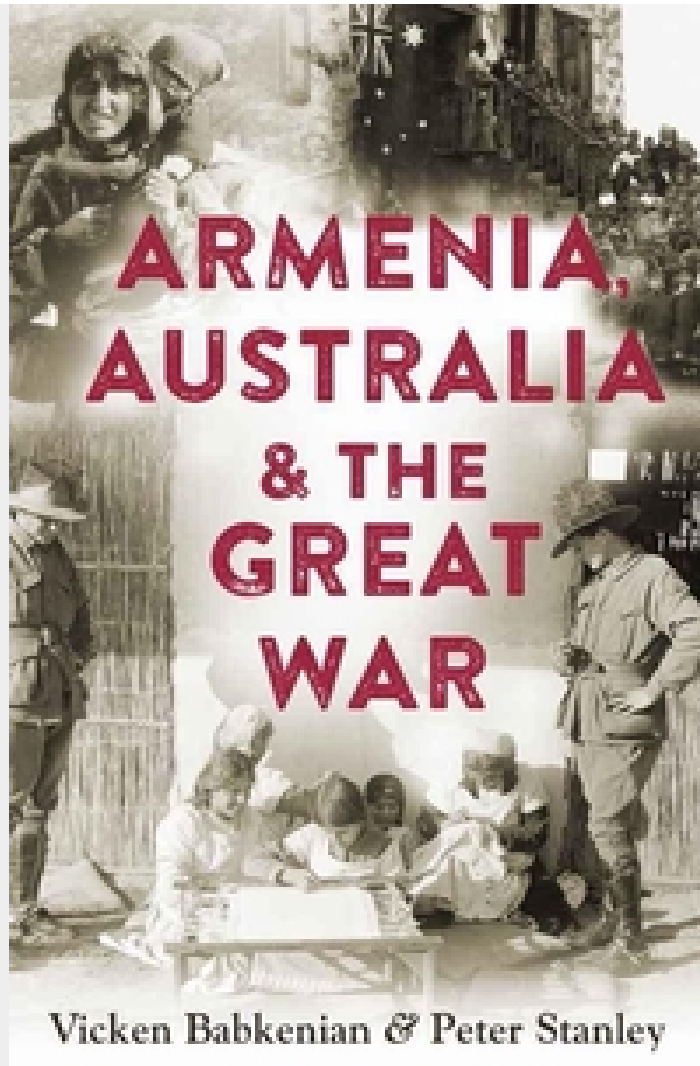


# "ARMENIA, AUSTRALIA & THE GREAT WAR"

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Category: [Opinions](#)



**Ashley Kalagian Blunt**, [The Newtown Review of Books](#), 12 May 2016

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In *Armenia, Australia and the Great War*, Armenian historian Vicken Babkenian and Australian military historian Peter Stanley explore the records of Australian witnesses to and even, at times, Australian heroism in this little-known history.

Starting with the surprising connection between one of the first Armenian immigrants to Australia and the Eureka Stockade, Babkenian and Stanley trace the history of the earliest recorded encounters between Australians and Armenians through to the Armenian community in Australia today.

The book weaves the larger geopolitical history together with anecdotes of individuals – Anzac soldiers and officers, Australian humanitarians and journalists, and the Armenians they met – as well as the stories of those few Armenians who managed to come to Australia in the decades following WW I.

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soldiers and officers, Australian humanitarians and journalists, and the Armenians they met – as well as the stories of those few Armenians who managed to come to Australia in the decades following WW I.

One such Anzac is Captain Thomas White of the Australian Flying Corps, a POW who survived the war, and bore witness to the genocide-in-progress:

*passed through Ras ul-Ai, which had gradually become one of the major transit concentration camps for Armenian deportees. At the time of White's arrival in early March, the CUP government had renewed a ferocious campaign against the surviving Armenian deportees encamped at Ras ul-Ain and along the Euphrates River. Armenians were being driven from the camps to be massacred or driven further down the Euphrates to the town of Deir el-Zor. White recorded seeing a 'large camp of Armenians herded together after the general round-up from their homes, and waiting to be sent on marches that always had the same ending.'*

As Babkenian and Stanley's research uncovers, captured Anzac soldiers were sometimes held in the empty houses and churches of Armenian deportees, which were used as internment camps; some Australians lie buried in Armenian cemeteries.

One key difference between the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust of World War II is that the Turkish government continues to deny it occurred. Nearly all historians outside Turkey who have researched the history, and even some Turkish scholars who have studied Turkey's own state archives, have proven the facts of the genocide; Babkenian and Stanley rightly position themselves beyond the Turkish denial, stating that there is no need to further engage in the debate. They draw on what they describe as:

*... a mountain of credible, first-hand evidence documenting the displacement, deportation and death of hundreds of thousands of Armenians at the hands of the Ottoman state and its agents.*

Within that context, however, Babkenian and Stanley make a strenuous effort at balance: they aim to present as complete and honest a history as possible. Where some histories of the genocide paint one-dimensional pictures of 'the Armenians' and 'the Turks', Babkenian and Stanley provide a fuller understanding of the history that includes instances of Turkish heroism and Armenian retaliation.

The authors also devote several chapters to chronicling the coordinated humanitarian aid Australians provided to Armenian genocide survivors. This was part of a larger international effort, spearheaded by England and the United States, that has been described as the world's first international aid campaign. The Australians involved included Sydney feminist Edith Glanville, who initiated creative publicity drives to raise awareness and funds. Another campaigner was South Australian minister James Cresswell, who visited the Australasian Orphanage for Armenian refugees in Lebanon in 1923. In addition to funding the orphanage, Australians donated flour, condensed milk, and clothing and other goods. So great was the commitment to the aid campaign that in South


Australia there was even a monthly magazine called the *Armenian*.

The authors present this as history Australians can be proud of, as history they should proclaim:

*Australians were helping strangers in remote regions of the Middle East to survive. Their engagement with the world may not have been as dramatic as that of the Australians who had fought on the Western Front, but their sustained generosity arguably had as great an impact on the Great War's victims, demonstrating that the war had truly brought Australia into contact with the world.*

They also succeed in providing new perspectives on the Anzac involvement in World War I:

*The Australian media have now fully committed to a view of the Great War, and especially of Gallipoli, that sees Turks as noble defenders – and, like Australians, the victims of an imperial power (Britain in Australia's case, and Germany for Turkey). The story of the Ottoman Empire turning on its Armenian minority and murdering a million innocent people sits awkwardly with this benign view ... We hope this book might offer Australians a different and more honest view of their involvement in the Great War.*

After the genocide, Armenian survivors fled to whatever countries would take them. While Armenia's population today is less than  4 000 000, the Armenian diaspora numbers perhaps 8 000 000 around the globe. Australia is home to 50 000 of those Armenians. The US has long had its great Armenian American histories, including Peter Balakian's *Black Dog of Fate* and Anny Bakalian's *Armenian Americans: From being to feeling Armenian*. Canada has its *Like Our Mountains: A history of Armenians in Canada* by Isabel Kaprielian-Churchill. Now, finally, Australia's Armenian history has been revealed.

This book is a great contribution to the history of the Armenian diaspora, but perhaps more importantly, it is also a great contribution to a little known chapter of Australian history.

Vicken Babkenian and Peter Stanley *Armenia, Australia & the Great War* NewSouth Books 2016 PB 323pp \$34.99

**Ashley Kalagian Blunt has written for *Griffith Review*, *McSweeney's* and *Right Now*. She teaches writing and public speaking, performs stand-up and has written two memoirs. Visit her [website](#) and follow her on Twitter: @AKalagianBlunt.**

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