



Arbeitsgruppe Anerkennung – gegen Genozid, für Völkerverständigung e.V. (AGA)

FROM: Dr. Tessa Hofmann
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Berlin, September 27 2004

Book review in the „Times Literary Supplement“ of September 17th 2004 (no 5294) by Andrew Mango (about Peter Balakian’s „The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide“)

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Sir,

Peter Balakian’s „Burning Tigris“ is a work of much merit, which, however, remains largely unrevealed for the readers of the „Times Literary Supplement“, because the reviewer misleads them. This is „not the work of historical research, but an advocate’s impassioned plea“, writes Dr Andrew Mango in his final judgement, which may well serve as a good summary of the review’s own shortcomings as well as an example of psychological projection.

Mango, born 1926 in Istanbul, educated in Turkey and honoured by Turkish semi-official and official institutions, is an ardent supporter of official Turkish historiography in general and in particular in the denial of the fact of the Armenian Genocide. His name is to be found on nationalist Turkish propaganda websites, including the Foreign Office, and together with Prof. Justin McCarthy, whom he recommends as an careful „American historical demographer“ he campaigned against the adoption of the Armenian Genocide Resolution by the U.S. House of Representatives. Both belong to the fortunately dwindling number of Turkish scholars, who call into question or at least play down the Armenian Genocide.

The stereotypes of their argumentation do not correspond with the realities of Ottoman rule over the conquered Non-Muslim populace of Asia Minor. This is not, as such, a problem of lack of knowledge, for I am convinced that scholars of Turkish studies have the same access to relevant archival sources as the rest of the interested academic community. Theirs is, primarily, a problem of selective perception, of extreme partiality and of proneness towards the ideology of denial.

Let us assume, for a moment, that Mango and his co-denialists are right. Let us forget about centuries of the *millet*-system, practised in the Ottoman Empire and resulting in the complete legal inequality of Non-Muslims (Christians and Jews) and the Muslim faithful. Let us forget, that the Non-Muslims’ hope for equality, justice and freedom was, nourished, first of all, by the French revolution, for most young Ottomans (Armenians and Turks included) used to study in Paris (and not in Moscow, as the reviewer indicates, obviously hoping for the average dislike of Russia). Let us even forget the many statements by Germans, serving in the Ottoman Empire as diplomats, engineers, teachers and in other professions. They were representatives of an allied and befriended nation, many of them with an open antipathy both for Armenians and for Jews, whom they disliked for the same reasons; Germans, who despite all prejudices came to the conclusion, that the death marches („dislocation“ – the euphemism



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used at the time) and massacres during WW1 were a planned annihilation, which could not be justified with any alleged or real Armenian revolt against the Ottoman state. And let us first of all forget, that, according to an estimation by the German Embassy of Constantinople 1.5 million of the Ottoman Empire's pre-war Armenian population of 2.5 millions perished as a result of this annihilation plotted and executed by the state.

All these facts left aside, let us assume, that things were, as Mango wants to make us believe. Let us assume, that the Armenians were just ungrateful for the many alleged benefits showered on them by the collapsing Ottoman state. Let us assume, that they really came under the influence of Russian ideology (whatever that is) and were Russian tools (despite the historic fact that Russia followed its own policy of creating an „Armenia without Armenians“ during the late 19th century until 1911). Let us assume that the above mentioned 2.5m Armenian men, women, children and elders, dispossessed of all weapons during the mass confiscation in 1914, were „the deadliest of all threats“ to the Ottoman Army.

Where does such assumption lead us? It leads to the justification of crimes, committed by states against their own citizens. Even under the less developed legal terms of the time, the crimes, plotted and committed by the war regime of the ruling „Young Turks“ were considered a crime against humanity. The Polish-Jewish „father“ of the UN Genocide Convention, Raphael Lemkin, was so embarrassed by this crime, that he tried, as early as 1933 to introduce an international agreement for the prevention of genocide, as he called the two cases of state mass murder, committed during his lifetime: the annihilation of the Ottoman Armenians and of the European Jews.

If we follow Mango's dangerous logic, states possess the right to expel and extinguish citizens in cases of alleged or real danger of secession. But even in the early 20th century the decision, whether a threat existed was not left to the state concerned alone. Here, however, Mango contradicts himself: Whereas he rules, that the Armenians were a real threat to the Ottoman Empire, he declares: „The Jews posed no such threat to the Germans.“ We can see where the problem is - who defines „threat“?

In the sick mind of those, plotting and eventually implementing genocide, the threat is always real and the victim always omnipotent. The perpetrator sees himself as the real victim, regardless of how defenceless and minoritised his victim is. For the Nazis, Jews were a universal threat, which they saw embodied both in the capitalist Wallstreet and in the communist Moscow Kremlin. This myth of the universal omnipotence of Jews is still popular in Turkey today and was publicly reiterated on August 17th 2004, in an article in the Turkish newspaper „Vakit“, whose author Karakoc praised both Hitler and Osama bin Laden for their fight against alleged Jewish/Israeli threat.

Furthermore, the Young Turks saw a threat in all centrifugal nationalist movements, not just in the Armenians. Hence their plan to re-model the ethnic composition and transform the multiethnic and multireligious Ottoman state into a monoethnic *Turkey for the Turks*. Does that ring a bell? *Germany for the Germans?* Yes, the Turkish publisher Cevat Rifat Atilhan



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(1892-1968), who introduced the slogan „Turkey for the Turks!“ was indeed an ardent Nazi and Antisemitist since 1930 and an admirer of Julius Streicher. Dr Mango's young years in Turkey covered exactly a period, when the chauvinism of the Young Turks, directed against Non-Muslim minorities, developed into open racism and anti-Semitism.

I would recommend Mango to study Adolf Boehm's history of the Zionist movement. After depicting in detail the way the Young Turkish leader and Army Commander, Ahmet Cemal, reduced the Jewish population of Ottoman Palestine by deportation and massacres, wiping out entire families of Jewish nationalist leaders, Boehm concludes: „Would Palestine not have been freed by the English at the end of 1917, the Jewish Yishub (settlement; T.H.) would have been exterminated by Djemal. By the war's end, it was reduced to 55,000 souls, that is the half of the pre-war population.“¹

If we leave the definition of „threat“ to national states, including those ruled by murderous regimes, we end up in agreeing not only with Ottoman Turkey's crimes against Armenians, Jews and other ethnic and/or religious minorities, but also accepting Serbia's feeling threatened by Catholic Croatians, Muslim Bosnians and Albanians in Kosovo. Or with Russian governments feeling threatened by the Chechen independence movement. We then end up supporting the genocidal warfare of Sudan against secessionist Darfur or in agreeing with the Hutu majority in feeling threatened by the allegedly influential Tutsi minority. And were not all the victimised minorities - the Ottoman Armenians, the European Jews, the Tutsi in Ruanda – economically and politically influential in the perception of genocidal perpetrators?

I shall not dwell any longer on the partial, selective and biased views, articulated by Mango. His pseudo-historiographic introduction into Turkish denialism is incompatible not only with recent International Law, but also with the law of the time in question. It is not difficult to understand why Mango takes the view that he does, despite his profound knowledge of Ottoman history and despite the events he must have witnessed during his adolescence in Turkey. But more important is the question: Why does an otherwise respectable paper like the „Times“ allow itself to be used, or rather misused, as a forum for the justification of genocide? There is no such thing as a justified genocide. This review is a disgrace for the „Times“ and an insult for Armenians in general and Dr Peter Balakian in particular. We can only hope, that this will be followed by an apology and a review which deserves to be called a review.

Dr. Tessa Hofmann
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¹ Boehm, Adolf: The Zionist Movement (Die zionistische Bewegung). Vol. 1: The Zionist Movement until the end of the World War. 2nd, enlarged ed. Tel Aviv: Hozaah Ivrit Co. Ltd., 1935, page 643 ff. Published in German.