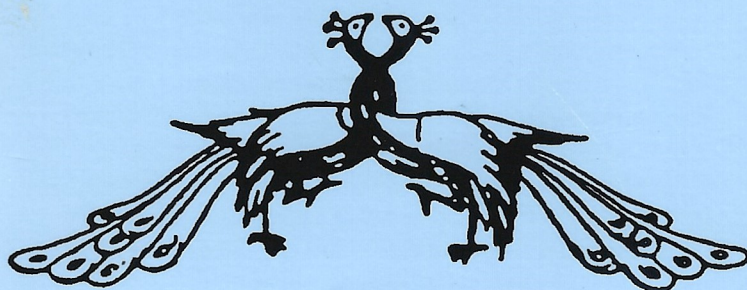


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MERRILL D. PETERSON. *"Starving Armenians": America and the Armenian Genocide, 1915-1930 and After*. Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2004. Pp. xiv + 199. Maps, photos, and index.

Using an amazing array of archival and printed sources, especially missionary memoirs and reports, Merrill Peterson sketches the history of Near East Relief (NER), highlighting Turkish atrocities against Armenians before and after 1915. Looking from another vantage point, however, the book can be seen as the history of the Armenian Genocide and its aftermath, against a backdrop of Near East Relief and missionary activities. Regardless of the perspective, however, the author is telling this "Armenian story" as "warp and woof with the American story" (p. xii). He believes that "the Armenian problem was peculiarly an American problem, made so by America's moral principles and convictions, with which the Armenian people had identified themselves, and its exemplary caretaking role" (p. 97), as he contextualizes Woodrow Wilson's proposed mandate for Armenia. He expands this point of view throughout the narrative while documenting and eloquently presenting what is also his topic delineated in the subtitle as "America and the Armenian Genocide, 1915-1930 and After."

The author's initial inspiration to undertake the enormous task of collecting documents and writing this book came from a rather curious source: his distant childhood memory of his mother's admonishment, "Clean your plate! Think of the starving Armenians!" (p. xi). Later, occasional readings about Armenians, their presence in America, their culture, and their determination to survive, added to his interest as curiosity drove him to use the opportunity offered by the Peace Corps to work in the newly independent Republic of Armenia. His Summer 1997 experience, cut short by a medical discharge, opened more doors for him. It added to his zeal to delve deeper into the history of a peculiar people emerging from an ancient culture and civilization. He describes Armenians and their traumatic experience during the Great War, an occurrence that he freely and unequivocally calls genocide, maintaining that "not to use this word may imply denial or avoidance of the true character of these events" (p. 30).

Peterson depicts the ups and downs of the missionary endeavors and NER activities before and during the darkest years in Armenian history. The situation is illustrated by quotations from letters, reports, and responses to events happening then and there. The author refutes the denialist tendency—that persists to this day—to disregard or discredit various missionary and NER reports of the Armenian sufferings as war propaganda. He quotes Turkish justifications and reasoning for the "events" and demonstrates their irrationality. Furthermore, he rightly rejects the religious factor as being instrumental in the initiation of the Armenian Genocide. As an exception to the assumption he advocates, Peterson tells the story of a mullah who, sword in hand, cuts the throats of one hundred Armenian babies as an order of the prophet Mohammad, a sacrifice to his altar, and concludes that "[t]he genocide produced atrocities of all kinds; however, manifestations of religious fanaticism of this

degree were unusual" (p. 44). Religion was, in effect, not an important factor, but perpetrators knew well how to arouse religious fanaticism in the populace and procure their participation in the carnage. In fact, episodes exemplifying this phenomenon recur frequently in the Armenian Genocide literature.

With all this evidence and an arduous recounting of details, one wonders how anyone can doubt that what happened to Armenians was less than genocide, which, as the author defines, is the annihilation of a race, a minority group in the Ottoman Empire with a distinct culture, religion, ethnicity, and a long history tied to the land, much longer than that of those ruling the country and imagining themselves as the supreme race with a righteous religion.

To date, several historical works based on sound archival materials and documentation have substantiated the truth of the Armenian genocide, while denialists insist that the last word concerning the tragedy has yet to be uttered. Would this new publication make a dent in the denial wall?

As the narrative stretches forward to cover more recent developments, another perturbing question arises. How can anyone doubt that Turkish intolerance against non-Muslims—be it American humanitarian organizations or the scant remnants of religious minorities in Turkey—have ceased?

Turkey, a trusted ally? As Peterson demonstrates, in terms of commerce and financial investments, Turkey has been and is a good partner but has never kept her end of the treaty to assure the smoothness or even the continuation of American educational, religious, and philanthropic work in the country. During the time when a treaty of friendship and commerce between the United States and the new Republic of Turkey was drafted and discussed in the U.S. Congress, several officials from the NER and missionary organizations stood in opposition. Oscar Straus, the ambassador to the Ottoman Empire before 1913, called the treaty "diabolically one-sided" (p. 147). Henry Morgenthau (Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire 1913-16) described it as "a purposeless and humiliating surrender to a red-handed faithless military despot [a reference to Mustafa Kemal]" (Ibid). Longtime devotees of the NER and American missionaries, who struggled all their lives for the cause of humanity, who worked in dire conditions and hostile environment in that backward country and left dispirited and disheartened, knew better not to believe in Turkish promises. Later events confirmed their worst suspicions. In the chapter titled "The Great Betrayal," referring to the book of the same title by Edward Hale Bierstadt (1924), Peterson speaks of the years before and after the ratification of the treaty (the treaty was rejected in 1926, then finally ratified in 1929, the year NER "went out of business" [p. 149]) as years of disappointment and shame for American philanthropists and indignation for the U.S. administration. Indeed, in Bierstadt's own words "That treaty was signed in oil and sealed with the blood of the Greeks and Armenians" (p. 147). Ironically, Bierstadt's analysis of the Turkish-American relationship, in terms of *realpolitik*, stands true to this day.

Faithful to its spirit, the "Epilogue: An Armenian American Chronicle" draws a schematic picture of the Armenian communities in the United States, from immigration difficulties (regulations and quotas) to limited infrastructure

(religious, cultural, and educational institutions), as Armenians struggle to maintain their identity, language, and traditions, while adapting to the American way.

In any such broad-brush study, unavoidable discrepancies (see particularly pages 153-155) emerge. Parodies or simplifications (as in the delineation of the chronology of the phases of massacres and deportations, page 6; the origin of the Armenian nation, page 15; or the renaissance of the Armenian people, page 19) are visible, although they do not diminish the importance of Peterson's great endeavor. This strongly convincing, smoothly flowing narrative, bolstered by reliable source materials and documents, is certainly a valuable source for anyone interested to learn more about the Armenian people and understand the Genocide—which has sadly become a political game in the U.S. Today, the mere mention of the Armenian Genocide in Turkey could be interpreted as a murder warrant, but as the author so firmly asserts, all is not lost for survivors. "The wholly unprecedented American humanitarian response to the Armenian genocide," Peterson ascertains, "though soon forgotten, merits a permanent place in American memory" (p. 177).

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