

## DIFFERENT WAYS OF INTERPRETING THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE OF 1915

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The Armenian Genocide of 1915 is a hotly disputed historical topic. Some historians accept its occurrence, while others do not. Different historians who consider this event as a historical fact provide different interpretations regarding its causes. In this essay, I will shed light on the theoretical and methodological tools used by historians Hilmar Kaiser and Stephen H. Astourian in explaining this human catastrophe, basing the discussion on Astourian's article "The Silence of the Land: Agrarian Relations, Ethnicity, and Power"<sup>1</sup> and Kaiser's article titled "The Baghdad Railway and the Armenian Genocide, 1915-1916."<sup>2</sup> Kaiser's article was published by the Wayne State University Press, Astourian's by the Oxford University Press. The university, an academic institution, is the site where proper histories are produced. In the course of their writing both historians accept the fact of the genocide.

To begin with, both historians follow the Rankian scientific method of doing history. Unlike in exemplar history, Kaiser and Astourian aim at unfolding the past and reaching the absolute truth. To this end both rely on a large number of primary sources, taking into account that in history the past is a dead reality and these tools help in uncovering it.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, they do not directly appear in the text with personal pronouns.

Both historians follow the Western tradition. They use endnotes when referring to their sources. As historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has noted, so-called Indian, Chinese and Kenyan historians, and in this case Germans and Armenians are also following the European standard for writing their histories. Hence, Europe is becoming the sovereign of the historical discipline, leading to the provincialization of Europe and its hegemony over the world as a metanarrative.<sup>4</sup>

Kaiser and Astourian rely primarily on Western primary and secondary sources. For instance, Kaiser makes use of the Baghdad railway company's reports.<sup>5</sup> He also bases his account on German state archives (German Foreign Office correspondence), Sir Arnold Toynbee's *The Treatment of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, 1915-1916*, some Ottoman archival sources and other materials. Kaiser also depends on English, French and German secondary sources.

Astourian, on the other hand, is more diverse in his choice as he relies on Armenian, Ottoman, German and British primary sources. But, in both cases these two historians write the histories of Eastern peoples, in this case, the

Armenians, based on European sources. Moreover, they are doing history from above, taking into account that both of them are using state archival sources that reveal the history of the elites.

In terms of content and form, Kaiser and Astourian pay attention to both aesthetic and referential constraints when producing their accounts. In other words, they combine the elements of both the “beau style” and “concrete reality.”<sup>6</sup> They make use of proper English language and, as mentioned above, are trying to reconstruct reality. However, it is important to note that Kaiser has a more aggressive writing tone than Astourian. For instance, Kaiser uses the verb “butchered,”<sup>7</sup> when referring to the Armenians killed by the Ottoman state during the First World War.

Similar to Leopold Von Ranke’s criticism of Guicciardini’s account based on primary sources, Kaiser’s account also criticizes Johannes Lepsius’s *Bericht Über die Lage des Armenischen Volkes in der Türkei* (A Report on the Situation of the Armenian People in Turkey) as well as Ulrich Trumpener’s *Germany and the Ottoman Empire*, which do not hold German officers responsible for the Armenian genocide.<sup>8</sup>

Both historians employ a variety of tools when analyzing the issue at hand. They do not simply rely on a single historical school of analysis. Kaiser uses Rankian political-based history and Fernand Braudel’s event-based method, whereas, Astourian follows the Braudelian *longue durée* style of interpreting the past. However, both historians are influenced by the Marxist tradition; they shed light extensively on economic factors.

In his article, Kaiser interprets the issue of the Armenian genocide by highlighting the role played by German military and civilian officers in allowing its occurrence.<sup>9</sup> This way, Kaiser uses an anti-imperialist and post-colonialist tool of analysis, since Germany was a Western imperial power. He also states that the German plan of constructing the Baghdad railway in the Ottoman territories was an imperialist project.<sup>10</sup> Kaiser holds both Western European Germany and the “Oriental” Ottoman Empire guilty of the Armenian massacres. Kaiser’s approach is in contradiction to most people’s interpretations that consider Western European states symbols of “progress” and “civilization.”

On the other hand, Astourian, like Braudel in his *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, sheds light on the long-term factors leading to the Armenian genocide. For Astourian, the roots of the genocide go back to the nineteenth century. He does not mention anything directly or immediately related to the year 1915 or 1916. Astourian pays attention to the question of land in two geographical locations: Eastern Anatolia and Cilicia. He sees land as the main factor leading to the annihilation of the Armenians rather than European diplomacy.<sup>11</sup> In Astourian’s view, the

Armenians had already started losing their lands in Anatolia in the 1850s; meanwhile Armenians were gaining lands in Cilicia from the 1870s till the outbreak of the WWI.<sup>12</sup>

Unlike Astourian, Kaiser mentions the names of many specific individuals and dates dealing with WWI and the Armenians. For him, the massacres suddenly happened in the years 1915 and 1916 without any prior warnings. He has a temporal and chronological approach to time. Kaiser also does a sort of microhistory, because he refers to the day-to-day meetings between the railway and Ottoman public officials regarding the decisions taken about the deportation of the Armenian workers employed by the railway company.

For instance, he refers to discussions that took place between Talaat, Enver and Gunther, who was protecting his Armenian employees. He also mentions the dates of Talaat's deportation decisions of August 17, 1915 and September 25, 1915.<sup>13</sup> The aim in giving specific dates is to show that the story told represents the complete truth.

But, interestingly, both histories are narratives dealing with a particular phase of a nation's history, and are of a patriarchal nature, since almost all the actors in both historical accounts are males. For instance, Kaiser mentions people such as Gunther, Bottrich, Talaat, Djemal, Enver and others. In terms of names, unlike Kaiser, Astourian does not point out specific details or names. Sultan Abdul Hamid II is among the most important names he mentions. He accuses him of the Armenian losses due to Kurdish-Armenian clashes after the establishment of the *Hamidiye* troops in 1891.<sup>14</sup> This way he analyzes the problem in a nationalistic context, whereby various national groups were fighting against each other.

As mentioned above, both Kaiser and Astourian stress the economic aspect of the genocide. Kaiser explicitly uses Marxist terminology. He analyzes the importance of the great number of Armenian staff within the German Baghdad Railway Company. He also notes that the company had hired a large number of Armenian deportees as "workers" at the railway construction sites<sup>15</sup> in the Taurus and Amanus mountains as well as in Northern Syria.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, Astourian highlights the existing competition between the Armenians and other ethnic groups such as the Kurds over land, which was a scarce resource in Anatolia.<sup>17</sup>

In the course of his writing, Kaiser highlights the debates that took place between the railway company directors and German military officials regarding the fate of the Armenians. Kaiser notes that due to the economic importance of the Armenian workers, the company's directors resisted the Ottoman orders to get rid of Armenian laborers. The author explains that the directors of the company were trying to persuade their military officials to ask the Ottomans to allow Armenians to keep their positions, since in their

absence the company would stop functioning. That is why, some of the Germans wanted to protect these Armenians.<sup>18</sup> Through this statement, Kaiser shows that the Armenians were crucial economic assets and the Germans were trying to keep them in order to safeguard their interests.

He notes, too, that German engineers were also recruiting Armenian women and children from the deported Armenian families as workers to be used at the construction sites.<sup>19</sup> The exploitation of women and children for laboring purposes is another central idea appearing in Marxist theory.

To compensate for its financial problems, the railway company directors wanted to extend the rail lines. To do this they needed workers and the Armenians were to be used in achieving this project. Kaiser seems to have an Orientalist view of Muslims, as inferior since in his article he mentions that the Armenian workers were “skilled” compared to the Muslims, who were mostly “unskilled.” He mentions that the Armenians remained in their positions when no one was found to replace them.<sup>20</sup>

However, these Armenian workers were eventually killed after the arrival of Indian and British prisoners of war in the Amanus Mountains after the British defeat at Kut al Amara in Iraq. As a result, by June 29, 1916 no Armenian was left on the railway construction site.<sup>21</sup> Hence, again, Kaiser gives economic explanations for the elimination of the Armenians. In his view, the availability of a new, substitute labor force allowed the Germans to comply with the Ottoman orders by getting rid of Armenians.

On the other hand, Astourian has a more interdisciplinary approach towards the issue. He focuses on social, political, economic and cultural factors. In contrast to Kaiser, he presents the larger historical picture rather than only talking about the Armenians. For him, land is the major problem leading to conflicts. Astourian refers to the movements of Kurdish tribes and their settlement leading to the loss of land owned by Armenians in Anatolia.<sup>22</sup> Hence, he uses sociological terms such as sedentarization in explaining the life of the Kurds, but he also interprets the destruction of the Ottoman Armenians in post-colonialist terms, by stating that the Ottoman Empire’s modernizing and westernizing ambitions led to what happened in 1915. He particularly refers to the Tanzimat reform edicts; the *Hatt-i Sherif of Gulhane* (1839) and the *Hatt-i-Humayun* (1856), which aimed at creating a rational society based on Western universal ideals.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, Astourian sheds light on the role played by the Ottoman Land Law of 1858, in causing the deterioration of relations between the various groups.<sup>24</sup> He notes that certain articles of the Ottoman Land Law allowed people to possess lands in the absence of their landowners. Kurdish tribal leaders benefited greatly from this law and ended up owning Armenian lands in the name of their tribes, while the majority of them had returned to

nomadic life.<sup>25</sup> The law itself was a Western product that was in favor of the bourgeoisie. This fact also appears in Wael Hallaq's study, "What is Shari'a?," in which he notes that there was no such thing as 'Islamic law;' it was codified through Western efforts.<sup>26</sup>

When talking about the attitude of the Kurdish tribal leaders regarding land, Astourian again relies on the accounts of two French scholars who had visited Cilicia in 1874. They mentioned that everything was in ruins and the tribal members had left the place and returned to nomadic life.<sup>27</sup> However, it is important to note that these Frenchmen might have been Orientalists, who would have exaggerated the situation. Astourian takes the truth of their statement for granted because it comes from a Western source, which is usually assumed to be reliable and credible.

Like the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault, Astourian also talks about the discursive formation or in other words sudden emergence of the *firka-i-islahiyye*, intended to keep peace and order, but in reality leading to the settlement of Kurdish nomads in Cilicia.<sup>28</sup> Hence, again he seems to show that the Ottoman state, through its attempt to resemble a modern nation-state aimed at centralizing its power at the expense of the Armenians.

Astourian also discusses the demographic changes that took place in Anatolia due to the migration of Circassian refugees in the long period between 1858 and 1878 into the regions of Erzurum, Sivas and Diyarbakir as well as Aintab, Kilis, Zeytun and Alexandretta in Cilicia,<sup>29</sup> all of which had dense Armenian populations. When talking about the migrations Astourian also makes use of statistical data by noting that around five to seven million Muslim refugees settled in Anatolia from 1873 till 1914.<sup>30</sup> This suggests that his aim behind presenting numbers is to make his account more objective and scientific, since numbers are quantitative and not qualitative in nature.

Astourian also notes that the migrations of Muslims into these territories, was not prevented by Ottoman officials because they lacked the necessary power to interfere.<sup>31</sup> This means that Ottoman authorities were considered to be weak and backward, unable to maintain order unlike their European counterparts. Moreover, Astourian states that lands were being given to Kurdish beys and aghas in return for bribes presented to high Ottoman officials.<sup>32</sup> But, again, this is based on the account of British Lieutenant Chermside, who probably presented a negative image of the so-called "Orientals." But, Astourian takes him at his word in order to prove his case. He notes that these government bureaucrats were accused of breaking the law.<sup>33</sup>

Astourian puts great emphasis on the existing feudal relations between the Kurdish tribal leaders and the Armenian peasants, who were suffering under harsh economic conditions and had to pay taxes to their Kurdish masters in

the various Anatolian provinces. But, again, most of this information comes from eyewitness accounts of Western diplomats, who were located in the Ottoman territories. For instance, Astourian quotes the report presented by Russian vice- consul Termen, who was located in Van in the early twentieth century. According to him, the lower class Armenian peasants were becoming landless, while the Kurds were taking over their properties since the former were not able to pay their debts.<sup>34</sup>

After discussing conditions in Anatolia, Astourian turns to Armenian life in Cilicia. He analyzes the economic and agricultural conditions of Cilicia that led to the economic prosperity of the Armenian inhabitants of those territories. Astourian points to the maritime location of Cilicia, which enabled it to establish trade relations with various parts of the world through the port of Alexandretta as well as through its land routes with Aleppo.<sup>35</sup>

Cotton, wool, barley, and wheat were among the goods that were exported from Cilicia.<sup>36</sup> All these economic and geographic factors led to the creation of an affluent Armenian community in Cilicia. Astourian also sheds light on Cilicia's integration into the wider world economy through establishing external contacts.

He stresses the importance of cotton production for the advancement of the Cilician economy,<sup>37</sup> cotton being a commodity of great significance. Major world events such as the American Civil War of 1861 to 1865 had a positive impact on the advancement of the Cilician economy through the increase of cotton production, especially after cotton exports from the USA to Great Britain stopped, leading to the increase of cotton prices. However, again, as previously, he gives this information based on the archives of the British Foreign Office.<sup>38</sup>

Astourian also points to the industrialization of Cilicia through the introduction into the region of new cotton processing factories.<sup>39</sup> This is another tradition coming from the Marxist approach, whereby factories play a crucial role in increasing the productivity of a country.

At the same time, Astourian does not forget to talk about Muslim migration from various places into Cilicia during the Crimean War of 1856<sup>40</sup> as well as the Turkish-Russian War of 1877-1878.<sup>41</sup> According to him, these wars led to the so-called "Turkification" of Cilicia,<sup>42</sup> which is a nationalistic term and implies that these Muslims were "Turks." The usage of the term "Islamization" would have been a better choice than "Turkification."

Astourian explains that the Armenians of Cilicia became victims because of their economic supremacy over the Muslims of the region, taking into account that the Armenians were moneylenders and gained land. They were agents of modernization for they introduced modern Western agricultural technologies.<sup>43</sup> This assertion makes it clear that Astourian is affected by the

Orientalist mode of thinking, because he shows that the (Christian) Armenians, in contrast to their Muslim/Turkish/Ottoman counterparts were agents of progress.

It is also important to highlight some of the concepts both Kaiser and Astourian have used. For instance, Kaiser uses the terms Muslims, CUP members, Turks and Ottomans interchangeably. For him, all of these wanted to kill the Armenians.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, Kaiser refers to the Armenians as being an independent national entity. He simply calls them “Armenians,” whereas Astourian usually uses the term Ottoman Armenian by fitting the Armenians into the larger Ottoman context, rather than resorting to nationalist discourse.

Besides presenting the English translations of certain Ottoman-Turkish words, Astourian also includes the original terms in order to help the reader properly grasp the concepts. For instance, he refers to the *aghas* and *beys*.<sup>45</sup>

It can be inferred from Kaiser’s narrative that he is interpreting the past in terms of the present, because he constantly makes use of the word genocide (a term coined in 1948) and blames the Ottoman state for having committed the massacres against the Armenian people. It seems that his aim is to show modern-day Turkey that its Ottoman “ancestors” committed a crime in the past. In his turn, Astourian very rarely mentions the word genocide. He uses the term “demographic engineering,”<sup>46</sup> when referring to the population migrations and transfers that took place in Anatolia and Cilicia. However, he states that the Ottoman state wanted to “de-Armenianize the Armenian plateau.”<sup>47</sup>

In conclusion, both historians accept that the genocide as a historical event, happened but present different interpretations of the same problem. Both claimed to be telling the truth. However, unlike Kaiser, what Astourian tries to show is that the Armenian genocide of 1915 was not a sudden event but was the result of accumulated factors that led to its occurrence in 1915.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen H. Astourian, “The Silence of the Land: Agrarian Relations, Ethnicity, and Power,” in *A Question of Genocide: Armenians and Turks at the End of the Ottoman Empire*, Ronald Grigor Suny, Fatma Muge Gocek, and Norman M. Naimark (eds.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Hilmar Kaiser, “The Baghdad Railway and the Armenian Genocide of 1915-1916,” in *Remembrance and Denial: The Case of the Armenian Genocide*, edited by Richard Hovannisian, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Elton, “Research,” in *The Practice of History*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1969, p. 48.

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- <sup>4</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History," in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 27.
- <sup>5</sup> Kaiser, p. 70.
- <sup>6</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. R. Howard, University of California Press, 1989, pp. 144, 146.
- <sup>7</sup> Kaiser, p. 75.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 68.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 67.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 70.
- <sup>11</sup> Astourian, p. 58.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 56.
- <sup>13</sup> Kaiser, p. 80.
- <sup>14</sup> Astourian, p. 64.
- <sup>15</sup> Kaiser, p. 70.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 72.
- <sup>17</sup> Astourian, p. 55.
- <sup>18</sup> Kaiser, p. 78.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 87.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid, pp. 79, 82.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 89.
- <sup>22</sup> Astourian, p. 56.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 57.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 57.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 74.
- <sup>26</sup> Wael Hallaq, "What is Shari'a?", *Yearbook of Islamic and Middle Eastern Law*, 12, 2007, p. 152.
- <sup>27</sup> Astourian, p. 74.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 71.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 60.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 58.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 70.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 75.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 76.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 60.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 67.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 68.
- <sup>37</sup> Astourian, p. 69.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid, p. 70.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 72.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid, p. 76.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid, p. 72.
- <sup>43</sup> Astourian, p. 77.



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<sup>44</sup> Kaiser, pp. 76, 87.

<sup>45</sup> Astourian, p. 59.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p. 65.

<sup>47</sup> Astourian, p. 65.

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ԴՐԴԱՊԱՏՃԱՌՆԵՐՈՒ  
(Ամփոփում)

ՊԵՏՐՈՍ ԹՈՐՈՍԵԱՆ

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Հեղինակը կը ներկայացնէ պատմաբաններ Հիլմար Քայզերի եւ Ստեփան Աստուրեանի տարբեր մօտեցումները 1915ի Հայոց Յեղասպանութեան մեկնաբանման շուրջ: Երկու ուսումնասէրները կ'ընդունին Հայոց Յեղասպանութեան գործադրումը իբրեւ պատմական ճշմարտութիւն:

Քայզեր կը ծանրանայ քաղաքական եւ տնտեսական պատճառներուն, մասնաւորաբար՝ Պաղտատի Երկաթուղին ունեցած կարեւոր դերին վրայ՝ Յեղասպանութեան իրագործման մէջ, իսկ Աստուրեան կը շեշտէ Անատոլիոյ եւ Կիլիկիոյ մէջ հողին դերը՝ Յեղասպանութեան գործադրման մէջ: Ան նաեւ կ'անդրադառնայ տեղական եւ միջազգային իրադարձութիւններուն, ընկերային եւ տնտեսական պարագաներուն: Աստուրեանի համաձայն Յեղասպանութիւնը արդէն արմատ կ'առնէ 1860ականներէն, իր գագաթնակէտին հասնելով 1915ին, իսկ ըստ Քայզերի՝ Յեղասպանութիւնը տեղի կ'ունենայ 1915ին:

