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Book review: Benny Morris, Dror Ze'evi, *The Thirty-Year Genocide. Turkey's Destruction of Its Christian Minorities 1894–1924*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge–London 2019, pp. 656

As one of Israel's so-called "new historians," Benny Morris generally aims at uncovering historical truth through the analysis of the documents available in historical archives, reports and testimonies of diplomats. All this allows him to reconstruct events and see through partisan interpretations of the powers that be. In this book, he applies, in collaboration with another famous Israeli historian, Dror Ze'evi, this principle of historical revisionism to a theme different from his other main works[1] and examines in depth the delicate issue of "minority cleansing" within the Ottoman Empire and, later, the new Republic of Turkey. The authors' objective is to reconstruct factual truth, while avoiding connections with more contemporary political issues: "the political use that others make of my work does not interest me," Morris stressed in a recent interview.[2]

1 The most important and famous works by Benny Morris are: *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited*, Cambridge, first published 1988, second edition 2004; *Righteous Victims. A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881–2001*, New York 1999; *1948. The First Arab-Israeli War*, New Haven 2008; *One State, Two States. Resolving the Israel/Palestine Conflict*, New Haven 2009; *Making Israel*, Michigan 2007.

2 See: the interview (in Italian) on 26 August 2020 with UCEI (Union of Italian Jewish Communities): https://moked.it/blog/2020/08/26/lintervista-a-benny-morris-lunica-cosa-che-conta-e-la-verita/ [access: 13.01.2021]. As with this review, the aim is to present the scientific historical contribution of the research published on the subject without any political bias.

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In some respects, this book can be considered a work of historical and political analysis, an important foundation for the investigation into the cleansing that was perpetrated over 30 years by three different regimes in Asia Minor: a cleansing that was not simply ethnic, but also confessional.[3] To demonstrate this, for the first time the two Israeli historians group together the genocides of the Armenians, Assyrians and Greeks all viewed as part of a single project of confessional cleansing in Ottoman (and later Turkish) territory,[4] within which a state was created that took as its reference points the concepts of nationalism and patriotism,[5] – which had been learned by the young men of the Turkish elite who had been sent to the West to study the new currents of thought[6] since the early 19th century – and the idea of a single Islamic religious substratum, considered to be a strong factor of social cohesion. On closer inspection, this substratum has always been present in the history of Anatolia and its neighbouring territories. Even in the first phase of modern Turkey, for instance, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk included in the first version of the Constitutional Charter, proclaimed in 1924, the recognition of Islam as the official state religion (Art. 2). This provision was eliminated only later, under pressure from the Kemalist party, to favour better relations with the West and a more "modern" view of religion within a nation state.[7] Turkish nationalism was therefore characterised from its very beginnings by an Islamic confessional identity which, to achieve its goal, "had" to eliminate any differential characteristics considered to be disruptive to unity.

The authors thus highlights a fundamental aspect of the project for the unification of the Turkish nation: a confessional-based purge of non-Muslim minorities, including Armenians, Greeks and Assyrians.

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3 In the article cited below, Giovanni Quer explains the link, at times inseparable, between ethnicity and religious affiliation in the Near East, whereby "being Greek in the Ottoman Empire implied belonging to the Greek Orthodox Church; being Arab implied belonging to the Islamic umma, just as being Jewish implied belonging to the Jewish people understood as a nation" (G.M. Quer, *Un millet per l'Europa: il modello pluralista nella gestione della diversità religiosa* [*A Millet for Europe: The Pluralist Model in the Management of Religious Diversity*], [in:] *Veritas et Jus*, vol. 2, Lugano 2011, pp. 61–83).

4 The subtitle of the Italian translation of this book – *The Turks' War to Create a Pure Islamic State* – is to be understood in this sense.

5 See: F. Chabod, *L'idea di nazione* [*The Idea of Nation*], Laterza–Roma–Bari 2019; E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Malden 2006.

6 See: N. Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey*, London 1998; B. Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, London 1968.

7 R. Bottoni, *Il principio di laicità in Turchia: profili storico-giuridici* [*The Principle of Secularism in Turkey: Historical-Juridical Profiles*], Milano 2012.

The book is structured to present successively the three periods during which this project took shape, by alternating testimonies, quotations from archives and diplomatic reports: the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876); the period of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), also known as the Young Turks (1908); and the first years of the new Republic of Turkey (1919–1924):

> In line with changing political, military, and demographic circumstances, the successive regimes dealt with Christian communities somewhat differently, though to the same end. During three campaigns beginning in 1894, the Turks turned variously to tools of steady oppression, mass murder, attrition, expulsion, and forced conversion. By 1924 they had cleansed Asia Minor of its four million-odd Christians (p. 9).

To strengthen national cohesion, it was necessary to eliminate those subjects who could be considered traitors to the Nation because they paid allegiance to a religious leader other than the Sultan and were allies of foreign powers if they feared or experienced oppression. For the nationalists, it was imperative to counter the increasing advance of the European states, but also the Empire's dependence upon them. According to the authors, in the first period analysed, the Armenians' serious break with the Sultan occurred when they began to think in constitutional terms, a prospect that hung like a sword of Damocles over the regime and was supported by the Treaty of Berlin thanks to the efforts of the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople. Starting from 1879, the Sultan became so infuriated by the interference of foreign powers that he ceased approving the reforms that had been requested precisely by the Armenians. Islam was to be the only unifying element within the Empire. The non-Muslim Turkish communities, which were increasingly looked upon as spies of the West, were marginalised, thus initiating the purging process, at first through debasement and later through massacres (between early 1894 to 1896). These communities were victims of the "game" played by the European powers to whom the Turks were subordinate. The survivors resumed their political activities through migrations to the West; those remaining in their villages relied on the occidental aid (pp. 44–134).

The second historical period analysed deals with the theme of the search for a Turkish identity, which increasingly questioned the concept of a multi-ethnic empire. At the beginning of the 20th century, there were thus, on the one hand, nationalistic pressures in the Balkans and other areas (due to the presence of the Armenians, Greeks, Albanians, Egyptians, and

other Arabs), and, on the other, the determination of the CUP to "Turkify" the Arabic-speaking areas by introducing into their schools the compulsory learning of the Turkish language together with Turkish history and culture. This brand of nationalism was essentially based on the Anatolian Turkish linguistic and cultural element, and it was strengthened later, after the loss of the Balkans (1912) and North Africa (pp. 137–141). During the first Turkish war of independence, one and a half million Muslims arrived in Anatolia in a state of complete destitution, so the government reacted by encouraging the counter-exodus of its Bulgarian and Greek subjects. The CUP saw all of this as part of a conspiracy hatched by the Christian powers who wanted to dismantle the Turkish empire, and they started to foment hatred for Christian subjects among the Muslim population. This led once again to the fear of new massacres, new emigrations, and tensions. Shortly after, in 1914, on the eve of the Great War, at the insistence of Russia and Germany, the Ottoman Empire and the European powers signed an agreement that provided for the appointment of European inspectors (p. 146):

> Given the attitudes and sentiments that many Muslims had toward Armenians, they became a convenient… scapegoat. As for the thousands of Ottoman Armenian troops taken prisoner by the Russians and sent to Siberia, the Ottoman army listed them as deserters (p. 170).

The same applied of course to Greek soldiers in the Ottoman army, who were accused of nothing less than treason. In the first half of 1915, the deportation of the Armenian population and their redistribution in villages began in accordance with strict rules (one of which established a maximum of 10% of Armenians in relation to the total population of the village) (pp. 164–170). After that, the massacre began. Morris and Ze'evi provide the reader with testimonies, archive sources, and diplomatic and military reports for the different parts of the Turkish state by listing the events in the main cities and areas. The CUP saw the annihilation of the Armenians as a sacred national mission. This objective was then extended to all unbelievers: in December 1915, the roundups also affected other Christians, Assyrians, Protestants and Catholics, and even converts to Islam (pp. 190–211).

In the last historical phase analysed, from the armistice concluding the First World War to 1924, hundreds of thousands of Greeks, Armenians and Assyrians were hit by new waves of massacres and deportations (p. 265). Thousands of Greeks were exchanged for Muslims coming from the Balkans and, at the end of the process, Anatolia was almost totally free from

Christians. Concerning this last phase, the author presents the historical context in which the massacres took place, highlighting how Kemal Atatürk, the "father" of modern Turkey, from the very beginning of his rise to power accused non-Muslim citizens of embracing separatist policies and abusing their privileges:

> Kemal made his clearest statement regarding the wartime massacres and deportations. He blamed the Armenians and Greeks for what had happened, while never actually defining what had taken place: "Whatever has befallen the non-Muslim elements living in our country is the result of the policies of separatism they pursued in a savage manner, when they allowed themselves to be made tools of foreign intrigues and abused their privileges" (p. 276).

The author's analysis therefore focuses on the massacres of Armenians, Greeks and Assyrians.

The authors conclude that the annihilation of Christians has been planned on a large scale, from massacres to forced conversions: from twenty percent of the population in Asia Minor to just two percent in 1924, "the destruction of the Christian communities was the result of deliberate government policy and the will of the country's Muslim inhabitants" (p. 484). Many Christians were eliminated by the civilian population, but the spatial synchronism of identical events in the four corners of the country is such that the annihilation of Christians must be considered as an intentional project (pp. 149–255). Precisely, the determination to eliminate even the Assyrian communities, which had no nationalist aspiration (and the Turks were well aware of this), is the key clue to confirm that the intention was indeed to eliminate any type of Christian from the Empire:

> The mass slaughter and expulsion during 1914–1924 of the Assyrians is the definitive "tell," indicating that what the Turks sought was the elimination of Turkey's Christians in toto, not this or that ethnic group that happened to adhere to Christianity. The Assyrians had no "national" political agenda and were not thought by the Turks to have one. They did not engage in terrorism. And they were so dispersed and demographically insignificant as to threaten no one. Nonetheless they were murdered and expelled *en masse* (p. 496).

The purification project lasted thirty years and was carried out, on the one hand, by the government, and consequently the people that was then in decline and felt threatened and, on the other hand, by modern nationalist movements

(pp. 497–506). "Beyond the circumstances and political effects that may arise from this theme, this book is an important contribution to the scientific research of a key period in the Western history of the early 20th century."