

Khatchig Mouradian, *The Resistance Network: The Armenian Genocide and Humanitarianism in Ottoman Syria, 1915-1918*, East Lansing: Michigan University Press, 2021, 233 pp.

Reviewed by Matthias Bjørnlund, historian.

We now move to another book on 1915 and beyond. The Armenian Genocide has begun, and a main protagonist from Adana, Ahmed Cemal, is not only at the very top of the Unionist party, but also governor and military commander of the neighboring region, Aleppo. We begin in the middle of things:

The next day we catch up with our battalion again, they have stayed in "Nesebin," here we can rest for a few days. There are lots of prisoners here, they are Englishmen and Indians, they come from "Kut-el-amara," about 300 km south of "Baghdad", they are on route to "Konia." 13-14.000 were taken prisoner down there, they sell all they got to get a few Turkish coins to buy just a little bit to eat, their catering is meager, I sure would not want to be a prisoner of the Turks.

Witnessing such cruelty, well, it is almost indescribably what goes on down here. We sometimes meet large groups of "Armenians" chained together by their wrists, those starving, tormented human beings, "infidel dogs," as the Turks say. Armenians are indeed a Christian people. Seeing their ragged clothing, their pleading looks when they meet us with their arms stretched out, begging for help, and begging for alms, seeing this cut through the heart, we would have liked to mow down the whole of the gendarmerie with machine guns, but, alas, we were not allowed to do so.

We gave all the bread we had to them, but the gendarmerie gave us evil eyes. It is sad that some people are tormented like that. The Turks went to their country, stole all they had, burned their houses, the children were killed, the girls were sold, and the men first had to work for as long as they could, and, when they broke down, they were forced into the desert to become food for the jackals. Later on, an "Armenian camp" was established, Karen Jeppe has done a great deal of work here to ease the suffering of the distressed Armenians.

Sometimes one [Armenian] managed to escape, we, too, had a couple with us, because here the Turks did not dare retrieve them, we could take a servant, and, for as long as it lasted, the Turks would be off his back. The next couple of days we meet many English and Indian prisoners. One morning we also meet the Swedish naturalist Sven Hedin, he is on his way from the East to Constantinople. 24 June we arrive at "Mosul."⁴

4 Heinrich Jessen, *Krigen 1914-1918 og mine Erindringer derfra*, privattryk u.å., excerpt from <https://denstorkrig1914-1918.dk/24-juni-1916-ulykkelige-armeniere-boernene-slog-de-ihjel-pigerne-solgte-de/>, accessed 02.03.2022. All translations are mine.

Heinrich Jessen, an ethnic Dane conscripted (unwillingly, like most Danes in Germany) into the German army, writes this about encountering Armenians on death marches in the Syrian desert in the summer of 1916. And meeting Sven Hedin, a leading Swedish pro-Turkish and pro-German intellectual, who spends time and energy defending the genocide that he, too, witnesses. Heinrich Jessen serves in a machine gun battalion and reacts frankly (and, I would add on a personal note, refreshingly) with anger to the sight of limitless suffering, in the middle of nowhere, far from any frontline. So angry are he and his comrades that their trigger fingers are itching to gun down the torturers of the defenseless Armenians. Because this is not war, this is genocide. Resentment is Janus-faced too, like so many other emotions, it can be a vice, facilitating mass murder, and a virtue, leading to righteous anger.⁵

How to make just some sense, then, of such horror in the Syrian desert? We have snippets by Jessen and a host of survivors and other eyewitnesses casting rays of light here and there on “what went on down here” during the Armenian Genocide. And we have Raymond Kévorkian’s magisterial treatment of the second phase of the genocide, the extermination of the survivors of the death marches.⁶ But many pieces of the puzzle have still been missing. Khatchig Mouradian sets out to fill the voids, and he succeeds. We now have an impressively straightforward, well-researched, and convincing account of how the genocide of the Armenians, and the mostly local and humanitarian, resistance to that state-initiated and state-led campaign of destruction, played out in Syria 1915-1918.

Truth is precision, and Mouradian, like Der Matossian, goes all the way in his extensive use of archives and a myriad of other sources, with a good and creative use of endnotes, to paint a detailed, nuanced, and vivid picture of the project of destruction, and how that project was met with various forms of local Armenian resistance that accompanied the genocide during all stages. Because just as genocide denial is hardly the last stage of genocide, but rather a companion to every stage of the annihilation process, so, fortunately, is resistance. A resistance that continues to this very day from many corners against the denial of fact, reason, and memory by the Turkish state and various fellow travelers.⁷

What is resistance to genocide, then? As Mouradian shows, it has many forms other than taking up arms, as desperate Armenians did at locations such as Musa Dagh and Urfa. In an overview, he points to how resistance has been defined in genocide literature as covering a broad range of actions and refusals to act, from organizing relief and refuge to spreading news about the annihilation, and to simply going on living. Mouradian chooses a rather narrow definition of resistance, i.e., “actions carried out illegally, or against the sanction and will of the authorities, to save Armenian deportees from

5 Thomas Brudholm, *Resentment’s Virtue: Jean Améry and the Refusal to Forgive* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2008).

6 Raymond Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2011).

7 See Gregory H. Stanton’s “Ten Stages of Genocide,” <https://www.genocidewatch.com/tenstages>, accessed 13.02.2022.

annihilation.”⁸ I disagree with that definition, as it excludes aiding refugees in Aleppo before the authorities crack down and start implementing the genocide there. It is still not just relief, but resistance to a genocidal scheme and regime – and still dangerous, as one’s actions at some point can lead to persecution.

But that is a minor point. In any event, soon there are ox carts for garbage disposal in the streets of Aleppo picking up dead or dying children to be put in mass graves. Just like in Adana, destruction and resistance begins here in the narrative, within the cityscape, the epicenter of despair, and moves to the periphery. How does it come to this, what to do about it, and how does it end? Mouradian explains this through the lens of the Armenian victims in Ottoman Syria, the destination of most death marches, the location of most concentration camps, and where most massacres during the second phase of the genocide took place. In 1915, the city of Aleppo becomes a hub for Armenians on death marches from the rest of the empire. Due to local circumstances, it is possible for Armenian city dwellers to extend humanitarian aid to their compatriots largely unhindered for a while.

Those circumstances include help from other nondominant groups, Syriacs, Christian Arabs, etc., and some Muslim notables’ resistance or indifference to the genocide. Mouradian convincingly argues that Cemal rather plays all sides expertly, and largely lets the genocide run its course, facilitating it here, ignoring it there. But what is most vital for survival has been quite neglected by scholars (including myself), as the author shows: Armenian agency, such as extensive lobbying, bribing, fundraising, establishing networks of informants, extending all sorts of aid to the persecuted, food, shelter, vaccines, etc. In short, acting like responsible, caring Ottoman citizens, rather than the disloyal terrorists the Young Turks claims them to be in the official propaganda.

Such agency – what has been called “victim agency” in somewhat related settings – saves thousands of lives long before Western aid begins to arrive from the outside, despite the dangerous circumstances and profoundly uneven power structure, where Armenians are pitted against the full power of a state bent on destroying them.⁹ But with the arrival during 1915 of hardcore Unionists to enforce the complete destruction of the deportees, humanitarianism moves underground. And moves increasingly from the relative safety of the urban setting and into the open, the desert, where the Armenians end up, in concentration camps, transit camps, and labor camps in their hundreds of thousands. Camps complete with the Ottoman version of *kapos* and other collaborators facing, perhaps, “choiceless choices,” at least in some instances, and with the endless degradation and murder we know from, say, Nazi and Soviet camps.¹⁰

8 Mouradian, *The Resistance Network*, xx.

9 See, e.g., Elizabeth M. Schneider, “Feminism and the False Dichotomy of Victimization and Agency,” *New York Law School Law Review* 38 (1993): 387.

10 “Choiceless choice” was originally coined by Lawrence Langer to denote impossible situations faced by Jews during the Holocaust: Lawrence Langer, “The Dilemma of Choice in the Deathcamps,” *Centerpoint: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 4, no. 1 (1980): 53-58.

Armenians are sent to the desert to die, and Mouradian's discussion of these camps, and of the phenomenon of concentration camps in general, should be required reading for all students of mass violence. So should his treatment of how the network of camps are shut down in 1916, usually after no more than a year. Too much disease, annihilation is too slow, Armenians are still too many, so the massacres of hundreds of thousands begin, thereby finally "answering" "The Armenian Question" that ends up being pushed all the way down to the desert. Supplementing Mouradian's account, here are two testimonies from Danish archives and contemporary publications on the short, precarious cycle of life and death for Armenians in 1915-1916.

First there is a doctor from Aintab, Khosrov Krikorian, who witnesses how seasoned perpetrator Zeki Bey arrives at Der Zor in 1916 as the new governor, begins by firing local civil servants "too friendly towards the Armenians," and proceeds to organize massacres with the help of a few hundred gendarmes and groups of local Chechen tribesmen, some of them led by one Suleiman Bey. Krikorian also overhears a massacre of 20,000 Armenian men, women, and children, the rifles, the cries of the victims, and the "deep, expressive 'Allah, Allah, Allah'" of the perpetrators. And then there is this testimony, related to a Danish priest in Greece in 1922:

The first ones to arrive in Der-Sâd [Der Zor] were not worse off there than they were at other places. They received a little land to till, but after some months an order came that all men had to meet ten hours from there to receive tools. They entered the barracks – 'Take off all your clothes and put money and rings on a blanket, fold your clothes neatly in another corner,' and then they were herded, naked, out in the field ten minutes from there and lined up. A detachment of Chechens came from the front, and a detachment of soldiers came from behind. This was the first massacre in the Der-Sâd district in March 1916.¹¹

In conclusion, of sorts: why study mass murder, why write these books, why read them? The books themselves provide some rather clear answers, and let us ask new, more informed questions. And then there is the answer by British author D. M. Thomas, when asked why he, as it is put, is obsessed with violence – first a novel about the Holocaust (*The White Hotel*, 1981), then one about the Armenian Genocide (*Ararat*, 1983)? His answer: "But that's the story of the twentieth century."¹² It is, and of the 21st century too, and yet none of this is history, really, as everyone who has been to Der Zor with their eyes open can testify to. The bones are still there, like ghosts of murders past, and since then Islamic State came by, adding new slave markets, new forced conversions, new massacres.

11 *Danish National Archives* (Rigsarkivet), pk. 15, "Arminier-Missionen. Diverse skildringer vedr. Arminierne [sic], 1906-1927, machine-written testimony in Danish.; H. P. Larsen, *Blodet og Taarernes Land i Europa. En Orienterelse 1922*, Industrimissionen i Armenien 1922, p. 36.

12 Donald Michael Thomas, *Memories and Hallucinations: A Memoir* (New York: Viking Penguin 1988), 56.