murder and genocide within the Great War.

Panel 7 and Roundtable 3

The Dersim genocide of 1938 and the commemorations during the centenary of the Armenian genocide in April 2015 in Turkey were the last two topics of the conference. NEZAHAT GÜNDOĞAN and KAZIM GÜNDOĞA’s (Istanbul) documentary, *Children of the Monastery*, that was screened, deals with the genocide of the Alevis and Armenians of Dersim in 1938 and the experience of the surviving children. The documentary showed how Armenian children grew up in Turkish or Kurdish families, converting to Islam or to Alevism without their families knowing anything about it.

The conference ended with a debate on the contested remembrance in Turkey – particularly with regard to the commemorations on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the genocide in April 2015. SEYHAN BAYRAKTAR (San Francisco) critically addressed this memory boom that – although having considerably increased since the early 2000s – has not challenged the state’s denial politics. She argued that the civil societal engagement in memory discourse has overshadowed the need for a formal acknowledgement and has not lead to a paradigmatic revision of the denial politics either. AYSEGUL ALTINAY (Istanbul) in contrast stressed the diversification of voices and the growing political activism within Turkey with regard to the Armenian genocide over the last 15 years. Altinay gave a vivid account of various commemoration efforts in Istanbul as well as in Eastern Turkey. SOSSIE KASPARIAN (Lancaster) asked how the centenary has challenged and altered the concept of the genocide and its continuing legacies. For her, 100th anniversary indicated a process of normalization where the genocide has finally shifted from being constructed as something controversial and contested to a key case study for intersecting fields of research.

Conclusion

In the context of the centenary, this conference showed the blind spots still prevailing in much of the academic debate about the First World War, Gallipoli and subtopics of military and political history concerning the years 1914-1918. The Ottoman cataclysm plays a marginal role in a history writing that is euro-centric and neglects the role, weight and the legacy of the Ottoman Empire on the Middle East. A critical account is needed that addresses the traditional narrative on the First World War.