"WHERE IS HUMANITY?": A CONVERSATION WITH BEDROSS DER MATOSSIAN

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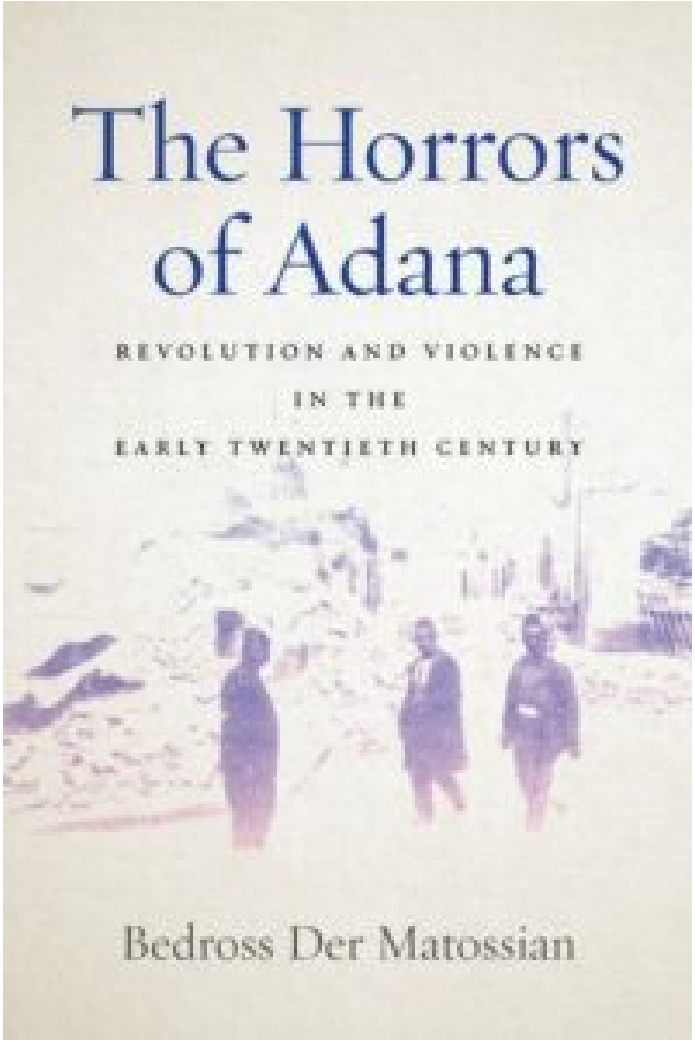
When it comes to crimes against humanity, we must admit, geo-politics and the great games between empires and their proxies determine who will be rescued, who will be prosecuted, who will get to properly bury their dead, whose memory will be safeguarded and whose will be left to forget. This "selective" memorialization is incontrovertible, the Armenian case perhaps being the chief example. Starting in the late 1890s, Ottomans set in motion a series of massacres, culminating in the 1915 genocide that shocked the world. Within decades, the world drifted into either indifference or denial. A bulwark against communism, Turkey was too precious an asset to upset. In the US, one presidential contender after another promised to recognize the genocide. Once they had secured Armenians' votes and were safely in office, each drifted into muteness or euphemisms to protect America's relationship to Turkey. Yet last year, on April 24, President Biden finally uttered the purported calamity-causing phrase — The Armenian Genocide — and Turkey and NATO went about its business as usual.



All the while, historians like Bedross Der Matossian, Associate Professor of Modern Middle East History in the Department of History at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, have been patiently doing their work. The Adana Massacres of 1909, nearly unknown outside of Armenians circles, has been the subject of scant English language research. With The Horrors of Adana: Revolution and Violence in the Early

Twentieth Century, *Der Matossian, has given us an extraordinary account of this extraordinary period of paranoia, tribalism, and violence. This book, a kind of harrowing sequel to his earlier* Shattered Dreams of Revolution: From Liberty to Violence in the Late Ottoman Empire*, deepens our understanding of the darkest 25 years — 1896 to 1921 — in Armenia's 2,500-year-old history.*

Der Matossian also gives us a master study in massacres: the way that history is twisted, how the future is painted as dangerous and uncertain; how central governments turn a blind eye, allowing facts on the ground to be darkly narrated. He shows how all this and more allows a vortex of hate to gather and generate the unthinkable. It was with all this in mind that I came to this interview, conducted with Der Matossian via email over a period of three days.

ARIS JANIGIAN: I want to congratulate you on writing such a well-researched, even-toned, and, most of all, for a non-historian like myself, highly readable book. Your research is rich, involving 15 archives and primary sources in 12 languages, yet, for all that scholarship, your narrative often reads like a "thriller": the way you set the stage and let the events unfold, step by cataclysmic step. But perhaps the comparison is offensive, because, of course, what unfolds on the pages is true, so vulgar, brutal, inhuman that I found myself having to put the book down periodically to catch a breath. What was it like, as an Armenian, to revisit this wrenching period in our people's history, over what must've been several years. Did it make the historian in you pause on occasion to grieve?

BEDROSS DER MATOSSIAN: I have always considered myself first a human being, next a historian, and then an Armenian. But I also firmly believe that identities are fluid. Having been born and raised in a cosmopolitan city such as the Old City of Jerusalem, I have acquired over time a hybrid identity. Working on topics such as massacres and genocides is never an easy task, especially when you are a descendent of the survivors of the Armenian Genocide and when you grow up listening to accounts of the horrendous acts of violence perpetrated against your group. As a scholar of ethnic conflict and genocide, with particular concentration on the Armenian Genocide, I have always had to negotiate between the emotional tribulations of confronting the past and the need to tell the story as an academic scholar.

Let me take one step back and give our readers a general sense of Adana, especially its importance to Armenians. Adana is located in the southern edge of modern-day Turkey, close to the Mediterranean and the port city of Mersin. Armenian presence there dates back to 100 BC., but with the sacking of Byzantium by the Seljuk Turks in 1071, Adana became a place of Armenian migration, and eventually the seat of the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia, which housed the Holy See of the Catholicos, the center of Armenians religious life and authority, similar to The Vatican for Catholics. Over time, the area was ruled by the Ottomans, Egyptians, and feudal lords. Muslim herding tribes, who were frequently in conflict with Armenians, sedentarized in the area in great numbers in the second half of the 19th century. Seasonal workers also came to pick cotton, which was the principal crop in the area. Cotton was also processed there, using

sophisticated machinery, and the port at Mersin connected the area to many major European cities. All in all, one gets the impression that the area was highly productive, cosmopolitan, in 1909 almost "modern," though Armenians surely had an oversized presence economically, particularly vis-à-vis the Muslim population. To round things out for our readers, is there anything else you might add or correct before we move on?

I only would like to stress that in the second half of the 19th century we see ethno-religious tensions rise in the region when the Ottoman Empire becomes integrated in the global economic system. The Ottoman reforms to the sedenterization of the tribes, centralization of the Ottoman rule, the agrarian reforms, and the settling of the Muslim refugees (in Armenian populated areas) who fled the Caucasus due to Russian persecution and as a result of the Russo-Turkish War of 1878-88 were all contributing factors to the massacres.

I had, of course, heard about the Adana Massacres, but, to be frank, before I read your book, I had only a hazy sense of what unfolded in 1909. I always imagined it as a kind of terrible bridge between the Hamidian massacres of 1890s and the Genocide of 1915, but your book complicates that picture some.

You write of how the 1908 Ottoman constitution offered Armenians liberties that they had never known before. Strong elements of the *ancien régime* felt that the Armenians were flouting their newfound freedom in a way that threatened Ottoman interests and entrenched power. As a cunning response, they fomented the idea that Armenians were seeking independence, to create a new Armenian Kingdom in Adana. This imaginary kingdom, they claimed, was premised upon vanquishing Turks. It was all part of a grand Armenian plan in concert with European powers designed to unfold something like this: Armenians would stage a violent provocation with the Turks, claim they were being helplessly attacked, and the British, French, US — whose ships were motoring right off the coast — would rush into to save the Armenians from slaughter, and slaughter the Turks in turn.

Now the paranoid fairy tale materializes into reality: in order to suppress Armenian independence, before their supposed plan is hatched, the Turks must vanquish the Armenians. In reality, the foreigners just off the coast looked blithely away as more than 20,000 Armenians were slaughtered, in two waves, over a period of two weeks. I'll borrow from the back of your dust-jacket to round out this summary of your book: "Despite the significance of these events and the extent of violence and destruction, the Adana Massacres are often left out of historical narratives. The Horrors of Adana offers one of the first close examinations of these events, analyzing sociopolitical and economic transformations that culminated in a cataclysm of violence. The central Ottoman government failed to prosecute the main culprits, a miscarriage of justice that would have repercussions for years to come."

As any other Armenian, I too grew up with a basic knowledge of the Adana Massacres of 1909. Over

time, however, I started to look in-depth as to why and how it happened. For me, the real turning point, however, was two decades ago when I first encountered images from the Adana Massacres in the Ernst Jäckh Papers at Columbia University where I completed my PhD. One particular image struck me and troubled me for weeks. It wasn't an image of dead bodies nor burnt quarters, but of a young female survivor who was being treated in one of the hospitals set up in the aftermath of the massacres. The girl was naked from the waist up. You couldn't see her flesh as most of it was burned and she was extensively wounded. While the physical wounds are shocking, it was her gaze that attracted my attention. In her gaze you could see the cruelty that befell the Armenians. You could see her asking, *Where is humanity? Why is this happening to us? What did I do to deserve this?* The dead cannot tell the suffering they experienced. The survivors are the ones who are able to tell the story. However, in her case she was neither dead nor alive. She was lingering between both worlds in a state of mental and physical shock.

No recovery is possible after experiencing such hate. No number of psychiatrists can fully restore a victim of such unhinged and gratuitous violence. It's a powerful image, this girl: betrayal, confusion, and horror.

Like the remains of victims, images like these are sacred, and they should be treated as such.

Maybe they are as close as modernity can get to icons.

It was still not an easy task to reckon with images such as this. My book is not about the Renaissance or the Scientific Revolution — it's about death, killing, and massacres. These subjects leave a mark on anyone person studying them, both consciously and subconsciously. The task becomes more difficult when you are obligated to remove your emotions in order to keep an "objective" tone. But you may grieve privately as a human being and as an Armenian by distancing the historian- self.

I'd like to use the subtitle of your book, "Revolution and Violence in the Early Twentieth Century," as an opportunity to put a couple of broad questions before you . From my perspective, there seems to be no end to suffering, massacres large and small, almost like we are waiting for the hypnosis of hatred to once again cast its spell over us. You write about this massacre, but how many have disappeared from our memories or were never indexed in the annals of history? Historians write with the hope that we will learn from the past, from our mistakes. But we don't. In your book, you identify two reasons for why this massacre, like many others, occurred: rumor and fear. We've now entered into the domain of psychology and sociology, maybe even spirituality. Do we repeat the past because we humans repeat ourselves? Is there any way to change the dark course of history other than to change who each of us is?

We humans by nature are not evil. But, given the right circumstances and stressors, we are capable of committing barbaric acts regardless of our religious and/or ethnic backgrounds. Scholars in past decades have tried to grapple with the question of why ordinary men and women become killers. Why do neighbors living together peacefully suddenly turn against each other? A vast literature

exists out there that attempts to answer these questions. Fear and rumor are not the only factors precipitating society's descent into a cataclysmic spiral of violence but they are crucial ones. Naturally, as human beings, we fear for the safety of ourselves, our families, and our community. When faced with perceived existential threats we are ready to do the unimaginable.

But we can't do it without a nod from those who hold the reins of power. They must either look away, open the flood gates, or even bait us into a mortal rage. Your book makes that much plain.

Definitely, groups and individuals in the position of leadership tend to play on and/or manipulate the fear of people in order to achieve their political and material gain. One way of mobilizing groups is through spreading rumors: "They are planning an uprising," "they are going to kill us," "they are backed by international forces," or "they are planning a massacre." All of these rumors were spread to set the stage for the Adana massacres. Rumors do not just belong to the pages of history; they are part and parcel of human behavior in the present as well as in the future. They become more lethal in periods of heightened tensions among different groups.

Rumors are, also, in a way, a self-fulfilling prophecy: the victim of rumor acts to protect themself. In the Armenian case, the act of self-protection confirms the impression that they were armed and dangerous and intent on aggression. I could feel this alarming dynamic gathering force in your compelling narrative. In the late 1800s, Armenians were subject to unspeakable slaughter at the hands of Abdulhamid II . Tens of thousands died. Armenians were encouraged by the 1908 revolution and the crafting of a constitution that gave them protection, representation, and a voice. But a lingering sense of vulnerability existed within the Armenian communities in cities large and small — how couldn't it? They weren't going to just sit by and be slaughtered again and again. So, they armed themselves, and in doing so, they reinforced the Ottoman conception that the Armenians meant to murder them. The fact that the Armenians were such a small minority in the greater sea of Ottoman peoples didn't seem to bother the killers' logic in the least.

In my research, I did not find any proof of a large plan by Armenians to establish a Kingdom in the region of Adana. Were they buying weapons? Yes, they were. Did they use these weapons to defend themselves and their families by killing members of the mob? Yes, they did. Yet, , secret Armenian documents from the period lamented that the acquisition of weapons was going very slowly. The Hamidian Massacres (1894-1896) were entrenched deeply in the collective memory of the Armenians. The aim of having weapons was to protect their communities against a surprise onslaught by reactionary forces. A s a matter of fact, these weapons were used for defensive purposes during the first wave of massacres. However, the sight of Armenians buying and selling weapons caused severe anxiety among sectors from the Muslim population for whom weapons and Armenians were only associated together in the context of Armenian revolutionary fighters (*fedayees*). While Turkish historiography, past and present, blames Armenians for buying weapons, none of them discusses that the Muslim population was itself in a frenzy of buying and selling

weapons maybe 4-5 times more than its Armenian counterpart.

I've often thought that Turks could not really bear the presence of Armenians in their midst. Their very presence was an irritant to the Turkish sense of a homeland. Unlike Greeks, or Jews — also active ethnicities of the Empire — Armenians had called these lands home a thousand years before a Turk ever set foot there. Their monasteries, and churches, artistic and architectural contributions were impossible to ignore; they were energetic and omnipresent in commerce, trade, farming. It was nearly impossible for Turks to believe that these people would not someday cry out, lash out, and try to recover what they'd lost, what had been stolen from them, their history, pride, and identity. I believe something similar exits in the American subconscious, that our sense of restlessness and rootlessness and predilection to violence, stirring permanently beneath our skin, is tied to our annexation and annihilation of our Native peoples, and the great stain of slavery. The Armenian reality was lodged in the Turkish subconscious. The pretext for massacres was written in psychic stone. In order for Turkish identity and homeland to be fully realized, these people had to be removed, their architecture razed, their presence erased. Even to this day, to admit the genocide, for Turks, is to admit that what they call home is in fact also another people's home.

You raise important issues, but I will answer as an historian, not a psychologist. As you imply earlier, I do not adhere to the continuum approach, which represents the Armenian Genocide as the culmination of the two previous phases of violence inflicted upon the Armenians of the Empire. However, with the internationalization of the Armenian Question following the Treaty of Berlin of 1878, the consecutive Ottoman governments and ruling elites had to face the reality on the ground. Unlike the Balkan provinces, which were geographically located in the Western part of the Ottoman Empire, Armenians were in the heart of Anatolia, a great portion of which was considered as historic Armenia. When the Balkan states were able to gain their independence from the Ottomans following the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913, the Ottoman government was worried that a similar scenario would repeat in Anatolia, which at that time had been transformed into the heart of Turkish nationalism. The consecutive Ottoman governments (Hamidian and Young Turk regimes) were reluctant to find a solution to the Armenian Question. For them the Armenian Question was a source of lingering problems and constant meddling of the European powers in the Ottoman affairs. Even the Armenian Reform project of 1914, which provided some hope to the Armenians of the provinces, did not lead to change. It was abolished by the Committee of Union and Progress when the Ottomans joined World War I on the side of the Central Powers. Faced with real external enemies and an imaginary (Armenian) internal one, the inner clique of the CUP decided to finally find a solution to the Armenian Question by orchestrating the second genocide of the 20th century. The annihilation of the Armenians was followed by the razing of thousands of Armenian churches, schools, and any type of evidence that could one day indicate that Armenians once lived there.

Some 2,600 Armenian religious sites existed throughout Turkey prior to the genocide, including

churches and monasteries. Extraordinary art, relics and libraries and manuscripts, some dating back to the early days of Christendom, were nearly all looted or reduced to cinders. But it didn't end there, this evisceration of our culture continues. The Azeris reduced to dust some 5000 ancient khachkars (delicately carved Armenian tombstones) in Julfa, just some twenty years ago now. Right under the watch of the world.

Yes, the last phase of this monstrous act was the razing of the Armenian from the Turkish collective memory. The theory that was perpetuated for decades, that the Turkish Republic created by Mustafa Kemal was a rupture from its Ottoman past, does not hold any ground anymore. Historians have demonstrated that there is a strong continuum between both entities in terms of institutions, rulers, genocidaires, and discriminatory steps towards the minorities. Thus, it is undeniable that today's Turkish Republic is the inheritor of a genocidal state and is responsible to the victims of the Armenian genocide and their descendants.

The book raised some harrowing ironies that I think are worth paying attention to. After the 1908 revolution, the *ancien régime* was sidelined and eventually withered away, and a liberal egalitarian constitution was constructed. Almost immediately, the public sphere exploded with publications, plays, public festivals of cultural pride. This also occurred after the Tsar was deposed in Russia: writers, painters, political parties, all freed up, flooding the public sphere with an extraordinary range of opinions and perspectives on what post-revolutionary Russia should look like. Similarly, between the two great wars, Weimer Germany, also throneless, was a hotbed of perspectives and opinions, in fact, it was in this laissez fair environment that the Nazi party was allowed to grow and gain traction. From a Western perspective, the turn of events should augur nothing but good. How could something bad come of freedom of assembly and expression? But in all three cases, very nearly the worst occurred: the Armenian Genocide, the Russian Civil War, and the Jewish Holocaust.

In 1793, the French thinker and counter-revolutionary Jacques Mallet du Pan wrote from his exile: "like Saturn, the Revolution devours its children." Revolutionaries around the globe in the 19th and the early twentieth century did not foresee the negative repercussions of the French Revolution. They were infatuated with the principles of *liberté*, *égalité*, *fraternité* and strove to reproduce these principles in their own societies. They adopted the French model as an ahistorical model; in adopting constitutionalism and parliamentary system, they sought to improve their own societies and save themselves from the clutches of authoritarianism. However, in most cases these attempts did not yield to the expected results. Struck by ideological contradictions and ambiguities and coupled with clashes between different interest groups, the short-lived constitutional "democratic" experiments immediately failed or were aborted. The fact that many societies used the French Revolution as the role model without problematizing it and without putting it in its historic context created serious impediments to the success of the newly born constitutional regimes.

Revolutions are achieved by ideologically diverse classes and interest groups who seem to have

one common goal: to topple the authoritarian regime. Once this has been achieved, a phase of euphoric feeling emerges. Religious, ethnic, and class differences immediately disappear, albeit temporarily, and a short-lived dream of a new free and egalitarian society emerges. However, euphoric feelings wane in a very short period of time, and the simmering tensions within the society that had existed in the pre-revolutionary period suddenly burst forth. Groups use their newfound freedom to communicate their satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the new regime and what it represents. The public sphere that emerges in the post-revolutionary period does not only become a means for celebrating the new beginning, but the dissatisfied elements also use it as a tool in order to air their grievances with the revolution, its authors, and collaborators. Eventually, they mobilize their own groups with the aim of toppling the new regime.

In sum, revolutions can go south fast.

Freedom itself is a double-edged sword. It is a blessing if used in the right manner and a curse if abused. As you suggested, one of the precipitating factors that led to the Adana Massacres was the 1908 revolution and the unrestrained freedom it introduced which disrupted the fine-tuned balance in the region. Many intellectuals in the post-1908 Young Turk revolution warned about the abuses of freedom. Revolutions culminate in drastic changes of the political system, leading to the emergence of disgruntled elements. The transition here is not gradual. As one writer from the period argued, "Armenians think of themselves in the middle of France." Armenians celebrated their cultural nationalism in the public sphere without taking into consideration the fragile political situation of the post-revolutionary period. This reverberated negatively among the supporters of the *ancien régime*. In the aftermath of the Adana Massacres, the Ottoman state was reluctant to improve the lot of Armenians in the eastern provinces which had been deteriorating. The gradual result was the largest phase of violence inflicted on the Armenians of the Empire: The Armenian Genocide (1915-1923). As you mention, post-revolutionary democratic or semi-democratic societies become a hotbed for the machinations of disgruntled elements.

You seem skeptical, then, of the ultimate value of revolutions. They are romantic in theory and at a remove, but up close they can pitch everything that anchors society down into a violent maelstrom.

Yes, and your examples echo my cynicism, or least skepticism. Let me briefly comment on your examples to illustrate why I feel this way, and why I am more inclined to believe in gradualism as the best means of changing society.

Similar to the Young Turk Revolution, the Weimar Republic (1919-1933) emerged in 1919 after a revolution that removed Kaiser Wilhelm II from power. In its 14 years of existence, the Weimar Republic faced numerous challenges ranging from the Great Depression and hyperinflation to the rise of extremist groups such as the Nazi Party. The unrestrained freedom provided by the Weimar Republic led to the crystallization of radical political groups that were able to mobilize great masses.

From a small disgruntled group in 1920, in less than a decade the Nazi Party became a power to be reckoned with, leading to the rise of the Third Reich and paving the way to World War II, destruction, and the Holocaust.

The Russian Revolution of 1905 influenced the Young Turks. It proved to them that it was possible to curb the power of the monarch and introduce constitutionalism and parliamentarianism. Even Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the 1917 revolution, did not shy away from saying that the Russian Revolution of 1905 was a "Great Dress Rehearsal" for the October Revolution in 1917. Similar to the 1905 revolution, the Young Turk Revolution led to the rise of the Young Turks and their main radical political party, the CUP, whose inner circle authored the Armenian Genocide.

The Soviet case was different. The Bolshevik revolution of 1917 was not a constitutional revolution. It transferred the power from the nation to the working class, at least in theory. In reality, the Soviet model, like its Chinese Communist counterpart, was an abrogation of the Marxist utopian model. From day one, the regime betrayed the ideals of the revolution itself. While some societies in the 20th century followed the French model, others copied the Bolshevik one. The French model continued to impact different societies, even in the twenty-first century, including t he Arab Spring which quickly turned into t he Arab Winter.

In light of the war in Ukraine and the massacres in Bucha and other towns there, I imagine that readers are wondering now what the future holds. There is an unprecedented proliferation of opinions and perspectives — many stupid, divisive, and menacing — as well as much misinformation. And now social media companies are facing pressure to crack down on incendiary speech. But who gets to decide what is and isn't incendiary?

These are important questions — especially when agents provocateurs are always one step ahead. Sometimes people underestimate the role of agents provocateurs who are not visible to the naked eye. In almost all massacres in the course of history agents provocateurs have played an important role in pouring gasoline on fire. This was the case in the Adana Massacres, the Odessa Massacres of 1905 in Ukraine, and the Sikh Massacres of 1984 discussed in the book. As long as strong measures are not taken, massacres will be part and parcel of human nature. Of course, learning from past events is important and educating people is essential, but being a pessimist, I fear that once law and order breaks down there is nothing that could be done. In the course of the 20th century the worst barbaric acts did not happen in the Global South; rather in Europe supposedly the torchbearer of the enlightenment. That says a lot about human nature.

Aris Janigian is the author of five novels, and co-author, along with April Greiman, of **Something from Nothing***, a book on the philosophy of graphic design.*

Comments

Lucine – 2022-04-26 14:22:24
Der Matossian will lecture by Zoom on May 7th. Link below. The Society for Armenian Studies (SAS) & The National Association for Armenian Studies and Research (NAASR) Present The Horrors of Adana: Revolution and Violence in the Early Twentieth A talk by Bedross Der Matossian (University of Nebraska, Lincoln) Discussant Uğur Ümit Üngör (University of Amsterdam) May 7, 2022 11:00am (PT) 2:00pm ET (PT) Zoom Link: https://bit.ly/3MdwJNN Bedross Der Matossian is the Vice-Chair, Associate Professor of Modern Middle East History, and Hymen Rosenberg Professor in Judaic studies the at Department of History at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Born and raised in East Jerusalem, he is a graduate of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He completed his PhD in Middle East History at Columbia University in 2008. He has taught at MIT and the University of Chicago. He is the author, editor, and co-editor of multiple books including the award-winning book Shattered Dreams of Revolution: From Liberty to Violence in the Late Ottoman Empire (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2014) Uğur Ümit Üngör is Professor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies at the University of Amsterdam and the NIOD Institute in Amsterdam. His main area of interest is the history and sociology of mass violence, with a particular focus on the modern and contemporary Middle East. He has published books and articles on various aspects and cases of mass violence, including "Paramilitarism: Mass Violence in the Shadow of the State" (Oxford University Press, 2020) and "Syrian Gulag: Assad's Prison System, 1970-2020" (Boom Publishers, 2022).

Tavo – 2022-04-24 22:28:51
There is a straight line of Turkish bloodlust from even before the 1909 massacres down to the present day. Definitions from Oxford Languages: Bloodlust - noun, uncontrollable desire to kill or maim others. "the victims of an insane killer's bloodlust"

Roubik – 2022-04-24 17:07:30
Turkey must acknowledge their crimes against Armenian people . Western Armenia and Nakhijavan and Artsakh territories must be returned to Armenian homeland . God bless Armenia