
The book sets out to examine the dominant Armenian and Turkish theses on the Armenian Genocide. The author suggests that two opposing camps exist among historians. While working largely with published material, he makes extensive use of German Foreign Office (Auswärtiges Amt, hereafter: AA) documents. Importantly, in his discussion Lewy does not clearly distinguish between academic studies, pamphlets, various types of memoirs, etc. despite his suggestion “that survivor accounts, like all other historical evidence, must be analyzed carefully and critically” (p. 148). Non-specialists will therefore find it difficult to understand current debates. Lewy states that at the center of what he labels a “quarrel” stands the question of premeditation, but his concept of genocide is not necessarily shared by the legal community. Likewise, his reading of 19th century Ottoman history is limited. Social and economic aspects receive little attention and his account resembles a moderate version of what could be labeled official Turkish histories. He also appears to be lacking familiarity with important sources. For instance, Ziya Gökalp’s involvement in the Armenian Genocide is hardly discussed. Contemporaries of this known writer, who was also a member of the ruling Committee for Union and Progress central committee, did not see him simply as a “respected advisor on cultural and educational issues” (p. 46). Lewy wrongly speculates that Colonel August Stange’s commanding position in the Special Organization would be a “highly unlikely assignment” (p. 84). It is documented that the officer was a commander. Moreover, his observations were so important that Liman von Sanders, head of the German Military Mission, forwarded them to the German Embassy. Lewy ignored this information. The author accepts Dyer’s false identification of Esat Uras as an unimportant individual although the mistake had been corrected some time ago. In his critique of some older publications, Lewy has little new to offer. Certainly, Mevlanzade Rıfat is not a reliable source, but no scholar is seriously considering the book. The same holds true for Aram Andonian’s book. Without access to the original documents, major parts of the book do not meet academic standards.

1) “Debates about historic cases of genocide need to be reassessed in light of evolving case law. In a series of recent decisions, the international criminal tribunals have broadened the reach of the 1948 definition; it has been held to apply to a somewhat more expansive category of groups than is listed in the text of the definition. No proof of state involvement, or of a policy or plan, is necessary to establish that genocide has been committed, it may even be perpetrated by an individual acting alone. As for those who participate in the crime of genocide, prosecutors need not establish that they actually had a genocidal intent, as long as they were in some way accomplices to the crime. Finally, and perhaps most importantly of all, the concept of genocide has been extended to acts that compromise the survival of a group, such as forced displacements, even when there are doubts about the intent to physically exterminate the group. … None of this can be particularly comforting to those who have tried to deny that the massacres of Armenians within Turkey in 1915 constituted one of the great genocides of the twentieth century.” William A. Schabas: “The ‘Odious Scourge’: Evolving Interpretations of the Crime of Genocide”, in: Genocide Studies and Prevention 1,2 (2006), Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 102.
At times Lewy’s claims are inconsistent. Writing on testimonies by U.S. missionaries he states: “In the eyes of the missionaries, when Armenians used guns it was always strictly for self-defense, while Turkish troops using force were usually described as engaged in murderous activities” (p. 144). The assertion is, however, contradicted by Lewy’s own use of missionary sources narrating Armenian outrages against Muslims (p. 97).

Lewy doubts that the Ottoman central government had control over the deportations: “Unfortunately and not surprisingly, the ability of the central government to influence events in the provinces remained limited” (p. 208). In support of his claim, he refers to opposition by local officials against Djemal Pasha’s more moderate Armenian policies (p. 219). Lewy did not study, however, the case properly. In fact, the “local” officials were members of the Ottoman Ministry of the Interior’s Directorate for the Settlement of Tribes and Immigrants. They secured the uniform application of central government directives throughout the empire and tried to prevent interference by Djemal Pasha’s Ottoman 4th army officers in favor of Armenians. Far from sustaining Lewy’s assertion, the example demonstrates the high degree of Ottoman central government control and its malignant character. His explanations for the causes of Armenian deaths remain unconvincing. Referring to Kurdish and other tribal groups as principal perpetrators is, at best, correct only in part. It is known that these groups acted in close coordination with or under the command of Ottoman officials. Likewise, German and Austrian eyewitnesses had met such commanders and their killing squads at the time. Lewy chose to ignore this information.

Armin T. Wegner, a German poet, was an important eye-witness who had seen Armenians in the Syrian Desert in 1916. Importantly, discrepancies between Wegner’s artistic production and his observations disqualify his artistic work as a source. Martin Tamcke has studied this matter thoroughly. Although basing himself on Tamcke’s work Lewy asserts that Wegner was “untrustworthy” (p. 135) thereby misrepresenting the former’s findings who emphasized the importance of Wegner’s original notes.

Similarly, Lewy’s use of AA documents mirrors by and large the empirical work of other authors, adding little, if anything, to the extant literature. Nevertheless, he offers radically different views based on these sources. In doing so, he presents a German embassy memorandum of September 1916 as an analysis of Armenian persecutions. However, this is only an example of his problematic use of German documents (p. 254). The document in question is well-known and was nothing more than a contemporary exercise in excuse making. It was drawn up upon instructions from Berlin in order to minimize Ottoman and German responsibility, to downplay the extent of the slaughter, and to put blame on the victims and the Entente powers. All this is well-known, but Lewy chose to ignore the archival and published records.
