

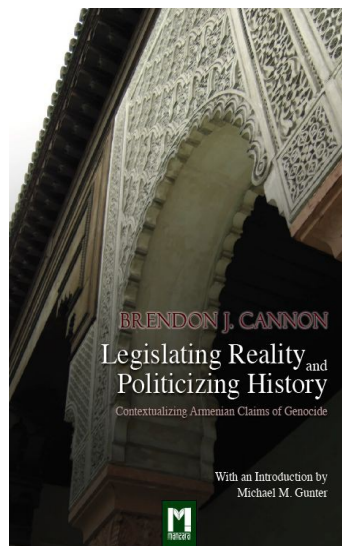


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Reading of:

Brendon J. Cannon

**Legislating Reality and Politicizing
History**
Contextualizing Armenian Claims of Genocide



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF MAPS

INTRODUCTION.....	15
BY MICHAEL M. GUNTER	
CHAPTER 1.....	19
UNDERSTANDING THE EVENTS OF 1915 AND THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE CAMPAIGN	
CHAPTER 2.....	39
MEMORY TRANSMISSION AND IDENTITY	
CHAPTER 3.....	141
A COMPLICATED GENESIS: ARMENIANS AND THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE	
CHAPTER 4.....	229
ARMENIAN DIASPORA POLITICAL ACTIVISM	
CHAPTER 5.....	251
THE GENOCIDE RECOGNITION CAMPAIGN: REASONING AND RATIONALE	
CHAPTER 6.....	279
MASSACRES, NOT GENOCIDE: TURKISH PUBLIC OPINION AND THE OFFICIAL STANCE OF THE TURKISH REPUBLIC	
CHAPTER 7.....	289
WHOSE GENOCIDE AND WHEN? ARMENIAN AND ARMENIAN DIASPORA VISIONS OF THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE	
CHAPTER 8.....	297
THE COST OF GENOCIDE RECOGNITION: DIASPORA DESIRES AND ARMENIA'S SURVIVAL	

CHAPTER 9.....	317
VERTICAL, HORIZONTAL AND DIAGONAL PRESSURE	
CHAPTER 10.....	321
DEALING WITH HISTORICAL ATROCITIES	
CONCLUSION.....	335
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	353

Muslims, it was tolerated by the Russian Czarist government. However, when Russian-supported activities such as Gugunian's raids foundered, assassinations proved embarrassing or when the Armenian nationalism fostered on Russian soil shifted its focus to a free Armenia that necessarily included western *and* eastern Armenia, Russian authorities responded with arrests and exile. Yet even at the height anti-Armenian sentiment amongst Russian government circles in the 1880s and 1890s, when church lands were confiscated and Armenian nationalist activities and raids were discouraged, "...Armenian nationalists revolutionaries refused to concentrate on fighting the Russian autocracy and instead (continued to direct) their activities against the Ottoman Empire."³⁴⁹

Reactions by the Ottoman State

Just as Armenian Dashnak and Hunchak violence often did not differentiate between "innocent" Kurdish or Armenian villagers and "guilty" Ottoman soldiers, so the Ottoman government's reaction to Armenian demands for autonomy and independence was characterized by its lack of nuance. Large-scale arrests occurred in 1893, in Marsovan, after the appearance of placards inciting Armenians to revolt against Ottoman rule. In 1894, after a number of Armenians refused to pay nomadic Kurdish tribes customary tribute and Armenian revolutionary groups indiscriminately attacked and killed large numbers of the Kurdish Bekhran and Zadian tribes, Ottoman troops were deployed. After bitter fighting, the Armenians negotiated a surrender. However, even after their surrender and given the atrocities committed by Armenian nationalists, the massacre of ethnic Armenian villagers that followed did not differentiate in regards to age or sex.³⁵⁰

Why was the Ottoman state so heavy-handed when it came to calls for autonomy, let alone independence? The

³⁴⁹ Ibid, 23.

³⁵⁰ McCarthy, et al., *The Armenian Rebellion at Van*, 56-61.

answer lies with previous calls for autonomy that had directly resulted in the independence of various states such as Bulgaria and Greece at the expense of the Ottoman Empire and accompanied by large-scale ethnic cleansing of Muslims. “According to the Ottoman state's collective memory, the only demand by minorities for any other type of autonomy was that initiated by the Ottoman Greeks. Although they had initially demanded communal autonomy, this soon became a demand for ‘territorial’ autonomy and ultimately led to the formation of an independent Greek state. Thus, the Ottoman state perceived all minority attempts to attain communal autonomy in this vein, that is, as demands for an actual territorial autonomy that would rapidly progress to political independence. This view of autonomy adopted by the Ottoman state became the most significant internal factor to polarize those Ottoman minorities whose political agendas did not already include territorial autonomy or political independence.”³⁵¹ Armenian actions and increasingly vocal calls for outright independence were part of this rubric. Similarly, the often-violent reaction by the Ottoman state was informed by previous, traumatic experiences that involved the loss of territory, wealth and prestige. In essence, the Ottoman Empire was collapsing. The Ottoman state was under no illusion by the late nineteenth century that outright independence for the Empire's minorities would lead to the demise of the Empire itself. As such, it was literally fighting for its life.

By provoking the Ottoman state through violence, Armenian nationalists were implementing a strategy designed to gain the sympathy of the United States, Russia and the European powers and bring about Great Power intervention in the hopes that this would eventually result in a free Armenian state. Cyrus Hamlin, the American founder of Robert College in Istanbul, was told by an “an eloquent defender of the [Armenian] revolution” that the Armenian rebels would “... watch their opportunity to kill Turks and

³⁵¹ Göçek, 532.

Kurds, set fire to their villages, and then make their escape into the mountains. The enraged Moslems will then rise, and fall upon the defenseless Armenians and slaughter them with such barbarity that Russia will enter in the name of humanity and Christian civilization and take possession.”³⁵²

The Hunchak platform actively encouraged the incitement of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire “...against their enemies and were to ‘profit’ from the retaliatory actions of these same enemies.”³⁵³ The American author and self-proclaimed friend of the Armenians, George Hepworth, as saying, “The [Armenian] revolutionists are doing what they can to make fresh outrages possible. That is their avowed purpose. They reason that if they can induce the Turks to kill more of the Armenians, themselves excepted, Europe will be forced to intervene.”³⁵⁴

Incitement to Action: The Armenian Seizure of the Ottoman Bank

The tense situation in eastern Anatolia in the mid-1890s was a result of a number of factors: continued Armenian revolutionary violence and the often-violent Ottoman responses; the overall weakness of the Ottoman state; multiple refugee crises that resulted in the resettlement to eastern and southern Anatolia of uprooted, impoverished and traumatized Muslims from the Balkans, Crete and Transcaucasia; the raids and slaughter of Armenians by nomadic, Kurdish tribes in eastern and southern Anatolia; and the lack of overt European support – military or otherwise – for an independent Armenia. These tensions were further exacerbated when a group of Dashnak revolutionaries seized the Imperial Ottoman Bank in

³⁵² Letter by Cyrus Hamlin in the *Boston Congregationalist*, 23 December 1893, reprinted in United States Department of State, *Papers Relating to Foreign Relations of the United States, 1895*, 1416; as quoted in Lewy, 17-18.

³⁵³ Nalbandian, 110.

³⁵⁴ George H. Hepworth. *Through Armenia on Horseback* (London: Isbister, 1898), 341.

Istanbul on August 26, 1896. Armed with pistols, grenades, dynamite and hand-held bombs, the Dashnaks threatened to blow up the Bank if various demands were not met by the Ottoman government. “The demands [of the Dashnaks] included the appointment of a European high commissioner for the Armenian provinces and a general amnesty for Armenians convicted on political charges.”³⁵⁵

While the Dashnaks were unable to bring about the wanted intervention of European powers or Russia, those who survived the initial efforts by Ottoman authorities to free the bank, did manage to negotiate their escape from the Ottoman Bank and get themselves safe passage to France. This was done via the assistance of European diplomats living in the city. Their actions, rather than achieving a degree of autonomy or protection for Armenians in the Empire, are said to have provoked the first recorded slaughter of Armenians in Istanbul.³⁵⁶

There is evidence that at least some in the Armenian community knew of the impending bank seizure.³⁵⁷ Many wealthy Armenian families left Istanbul that morning. After the seizure, some Ottoman officials reportedly provided Muslims, including Kurds and Laz who held deep-seated grievances and prejudices from experiences in eastern Anatolia, with iron bars and cudgels, inciting them to violence against the Armenian “perpetrators” who also happened to be their neighbors and fellow Ottoman citizens.³⁵⁸ The ensuing slaughter claimed an estimated five to six thousand Armenians, with most of the deaths occurring amongst the very poor.

As noted, the provocations, assassinations, murder of Ottoman Muslims and sabotage performed by Armenian revolutionaries were coldly calculated to provoke the reactive slaughter and murder of fellow Armenians for the consumption of Europeans and Russians via lurid press

³⁵⁵ Ibid, 24.

³⁵⁶ Bloxham, 55.

³⁵⁷ Lewy, 25.

³⁵⁸ William L. Langer. *The Diplomacy of Imperialism: 1890-1902* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1935), vol. 1, 325 as quoted in Ibid.

articles informed by knee-jerk sympathies for Christians and racist views of Turks, in particular, and Muslims, in general. The Ottoman reaction was also cold and indiscriminate. Judging from numerous historical accounts, Ottoman responses to Armenian violence and demands for outright independence varied from province to province and town to town, but resulted in the killing of innocent people. These people may have had no connection to Armenian revolutionary movements, but they were marked because of their Christian, Armenian identity. Men, women and children who fled and survived these massacres often starved to death in the harsh winters or cruel summers of eastern Anatolia. The often severe Ottoman reaction to the violence provoked by Armenian nationalists received widespread coverage in Europe, the United States and Russia and continued to inform the racist image of the "terrible Turk," however erroneous.³⁵⁹

By underlining the highly complex and volatile situation that existed in the Ottoman Empire, but particularly in eastern and southern Anatolia, this book calls attention to the plight and horrific demise of many innocents, both Muslim and Christian. It also underscores the direct links between the often-violent actions of Armenian revolutionaries and the reactive, Ottoman massacres that ensued in the 1890s. These purposely provocative, often murderous Armenian actions and the reactions they provoked represent a startling prelude of what was to befall the Empire and many of its Armenian citizens in 1915. However, prior to those cataclysmic events, the Empire experienced a renaissance of sorts and, for a brief moment in time, a modicum of stability and cooperation between Muslims and non-Muslims ensued.

The Young Turk Period

Fighting and slaughter between Muslims and Armenians continued intermittently in eastern Anatolia until the

³⁵⁹ See Yavuz. "Orientalism, the 'Terrible Turk' and Genocide."