B. Morris and D. Ze'evi, *The Thirty Year Genocide: Turkey's Destruction of its Christian Minorities 1894–1924*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019, 656 pp., £25 (hardback).

Reviewed by James Mehigan

There is a monument at the Kemah Gorge where thousands of Armenians were murdered in 1915. They were taken in batches by Turkish gendarmes and slaughtered with the assistance of local brigands. But the world was not to know of them immediately. Reports of these massacres leaked out slowly during the period commonly referred to as the “Armenian Genocide”. The monument was built some 86 years later in tribute, not to the murdered Armenians, but to some Turkish soldiers involved in a road accident at the ravine. So deep is the denial of the mass killing of Armenians by the Turkish state and its associates that this kind of insensitive whitewash is to be seen throughout all discussion of the Genocide from those who advocate that it was justified or deny that it was genocide at all.

The Armenian Genocide is widely understood as the series of forced marches and mass executions that took place in the Ottoman Empire in 1915–16, while the Empire was engaged in World War I. The evidence that it was a genocide is overwhelming, yet contestation of this fact is stubbornly persistent. The US House of Representatives only acknowledged the Genocide in October 2019, soon after Turkey began killing Kurds when US forces withdrew from northern Syria. The Israeli Knesset deferred a similar resolution in 2018 after the Israeli government attempted to water down the language from “genocide” to “tragedy” or “horrors”.

For both these states, the geopolitical relationship with Turkey has long been more important than acknowledging the truth. However, for historians who have studied the region at the time, the evidence is undeniable. The authors of this text go so far as to find “the proof of Turkey’s 1915–1916 anti-Armenian genocide to be incontrovertible” (1). Their research, mostly archival in nature, sought to go beyond that, to step back and take the longer view, not simply of the Armenian Genocide as generally conceived but to look at Turkish policies towards Christians over three decades (1894–1924).

This volume expands our understanding of the Armenian Genocide by viewing it not in isolation, but as the middle part of a three-phase project. Each phase is controlled by a different ruler or ruling group, but the clear effort in all of the phases is the elimination of Christian minorities over the period studied. The Christians in Turkey and its closely neighbouring regions were systematically destroyed in staggered fashion by the successive Ottoman and Turkish leaders and their Muslim agents. Accordingly, the authors posit that: “The process of

ethnic-religious cleansing was characterized by rounds of large-scale massacre, alongside systematic expulsions, forced conversions, and cultural annihilation that amounted to genocide.” (485).

To reach this conclusion they have taken a lengthy and detailed methodological approach to the available archival material and cross-referenced it with the diaries and letters of foreign observers. Some of these were diplomats posted to the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, some were missionaries working with the local Christian population. A notable methodological challenge in the work is that the Turkish archives have been carefully purged of materials in order to reduce the opportunities for demonstrating a systematic operation with murderous intent. Furthermore, while the accessible archives have been purged of key documents, other archival resources under the control of the Turkish government are closed to researchers. This is of course not evidence that there is incriminating material within, but when the remaining material is correlated with the eyewitness accounts at the time, it develops into a compelling narrative of planning, ordering and intent.

For anyone who is at risk of suffering trauma from reading primary accounts of human pain, this is a book to approach with care. The first-hand materials are sobering, as well one might expect in a historical work that is true to its original sources. This is perhaps particularly significant when the prevalence of gender-based violence over the entire 30 years is taken into account. Yet it is never gratuitous, particularly in light of the diminishment of the seriousness of the Turkish actions over the three decades.

This broader perspective takes in three different rulers. The pre-war years until 1909 were ruled by the last autocratic leader of the Ottoman Empire, Sultan Abdulhamid II. This was followed by the rule of the Committee of Union and Progress (also known as the Young Turks) encompassing the Great War. This promised greater equality and constitutionalism rather than theocracy. Finally, the rise of the Turkish Nationalists under Kemal Atatürk in the immediate post-war years is considered to be the foundation of modern Turkey.

The book further increases the scope of the study to include not just Armenian victims of genocide but also Greeks and various Assyrian communities. The book’s structure fits around the three regimes, each of which approached the “problem” of the Christians in slightly different ways. The first part looks at the massacres of 1894–6 which, in both motivation and technique, were clear precursors of the Armenian Genocide during the war. The authors defer to the works of others on the 1915–16 Genocide and therefore this section is shorter than one might expect given the significance of this part of the three decades of brutality. The project here is not to document the Armenian Genocide, but to contextualize it within a much longer term project to rid Turkey of its Christians.

Traditionally, historians have seen the three phases as distinct periods of rule and therefore the atrocities committed within them as “separate policies carried out according to distinctive logics tailored to their particular circumstances” (4). Such an approach, argue the authors, obfuscates the Turks’ intentions and the reality of what transpired. Although the figures are difficult to accurately collate, it seems clear that, at the end of the nineteenth century, Christians made up 20 per cent of the population of Asia Minor, by 1924 this had fallen to 2 per cent (485).

The scholarly focus on the elimination of Christians broadens the study of the Armenian Genocide to include Greeks and Assyrians who were killed, forcibly converted or deported during the period studied. Though they received different treatment to the Armenians, during the final phase the Greeks and Assyrians suffered significantly at the hands of the Turks.

For the scholar of state crime, there may be a temptation to dismiss a work such as this as a historical account, something of little relevance to those seeking to understand the contemporary criminality of the state. There are three major reasons why this conclusion should be avoided.

The first is that the techniques of denial engaged in by those who favour Turkey, or who wish to reduce the moral turpitude of the Turkish authorities, are the forerunners of the techniques of denial deployed by states, their agents and apologists today. Morris and Ze’evi detail again and again that the Turks had convinced themselves that the Armenians were a threat to national security. There may be some small examples of resistance but the evidence that the Armenians posed an existential threat to the Turkish and Ottoman states is vanishingly thin. Yet this perceived, or manufactured, necessity to move the Armenians by forced march has produced the narrative that the marches were ordered in good faith, for legitimate security reasons. The deaths were, the logic goes, a tragic and unavoidable by-product. There are few regions of the world today where claims of threats to “national security” are not employed to justify serious criminality, from snooping to torture.

The second reason is a methodological one. The conclusions drawn by the authors, that there was a systemic staggered genocide spanning 30 years, are so compelling because they are built on a methodologically rigorous approach to the remaining evidence. There is no “smoking gun” for the 30-year genocide. There is clear evidence of brutality and mass murder, but the genocidal intent is never explicitly spelt out. Of course, this is at least partially because of Turkish purging and closing of archives. Yet even without the smoking gun the circumstantial evidence is highly convincing. The construction of this circumstantial case is a masterclass in the use of scholarly sources and methods in the fight against state denial.

At the end of the First World War there was a cursory effort by the Turks to prosecute and punish those who had perpetrated the most serious violence. Yet these trials were wholly unsuccessful and half-heartedly engaged in. In the end, a

senior judge who had run the trials was himself indicted and imprisoned. The trials were left with little or no legitimacy and, with them, the idea that the Turks had massacred the Armenians was left with reduced credibility. The failings, it seems, of the Turks and the Allies to prosecute the worst of the *genocidaires*, sowed the seeds of the denial of the Armenian Genocide. This failure of post-war justice, fuelled by various political expediencies, is the third key learning in this book for the state-crime scholar.

By broadening the study of Turkish genocide beyond the core genocidal event the authors have greatly increased our understanding of Turkish genocide against Christians. In so doing they have added not only to the historical literature on the topic but to our perspective on one of the most widely denied atrocities of the twentieth century.

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