

BOOK REVIEW

From Adana to Der Zor. A review of Bedross Der Matossian, *The Horrors of Adana: Revolution and Violence in the Early Twentieth Century*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2022, 343 pp.

Reviewed by Matthias Bjørnlund, historian.

A review essay, in which we move in time from 1909 to 1918. In space from Adana over Aleppo to Der Zor in the Syrian desert. And, on this journey ever further to the southeast of the Ottoman Empire, we move in scale of destruction, from the massacre of tens of thousands to the finalization of the genocide of 1,5 million Armenians or more. We begin with the 1909 massacres at Adana in the wake of the Young Turk/Unionist revolution of 1908, the event that first brought to power such main perpetrators as Mehmet Talaat and Ahmed Cemal – the latter particularly tying the events in Cilicia and Syria together in person.

Bloodbath in Armenia. 30.000 people killed? It is reported to local papers from Messina that two Turkish regiments were sent ashore on Saturday and immediately dispatched to Adana. The night between Sunday and Monday they have perpetrated a horrible bloodbath on the local Armenians and set the houses on fire. 1.000 Armenians burnt to death, and the fleeing Armenians were shot down by the soldiers. In the province of Adana, it is estimated that 30.000 Armenians are killed. The material losses are enormous.¹

This, from the front page of the Norwegian daily newspaper *Sandefjords Dagblad*, 30 April 1909, is but one of thousands from around the world dealing almost in real time with a new round of massacres of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, as the papers had done during the 1890s Abdülhamid massacres. Of course, as the question mark and the estimated number of casualties indicate, getting precise information and an accurate overview of seemingly chaotic events most often takes time. In the case of Adana 1909, we basically had to wait until 2022 and Bedross Der Matossian's book to get a proper account of the events.

Der Matossian himself is rather modest about his aims and achievements, but I do not have to be, so here goes: *The Horrors of Adana* is the first broad, deep, and analytical take on the Adana massacres. The introduction alone is a tour de force, giving us an overview of the relevant literature and discussions pertaining to the main question: How do we

¹ *Sandefjords Dagblad*, 30 April 1909.

explain the massacres and destruction of Armenians in and around Adana in 1909? To answer that question, we begin in the city of Adana, the epicenter of the violence in 1909, with its public space – its rapidly modernizing agora – increasingly filled with emotions, ranging from excitement to anxiety and resentment, and with rumors, manufactured or readily instrumentalized and acted upon, especially during and after the 1908/9 revolution/counter-revolution.

How and why, then, does this “well-organized conspiracy against the hated Armenians,” as a German eyewitness puts it, happen?² Der Matossian deals in detail with the longer socioeconomic and political lines, but here we jump right to the immediate context: how the revolution and counter-revolution upsets the existing ethnoreligious balance, enfranchising and emancipating some, at least for a while and on the surface, like the local Armenians and supporters of the new Young Turk regime in general. While many Muslims, especially the supporters of the ancient regime, experiences relative deprivation. And chooses to interpret an Armenian cultural revival, flourishing under a (relatively) democratic constitution, as preparations for an insurrection to bring back the medieval Cilician kingdom.

The flipside of the Janus-faced new freedoms is thus that the indigenous Armenians in the economic powerhouse that is Adana – where much is at stake – are suddenly appearing assertive in the face of the dominant Muslim groups. And inadvertently end up visible and exposed, convenient scapegoats for those groups disengaged from discourses of ethnoreligious equality, and less able to benefit from socioeconomic change and the overall twists and turns of this new, fragile experiment with Ottoman modernity heralded by the Unionist revolution.

The author’s detailed micro level analysis of the actions and reactions of perpetrators, bystander, and victims – who fight back, outnumbered and outgunned – is dispassionate, evenhanded, and yet reads like a thriller: tensions rise, and then begin the killings, the rapes, forced conversions, and the pillaging, burning, and plunder during Easter of 1909. The ignition: a brawl between an Armenian and a Turk. False rumors are spread, including from the center in Constantinople, emotions run high, leading to the first large-scale attacks on the Armenian Quarter in Adana, attacks that are spreading to the whole region and beyond, including to the province of Aleppo. Resentment and anxiety find an outlet. And, I would add, transforms perpetrators by creating joy in the process, since the ugly truth is that very many participants in such transgressions find it uplifting to be part of “righteous” mobs, with a license to get high on abusing and destroying “evil.”

The immediate end-result: at least 20.000 murdered Armenians and other Christians, some 2.000 Muslims killed in self-defense, and a botched attempt at holding accountable the main perpetrators, found among supporters of both the old and the new regime. Order is restored, not least thank to Ahmed Cemal’s stint as governor of the region, and

2 *Hejmdal*, 11 May 1909, 1.

humanitarian aid from Armenian, Ottoman Christian, Jewish, and Western organizations pour in, but the Armenian community is devastated and severely decimated, subdued economically and culturally, as was a main motive of the massacres all along.

Drawing a direct causal line from these events to the genocide only a handful of years later is difficult, as Der Matossian states in yet another nuanced and informed discussion in the book's conclusion. But arguably, the Adana massacres continue an Ottoman culture of impunity, radicalize the Young Turks, create even deeper intercommunal mistrust, and show once more that massacre is a handy tool in the toolbox when it comes to "solving" perceived ethnoreligious, socioeconomic, and demographic problems. So, though a new balance is struck in Adana after 1909, this all points towards 1915 and the destruction of the Christian populations in the empire.

Because a balance of terror this fragile is not a balance at all, as we see in the Ottoman and other cases. Anyway, it is not a balance worth preserving since, all virtues of the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic aside, there is a massacre here and a genocide there waiting to happen. Chios 1822, Lebanon 1860, Dersim 1937-1938, yet another invasion of Syria coming up, the list goes on. As an Armenian or Assyrian in 1909, the question is to reform or not to reform, to thrive, economically, politically, religiously, or not to thrive. Damned if you do, damned if you do not. Because you are acutely aware that continuing life as a second-class citizen in your own country is unviable, yet it is equally clear that the dominant groups always have massacre to resort to if you stick out your neck.

To sum up: Der Matossian's *The Horrors of Adana* is the book we could have hoped for on the Adana massacres. I have few issues, one of them being the oft-repeated claim of Western indifference to Muslim suffering: "In the European view, it was always the Muslim who killed the Christian." Racism, also in the form of anti-Muslim/Turkish sentiments, is indeed widespread at the time, but very many Westerners during the 1890s massacres, Adana 1909, and the Armenian Genocide are not only decidedly anti-Armenian (and against Jews and "Oriental" Christians in general), but also pro-Turkish/Muslim, defending the empire as well as its excesses. In addition, they are often quite influential, particularly in Germany, ranging in ideological backgrounds from Conservatives supporting the Sultan and the imperial status quo, to Liberal intellectuals despising the empire's non-Muslim "soulless modernizers," and Socialists seeing Ottoman Christians and Jews through a Marxist lens as the "Comprador" oppressor class holding the Muslim peasants and workers down.

Moreover, related to this discussion, there is the criticism, also brought forward by Der Matossian, that Western aid to, and intervention on behalf of, Ottoman Armenians leaves out or discriminates against Muslims. I.e., that we in 2022 should expect all Western humanitarianism in the decades around 1900 to be truly universalistic. In my mind, such criticism is somewhat anachronistic and unfair. It is hardly surprising that European and

American humanitarianism is heavily influenced by Christian solidarity – if it is not too expensive in economic or geopolitical terms. Just like notions of “Muslim solidarity” and pan-Islamism are widespread during those times.³

3 See, e.g., Matthias Bjørnlund, “Virtuous Victims? Imagining Armenians in the West,” *Armenian Weekly*, April 2012, 38-42; idem, “Adana and Beyond: Revolution and massacre in the Ottoman Empire seen through Danish eyes, 1908/9,” *Haigazian Armenological Review* 30 (2010): 125-156; Alp Yenen, “Pan-Islamism (Ottoman Empire),” in *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, April 2020, https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/pan-islamism_ottoman_empire; Mehrdad Kia, “Pan-Islamism in Late Nineteenth-Century Iran,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 32, no. 1 (1996): 30-52.