

Caravans to Oblivion Chronicles Plight of Genocide

Caravans to Oblivion, The Armenian Genocide, 1915

By G.S. Gruber

210 pages including glossary, a list of recommended further reading, and index. New York, Chichester, Brisbane, Toronto, Singapore: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1996.

BY DR. ROUBINA PEROOMIAN

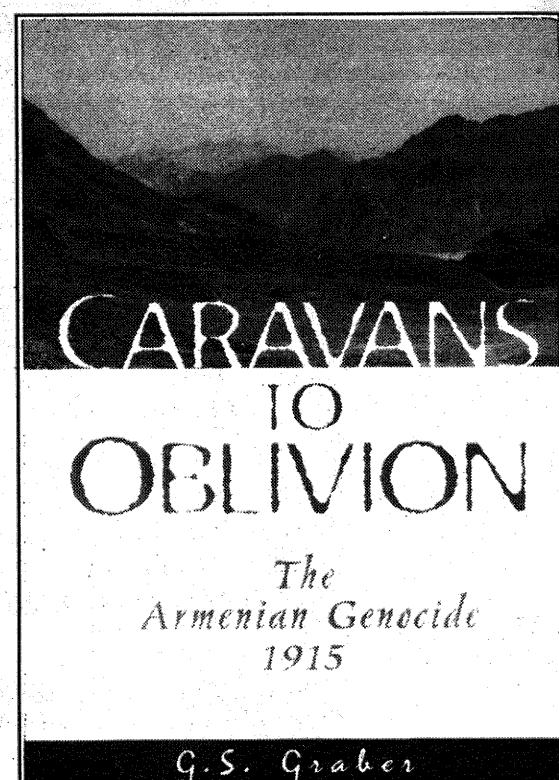
My curiosity aroused by the attractive title and impressive cover design, I begin reading G. S. Gruber's *Caravans to Oblivion*. The exterior features already indicate that this book does not belong to the recently invigorated Turkish campaign to rewrite history. It is not sponsored by an organization or a government. It is, in fact, a personal incentive, a commendable endeavor by an author and historian to pursue the truth about an event which the Turks would so much like the world to forget. Frequent references to scholarly,

familiar works on the subject of Armenian Genocide and World War I and proper end notes are an indication of the serious research that has gone into this work. I have a significant book in my hand.

The foreword by Roger Smith, Professor of Government at the College of William and Mary, explains what genocide is and cites examples of the past and fairly recent occurrences of genocide; thus, putting the Armenian case in the context of world history. Professor Smith does not need to. His foreword, wrought skillfully in a scholarly style, prepares the reader for an unusual reading experience ahead, and account of a formidable crime against an ancient race called Armenians. Indeed, Gruber's unique narrative in the genre of historiography, aims to lay bare the political cover-up of the Armenian Genocide in the embassies in Constantinople and in diplomatic circles abroad while showing, at the same time, the real life, or rather the real hell, in the desert and on the deportation routes.

Gruber's style of writing is very lively and graphic. He makes the most familiar stories

new and interesting. He has set out to write the story of the murder of the Armenian people, and, for readers with no background in the history of that part of the world, he introduces, step by step, the political situation in the prewar Ottoman Empire. With short and colorful strokes, he depicts the rivalry of the big powers of Europe to gain favors in the empire and exert influence upon successive sultans and governments. Caught between the discriminatory treatments of despotic sultans and ambitious Young Turk leaders and the political games played by the big powers are the Armenians whom Gruber defines as the unfortunate minority "without automatic external support" (p. 24). Besides occasional diplomatic notes of warnings, he notes, the only foreign reaction against Armenian persecutions would come from the "foreign press which



might deal vociferously with what was happening to the Armenians, but the Turks had come to view this as so much empty noise. It was unbacked by the force of arms" (p.25).

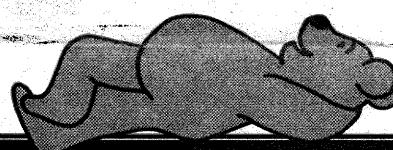
In his attempt to build a historical background for the Armenian Genocide of 1915, Gruber describes the plight of the Armenians in the empire before the turn of the century. He quotes excerpts of testimonies on the massacres of 1894-1896 and the official Turkish stand denying any wrongdoing and blaming the Armenians for spreading anti-Turkish propaganda and provoking bloody incidents to procure foreign intervention. The question arises at the outset: where does the truth lie? "Two hostile groups of scholars representing diametrically opposed viewpoints confront the student keen to learn something about the relations between Ottomans and Armenians at the turn of the century. On one side, Armenian literature gives the picture of an innocent nation duped by cynically delivered promises from abroad while being left at the mercy of sadistic killers. On the other side, Turkey, and her supporters claim that a genocide against Armenians never took place" (p.34).

In the quest of reasons behind the massacres of 1915 and the ideology that drove the Young Turks to commit genocide, Gruber delves into internal state of the affairs and follows the outburst of dissident thoughts among the educated Turks that led to the formation of the Young Turk or Ittihad ve Terraki party. These idealist dissidents struggled for the betterment of life in the Ottoman Empire. They dreamed of a modern state, but their goal from the outset, as Ahmed Riza wrote in 1895, was "fortifying the Ottoman element." As to the minorities in the empire, or more precisely the Armenians now demanding their rights, Gruber shows that the Young Turk leaders, among them Mourat bey, considered them "naive" and the pursuit of an Armenia "a maladroit project." Writing in the 1890s, this Young Turk ideologist criticizes Armenians for seeking help from outside. He blames the "cold blooded calculations" of Armenian revolutionaries, offering up "thousands of their people in a vain attempt to achieve their ends" (p. 39). Gruber calls this a curious evaluation," but this was, indeed, the beginning of the Young Turk campaign to Ottomanize the empire, and Armenians were obstacles along the path.

With the 1908 Young Turk revolution and

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the restoration of the constitution in the Ottoman Empire, "a brief honeymoon did take place ... between the Young Turks and those minorities (Jews, Greeks, Armenians) who also believed that their lot might be improved if representative governments were introduced" (p. 46). The honeymoon ended with the mishaps in Cilicia resulting in a new wave of massacres of Armenians. Gruber asserts that the regiment sent by the government to quell the disturbances entered in conspiracy with the perpetrators.

In terms of sources used, Gruber's work may not be original; in other words, his research is based mainly on printed texts, although some archival materials have also been used. However, the author's selection of sources, his vantage point, his genuine quest for the truth—a theme threading throughout the text—make the work original in its right.

Gruber proves the German-Turkish alliance, "so assiduously fostered by William II and Wangenheim," to be only a liability costing money and reputation for Germans. This point of view is apparently influenced by General Snader's memoirs in which this German officer, in charge of organizing and training the Ottoman army, expresses his unequivocal views of the Ottoman government, army, and top officials. Gruber blames Wangenheim (the German ambassador in Constantinople in the early years of World War I) for "fence-sitting" in various occasions when an intervention could perhaps alleviate the ongoing atrocities. He quotes Wangenheim warning Talaat during the Van "disturbances" that "the German government

hoped the Ottoman authorities would impose discipline locally, so that these disturbances did not translate into an indiscriminate massacre of Armenians" (p. 91).

Impressed with the magnitude of the atrocity and immenseness of the sufferings, Gruber refuses to accept any justifications or explanations by the perpetrators of the crime, the most important among them the alliance of Armenians with Russians in conspiracy to topple the Ottoman government. To further sustain his view, he notes that even before the advance of the Russian army into the Ottoman Empire, massacres and persecutions were taking place, and Armenian refugees were crossing the Russian border to flee the persecutions and wait for things to quiet down. "Survivors, refugees all, sought safety in Russia," he writes, "until Russian armies advanced in a southwesterly direction. Armenians anxious to retrieve their possessions in the vilayets they and their ancestors had called home for centuries often accompanied the advancing Russian armies, hoping the front line of battle would extend southwestward and the Turks would be driven out" (p. 90). It is in this context that he views the incident of Van, labeled by the revisionists as an example of Armenian insurrections as the reason for persecution, Gruber points to the widespread massacres and deportations in the empire. He cites Shefik Bey's testimony that Armenians massacred under his jurisdiction were peaceable folk and that he had not seen any sign of insurrectionary movement or going over to the Russians (p. 110-111).

Gruber rules out the possibility of any major wrongdoing on the part of Armenians

to incite such large scale execution and looks for motive. He points to the increasing racial slant and credence in the great qualities of the Turks and the shift from multiethnic Ottomanism to Turanism, the latter being more attractive, since it suggested a new kind of patriotism and sacrifice for the sake of the great land of Turan. The starting point, as Gruber states, was eliminating foreign influences in the empire. "This might then be used as a jumping off point for excursions in the direction of central Asia. Eliminating Armenians was, so they thought, an essential part of this design. It might, therefore, be argued that the chief victims of Turanism were the Armenians" (p. 97). The ideology of Turanism worked, indeed, even when the Ottoman army was suffering defeat in the south and southwest. With these parts of the empire seized by the united Arab and British forces, the Young Turk leaders were looking toward the Caucasus for the future of the great Turan. Toward the end of the war, in those gloomy days of Turkish defeat, as Gruber notes, Turanism received "an enormous boost" (p. 144) by the Russian abandonment of Turkish Armenia and the Brest-Litovsk peace talks leading to the advancement of the Ottoman army into the Caucasus as far as Baku. The reunification of Turkish brothers in Azerbaijan and the chance to start a new round of plunder and murder of Armenians in Baku were great incentives, or motivation, or ideology if you may, enough to move an army.

Gruber depicts separate incidents of deportation, plunder, looting, torture, and murder of the Armenian people, mostly citing reports from European consulates and eyewitness testimonies, always underscoring the systematic, pre-planned and premeditated nature of the execution. He uses a number of German sources, eyewitness accounts, official reports and then stops to ponder, "Did they [the Germans] aid and abet their allies in the execution of their program? Did they do enough to attempt to stop it?" (p. 120). Gruber sets out to elucidate the complex nature of the German-Turkish alliance and the extent of assistance offered by German diplomats and field officers—or their abstinenace to intervene and help the victims—for the sake of maintaining that valued liaison. Gruber cites examples from a wide spectrum of German reactions, from noninterference to cautious warnings, to strong protestations and practical assistance to victims and refugees.

With such a variety in German reactions, he argues, it is absurd to make generalizations on German involvement and complicity. Gruber is critical of the French and British accusations of the Germans while both had the opportunity to redress the great injustice but refrained from doing so.

He seeks to prove that although the official German stance was not to break with Turkey on account of the Armenians, many like Walter Roessler, the German consul in Aleppo, genuinely attempted to stop the atrocities, or pleaded the German government to intervene. "It is one of the ironies of the period," he maintains, "that

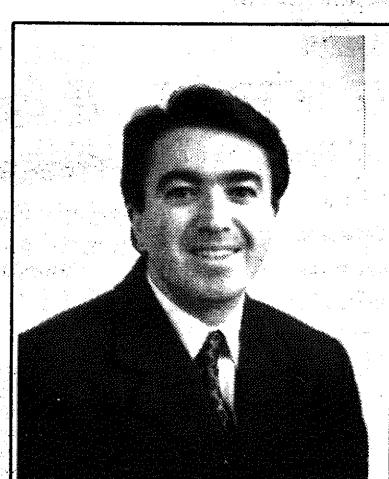
this consistent defender of the Armenians should have been the target of vilification in the British and American press" (p. 131). Nonetheless, he objectively agrees that "the generally ineffective nature of German resistance to the genocide cannot be denied" (p. 134). Nonetheless, he objectively agrees that "the generally ineffective nature of German resistance to the genocide cannot be denied" (p. 134) and adds, that it is Johannes Lepsius and few philanthropists like him who restore the German image.

The war was over. The annihilation of the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire was almost complete. A horrendous crime had been committed. Was justice to be rendered and the criminals tied and punished? Gruber followed the events after the armistice and the attempts of the victorious Allies to gather evidence and court martial those responsible for the deportation and massacre of the Armenians. However, new developments in the relationship of the Allied Powers and new interests in the rising Nationalist Turkey indicated quite clearly "how political exigencies would come to determine whether or not the Armenians would see their persecutors tried in court" (p. 162).

The last chapter lays a unique perspective on genocide as a universal problem. Gruber argues that lessons learned from a genocide in the past, like that against Armenians or the Jews, cannot help to fully understand another recent genocide or recognize the early signs and prevent a genocidal act from occurring. But for all intents and purposes, he offers an extensive comparison of factors and circumstances surrounding the two colossal catastrophes of the century.

Indeed, as Gruber notes, learning about a genocide may not shed light upon another atrocity committed in a different time and a different place. Even the most extensive study of an example of a genocidal act cannot set up a "causology of genocide." History has proved that neither the condemnation of the civilized world nor the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide have been able to prevent this crime from reoccurring. But again, even if today's "scientific" means and methodology are unable to dig into the human psyche and bring out to light that dark and unfathomable drive which can turn an ordinary man into a perpetrator of genocide, the study and understanding of each case add to alertness for that crime against humanity. In this context, Gruber's work has a two-fold importance. It possesses universal value and certainly contributes to the better understanding of the Armenian Genocide by the world community.

With more studies of this kind, it will be less likely for world public opinion to buy the distorted Turkish view and more difficult for the Turks to go on, unabatedly, playing their game of denial. It gives me satisfaction to see that a book of this caliber is available to the English-speaking world, and I strongly recommend it to the Armenian public as well.



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