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# The Armenian Relocations and Ottoman National Security: Military Necessity or Excuse for Genocide?

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Professor William A. Schabas has provided a lens through which the modern world might compare atrocities committed in the past with the intent and terminology of contemporary international law.<sup>1</sup> In my view, Schabas establishes, in a unique way, a context for broadening the historical narrative by narrowing definitions and terminology. Unfortunately, some partisans in the contemporary debate over the Armenian relocations and massacres of 1915 may seek to use his ideas to establish retroactive accountability. In this article, my intent is not to establish any kind of retroactivity regarding these events. Rather, here I offer an opinion as to whether the relocation of the entire Armenian population of eastern Anatolia was necessary for reasons of national security during the First World War.<sup>2</sup>

As a matter of historical record, the Ottoman government considered the Armenian population of eastern Anatolia as ‘enemies within’ during the First World War.<sup>3</sup> When in April 1915, internal rebellion by Armenian revolutionary committees and external invasion by the Russian army supported by Armenian guerrillas began, the Ottoman high command responded with an active counterinsurgency campaign of population relocation and cordon and destroy operations.<sup>4</sup> The speed and ferocity of the Ottoman counterinsurgency campaign was a function of imperative military necessity. In fact, actual Armenian threats to the logistics and security of three Ottoman armies caused the Ottomans to consider the potentially catastrophic effect on the national security of the Ottoman Empire should these armies collapse. The government considered this situation

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<sup>1</sup> See the article by William A. Schabas, Crimes Against Humanity as a Paradigm for International Atrocity Crimes, in this issue.

<sup>2</sup> I previously have written about the nature and extent of these circumstances and events; see, e.g., Edward J. Erickson (2008) The Armenians and Ottoman National Security, 1915, *War in History*, 15(2), pp. 141–167.

<sup>3</sup> A. Emin Yalman (1930) *Turkey in the World War* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press).

<sup>4</sup> See Mesut Uyar and Edward J. Erickson (2009) *A Military History of the Ottomans, From Osman to Atatürk* (Santa Barbara CA: Praeger).

as an existential threat to the national security of the Ottoman state.<sup>5</sup> Today the Ottoman government's relocation decision continues to feed a polarized academic debate that hinges on two positions that interpret the decision either as one of military necessity or as an excuse for genocide.

### The Historical Context

The historical context that led to the events of 1915 is crucial for understanding the framework within which the relocation decision was cast. There are four main historical antecedents that must be understood in order to establish this context:

- (1) the activities of the Armenian revolutionary committees (particularly the Dashnaks);
- (2) the activities of outside powers supporting the Armenian committees;
- (3) the contemporary counterinsurgency practices used by the Great Powers; and
- (4) the Ottoman counterinsurgency policies and practices in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

This history and these four elements form a lens through which the Ottoman government and its military staff approached the problem of insurgency in the decades immediately prior to the First World War.<sup>6</sup> In effect, these antecedents provided Ottoman decision-makers with intellectual appreciations of the scale and objectives of the Armenian revolutionary committees as well a practical working knowledge of how to suppress insurrections.

The Armenian revolutionary committees, particularly the Dashnaks and the Hunchaks, grew dramatically in size and capability after 1890.<sup>7</sup> Both committees were revolutionary, socialist and committed to violent action to achieve their goals. Both groups were dedicated to the creation of an independent Armenia carved from the Ottoman Empire, and in today's terms would be labeled as terrorist organizations. They were established as secret organizations with a structure of small, independent, heavily armed and well-trained quasi-military cells. Neither group was self-sufficient and both depended on foreign financing, exterior safe haven and sanctuaries, and weapons acquisition via smuggling. By 1914 the Ottoman intelligence services knew that the Armenian revolutionary committees were well led, heavily armed, well organized and possessed genuine military capabilities.

Prior to 1914 most of the Great Powers supported or tolerated Armenian activities to some extent. Russia and Bulgaria, in particular, encouraged and supported the Armenian revolutionary committees by allowing them to operate freely within their respective territories.<sup>8</sup> It was from these countries that most of the illegal weapons smuggling into the

<sup>5</sup> See further Erickson, *The Armenians and Ottoman National Security*.

<sup>6</sup> See Edward J. Erickson (2011) *Template for Destruction: The Congress of Berlin and the Evolution of Ottoman Counterinsurgency Practices*, in: Peter Sluglett & Hakan Yavuz (eds.) *The Political and Social Implications for the Ottoman Empire of the Treaty of Berlin, 1878* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press).

<sup>7</sup> See Hratch Dasnabedian (1990) *History of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, Dasnaktutium 1890–1924* (Milan: OEMME Edizioni); and Louise Nalbandian (1963) *The Armenian Revolutionary Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press).

<sup>8</sup> See Dikran Mesrob Kiligian (2009) *Armenian Organization and Ideology under Ottoman Rule 1908–1914* (New Brunswick NJ: Transaction Publishers).

Ottoman Empire originated. France and the United States tolerated the committee's fundraising activities and allowed financial support to flow into the empire as well. When the war started, Russia, France and the UK all supported the efforts of the Armenians to rebel against the Ottomans. Russia bore the heaviest role by actively raising Armenian regiments for its army and then using them to invade the Ottoman lands.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, counterinsurgency policies based on the relocation of civilian populations emerged as viable and acceptable practices in warfare. Three wars, in particular, set important precedents for the Western world in the way in which militaries dealt with guerrillas and irregular insurgents. These wars involved Spain in Cuba (1893), the United States in the Philippines (1900–1902) and Britain in South Africa (1899–1901) and all three saw the evolution of similar strategic, operational and tactical practices by the Great Powers.<sup>9</sup> At the strategic level, these countries sought the destruction of guerrilla and irregular military forces in order to end insurgencies and, in the case of the Boers, end a conventional war that had entered a guerrilla warfare phase. Operationally, Spain, the United States and Great Britain employed campaign designs that focused on separating the guerrillas from their principal sources of support (the friendly civilian populations), thereby enabling the military defeat of the weakened guerrilla armies. At lower tactical levels, military commanders isolated the guerrillas by establishing fortified lines that cut their operational areas into manageable sectors and then removed the civilian populations to concentration camps. Simultaneously, their regular and numerous forces swept the sectors clean of guerrillas by relentlessly pushing them to destruction against the fortified lines.<sup>10</sup> To varying degrees these campaigns of population removal and concentration were successful with the British in South Africa setting the standard by the complete and brutal subjugation of the Boer republics.

The Ottomans, however, during the period 1890 to 1914 did not use counterinsurgency practices that involved or depended upon on the relocation of populations. Today we would call the Ottoman counterinsurgency policy a kinetic strategy that relied on force and weapons. In the Balkans during the nearly continuous insurrections of the Macedonian committees (1890–1912), the Ottoman army employed large-scale regular military forces of over 100,000 men to crush the rebels.<sup>11</sup> These campaigns involved isolating the battle area and then using highly mobile and trained battalion sized units of regular soldiers sweeping the sectors clear of rebels. In Caucasia, the nearly bankrupt Ottoman Empire formed the infamous Hamidiye Tribal Light Cavalry as a financially expedient means of creating the additional force structure necessary to quell Kurdish and Armenian rebellions.<sup>12</sup> At its

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<sup>9</sup> See further David F. Trask (1981) *The War with Spain in 1898* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company); Brian McAllister Linn (1989) *The U.S. Army and Counterinsurgency in the Philippine War, 1899–1902* (Chapel Hill NC: The University of North Carolina Press); and S. B. Spies (1977) *Methods of Barbarism? Roberts and Kitchener and Civilians in the Boer Republics January 1900–May 1902* (Capetown: Human & Rousseau).

<sup>10</sup> See further Colonel C.E. Callwell (1996) *Small Wars, Their Principles and Practice* (Lincoln NE: University of Nebraska Press).

<sup>11</sup> See further Duncan M. Perry (1988) *The Politics of Terror: The Macedonian Liberation Movements, 1893–1903* (Durham NC: Duke University Press).

<sup>12</sup> See Turkish General Staff (1993) *Balkan Harbı (1912–1913), I Cilt, Harbin Sebepleri, Askeri Hairlıklar ve Osmanlı Devletinin Harbe Girişi (İkinci Başkı)* [Balkan Wars 1912–1913, Military Mobilization and the Entry of the Ottoman State] (Ankara: Genelkurmay Basımevi); and Janet Klein (2011) *The Margins of Empire: Kurdish Tribal Militias in the Ottoman Tribal Zone* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press).

height, the strength of the Hamidiye cavalry regiments was in excess of 60,000 heavily armed men. In their employment, these units were used in conjunction with regular Ottoman army infantry divisions to crush rebels and, occasionally, bandits. Both the Balkan and the Caucasian counterinsurgency campaigns were manpower intensive and relied on thousands of soldiers and heavy weapons such as artillery. This pattern was repeated in Yemen and the Hedjaz against rebellious tribes, and by 1911 the Ottoman army deployed over 150,000 men to those places as well. Occasionally, when the insurgent threat was localized, the Ottoman army would send smaller, fast-traveling columns of company or battalion size (200 to 1,000 soldiers) to subdue the rebels.<sup>13</sup> In no case prior to 1915 did the Ottomans include population relocation in their overall strategy, their operational designs or in their day-to-day tactical approach to the problem of counterinsurgency.

### Drivers of Change

Many historians view the outbreak of the First World War as the proximate cause of what some historians refer to as the Armenian Genocide, others as massacres and relocations, and still others as the Events of 1915. To this day, interpretations of this question remain hotly contested by the advocates of the opposing positions.<sup>14</sup> However, both sides agree on the fact that the Ottoman approach to the problem of quelling an insurgency clearly and dramatically changed in 1915 when it shifted from a historical policy of kinetic direct action by large-scale military forces to a new policy of population relocation. The problem then becomes that of explaining how the First World War created the drivers of change that caused this fundamental policy shift. Similarly to the four elements of the historical context, there were also four principal drivers of change created by the war:

- (1) the actuality of an insurrection by the Armenian revolutionary committees;
- (2) the actuality of allied interventions and support;
- (3) the locations of the Armenian population as an existential threat to Ottoman national security; and
- (4) the inability of the Ottomans to mass large forces effectively and rapidly to quell the insurgency.

In fact, there was an actual insurrection by the heavily armed, well-trained, and highly motivated Armenian revolutionary committees in the spring of 1915. The causes for that uprising are subject to debate: Did the Armenians rise up for independence or did the Ottomans push them unwillingly into a self-protective armed response? These questions have become the source of a vigorous, heavily politicized and highly emotional academic debate. Nevertheless, it is a matter of historical record that by late April 1915 the Armenian revolutionary committees held the key city of Van and other Armenian

<sup>13</sup> See further Caesar E. Farah (2002) *The Sultan's Yemen: Nineteenth-Century Challenges to Ottoman Rule* (London: I. B. Tauris); and Vincent S. Wilhite (2003) *Guerrilla War, Counterinsurgency, and State Formation in Ottoman Yemen*, PhD thesis, The Ohio State University.

<sup>14</sup> For the Armenian position, see for example, the works of Vahkan Dadrian, Richard Hovannasian, Raymond Kevorkian and Taner Akçam. For the Turkish position, see for example, the works of Bernard Lewis, Justin McCarthy and Stanford Shaw. For balanced commentary, see for example, the works of Michael Gunter, Donald Bloxham and Guenter Lewy. Full citations for all these authors may be found in the references of M. Hakan Yavuz's introductory article in this issue.

insurrections were breaking out simultaneously in other locations in eastern Anatolia.<sup>15</sup> From the Ottoman government's point of view the reasons were irrelevant: It did not matter why the Armenians were in revolt as much as the fact that they were in revolt. To be sure, not all of the Armenians were actively in rebellion—the membership of the Armenian revolutionary committees constituted only a small portion of the Armenian population. According to Ottoman intelligence reports and the reports of neutral observers, there may have been as many as 25,000 insurgent Armenians actively conducting military operations against the empire.<sup>16</sup> In fact, the cause of the insurrection was largely irrelevant since it did actualize and by the mid-spring 1915, thousands of Armenian revolutionaries were under arms and fighting under effective command and control. And, as contemporary operations in Afghanistan and Iraq have conclusively shown, it does not take a large number of insurgents to cause problems when they can hide within a larger population.

The uprising in the city of Van in April 1915 was orchestrated by the Dashnaks in conjunction with a simultaneous offensive by the Russian army, which itself included Armenian regiments of expatriate Ottoman Armenian citizens. It was carefully planned and the small Ottoman force in the area quickly lost control of the city and then failed to prevent the relief of the Armenians by the advancing Russian army. The Ottoman high command immediately viewed the loss of the city in this manner (internal revolt supported by well-coordinated Russian military offensives) as a template for future enemy operations. Moreover, in the Alexandretta and Dortyol region, the Ottomans expected an amphibious invasion by the British and French to link up with and support the heavily armed Armenian committees in that area as well.<sup>17</sup> Today there is no doubt that the Allies encouraged and supported the Armenian committees to revolt against the empire in the spring of 1915 and the Ottomans believed that what happened in Van was about to be repeated elsewhere.

The location of the Armenian population and insurgency is critical to understanding why the Ottoman state perceived the situation as posing an existential threat to its national security.<sup>18</sup> The Ottomans were fighting the Russians on the Caucasian frontier and the British in Mesopotamia and Palestine. The supply lines supporting those Ottoman fronts ran directly through the areas of eastern Anatolia that were heavily populated by Armenian communities and, by extension, by the heavily armed Armenian revolutionary committees. Importantly, none of the Ottoman armies on the fronts in Caucasia, Mesopotamia or Palestine was self-sufficient in food, fodder, ammunition or medical supplies, and all were dependent on the roads and railroads leading west to Istanbul and Thrace for those supplies. Moreover, none of these forces had much in the way of prepositioned supplies available and all required the continuous flow of war material. The Armenian revolutionary committees began to attack and cut these lines of communications in the spring of 1915. Ottoman army messages regarding the interdiction of the roads and lines of communications in the spring of 1915 clearly demonstrate both

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<sup>15</sup> See further Justin McCarthy, Esat Arslan, Cemalettin Taşkıran & Ömer Turan (2006) *The Armenian Rebellion at Van* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press).

<sup>16</sup> See Edward J. Erickson (2005) Bayonets on Musa Dagh, Ottoman Counterinsurgency Operations-1915, *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 28(3), pp. 141–167.

<sup>17</sup> See Edward J. Erickson (2010) Captain Larkin and the Turks: The Strategic Impact of the Operations of HMS Doris in Early 1915, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 46(1), pp. 151–162.

<sup>18</sup> See further Erickson, *The Armenians and Ottoman National Security*.



alarm and concern for the acute danger presented by the Armenian insurgents. The cutting of the road networks for more than a period of several days had a severe impact on the amount of material getting through to the armies on the active fronts, thereby denying them the means to fight. Thus, the Armenian insurrection was seen as a genuine security imperative requiring an immediate solution, and it was an existential threat to the survival of the empire's armies.

The mobilization and the concentration of the Ottoman army in 1914 brought the entire regular army to the fringes of the empire's frontiers. The army stayed on the frontiers and by April 1915 was heavily engaged in the Caucasus, at Gallipoli, in Mesopotamia and in Palestine.<sup>19</sup> This drained the army's strength and left almost no trained regular army combat units in the interior provinces. Moreover, the Hamidiye cavalry had been disestablished previously and its successor, the light cavalry corps, likewise was dissolved in November 1914. Even the well-trained and mobile field gendarmerie (Jandarma) were activated for war and deployed to the active fighting fronts to assist the regular forces.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the Ottoman Empire had sent all of its available military combat strength to the front lines and in the spring of 1915 had almost no military forces left in the interior.

### **Analysis: Understanding the Ottoman Strategic Policy Shift**

How can we understand and how might we explain the Ottoman decision to shift its counterinsurgency policy to one that was based on the relocation of the Armenians from the eastern provinces of Bitlis, Dyarbekir, Erzurum, Harput, Sivas and Van. First, let's look at the historical context. Counterinsurgency campaigns as practiced by the Ottoman state from 1890 to 1914 were characterized by large-scale military operations and large numbers of soldiers, often exceeding 100,000 regulars. The campaigns were kinetic and involved the hunting to destruction of insurgent bands. In smaller expeditions against the Kurds and Arabs, the Ottomans employed well-trained regular forces to destroy the enemy. As long as the Ottomans had military forces available, they were never forced to use strategies of population removal, as had the Spanish, Americans and the British in contemporary counterinsurgency operations. The Ottomans also knew that the Armenian revolutionary committees were well armed and that they had significant levels of external support. Second, we should then look at how the war drove changes in Ottoman counterinsurgency practices. There was a genuine and existential threat to the national security of the Ottoman Empire in the late spring of 1915. This was the result of the unfortunate demographic fact that large concentrations of Armenian people happened to live in cities such as Erzurum, Harput and Urfa which lay astride lines of communications vital to the armies fighting on three fronts. While it is true that the Armenian revolutionary committees did not represent the majority of Armenians, they were powerful enough to take cities and large enough to choke and obstruct the flow of supplies.

Unfortunately, the Ottoman state and its leaders were ill equipped by their experiences to deal with the Armenian insurrection. This was because in their own immediate past the

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<sup>19</sup> See Edward J. Erickson (2001) *Ordered To Die: A History of the Ottoman Army in the First World War* (Westport: Greenwood Press).

<sup>20</sup> See Edward J. Erickson (2006) Armenian Massacres, New Records Undercut Old Blame, *The Middle East Quarterly*, 13(3), pp. 67–75.

empire had solved the problem of insurgency by sending in large armies of up to 100,000 regular soldiers and paramilitary cavalymen. Such a response was impossible in 1915, as the interior of the empire had been stripped of regular forces and the gendarmerie. The traditional tools necessary for the suppression of an insurrection were nonexistent and this forced the government into an alternative counterinsurgency strategy based on relocation, which could be accommodated with minimal amounts of military effort. Moreover, unlike the Spanish, the Americans and the British, who dealt with hostile and uncooperative colonial populations, the Ottomans were dealing with their own citizens, the majority of whom did not resist their own relocation. This further reduced the requirements for combat-capable military forces in the relocation and much of the actual movement was conducted by local paramilitary elements.

The decision to relocate the Armenians was an evolving response that started with localized population removal but which, by late May 1915, escalated to a region-wide relocation policy involving six provinces. The Ottoman leaders believed this policy was their only option, given the wartime situation. A large-scale kinetic military response as they had employed from 1890 to 1914—the application of force—was impossible. The Western model of population relocation had worked for the Spanish, the Americans and the British. It is understandable therefore that the Ottoman government turned to this viable and low-cost counterinsurgency policy in order to deal effectively with the Armenian insurrection. As the relocations progressed into the summer and fall of 1915, it became progressively easier for the Ottoman military forces committed to eradicating the insurgency to mop up the battered surviving rebels. In 1915, for the Ottoman state, relocation was an effective strategy borne of weakness rather than of strength.

With respect to the question of whether the relocation was necessary for reason of Ottoman national security in the First World War, the answer is clearly yes. There was a direct threat by the small but capable Armenian revolutionary committees to the lines of communications upon which the logistics of the Ottoman armies on three fronts depended. There was a real belief by the government that the consequences of failing to supply adequately its armies that were contact with the Russians, in particular, surely would lead to the defeat of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman high command believed it could not take that chance. Pressed by the imperative of national survival to implement an immediate counterinsurgency strategy and operational solution, and in the absence of traditionally available large-scale military forces, the Ottomans chose a strategy based on relocation—itsself a highly effective practice pioneered by the Great Powers. The relocation of the Armenian population and the associated destruction of the Armenian revolutionary committees ended an immediate existential threat to the Ottoman state. Although the empire survived to fight on until late 1918 unfortunately thousands of Armenians did not survive the relocation. Correlation is not causation and the existing evidence suggests that the decisions leading to the Armenian relocations in 1915 were reflexive, escalatory, and militarily necessary, rather than simply a convenient excuse for genocide.

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