

5-28-2021

Book Review: *Collective & State Violence in Turkey: The Construction of a National Identity from Empire to Nation-State*

Cheng Min Xu
University of Toronto

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gsp>

Recommended Citation

Xu, Cheng Min (2021) "Book Review: *Collective & State Violence in Turkey: The Construction of a National Identity from Empire to Nation-State*," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*: Vol. 15: Iss. 1: 141–144.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.5038/1911-9933.15.1.1824>

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gsp/vol15/iss1/13>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

Book Review: *Collective & State Violence in Turkey: The Construction of a National Identity from Empire to Nation-State*

Cheng Min Xu
University of Toronto
Toronto, Canada

Collective & State Violence in Turkey: The Construction of a National Identity from Empire to Nation-State

Stephan Astourian & Raymond Kévorkian, eds.
New York, Berghahn Books, 2021
578 Pages; Price: \$69.95 Hardcover

Reviewed by Cheng Min Xu
University of Toronto, Canada

The contributors of *Collective & State Violence in Turkey: The Construction of a National Identity from Empire to Nation-State*¹ shed analytical light on some of the lesser known episodes of mass political violence in the Anatolia region from the times of the Ottoman Empire to contemporary Republican Turkey. These essays are set against the backdrop of the most notorious instance of state violence in the region, the Armenian Genocide. As a result, this edited volume effectively demonstrates that the degree of organization, mobilization, and violence marshalled by the Committee for Union and Progress (CUP) to prosecute the Armenian Genocide was not a historical aberration, but rather, part of a larger tapestry of collective and state violence endemic to the region that continues to this day.

While many of these episodes of violence did not reach the intensity or scope of the Armenian Genocide, they nevertheless demonstrate a historical continuity in which the ideologies, institutions, and social relations designed to facilitate ethnoreligious homogeneity in the region remains durable over time. Both Astourian and Korkmaz point out in their respective chapters, the CUP engineered the Armenian Genocide by inheriting the structures and precedents of anti-Armenian violence established by the preceding Hamidian regime.² Furthermore, violence against the Armenians did not end with the fall of the Ottoman Empire or the CUP, as Kévorkian, Suciyan, and Törne each document the systematic campaigns of the ethnic cleansing of survivors, erasure of identity, and genocide denial by the subsequent Kemalist and Republican Turkey governments.³

Although none of the chapters directly focus on the events of the Armenian Genocide as a central point of analysis, one of the most important contributions this volume makes to the scholarship on the Armenian Genocide is its focus on the various other groups that have also fallen victim to mass collective and state violence throughout this time period that have been left out of the mainstream discourse. Gaunt's chapter brings light to the long history of genocidal violence against the Assyrians;⁴ Shrinian explores the continuity of anti-Greek violence

¹ Stephan Astourian and Raymond Kévorkian, eds., *Collective & State Violence in Turkey: The Construction of a National Identity from Empire to Nation-State* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2021).

² Stephan Astourian, "On the Genealogy of the Armenian-Turkish Conflict, Sultan Abdülhamid and the Armenian Massacres," in *Collective & State Violence in Turkey*; Ayşenur Korkmaz, "The Hamidian Massacres: Gendered Violence, Biopolitics and National Honour," in *Collective & State Violence in Turkey*.

³ Raymond Kévorkian, "The Final Phase: The Cleansing of Armenian and Greek Survivors, 1912–1922," in *Collective & State Violence in Turkey*; Talin Suciyan, "A History of Armenians Remaining in Turkey: Survival and Denial," in *Collective & State Violence in Turkey*; Annika Törne, "Inscriptions of Denial of the Armenian Genocide in Memory Narrations from Dersim," in *Collective & State Violence in Turkey*.

⁴ David Gaunt, "The Long Assyrian Genocide," in *Collective & State Violence in Turkey*.

through Hamidian, Unionist, and Kemalist regimes;⁵ Bali brings to light the latent anti-Semitism and tenuous social position Jews held in Anatolia and deconstructs the “model minority” myth;⁶ Yeğen examines the undulating terrain of Turkish-Kurdish relationships and the sustained violence Kurdish movements experience in modern Turkey;⁷ Dressler discusses both physical and non-physical forms of violence endured by the Alevis under a rubric of Turkish-Muslim hegemony;⁸ finally, Schneider traces the long history of persecution faced by the Yazidis at the hands of both the Ottoman and Persian Empires, all the way to the visceral events of the Sinjar Massacre perpetrated by the Islamic State in 2014.⁹

By compiling these vignettes of violence and persecution against a multitude of minority groups in Anatolia, the editors of *Collective & State Violence in Turkey* remind the readers of two crucial interlocking features of mass state violence and genocide. The first is that the state embarks on an objective towards the creation of an ideal-typically homogenous society that is impossible to achieve. As such, while the state often distinguishes one group as the target for extermination, it will inevitably expand its agenda to other groups that do not fit within this particular ideal-type vision. In the case of Anatolia, it was not only the Armenians that were deemed to be threats to this particularist state-building project, but other Christian and non-Muslim groups as well, such as the Assyrians, Greeks, and Jews. This is not an exclusive phenomenon to Ottoman and Turkish state violence, but is evident in the Holocaust, the Cambodian Genocide, the Rwandan Genocide, and elsewhere.

The second and related feature that is important for scholars of genocide and mass political violence to recognize is that identities are always fluid and dynamic, and that it is impossible to draw clear and hard boundaries between the intersectionality of multiple identities. Yeğen, for instance, demonstrate that despite adoption of Sunni Islam and recruited as allies by the Ottomans to cleanse Anatolia of Christians, Kurdish tribes were still not granted the ability to hold on to their unique cultural identity and were either subject to mass Turkification or face violent reprisal.¹⁰ Similarly, Dressler unpacks the complexities of Alevi identity and shows that despite being ethnically Turkish and Muslim, the particularities of Alevism still “others” them from the hegemonic Turkish-Muslim social order.¹¹ As such, the fluidity of identity means that not only is a homogeneous state-building project impossible to achieve, but the impact of violence that different groups experience will vary across time and space, contingent on their positionality within the dominant ideological and social hierarchy. Therefore, while there is a centralized structure of violence imposed at the political centers, the impacts and manifestations of violence at the local and communal levels will be highly varied and contingent. This explains the differential, and often divergent, experiences of the different minority communities throughout the course of the Armenian Genocide, and beyond.

In this way, the contributors of *Collective & State Violence in Turkey* also remind readers to assign agency to the target groups of genocidal and mass state violence. Because of their differential experiences of violence at the hands of the state, their responses are also just as varied. Suciyan and Törne, for instance, each respectively outlined the different strategies adopted by the Armenian diaspora to survive in post-genocide Turkey.¹² Similarly, on the experiences of minority groups such as the Jews, Kurds, Alevis, and Yazidis, the respective

⁵ George N. Shrinian, “Collective State Violence against Greeks in the Late Ottoman Empire, 1821–1923,” in *Collective & State Violence in Turkey*.

⁶ Rifat N. Bali, “The Attempted Pogrom against the Jews of Thrace, June–July 1934,” in *Collective & State Violence in Turkey*, 234.

⁷ Mesut Yeğen, “State Violence in Kurdistan,” in *Collective & State Violence in Turkey*.

⁸ Markus Dressler, “Physical and Epistemic Violence against Alevis in Modern Turkey,” in *Collective & State Violence in Turkey*.

⁹ Caroline Schneider, “The Yazidis: Resilience in Times of Violence,” in *Collective & State Violence in Turkey*.

¹⁰ Yeğen, *State Violence in Kurdistan*, 311.

¹¹ Dressler, *Physical and Epistemic Violence against Alevis*, 349.

¹² Suciyan, *A History of Armenians Remaining in Turkey*, 269; Törne, *Inscriptions of Denial of the Armenian Genocide*, 373.

authors highlight that the variance between how state violence impacted these groups are directly related to their different levels of integration within the dominant Turkish-Muslim social structure. Furthermore, the contributors showed that targeted groups consciously and actively deploy a wide-spectrum of survival tactics from armed resistance to assimilation, and they did not simply resign to becoming hapless victims of history. Given the structures of constraints of violence from which they operated, the subaltern groups exercised resiliency and agency.

Through the collection of these historical and analytical accounts of collective and state violence in the Anatolia region, the editors also demonstrate that the use violence itself is multidimensional. Although it is easy to take genocidal violence at face value as a means to the end of creating a homogenous nation-state, several contributors to this volume ask readers to consider alternative forms and logics of violence that serve a variety of purposes. Güven's account of the anti-Christian riots on September 6–7, 1955 in Pera showed how the state sponsors civil society organizations to decentralize violence on their behalf,¹³ while Kieser argues that the mass participation of private citizens and civil society in these instances of a public display of violence is essentially a process of socialization for individuals to identify with a particular group.¹⁴ As such, violence can be both a means to an end and an end in itself. On the other hand, contributors such as Derin, Dressler, and Copeaux, argue that violence does not even have to be physical, but it can be discursive, cultural, and epistemic, conducted through genocide denial, systemic discrimination and marginalization, and the promotion of ethnic chauvinism.¹⁵ Regardless of the form and nature of violence, Bozarslan emphasizes that violence can only occur on this scale because of an existing structure that both enables and incentivizes it.¹⁶ By establishing the proximate conditions, agents of violence become less restrained to act. Seen as both means as well as ends, this volume calls upon the readers to examine violence both from rational-instrumental, as well as constitutive perspectives.

The central themes of this volume, through highlighting historical continuity and episodic violence against various communities in a multitude of ways, have two important implications for the study of genocide and mass political violence. First and foremost, it is critical to recognize that *none* of the episodes of violence documented are inevitable. That is to say, by tracing the historical lineages and continuities, the contributors show the different junctures where a different pathway and outcome could have been possible. This places the role of agency back into focus such that albeit agents do not act under conditions of their choosing, they can make their own history and shape those structures and history for posterity.

The second, and related, implication is that by understanding the historical continuities of the structures of violence, the culpability and responsibilities of the perpetrator groups should also be brought to the forefront of the discussion. Just as the victims have the agency to resist, the perpetrators also have the agency to choose from a range of possible courses of action that does not lead to genocidal outcomes. Furthermore, regime change does not exonerate and absolve the state from the role it plays in the creation and maintenance of the structures of violence, especially when it inherits the legacies of their predecessors. As such, it begs the reader to question the roles and responsibility that the contemporary Turkish state has towards reconciliation and restitution.

By taking an interdisciplinary and multivariate approach to the study of violent episodes, both historical and contemporary, in Anatolia, the editors and contributors of

¹³ Dilek Güven, "The Events of 6–7 September 1955: Greeks, Armenians and Jews within the Context of the Strategies of the Turkish Republic," in *Collective & State Violence in Turkey*.

¹⁴ Hans-Lukas Kieser, "Public Violence in Turkey from the Nineteenth Century Onwards," in *Collective & State Violence in Turkey*.

¹⁵ Uğur Derin, "'Who Did this to Us?' Blaming the Enemies as Part of Turkey's Authoritarian Political Culture," in *Collective & State Violence in Turkey*; Dressler, *Physical and Epistemic Violence against Alevis*, 349; Etienne Copeaux, "Nationalism and History, Masks of Violence," in *Collective & State Violence in Turkey*.

¹⁶ Hamit Bozarslan, "Structures of Power, Coercion and Violence in Republican Turkey," in *Collective & State Violence in Turkey*.

Collective & State Violence in Turkey make significant contributions to not only the literatures of the Armenian Genocide and Turkish state violence, but the scholarship on genocide and mass political violence as a whole. The human experience with political violence is never even across time and space, and by snapshotting those different experiences, the contributors of this volume paint a cohesive narrative that capture both the nuances as well as broad patterns of the different cases and themes examined. The approaches taken in this book represents a microcosm in the broader array of genocide and mass political violence case studies, and as such, is essential reading for any audience, whether academic or practitioner, vested in understanding how genocidal violence occurs and the potential for its prevention and mitigation.