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Peter Balakian

THE BURNING TIGRIS The Armenian genocide 474pp. Heinemann.

It is easy to understand the anger and anguish of Armenian nationalists. They gaze at their *terra irredenta*, historic Armenia which lies almost entirely within the borders of the republic of Turkey, and which is dotted with the ruins of monuments bearing witness to the high culture of Armenian kingdoms before the Turkish conquest from the eleventh century onward. But there are no *irredenti* - no unredeemed Armenians - in historic Armenia or elsewhere in Asia Minor. Nor are there any prospects of a *reconquista*. The population of the small landlocked Armenian republic in the southern Caucasus has fallen from over three million at the time of the dissolution of the Soviet Union to an estimated two million today. One-fifth of the territory of the neighbouring republic of Azerbaijan, which the Armenians have occupied, lies largely empty after the flight of close on one million of its Azeri inhabitants. There are not enough Armenians to hold on to recent conquests, let alone to people their *terra irredenta* in Turkey. Why have things come to such a sorry pass?

In his campaigning book, Peter Balakian seeks to persuade liberal Americans in general, and members of the United States Congress in particular, that the Turks alone are to blame, and that, for reasons of realpolitik, the Christian West has failed to bring their crimes home to them. In Balakian's account, Muslim Turks have always oppressed Christian Armenians. Oppression turned to unprovoked massacre in the 1890s in the reign of Sultan Abdul Hamid II, and peaked in genocide when the Young Turks deported the Armenians from Asia Minor in 1915 during the First World War. It was he argues, the first genocide of the twentieth century and a model for the Jewish Holocaust. The historical record does not support Balakian's thesis.

For eight centuries - from 1071 when the Seljuk Turks defeated the Byzantines at Manzikert, in historic Armenia, to the congress of Berlin in 1878 when the Armenian Question entered the agenda of international diplomacy - the Armenians lived as a self-governing religious community perfectly integrated into the mosaic of Ottoman society. They provided the Ottoman State with most of its craftsmen - from humble farriers to imperial architects, from potters to jewellers, and in modern times, mechanics, train drivers and dentists. Not only did many, if not most, of them adopt Turkish as their mother tongue, but in a rare linguistic phenomenon, the grammar of the Armenian language was affected by Turkish morphology. The Armenian contribution to Turkish culture was immense: they set up the first modern Turkish theatre, they published books in Turkish, they devised Turkish translations for new Western terms and concepts, they were prominent in Turkish music, both as composers and performers.

Like other non-Muslim communities, the Armenians were among the main beneficiaries of the nineteenth-century Tanzimat reforms which proclaimed the equality of the Sultan's subjects, regardless of creed. The prosperity which the Tanzimat brought in its train drew the Armenians from their harsh homeland on the eastern Anatolian plateau to the great commercial centres of the Empire - to Trabzon, Istanbul, Izmir and the market towns of Asia Minor, where, together with the Greeks, they accounted for the bulk of a new middle class. The Armenians had always been renowned as merchants and bankers; under the Tanzimat many became senior civil servants. Right up to 1914 there were Armenian ambassadors and Cabinet ministers serving the Ottoman State. Balakian does not mention them. Of course, the Armenians had grievances, particularly in the mountainous areas of eastern Anatolia, where they were subject to the depredations of Kurdish tribes and of destitute Circassian refugees, not to mention venal Ottoman officials. But most Muslims were much worse off.

As a result of Armenian emigration and the immigration of Muslim refugees fleeing from successive Russian advances in the Caucasus, Muslims came to outnumber the Armenians by a large margin in historic Armenia. There were prosperous Armenian communities everywhere, but they were not in the majority in a single province. This posed the biggest problem for Armenian nationalists, when they began to agitate for autonomous government. In his celebrated essay, "Minorities", Elie Kedourie described how ideas originating in the West destroyed the Armenian community in Asia Minor and the Jewish community in Iraq. In the case of the Armenians, these ideas came through two channels - from the Russian Empire where Armenian nationalism was born in the revolutionary ferment of opposition to the rule of the Tsars, and from American missionaries whose schools produced the unintended effect of alienating the Armenians from their Ottoman environment. Kedourie relates how Armenian nationalist

terrorism was the pretext for the anti-Armenian pogroms of the 1890s - the first major inter-communal clash between Muslims and Armenians, who had earlier been known to the Ottomans as "the faithful nation". Even if one disregards the exaggerated figures put out by Armenian nationalists, and reduces the number of people killed to the more likely figure of 20,000-30,000, the pogroms were bad enough. But worse was to follow.

It was the decision of the Young Turks to enter the Great War on the side of Germany against Russia and the other Allies that sealed the fate of the Armenians. By 1914 there were roughly as many Armenians in the Russian as in the Ottoman Empire. Torn between two warring sides, the Armenians were bound to prefer the Christian Russians. One can argue about the extent of the threat posed by Armenian irregulars to the Ottoman army, which was trying to contain a Russian advance in eastern Anatolia in 1915. In the words of the American military historian Edward Erickson, "It is beyond doubt that the actuality of Armenian revolts in the key cities astride the major eastern roads and railroads posed a significant military problem in the real sense".

But it is hard to argue that the problem justified the decision of Enver Pasha and the other Young Turk leaders to deport almost the entire Armenian population of Asia Minor (outside Izmir and, of course, Istanbul). The Young Turks issued a sheaf of orders and regulations which, in theory, were meant to ensure the humane evacuation and transport of deportees. But as Erickson points out, "Enver Pasha's plans hinged on non-existent capabilities that guaranteed inevitable failure". An earlier military historian, Gwynne Dyer, wrote "I believe that historians will come to see [the Young Turk leaders] not so much as evil men but as desperate, frightened unsophisticated men struggling to keep their nation afloat in a crisis far graver than they had anticipated, reacting to events rather than creating them, and not fully realizing the extent of the horrors they had set in motion".

The horrors involved, according to the careful calculations by the American historical demographer Justin McCarthy (whom Balakian does not mention), the loss of some 580,000 Armenian lives from all causes - massacre, starvation and disease. The fact that Muslim losses were much greater in the same theatre of operations does nothing to detract from the extent of the Armenian tragedy. Was it a genocide? Bernard Lewis was sued in a French court for saying sensibly that it all depends on the definition of genocide. But, whatever the definition, Balakian's insistent comparison with the Jewish Holocaust is misleading. The Turkish Armenians perished in the course of "a desperate struggle between two nations for the possession of a single homeland", in Professor Lewis's words. For the Turks, Lewis wrote, "the Armenian movement was the deadliest of all threats", to yield to it "would have meant not the truncation, but the dissolution of the Turkish state". The Jews posed no such threat to the Germans. Religious fanaticism was a factor in the Armenian tragedy, racism was not. There is a much closer parallel with the eviction of Circassians and other Muslim mountaineers from Russian Caucasus in the nineteenth century. The figures are of the same order as those relating to the Armenians: some 1.2 million Muslim Caucasians left their Russian-conquered homeland, 800,000 of them lived to settle in Ottoman domains.

The Burning Tigris fits in with the campaign waged by Armenian nationalists to persuade Western parliaments to recognize the Armenian genocide. It is not a work of historical research, but an advocate's impassioned plea, relying at times on discredited evidence, such as the forged telegrams attributed to the Ottoman interior minister, Talat Pasha, which were produced at the trial of his assassin in Berlin. Some of Balakian's assertions would make any serious Ottoman historian's hair stand on end. Like other similar books, it is replete with selective quotations from contemporary observers. Turkish historians have drawn from many of the same sources for material to rebut Armenian accusations. It would be better if, rather than ask parliaments to pass historical judgments, historians from all sides came together to research the horrors of the war on the Ottomans' eastern front. But it is better to lobby parliaments than to assassinate Turkish diplomats, as happened in a previous campaign by genocide-avengers, which Peter Balakian, to his credit, regrets. At present, Armenian nationalists refuse to engage in a dialogue with Turkish historians unless there is preliminary recognition of their genocide claim. Refusal is in their eyes tantamount to the crime of Holocaust denial. But acceptance would be a denial of the freedom of historical research, not to say of free speech.