
RECONCILIATION PROCESSES

DOI: 10.19266/1829-4286-2015-02-113-119

Historians' Assessment of the *Medz Yeghern*: Is There a Scholarly Consensus?*AMIR AZARVAN
Georgia Gwinnett College, USA

Is there a scholarly consensus among Ottoman historians that the 1915 mass killings of Armenians qualify as an act of genocide? Previous efforts to prove such a consensus are flawed, in part because they fail to rest their conclusions on the opinions of scholars who have specialized in this particular era. This study, which is based on a survey analysis of Ottoman history specialists, is the first attempt at avoiding this problem.

Keywords

Genocide, Armenians, Ottoman Turkey, Turkish ethnicity, scholarly consensus, historians.

Introduction

Amid the widespread intercommunal violence that marked the final years of the Ottoman Empire, an estimated 1.5 million Armenians were killed in what has frequently been described as the first genocide of the twentieth century. More than twenty countries and the European Union have officially recognized the 1915 mass killings – known to the Armenians as the *Medz Yeghern* – as an act of genocide. Yet, whether this event does in fact meet the international legal definition of genocide¹

* I would like to thank Eric Wilk for his methodological input. I also owe a debt of gratitude to students, Laurice Abdelshahid, Fathia Ahmed, Flurim Aliu, Amelia Bennett, Alexander Bonds, Matthew Davis, Benjamin Dinger, Amani Elkhatib, Rebkea A. Emerie, Leaford Grayson, Jeremy C. Holcomb, Coeurgelita W. Pierre-Louis, Gabriel Saldana, and Tyler Vining for their invaluable research assistance.

¹ Here I refer specifically to the 1948 Genocide Convention, which defines genocide as acts committed with the “intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such.” Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

is occasionally treated as a matter of scholarly debate². Is there a consensus among Ottoman historians on this matter, as it is often assumed? Findings from my survey of Ottoman historians suggest that such a scholarly consensus does indeed exist.

This article is organized as follows. I discuss previous efforts to demonstrate the existence of a scholarly consensus on the 1915 mass killings. After elaborating on the research design and methods employed in my study, I then present and interpret my central findings.

Brief Terminological Note

Lest I invite the impression that I am implicitly denying that a genocide occurred in 1915 against the Armenians, I wish to briefly explain my terminology. I use the term “mass killings” to describe this event partly because the very validity of the view that a genocide occurred – according to those who are much more knowledgeable than I am about Ottoman history – is what is being ascertained in this article. Referring to this event as a genocide would therefore amount to saying “Here I would like to discuss whether the Armenian Genocide was, from the perspective of Ottoman historians, a genocide”. Thus the article attempts to avoid such circularity of reasoning. “Mass killings” is a neutral alternative since historians who differ over how this event should be classified are nonetheless in agreement that mass killings did occur.

Is There a Scholarly Consensus?

It is often asserted that a preponderance of Ottoman history specialists agree that the 1915 mass killings meet the legal definition of genocide³. “Most historians know” this to be the case, argues Ronald Suny⁴. Nevertheless, one can find prominent historians who question the alleged scholarly consensus, including Bernard Lewis (professor emeritus

² BBC. “Head to head: Were massacres of Armenians genocide?” March 4, 2010, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7042209.stm>. (accessed 12.11.2015)

³ Cohan S., A Brief History of the Armenian Genocide, *Social Education*, 69, 2005, 333–337.

⁴ BBC. Op. cit.

of Near Eastern studies at Princeton University), Heath Lowry (professor emeritus of Near Eastern studies at Princeton University), Justin McCarthy (professor of history at the University of Louisville), and Eberhard Jäckel (professor emeritus of history at the University of Stuttgart). Are they merely exceptions to the rule? What efforts have been expended to substantiate this apparent consensus?

Over 30 years ago, a group of sixty-specialists in Turkish studies signed an open letter addressed to the U.S. Congress which refuted the charge that the killings amounted to genocide⁵. However, in summarizing the investigation by the Armenian Assembly of America, Charny states that “a majority of [these] scholars were not specialists in the subject matter of the period of the genocide”⁶.

In another, more recent open letter sent to Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who had called for an “impartial study by historians” – concerning the fate of the Armenian people in the Ottoman Empire during World War I” – the International Association of Genocide Scholars (2005) sought to assure the letter’s recipient that “the Armenian Genocide is corroborated by the international scholarly, legal, and human rights community”⁷. In addition to its own unanimously-passed resolution affirming this view, the group specifically cites the opinions of prominent figures, Holocaust scholars, “leading texts”, and genocide research institutes. Yet, in spite of this impressive list of authorities, the group does not refer to scholars with specific interest in or knowledge of Ottoman history.

In short, it appears that previous efforts to demonstrate a scholarly consensus are limited, in part because they fail to base their conclusions specifically on the opinions of scholars who are the most qualified to speak on this particular subject. Methods similar to those

⁵ **Hovannisian R.**, *Remembrance and Denial: The Case of the Armenian Genocide*, Detroit, MI, Wayne State University Press, 1998.

⁶ **Charny I.**, *The Psychological Satisfaction of Denials of the Holocaust or Other Genocides by Non-Extremists or Bigots, and Even by Known Scholars*, *IDEA* 6, 2001, available at <http://www.ideajournal.com/articles.php?id=27> (accessed 1.11.2015).

⁷ International Association of Genocide Scholars, *A Letter from the International Association of Genocide Scholars*, June 7, 2005, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/A_Letter_from_The_International_Association_of_Genocide_Scholars (accessed 14.10.2015)

used to demonstrate the scientific consensus on climate change – ranging from analyses of abstracts of refereed scientific journals⁸ to surveys of climate scientists⁹ – do not appear to have been used to gauge scholarly opinion on the Armenian mass killings.

Research Design and Methods

The method I used to sample relevant professors involved an online search of the following terms: "history", "department", "faculty", and "Ottoman history". Restricting my focus to faculty web pages from among the approximately 200 search hits, I then invited professors whose research, teaching interests or specialty included Ottoman history to complete my online survey. Twenty-seven Ottoman historians responded to survey (yielding a response rate of 23%). While this is an arguably small number, it must be remembered that the population of the Ottoman historians is itself quite small. Further, the importance of response rates appears to be overstated. Carley-Baxter *et al.* find that despite the common impression among social science researchers, journal editors do not generally weigh response rates heavily in their publication decisions. Instead, they go on to explain, most “seem to rely more on a gut feeling and think about any manuscript’s worth or merit based more on intangible or global concepts, such as design...than they do on measures of survey quality”¹⁰.

Respondents were asked the following question: “Do you believe that the mass killings of ethnic Armenians in 1915 in Ottoman Turkey were the result of a deliberate plan on the part of the Ottoman government to exterminate, in whole or in part, members of the ethnic Armenian community?” I also included questions on the respondent’s religious and ethnic identification. Regarding the latter, one might

⁸ Oreskes N., The Scientific Consensus on Climate Change, *Science*, 306, 2004.

⁹ Anderegg William et al., Expert Credibility in Climate Change, *PNAS*, 107, 2010, 12107-12109.

¹⁰ Carley-Baxter Lisa R., et al, Does Response Rate Matter? Journal Editors Use of Survey Quality Measures in Manuscript Publication Decisions, *Survey Practice* 7, 2009, available at <http://www.surveyppractice.org/index.php/SurveyPractice/article/view/192/html>. (accessed 1.11.2015),

suspect that Turks are more likely to reject the popular account for nationalistic reasons. Since many respondents were of mixed ethnic background, I measured Turkish ethnicity as the percentage of one's ethnic ancestry that is Turkish.

Measuring Consensus

Before reporting on whether there is a scholarly consensus on the 1915 mass killings, it is necessary to define this elusive term. Should it be defined as a general or unanimous agreement?¹¹ If we choose the former meaning, at what degree of generality must an agreement be to qualify as a consensus? Since there is no consensus as to what constitutes a consensus, I will briefly explain how I employ this term.

By definition, controversial issues like the 1915 mass killings are characterized by conflicting opinions. Therefore, consensus cannot imply unanimity on such issues. But what kind of majority qualifies as a consensus? A simple majority of a given sample (i.e., 50%+1)? A supermajority of, say, 2/3 or 3/4? Rather than arbitrarily choosing one of these options, I distinguish among the following three levels of consensus in Table 1.

Table 1: Levels of Consensus

<i>Type of Consensus</i>	<i>Range of Sample</i>
Majority opinion	50%+1 - less than 2/3
Consensus	2/3 - less than 3/4
Strong consensus	3/4 and above

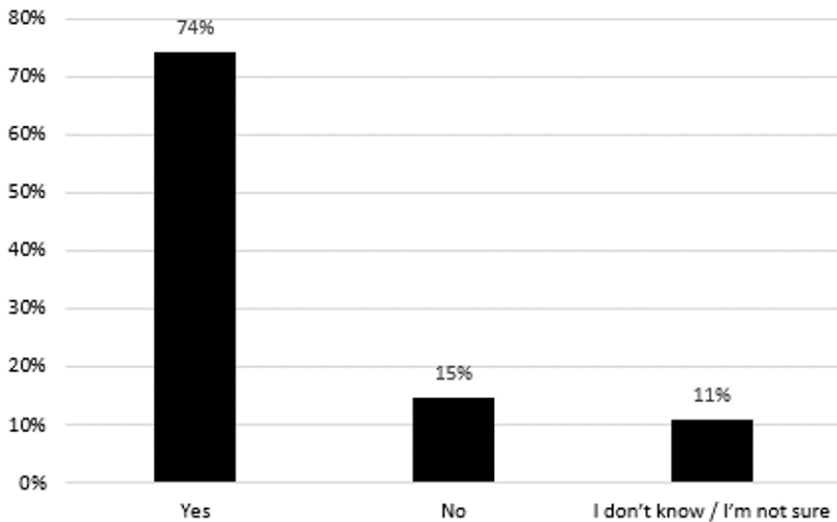
Results and Discussion

There was a consensus of 74% in support of the popular view that the 1915 mass killings were believed to be the result of a deliberate

¹¹ *Webster's New World College Dictionary* offers both definitions of "consensus", <http://www.yourdictionary.com/consensus>, (accessed 22.10.2015).

government plan to exterminate, in whole or in part, members of the ethnic Armenian community (see Figure 1). Only 15% of the respondents denied that the killings were the result of a genocidal government plan. An additional 11% were ignorant of or uncertain about this particular issue.

Figure 1. Ottoman Historians' Position on whether the 1915 Mass Killings were the Result of a Deliberate Plan to Exterminate the Armenian Community



Survey question: “Do you believe that the mass killings of ethnic Armenians in 1915 in Ottoman Turkey were the result of a deliberate plan on the part of the Ottoman government to exterminate, in whole or in part, members of the ethnic Armenian community?”

Interestingly, three of the five fully Turkish respondents of my survey (and six of the nine who reported some Turkish ancestry) agreed that the 1915 mass killings were the result of a genocidal government plan. Such findings should be promoted in order to dispel the notion that disagreement with this proposition is somehow an intrinsic aspect of Turkishness. It is true that no more than 9.1% of the general Turkish public – who, it is reasonable believe, are less knowledgeable about the

Ottoman history than my survey respondents – believes that the government should recognize the mass killings as an act of genocide¹². However, if the absolute number of Turks who subscribe to this minority view (over seven million¹³ – a population greater than that of the U.S. state of Washington) is taken into account, one can more easily resist the temptation of stereotyping all Turks as genocide deniers.

Conclusion

This study is the first attempt at determining whether a consensus exists among Ottoman historians that the 1915 mass killings of ethnic Armenians may be qualified as an act of genocide. While the findings presented in the article should be accepted with a degree of caution – as it remains to be seen whether they can be replicated on a larger sample of Ottoman historians – such a consensus was indeed discovered among historians in my survey. Nearly three-fourths of the survey respondents agreed that the killings were the result of a deliberate plan on the part of the Ottoman government to exterminate, in whole or in part, members of the Armenian community.

¹² Center for Economic and Foreign Policy Studies, *Turks Regretful Over the Armenian Tragedy of 1915 but Refuse to Qualify It as a Genocide*, 2005, available at <http://www.edam.org.tr/en/File?id=2162> (accessed March 7, 2015).

¹³ This number might be smaller if ethnic Kurds were excluded.