

Robert Melson, *Revolution and Genocide : On the Origins of the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust*, with a foreward by Leo Kuper. Chicago and London : The University of Chicago Press, 1992, 286 pp.

The twentieth century is estimated to have resulted so far in the death of up to 60 million people as a direct consequence of politically-sanctioned mass murder of members of specific ethnic groups, not necessarily for what the latter had or had not done, but for their collective identity and their ascribed group membership. Two cases, however, stand out among these as the most discussed : the Genocide of Ottoman Armenians during the First World War; and the Holocaust of the Jewish population of Eastern and Central Europe, in the Second. Yet, until very recently, little had been done in the field of scholarly research to compare these two experiences. The reluctance of both Armenian and Jewish experts to delve into this controversial, yet interesting, subject should probably be first and foremost explained by the sense of uniqueness that such mass victimisations create among the survivors of the targeted group. «The expectation that victims of oppression, when liberated, would transcend their own trauma in compassion for the suffering of others seems unrealistic in retrospect,» writes the late Prof. Kuper in his foreward to the book under review (p. ix). But subjective evaluations of the respective post-genocidal political situation of the two ethnic groups have not been helpful either. Many Armenians, who have found refuge in countries of the Arab East and have been integrated since relatively smoothly into the social fabric of their newly-adopted countries, are reluctant to compare their own tragedy with a similar experience which is sometimes taken as the main reason for supporting the right of the state of Israel to exist, when the legitimacy of the latter is still being questioned by their host governments. Israelis, on the other hand, were not interested to meddle in a subject that would have raised the sensitivities of the Turkish government, until recently the only state with a majority Muslim population to recognise Israel's right to exist and maintaining diplomatic and other ties with the latter. It should not be surprising, moreover, that the first steps in this specific field are now being taken in the United States of America, where the political and intellectual climate is favourable for such an undertaking, and where the numbers of the Armenian and Jewish communities are large enough to make day-to-day contacts between their members inevitable. Robert Melson was certainly not the first to embark on this discipline, yet the work he has produced, *Revolution and Genocide : On the Origins of the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust*, is undoubtedly the most comprehensive to-date in this field. The radical changes that are occurring in the world and in the Middle East in particular since the col-

lapse of the Communist Bloc and the subsequent Arab-Israeli peace process give some hope that in time most of the above-mentioned biases, that have hindered progress in this particular field of comparative genocidal studies, will be eroded, paving the way for other specialists to follow Melson. The process of the thorough understanding of the whole complex of issues generated by the Armenian Genocide can only benefit from this and similar attempts.

Melson (b. 1937), a specialist in comparative politics by training, is an associate professor of political science and chairperson of the Jewish Studies Program at Purdue University. His choice of the field of comparative study of genocides may not seem surprising if his biography is scrutinised. Melson was only four, when he and his parents, in October 1941, narrowly escaped annihilation by a Nazi extermination squad, which massacred most of the Jews of Stanislawov, the small Polish town in which the Melsons lived, only because his parents refused to go to the appointed place of assembly. Later because of their Slavic features, they were able to acquire false papers of identity and to pass as non-Jews until the end of the war. Other members of his extended family, however, were less fortunate, and this book is partly dedicated to the memory of three of the author's grandparents who perished during the Holocaust. Then, in his late twenties, Melson had just returned from a brief fieldwork visit in Nigeria when the world was shocked by the bloody massacres targeting the Ibo population there. Melson admits that he was later pleasantly surprised seeing that, after the surrender of Biafra, the defeated Ibos were, against his initial expectations, being treated humanely by the victorious Nigerian government. This, he says, made him all the more eager to find out what made the Holocaust different from the fate of the Ibos. In his search for plausible explanations, Melson paused at another case of state-orchestrated total domestic genocide, which according to him, resembled the Holocaust most closely : the fate of the Armenians in 1915 and after. He finally started to study the comparable aspects of the two experiences in earnest in 1977. The book under review is the end-product of years of careful examination, the intermediate results of which have been published since the early 1980s in journals like *Comparative Studies in Society and History* and *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* and presented by the author himself during symposia in the USA and (then Soviet) Armenia.

Melson attempts with this book to alert his fellow researchers that by comparing the Holocaust to the Armenian genocide it is possible to study the origins of certain kinds of mass destruction, those that the United Nations (UN) has called *genocide in whole*; to identify some of the deadly intentions and circumstances that turn ordinary human beings into killers; and to shed light on the empirical conditions, the underlying pattern of empirical similarity, that led to genocide in the past and may lead to it in the future.



But the definition of the term «genocide» remains a matter of controversy, and not everyone, including Melson himself, is fully satisfied with the definition adopted by the UN in 1948. For analytical purposes the UN definition, says Melson, does not discriminate sharply enough among a pogrom, or the massacre of part of a group, a policy of state-sponsored killing whose aim is the repression of a group, and the extermination or total destruction of a collectivity. Furthermore, the UN definition is in the meantime too narrow because it leaves out massacres of classes and other collectivities or social categories that are not necessarily ethnic or communal groups. For the purposes of this study, therefore, Melson defines «genocide» as a «public policy mainly carried out by the state whose intent is destruction in whole or in part of social collectivity or category, usually a communal group, a class, or a political faction» (p. 26). Furthermore, the distinction between partial and total genocide rests, according to him, on both the physical and cultural dimensions of group destruction, as well as in the killers' intent whether to destroy completely or not a communal group or class, thereby eliminating it from state and society. *Total genocide* implies either the extermination of a group, or the mass murder of a large fraction of its members together with the destruction of its cultural and social identity. *Partial genocide* is less drastic. It stops short of intending the total extermination of the members of the group, and though it may affect the identity of a group in some dimensions, it does not attempt to destroy completely its cultural and social identity in all of its aspects. It resorts to mass murder in order to coerce and alter the identity or the politics of a group, not destroy it, like the policies pursued by the Nazis toward Poles and Russians.

Melson agrees with most other Jewish scholars in claiming that the Holocaust, i.e. the specific historical instance of total genocide practised by the Nazis with the intention of exterminating the Jewish people from the face of the earth and obliterating its identity in all its dimensions, stands apart in modern consciousness as the apotheosis of mass destruction and is in many ways, like in its Manichean theodicy and its global scope, incomparably unique. But this, says Melson, does not imply that the Holocaust is incomparable or that it is unique in all dimensions. It bears enough similarity to recent acts of genocide and mass murder to warrant a comparative study of phenomenon and its unique features should not prohibit such comparisons. Indeed, continues the author, «to hold that the Holocaust cannot be compared implies that it cannot be thought about, and that it has no important lessons for other peoples who in the past have been or in the future may be in mortal danger.» (p. 35) and that «if indeed, the Holocaust was totally unique and incomparable on any dimension, then one must conclude that suffering of its victims was distinctive from the suffering of others, and other victims have less of a claim to a respectful hearing and a just verdict

from the court of history. Moreover, if the Holocaust is incomparable, then it also follows that studying its origins has nothing to teach us about the causes of other genocides in the past or about the possibilities of genocides in the future. The implication of both these views is that one can learn nothing from the Holocaust that might be of use for the contemporary world and that the only valid stance is horror before its perpetrators and grief for its victims» (p. 38).

Briefly stated, Melson's thesis is as follows : Until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries both Jews in Central Europe and the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire were ethnoreligious communities occupying a low or pariah status in traditional societies. They were treated as distinct inferior corporate groups that were tolerated only as long as they made no claims to equality. Beginning in early nineteenth century, however, due to socio-economic and attendant political changes introduced in their respective societies, both experienced rapid economic progress and social mobilisation. Such changes were not welcomed by the dominant sections of the larger societies, which viewed the progress of traditionally despised religious minorities as a challenge to their socio-economic conditions and their world-view. As long as the old regimes with their respective long-accepted criteria of legitimacy persisted, however, the Armenians and Jews might have suffered persecution or experienced discrimination, but in neither case was a policy of genocide formulated or implemented against them. Both groups became victims of genocides only after their larger societies underwent a social revolution followed by a global war. Melson defines the term «revolution» as «a fundamental transformation, usually carried out by violence, in society's political, economic, and social structures and cultural values and beliefs, including its reigning ideology, political myth, and identity» (p. 32). Revolutions, he argues, provide the structural opportunities for ideological vanguards to come to power and to impose their views on society. In destroying the institution and power of the old regime, undermining the legitimacy of the state, redefining political culture and the identity of the new, authentic political community, revolutions also place in question the political identity of some groups, whose identities cannot be made to fit into the new post-revolutionary political community they wish to establish, and thus render the latter vulnerable to repression and even genocide. Both the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) in the Ottoman Empire and the Nazis in Germany, parties responsible for devising and implementing the respective genocidal policies, were such revolutionary vanguards motivated by ideologies of revolutionary transformation, believing strongly that these transformations will usher in a new era where a more perfect and powerful state would rule over a more coherent and united nation or race. Both parties came to power during a revolutionary interregnum after the fall of an old regime and, like other revolutionary governments that attain power in simi-



lar circumstances, felt the need to create a new order that will support their revolutionary state. Moreover, they too soon realised that they could not simply wait for support to bubble up from below and that such support must be mobilised and shaped to create a new order that will support the revolutionary state. In such cases, communal groups, like European Jews and Ottoman Armenians, that had been traditionally despised by the dominant groups in their larger societies, but had had rapid progress in the period leading to the revolution, are especially prone to victimisation by the new radical regime. Moreover, revolutionary regimes create international tensions that may lead to war, which itself gives further rise to feelings of vulnerability and/or exultation, engendering or intensifying the fear that the state's internal enemies, those that earlier have been labelled as the «enemies of the revolution», are part of an insidious plot with the regime's international foes to undo the revolution or even to destroy the state and the political community itself. Ideological vanguards may hence use the opportunities created by war to destroy completely those internal «enemy» communities, because war increases the autonomy of the state from internal social forces, including public opinion and its moral constraints, and closes off other policy options of dealing with internal «enemies», such as expulsion, assimilation, or segregation. This is exactly, according to Melson, what happened to the Ottoman Armenians under CUP rule in World War I and to Jews in Nazi Germany two decades later.

In expounding the above-described theory as regards the origins of the Armenian Genocide of 1915, Melson vehemently rejects what he calls the provocation thesis put forward by some Western historians of the late Ottoman Empire, like the Shaws and Bernard Lewis, that the Armenians themselves, by reason of their revolutionary and provocative behaviour had posed an intolerable threat to the Ottoman Empire and CUP and were thus in fact the agents of their own destruction. Instead, Melson suggests «that the intolerable threat that the Young Turks experienced derived not from Armenian actions but from their own constructions about the Armenians» (p. 11). He reminds the readers that the Armenians had little to do with the Young Turk decision to join the Great War in 1914. The latter allied themselves with Imperial Germany against Russia with alacrity and enthusiasm, hoping that victory would enable them to create a new homogeneous Pan-Turkish empire stretching from Anatolia to China, rivalling in extent the old Ottoman Empire. Here, Melson's line of reasoning is consonant with the basic premise adopted by the vast majority of scholars of the Holocaust, who never argue that it was the Jewish victims themselves who provoked the «Final Solution» and suggest that it was not what the Jews did or failed to do that mattered, but what the Germans imagined them to be that determined their fate. Furthermore, Melson is also careful to reject any hints that the Armenians and Jews had evoked widespread resentment, even vio-

lence, that ultimately led to genocide only by being able to rise swiftly in still traditional societies. This would suggest, he continues, that so long as minorities accepted their lowly status, refrained from challenging their rulers, and did not upset the sensibilities of majorities, they would remain safe and unharmed, i.e. powerlessness, poverty, and humility are a small price to pay for life itself (p. 42).

Melson's emphasis on the above-described similarities in the conditions that led to attempts of mass annihilation of Armenians and Jews does not prevent him from also paying due attention to some of the notable and instructive differences he sees between the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust. The first, says Melson, was the difference in the traditional statuses of Armenians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire and Germany respectively, for, until the instability created by the rise of capitalism and nationalism, Ottoman Armenians enjoyed as *dhimmis* a measure of tolerance and respect that was denied to the Jews in Europe. Moreover, most Armenians were, prior to the genocide, concentrated, unlike the Jews of Europe, on their ancestral lands in Anatolia and Cilicia, which gave them a further claim to the land and reinforced their autonomy as a component *millet* of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Armenians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries wanted a greater degree of separation and autonomy, while at first the Jews wanted to be included in the newly emerging capitalist society in Germany. In the end, however, both minorities were denied their aspirations. The second significant difference, according to Melson, lies in the specific content of the ideologies of the Nazis and the CUP. The Nazis wanted to see all Jews everywhere on earth annihilated in order that the world might be purified and redeemed. In the Ottoman Empire, however, nationalism, or ethnic chauvinism, not millenarian racialism, was the governing ideology. The Armenian populations in Lebanon and Palestine, for example, were not destroyed, and some Armenians, who spoke Turkish fluently and had converted to Islam, were able to save themselves or to be saved by sympathetic Turks. Hence, for Melson, «in their single-minded and murderous nationalism the Young Turks have more to teach us about current massacres and partial genocides in parts of the contemporary Third World... than does the Holocaust (p. 252). The third and final difference is considered to be in the methods of destruction, although the author is careful to warn against exaggerating this aspect. The death camp as a sophisticated factory of destruction, the hallmark of the Holocaust, was indeed absent during the Armenian Genocide. The Ottoman Empire during World War I, however, was, compared to Nazi Germany, an industrially backward country. Nevertheless, it too used effectively those industrial facilities that were at its disposal, like the telegram and railroad system, to implement the policy of genocide. The death marches were specifically designed to kill the greatest number of victims and can themselves be considered as a hall-



mark of the Armenian Genocide. The decision to kill the Armenians was taken by CUP in conjunction with the outbreak of the First World War and the danger and opportunities that wartime provided. It did not, therefore, have the quality of experimentation with various solutions as was the case with the «Jewish Problem» in Germany. The CUP initiated, encouraged, co-ordinated, and tolerated popular violence against the Armenians, which was largely perpetrated by the descendants of those Turkic and non-Turkic Muslim refugees, who had fled the Russian Empire and the Balkans in the nineteenth century and been resettled in Armenian-populated areas. Popular massacres thus complemented the tasks of special killing units, diminishing the need for special factories of destruction.

The similarities and differences of the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust, as enumerated and analysed by Melson, are certainly not exhaustive. Nevertheless, the comparison is conducted in this book conscientiously and scrupulously and can easily turn into the foundation-stone for a future and even more detailed comparative analysis of the two cases of mass extermination, which will undoubtedly further illuminate many of the still controversial aspects of each genocide.

In a separate chapter, Melson briefly applies the analytical procedure he proposes linking revolution to total domestic genocide to the annihilation of the Kulaks in the USSR under Stalin and to the «autogenocide» in Kampuchea, using these two examples as confirming cases for the propositions derived from the analysis of the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust. Although the targeted groups in these latter cases were classes, not ethnic or communal groups like the Armenians and Jews, and thus their inclusion as an instance of comparison may not qualify as «genocide» under the definition adopted by the UN, they, too, however, argues Melson, were instances of planned and total destruction of a collectivity by the state. The genocide of the Kulaks and the Kampuchean bourgeoisie targeted not only the active participants of the respective classes but often their families as well, implying not only the killing of members of the group but its destruction as a social collectivity. Furthermore, the extermination of the Gypsies by the Nazis, says Melson, also constitutes a total domestic genocide, but was not used in this study as a point of comparison of the Holocaust, simply because — with significant differences — both instances were a product of Nazi racialist ideology and German revolutionary circumstances.

Melson still keeps his overall argument carefully qualified, however. He is careful not to suggest a universal theory, simply presenting a conceptual framework of limited scope, which does not claim to explain all massacres and genocides, only those that are defined as total and domestic. Moreover, says Melson, comparative history concerns itself with propositions valid only within specific historical time periods, and in this case, the specific historical time period is the age of capitalism and emergence of the modern

state. He further admits that revolution and war, though necessary, are not sufficient conditions in themselves for genocides to follow, for not every revolution leads to genocide nor every genocide in history has occurred because of revolution. Revolutions are only potentially genocidal, depending on many variables that influence the final result.

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