

Book Review by Guenter Lewy
Slavic Review, Vol. 67 No 4 - Winter 2008

Readers familiar with Russian and Turkish history will experience the same sense of unreality in reading Hovannisian's insistence that the Armenian disaster in 1915 was entirely unprovoked and the result of a xenophobic nationalistic mindset and a total war ethic on the part of the Young Turk regime. In this narrative there is no place for the decades-long armed struggle of the Armenian revolutionary movement for independence or for the thousands of Turkish Armenians who fought a guerrilla war behind the Ottoman army in 1915, cut roads and lines of communications, and generally aided the Russian invader. Henry Morgenthau, the American ambassador in Constantinople, reported to Washington on 25 May 1915 that nobody put the Armenian guerrillas at less than 10,000, and that 25,000 was probably closer to the truth. All this took place in a situation of extreme danger for the Ottoman regime caused by serious military setbacks. Bragging about the Armenian contribution to the Allied war effort, Boghos Nubar, the head of the Armenian delegation, told those at the Paris Peace Conference on 18 March 1919 that the Turks had devastated the Armenians in retaliation for their unflinching devotion to the Allied cause. None of this can justify the brutality and extreme callousness with which the Young Turks carried out the deportation of the Armenian community from their ancient homeland in Anatolia at a huge cost in innocent lives, but it provides the indispensable historical context for the human catastrophe that ensued.

According to Hovannisian and other contributors to this volume, the scholarly world has accepted the Armenian genocide, and all those who question the Armenian version of these tragic events are "genocide deniers." Yet while many historians indeed speak of the first genocide of the twentieth century, other historians, including well-known scholars of Ottoman history such as Roderic Davison, Bernard Lewis, and Andrew Mango, while not questioning the horror that transpired, have raised doubts about the appropriateness of the genocide label for the occurrences of 1915. Ignoring this formidable array of learned opinion, Armenians continue to assert with superb arrogance that the Armenian genocide is incontrovertible fact and established history that can be denied only by lackeys of the Turkish government or morally obtuse individuals. Unless there is a change in this attitude and Armenians accept the existence of a genuine historical controversy, I see little hope for ending this almost century-old conflict.

GUENTER LEWY
University of Massachusetts, Amherst