

***The Great Game of Genocide:
Imperialism, Nationalism, and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians***
By Donald Bloxham (New York 2005)
329 pp. ISBN 0-19-927356-1

Book Review

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Donald Bloxham is professor of modern history at the University of Edinburgh. His main research interests are the perpetration, punishment and representation of genocide, war crimes and other mass atrocities.

Regarding the Armenian genocide, a mnemonic battle rages between the Turkish state, and consequently the majority of the Turks, and the Armenian Diaspora and the state of Armenia. The Turkish state has consistently had a policy of refusing to recognize the killings of Armenians in the nineteen tens as 'genocide'. So, while the Armenian genocide is commemorated both in Armenia and throughout the world by the Armenian Diaspora, in Turkey there is a mnemonic socialization of semantic denial where 'tragedies and mutual killings' and not genocide is remembered. In his book *The Great Game of Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians*, Bloxham attempts to discard age-old polemical debates on the issue of the Armenian Genocide. The book is based on several articles Bloxham had written on the subject during the three years prior to publication.

In the introduction, Bloxham provides an overview of both the CUP's decisive role as perpetrators and the role of Western powers in the Armenian genocide and the later politics of denial. Subsequently, the book lays out the existing debates on the Armenian Genocide, its place among other atrocities of the twentieth century and the political contexts behind them. Bloxham then explains in a proper academic decisiveness that his book will not take part in this 'Great Game of Genocide', that is, questioning whether the Armenians were murdered en masse, nor sanction any discussion whether genocide and mass theft are in any sense justifiable. Bloxham correctly states that 'deniers and obfuscators should not be allowed to set the agenda' (Bloxham, 2005, pp. 20).

The book is divided into three parts, each containing several chapters. The first part, 'Mass Murder in an International System', describes how in the wake of various domestic and international pressures like increasing European penetration and rising nationalism within the declining Empire caused an urge for reform. As middleman minorities, with diasporic trade networks, the position of the Armenians became increasingly problematic. In the late nineteenth century, under sultan Abdulhamid II, who adopted a pan-Islamist agenda in an attempt to mobilize the Empire's Muslim majority into a unit, several Muslim groups were

placed in regions where Armenians lived. Even though nationalism was not a vibrant ideology among the Armenian population, the Ottoman government thought the Armenians were susceptible to nationalism like the peoples of the Balkans had been. Bloxham points out how under the CUP's rule, and especially during and after the Balkan Wars, Turkish-Armenian relations became more and more polarized. The imperialist advance of both Britain and Russia in the years before the Great War, and killings of Muslims by Armenian and Cossack militias triggered several deportations and killings of Armenians. Bloxham essentially claims that the motivation for the Ottoman government to displace the Armenian population was the idea of creating an ethnically homogenous nation rather than pre-emptive realpolitik due to a risk of Armenian collaboration with the Empire's enemies.

The second part of the book focuses on international response and responsibility in the Genocide era. Bloxham deconstructs the alleged influence of the German Empire as an ally of the Ottomans during the First World War in the implementation of the Genocide. Despite the anti-Armenian rhetoric of some German high officials, and the general blasé attitude with regard to the events, Germany had no direct role in the planning and execution of the Armenian deportations. The British and the French were instrumental in removing the diplomatic groundwork that would have made a Turkish denial of the genocide very difficult.

There was, however, an indirect international responsibility for the implementation and the later denial of the Armenian Genocide. In the third part of the book, Bloxham points out the United States's decisive role, first by non-intervening during the genocide and later in the facilitation of the denial of the Genocide. Turkey's role as a key United States economic, strategic and military ally in the Middle East, especially after the Second World War, guaranteed super-power political support for Turkey's policy of denial. According to Bloxham, because of the end of the Cold War and recent events in the Middle East such as the American invasion of Iraq and the possible reform of Iran, there might be a lesser American support for Turkish denial in the future. Moreover, the author explains convincingly that matters of historical events are to be discussed and decided by scholars and not politicians, but since Turkey has decided to 'play the game of denial' on a high international-political level a response in kind is to be expected. Furthermore, without external pressure it is unlikely that Turkey will change her internal mnemonic policies in terms of education and public propaganda.

Bloxham concludes his book by very concisely recapping the main argument. The Turkish state is deploying a counterproductive policy of both international denial and domestic fear-mongering against Armenian historical aggression, criminality and territorial ambition. Consequently, the collective consciousness of the Armenian people remains an open wound, and the Armenian state is apprehensive in its relations with Turkey. In Bloxham's words: 'The future of the past remains uncertain' (Bloxham, 2005, pp. 234).

Donald Bloxham's *The Great Game of Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians* provide valuable insights on the very complex interactions preceding, during and after the Armenian Genocide. He puts the many themes related to the politics of Genocide and Genocide denial into context. Moreover, the book rightfully does not attempt to 'convince' the reader of the actual happening of the Genocide but opts for dismissal of any such questions. Instead, Bloxham critically analyzes the backgrounds,

politics and effects of 'the great game' that is the paradigms and 'debates' on the Genocide. Furthermore, the book is supported by an extensive amount of primary and secondary sources.

Perhaps because of its handling of such a subject that is complex due to the many international and national aspects to it, as well as the huge period of time it spans, the book seems at first sight like a disjointed narrative covering a wide array of themes. Those themes, however, are presented in a well-structured and comprehensive manner. Besides being an excellent work for an audience interested in the politics of Genocide, the book can also serve as a book of reference wherein the various themes regarding the 'The Great game of Genocide' can be retrieved independently.