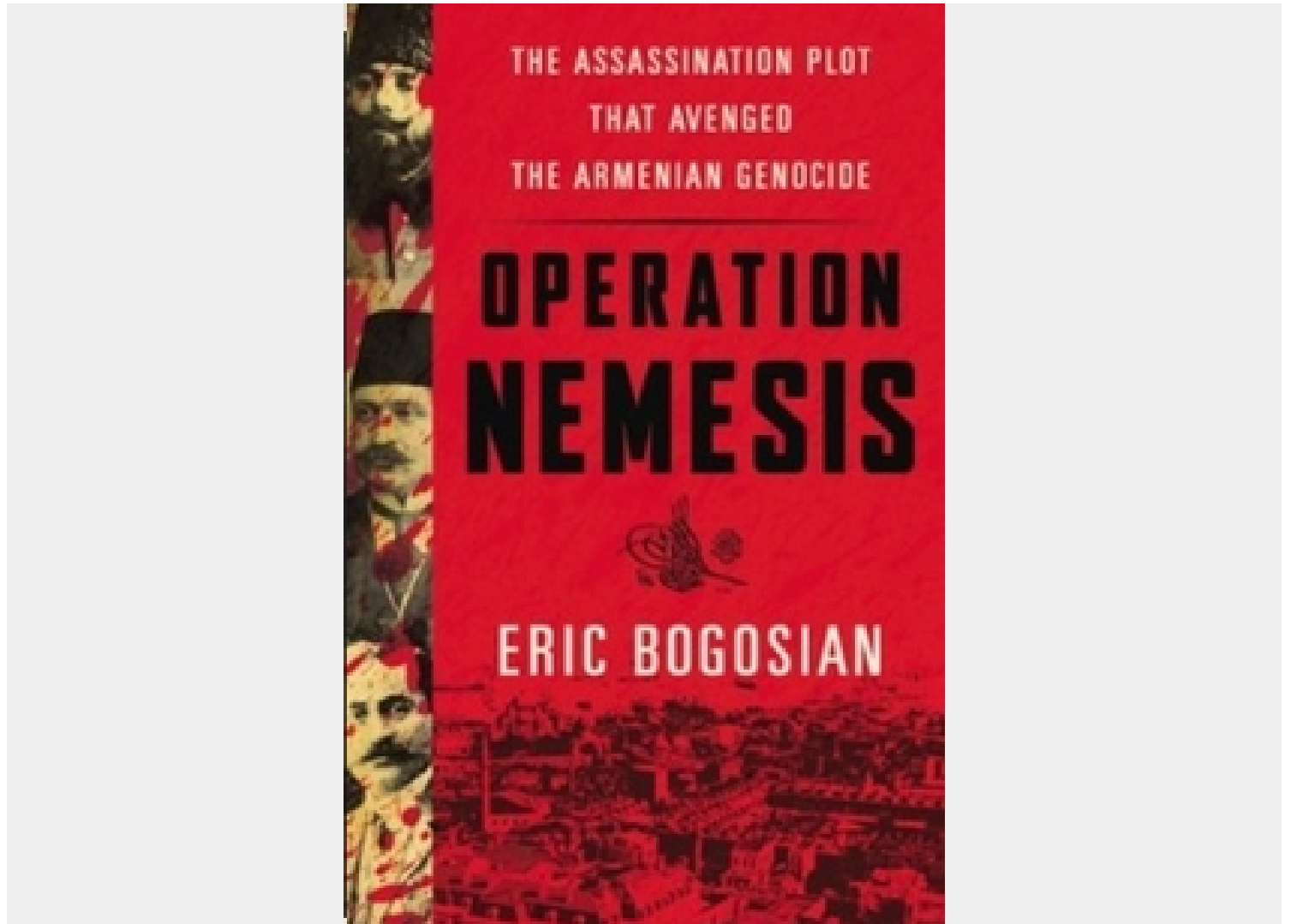


ERIC BOGOSIAN'S OPERATION OBFUSCATION (C)

Posted on May 5, 2015 by Keghart




Category: [Opinions](#)



Book review by **Lucine Kasbarian**

New Jersey, 1 June 2015

Seven years after starting his research about one of the most dramatic episodes of 20th century Armenian history, actor, playwright, and novelist Eric Bogosian has written *Operation Nemesis: The Assassination Plot that Avenged the Armenian Genocide* (Little, Brown & Co.; April 21, 2015). 


Much was expected of this widely publicized book whose author is fairly well-known to the American public. Many Armenians hoped that the work would bring into focus the fact that a group of Armenian patriots executed Turkish leaders who had escaped court-ordered death sentences for planning and carrying out the Armenian Genocide.

However, while serious students of the Armenian Genocide may be merely disappointed in this book, others could be misled.

Bogosian's account of Operation Nemesis—the post-WWI Armenian execution of Talaat and other Turkish genocidists—does not start until one-third of the way into this 300-page book. Readers first learn about the events that led up to the Genocide. Much later in the book, the author provides information irrelevant to Nemesis. Even if this was ostensibly done to provide context, the title *Operation Nemesis: The Assassination Plot that Avenged the Armenian Genocide* is misleading because it gives the impression that the book is solely about Operation Nemesis.

Book review by **Lucine Kasbarian**

New Jersey, 1 June 2015

Seven years after starting his research about one of the most dramatic episodes of 20th century Armenian history, actor, playwright, and novelist Eric Bogosian has written *Operation Nemesis: The Assassination Plot that Avenged the Armenian Genocide* (Little, Brown & Co.; April 21, 2015). 

Much was expected of this widely publicized book whose author is fairly well-known to the American public. Many Armenians hoped that the work would bring into focus the fact that a group of Armenian patriots executed Turkish leaders who had escaped court-ordered death sentences for planning and carrying out the Armenian Genocide.

However, while serious students of the Armenian Genocide may be merely disappointed in this book, others could be misled.

Bogosian's account of Operation Nemesis—the post-WWI Armenian execution of Talaat and other Turkish genocidists—does not start until one-third of the way into this 300-page book. Readers first learn about the events that led up to the Genocide. Much later in the book, the author provides information irrelevant to Nemesis. Even if this was ostensibly done to provide context, the

title *Operation Nemesis: The Assassination Plot that Avenged the Armenian Genocide* is misleading because it gives the impression that the book is solely about Operation Nemesis.

Moreover, "Assassination Plot" implies a sinister or unjust political motive, which is definitely not the case for the Armenians of Nemesis. Call me fastidious, but a more appropriate title for these events would be *Operation Nemesis: The Secret Plan to Execute the Guilty Perpetrators of the Armenian Genocide*.

His bibliography indicates that an incredible amount of research material was at Bogosian's disposal to produce this book. But the selectivity he exercised in the use of that material is apparent. Bogosian's choice of words, phrasing, style, tone, and reasoning—as well as certain insertions and omissions of information—will often bewilder and disorient knowledgeable readers as well as those new to this history.

In the opinion of this reviewer, the result obfuscates the significance of the Nemesis operation and the gravity and persistent dangers of Turkish ultra-nationalism. One winces reading many of the author's passages. In our opinion, this book disingenuously brings the Turkish reputation up a few notches while subtly bringing that of Armenians down at least that many. Having read both the pre-publication and published editions, we have noticed that a few of the more egregious passages have been modified or removed in the published edition.

Perhaps Bogosian is following today's so-called 'conflict resolution' paradigm. That is, in exchange for Turkish acknowledgment of the Armenian Genocide, the victim group must sacrifice truthful aspects surrounding this crime against humanity and concede that the Ottoman Turkish Empire simply found itself under siege in WWI, had an anxiety attack, and, unfortunately, struck out against 'rebellious' Armenians.

Following are some passages from the book and our comments.

• **P. 17: "At their peak, the Ottomans displayed a culture and scientific sophistication equal to the greatest pre-modern civilizations."**

To the extent that this may, in part, be true, can Bogosian prove that this was the doing of the Ottoman Turks themselves rather than that of the empire's subject peoples?

• **P. 18: "Aside from their respective religious faiths, the two peoples are in many ways congruent in their culture and style."**

Most Armenians, Assyrians, and Greeks, as well as visitors to the Ottoman Empire during the periods Bogosian writes about, would disagree.

• **P. 30: "A slave girl from the most remote corner of the empire could become mother to a sultan."**

True, but the phrasing implies that a girl's captivity in the imperial harem was somehow an honor. Turks abducted or captured thousands of non-Muslim women to live as the sultans' harem sex slaves and servants. Only five pages later does the author say that harem women were sometimes executed or drowned when no longer deemed useful.

• **P. 31: Bogosian takes a page to describe Europeans' allegedly erroneous view of Ottoman Turkey (“an impressive civilization”) as being composed of “outlaws who abducted women into their harems, castrated young boys, or enslaved the crews of captured ships.” Europeans, writes Bogosian, also had “lush fantasies” about harems “filled with naked slave girls and fierce eunuchs.”**

Could it be that Europeans had a more accurate view of the Ottoman Turks than does Bogosian?

• **P. 33: “Religious minorities were tolerated under what was called the *millet* system, in contrast to the violent suppression of ‘heretics’ common in Europe.”**

This is very much a generalization. Was the Ottomans' forced Islamization of many Christians “tolerant”?

• **P. 34: Turks seized Christian boys to become Ottoman soldiers—Janissaries (literally ‘new troops’): “The most attractive teenagers were collected under the process of *devshirme* , often with the consent of their families, because to be invited into the sultanic milieu was a great honor and opportunity.”**

However, in those many cases where families did not consent, did these boys and their families really consider it a “great honor and opportunity” to be forcibly converted to Islam and never see their families again?

• **P. 54: Bogosian has apparently bought into some pro-Turkish historians' contempt for ‘nationalism’: “The Serbs, the Greeks, the Arabs, and the Armenians also began to think of themselves as ‘nations’” and some successfully broke away from the Ottoman Empire. But for Armenians “nationalism would have tragic consequences.”**

It was Turkish ultra-nationalism, however, rather than Armenian nationalism that brought about the Armenian Genocide. Armenians mainly desired to not be oppressed and massacred. Moreover, are people forever condemned to live in multi-national empires ruled by Turks and others? For example, should the various peoples of North America, South America, and Africa still be ruled by European empires?

• **P. 59: “With the assault on the Bank Ottoman and now the attempts on Abdul Hamid’s life , the Tashnags were establishing themselves as a truly dangerous terrorist organization.”**

While the use of the word “terrorist” (also see p. 50) may be appropriate in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and while the ARF at the time used it, in 21st century America it implies something

deliberately sinister and inhumane and misleads readers early on. Only in a footnote (#6) buried on p. 318 does Bogosian concede that the ARF did not generally target "innocent civilians."

• **P. 62: "A series of attacks against Armenians erupted in the vilayet of Adana in 1909, leaving some twenty to thirty thousand dead."**

True. But these significant massacres are mentioned in only four or so other sentences in the entire book. Had Turkish massacres of subject nationalities become so commonplace that they came to appear normal to Bogosian? Would the author have devoted more pages to these massacres had Armenians been the perpetrators and Turks the victims?

• **P. 68: "And it was under the cloak of this war between the Ottoman Empire and the Allies that the Armenian Genocide proceeded with little detection."**

This is a strange assertion that an editor should have caught. In May 1915, as Bogosian knows (he mentions it in footnote #34, chapter 3), Allied governments warned Turkey that they will "hold personally responsible for these crimes all members of the Ottoman government, as well as their agents who are implicated in such massacres." There were also hundreds of contemporary worldwide newspaper reports of the Genocide in 1915 and later.

• **P. 71: "The Central Committee of the CUP quickly came to believe that the Armenian population represented a mortal threat to the dying Ottoman Empire."**

If the empire was "dying" anyway, how could Armenians—particularly women and children—represent a "mortal threat"? And why omit that scholars have found considerable evidence that the Genocide was pre-meditated, not something decided, as Bogosian puts it, "quickly"?

• **P. 97: Before the Genocide, Armenian "revolutionaries, hard to distinguish from the bandits who roamed the countryside with impunity, made it their life's work to pester the local authorities."**

Bogosian's wording is confounding. Since when is fighting back against a government that was massacring Armenians "pestering"?

• **P. 107: During the Genocide, "Muslim fighters were well aware of acts of atrocity that the Russian army had committed against their Bulgarian brethren during the Balkan wars only a few years before."**

Even if true, this could not justify killing Armenians. The average reader might also conclude that were it not for the Balkan wars Turks would not have massacred Armenians. Yet Turkey had massacred Armenians in the 1890s and 1909, years before the Balkan wars of 1912-13.

• **P.108: In May 1915, the Armenians of Van, "certain they were about to be attacked by the Ottoman army ... fortified their city and prepared for battle. These preparations incited the military to attack."**

Armenians "incited" Turks? It was the other way around: the Turkish massacres incited the Armenians of Van to defend themselves.

• **P. 110: "In the early days" of the Genocide, forced Armenian conversion to Islam "meant real salvation—literally, a means of saving one's neck."**

We doubt it was that simple. Did Bogosian mean to editorialize that it was preferable to convert than to die for remaining loyal to one's chosen beliefs? Moreover, Bogosian does not immediately make it clear that for females 'conversion' was often just another word for abduction and rape. Armenian women—some already widowed from the massacres—and girls were subsequently forced to bear the children of their Turkish captors.

• **P. 126: After the Allies won WWI, they "memorialized their thousands of fallen brethren by stomping on Turkish pride." What is Bogosian's evidence for the alleged "stomping"? French Marshal Louis Franchet d'Espèrey entered Constantinople "riding a white horse, a symbolic gesture of victory harking back to the Crusades ... greeted by cheering crowds of Armenians and Greeks" and occupied the palace of genocidist Enver Pasha; Allied ships anchored in the harbor; and the city was "crowded with thousands of foreign troops."**

Should the Allies, instead, have handed out *pakhlava* to the "proud" Turks, provided them grief counseling, and told them that they really didn't lose WWI?

• **P. 128: Apparently referring to the pre-WWI period, Bogosian writes, "The Armenians themselves did not constitute a majority in most of the territory considered a potential territory for them."**

Of course, it really depends on the particular regions being considered and is, therefore, a somewhat misleading demographic generalization. Bogosian also fails to note the massive toll that many pre-Genocide massacres, forced Islamizations, abductions, deportations, and the deliberate Turkish importation of non-native peoples had taken on the Armenian population. Moreover, in some locations Turks were in the minority while Armenians combined with non-Turks constituted the majority. And what about the Greeks and Assyrians in those regions?

• **P. 131: "As the war was winding down, Prime Minister Lloyd George, a great champion of the Greek nation, encouraged the former Ottoman possession, which had been independent from Turkey since the early nineteenth century, to invade the Turkish lands along the coast in an attempt to 'reclaim' its ancient littoral. To the Greeks, this made sense, because there still existed large Greek populations in the city of Smyrna, in villages along the coast, and in the Aegean islands. This ill-considered move would result in the tragic destruction of the city of Smyrna in a devastating fire."**

Occupied and dispossessed peoples such as Greeks are called invaders, victims are to blame, and the Turkish destruction of Smyrna is excused. Bogosian does not mention the expulsion

of Greeks—natives for 3,000 years in the Pontus region—along the Black Sea and the fact that Turkey persecuted, deported, and murdered its Greek citizens during WWI. Did not Greece have any right to protect the remaining Greeks in Turkey, or were they all to be left to the bloody whims of Kemal Ataturk? Bogosian (p. 250) accuses the Greeks, after Greece's army landed in Turkey in 1919, of "atrocities against Turkish citizens." "The Greek invasion was a crime against their humanity." Again, Bogosian fails to mention that this "invasion" came only after an earlier, years-long genocidal campaign by the Young Turks against Greeks during WWI. Do only the Turks have the right to, as Bogosian calls it, "invade"?

• **P. 131: In Constantinople in 1919, says Bogosian, "the war crimes trials" of Turks accused of the destruction of Armenians "added insult to the injury of defeat."**

We are sorry that Turks considered it an "insult" that their esteemed leaders were being tried and found guilty for war crimes against Armenians. As for "injuries," Armenians had been injured far more than Turks. Is the world expected to reward the bad behavior of mass-murderers?

• **P. 139: Regarding the post-war Treaty of Sèvres (1920) signed by the Allies and Armenia: "Had such a plan gone into effect, there would have been little left of the Ottoman Empire but a fraction of its former self."**

True. Aggressive empires that lose a major war inevitably forfeit territory. Should it be otherwise? Let's recall that Turkey tried to destroy the Republic of Armenia during and after WWI. Kemal Ataturk ordered his generals to "destroy Armenia politically and physically." Bogosian (p. 262) says that Sevres "conceded territory to the Armenians and distributed the rest of Anatolia to Greeks and Kurds." Not quite true. The treaty actually left Turks considerable territory in central Asia Minor. Had the Turks won the war, they would not have been so generous to their enemies. When all was said and done, Turkey got 100% of Asia Minor, including the Armenian Plateau, while Armenians, Assyrians, Greeks, and Kurds got nothing whatsoever.

• **P. 150: Bogosian says that Soghomon Tehlirian, Talaat Pasha's assassin and Nemesis member, followed "in the footsteps of the first assassins" when he killed Talaat in Berlin in 1921. The word assassin, explains Bogosian, refers to the followers of Hassan-i Sabbah, an 11th century Muslim "extortionist" who "vengefully sent out followers to murder his enemies." Bogosian also harkens back to the Turkish sultans who assassinated their brothers to gain the Ottoman throne.**

This may be interesting history, but Tehlirian followed in no such historical "footsteps," was not an extortionist, and aspired to no throne. He and other members of Nemesis carried out entirely justified executions. Talaat and others had already been sentenced to death in absentia by post-war Turkish tribunals. After his acquittal by a German jury, Tehlirian married and lived a modest, unassuming life in San Francisco.

• **P. 155: Bogosian compares the ARF to the CUP. Each had "no compunctions about deploying violence" and "a shared code of violence."**

Whatever one thinks of the ARF, it is clearly inaccurate to compare a political party whose goal was to defend Armenians against oppression and massacre to one that tried to expand an oppressive empire via genocides.

• **P. 281: Bogosian lauds mass-murderer Kemal Ataturk. The latter was “ruggedly handsome,” “one of the most quoted men in history,” (p. 277) “a born leader of rare genius,” (p. 134), and “a resilient and an able foe” (p. 178) who had “tremendous vitality and charisma” (p. 283).**

It is unusual for a truly informed writer to praise Ataturk, though Bogosian sometimes (p. 282-283) describes him in less flattering terms. That Ataturk annihilated Armenians who had survived the Genocide is largely passed over. That he inducted many Young Turk genocidists into his new government is given one sentence (p. 301).

• **P. 290: “Within each community were thousands of survivors who had mixed feelings about Tashnags . Some sided with the ARF, believing that in the years leading up to and including World War I, the only appropriate Armenian response to Turkish violence was strong revolutionary, often violent action. Others (and among these I would include my own grandparents) felt that the politically activist Armenians were troublemakers who willingly courted violence.” Note: The book’s pre-publication version had ended that sentence with “and had possibly triggered the Armenian Genocide.”**

The oppression and massacre of Armenians by Turks spawned Armenian revolutionaries rather than the other way around. Moreover, in hopes that Turkey would reform, the ARF largely cooperated with the CUP/Young Turks before and after the 1908 Young Turk revolution. Those who blame Armenian revolutionaries must ask themselves why Turks also committed genocide against Christian Assyrians and Greeks, who had not formed such revolutionary groups. Continuing in this vein (p. 305), Bogosian writes: “The Armenian Genocide is part of that history, but so is the story of Armenian revolutionary groups and their actions.” Is Bogosian following in his grandparents’ footsteps by giving credence to the false idea that the ARF brought the Genocide upon the Armenian people?

• **P. 301: Bogosian questions the legality of the executions committed by the Armenians of Operation Nemesis: “Though the perpetrators were convicted by a court of law in Constantinople, those convictions were later thrown out by the new Ankara government.”**

To which we must ask, since Bogosian does not: Did the new “Ankara government” of Kemal Ataturk have the legal right to do so? Bogosian (p. 302) concedes that the “men and women of Operation Nemesis did what governments could not. They were appealing to a higher, final justice.” Fine, but Bogosian’s questioning the legality of the Nemesis executions is rather breathtaking considering the millions of crimes committed by thousands of individual Turks against Armenians that went, and have gone, completely unpunished to this day, and for which Bogosian seems to want, at best, a mere acknowledgment.

• **P. 302-303: Bogosian spends two pages meandering, equivocating, and asking himself if and why the Genocide may be important today. "Memory lies at the center of the Nemesis story. It is the engine of an intense bloodlust. We remember, but we remember differently. Our respective narratives lead to different actions. Thus the conundrum of history" and so on.**

Does Nemesis really inspire "bloodlust" in Armenians? Or do Armenians simply seek justice for the Genocide and its concomitant dispossession of culture and homeland? Bogosian fails to mention a major reason why the Genocide is important today: Turkey's pan-Turkic ambitions in Azerbaijan and Central Asia—now supported by the power of the US, Europe, and NATO—remain a threat to Armenia. An unrepentant, snarling, and self-admitted neo-Ottomanist Turkey is an obvious danger, but there is no indication that Bogosian understands this or wishes to let readers know this.

P. 305: Bogosian rarely gives much credit to the Nemesis group or to Armenians.

Only in the Postscript's final sentence does Bogosian bother to describe the Nemesis participants as "this brave group of men possessed of remarkable will and courage." This is too little, too late.

P. 339: The large bibliography, some 450 references, includes many excellent books on the Genocide but also many Genocide denial books by authors such as Kamuran Gurun, Bernard Lewis, Guenter Lewy, Justin McCarthy, Hugh Pope, and Stanford Shaw.

We hope that they have not filled Bogosian's head with falsehoods. Is he trying to hit a "happy medium" between the facts of the Genocide and its denial?

After reading Bogosian's book, one comes away thinking that the literary, educational, and political establishments of the West would be very pleased if young people, including Armenians, who read *Operation Nemesis*, conclude that Armenians are partly responsible for the Genocide, and decide that it is best to leave the past alone.

In publishing this book, an opportunity was squandered to let the world know that the Armenians got a raw deal after their attempted annihilation; that valiant Armenians stepped in only after the 1919 Turkish Military Tribunals did not follow through on their verdicts; and that a century later the legacy of a great unpunished crime against humanity begs to be resolved.

Perhaps Bogosian will consider the above issues if he publishes a second edition of this book.

Three other books about Operation Nemesis have recently been released:

- ***Special Mission – Nemesis*** by J.B. Djian and Jan Varoujan; illustrations by Paolo Cossi; translated into English by Lou Ann Matossian (Editions Sigest; Sept. 2014). Covers the events before, during and after the execution of Talaat. A good primer for all ages, produced in graphic novel format.

- ***Sacred Justice: The Voices and Legacy of the Armenian Operation Nemesis*** by Marian Mesrobian MacCurdy; Edited by Gerard Libaridian (Transaction Publishers; March 2015). A combination of

Armenian, community, and family history as it relates to MacCurdy's grandfather, Aharon Sachaklian, a member of the Nemesis group. Not reviewed at press time.

• **Operation Nemesis** by Josh Blaylock; illustrations by Hoyt Silva (Devil's Due Publishing; May 2015). An interpretation of Tehlirian's life, the Talaat execution, and the subsequent trials in Berlin. The attire and use of language featured are not entirely authentic to the times nor of the peoples they depict. Presented in graphic novel format.

For those interested in other accounts of Operation Nemesis, visit: [Operation Nemesis](#)

[Back to top](#)

