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## Letters from Readers

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### Genocide?

TO THE EDITOR:

Guenter Lewy's article is an accurate reflection of the Turkish government's nine-decade-long campaign to deny the Armenian genocide ["The First Genocide of the 20th Century?," December 2005]. Like the Turkish government (which prosecutes its citizens for even referring to an Armenian genocide), Mr. Lewy claims that: (1) what happened to the Armenians at the hands of the Turks in 1915-16 somehow does not qualify as genocide; (2) all the documents that scholars have used for decades as evidence of the genocide are forgeries or otherwise unreliable; (3) the times were hard for the Ottoman Empire, too, and many Turks, especially soldiers, died along with Armenian civilians from famine, disease, and wartime chaos; (4) the Armenians are to blame for their fate because guerrilla groups and revolutionaries

teamed up with the Russians who were fighting against the Ottomans in World War I.

In fact, documentation of the genocide is abundant and incontrovertible. For starters, there are some 4,000 U.S. State Department documents in the National Archives, written by neutral American diplomats and confirming what Ambassador Henry Morgenthau called "a campaign of race extermination"; the edition of the British Parliamentary Blue Book titled "The Treatment of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, 1915-16," compiled by Viscount Bryce and Arnold Toynbee; the foreign-office records of Austria and Germany (Turkey's wartime allies) now available as books; and the Ottoman parliamentary gazette, which records the confessions of government and military officials at the Constantinople war-crimes tribunal held after the war. (Mr. Lewy claims the gazette records

are invalid, but their authenticity has been validated by meticulous scholarship.)

Add to this the thousands of pages of eyewitness accounts from relief workers, missionaries, and survivors, and one can see why the Armenian genocide is established history. The documentation shows that the ruling Turkish government, through high-level bureaucratic planning, emergency executive legislation, the mobilization of killing squads that included some 30,000 convicts released from prison, and an ingenious use of railroad and telegraph technology, implemented the empire-wide deportation and massacre of its persecuted Christian minority.

To claim that Armenians were revolutionaries threatening the security of the Ottoman Empire is to confuse resistance to slaughter with revolt. Mr. Lewy's assertion that because there were thousands of Russian Armenians in the Russian

army all the Ottoman Armenians were disloyal is a non-sequitur. The former were, after all, Russian citizens, many of whom fought on the European front. It is true that thousands of Ottoman Armenians fled to fight for the Russians, but these defections had nothing to do with the more than 2 million loyal Armenians spread throughout Turkey.

Mr. Lewy's manipulation of history is so blatant that in his attempt to provide context for why Armenians became dangerous "revolutionaries" in the 1890's, he neglects to mention the major event of the era: Sultan Abdul Hamid II's massacre of 200,000 Armenians in 1894-96. This was in response to Armenian protests for civil-rights reforms that they hoped would ameliorate their "infidel Christian" status. So unprecedented in modern history were these massacres of defenseless citizens that human-rights movements sprang up all

over Europe and the United States in response, and Abdul Hamid was dubbed the “bloody Sultan.”

Mr. Lewy’s denialist strategy is also clear in his effort to separate Raphael Lemkin, the man who coined the term “genocide,” from the Armenian genocide by suggesting that Lemkin meant the term only for the Holocaust. But Lemkin named the Armenian case in first developing the concept of genocide, and he consecrated the term “Armenian genocide” in a nationally televised interview in 1949.

Mr. Lewy’s claim that there is no proof of the Ottoman government’s intent to destroy the Armenian people is an absurdity. The entire corpus of documentary evidence corroborates many times over how systematic and organized the extermination was. Every book on comparative genocide in the English language has a substantial section on the Armenian case, and the International Association of Genocide Scholars is unanimous in its assessment that it was one of the major genocides of the modern era.

The record yields one of the most grotesque compendiums of government-planned murder and plunder in history. For a historian to assert that “the documentary evidence suggests that the Ottoman government wanted to arrange an orderly process of deportation” that was “humane” and “compassionate” is as outrageous as the claim of David Irving and other Holocaust deniers that there were no gas chambers in the Nazi camps.

PETER BALAKIAN  
*Colgate University  
Hamilton, New York*

#### TO THE EDITOR:

Guenter Lewy’s article is too clever by far. First, he denies that the Armenians were victims of genocide because evidence of premeditation on the part of the Turks is not apparent to him. He seems to find it problematic for the claim of genocide that Talaat Pasha did not produce posters announcing his intention to wipe out a group “in whole or in part” (as the UN Genocide Convention puts it). Neither, one might note, did Hitler.

But one does not have to string together a list of pronouncements over a period of years to show premeditation; it is sufficient to demonstrate that the perpetrators devised and carried out a plan for extermination.

The genocide of the Armenians was carried out chiefly by a covert “special organization” established by the Ottoman government and later taken over by the dictatorial Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), known popularly as the Young Turks. Brigands, as well as thugs and murderers taken from prisons, were organized into battalions to carry out the killings, along with gendarmes, tribesmen, villagers, and parts of the army. Officials who refused to cooperate with agents of the CUP (who demanded not only the expulsion of the Armenians but also their slaughter) were dismissed from their posts or put to death.

Sophisticated foreign officials, neutral observers as well as friends of the Turks, came to the conclusion that the purpose of the deportation of the Armenians was extermination. The German vice-consul in Erzerum re-

ported in 1916 that “[t]he fear I spoke of . . . that the evacuation of the Armenians would be tantamount to their annihilation [and] that this was the purpose behind it, has unfortunately turned out to be true.” In another revealing dispatch in 1916, the third wartime German ambassador at the Ottoman court wrote to his government: “The [CUP] demands the annihilation of the last remnants of the Armenians, and the government must bow to its demands.”

The U.S. consul in Harput, Leslie Davis, wrote to the State Department that “[a]nother method was found to destroy the Armenian race. . . . A massacre would be humane in comparison.” A second report from Davis was even more pointed: “That the order is nominally to exile the Armenians from these [provinces] may mislead the outside world for a time, but the measure is nothing but a massacre of the most atrocious nature. . . . There is no doubt that this massacre was done by order of the government; there can be no pretense that the measure is anything but a general massacre.”

Mr. Lewy has argued elsewhere that though Talaat and his cohort should have known that expulsion under wartime conditions would result in an overwhelming number of deaths, they were too ignorant to understand this. If Mr. Lewy were to go to Turkey today, he, like the novelist Orhan Pamuk, could be prosecuted under the criminal code for “insulting Turkish officials.” In fact, the Young Turk officials were highly intelligent and hardly ignorant, which made them all the more cul-

pable for their crimes, and more adept at trying to cover them up.

DENNIS R. PAPAIZIAN  
*Armenian Research Center  
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#### TO THE EDITOR:

Guenter Lewy writes that the “historical question at issue” in determining whether the Armenians were victims of genocide at the hands of the Turks “is premeditation—that is, whether the Turkish regime intentionally organized [their] annihilation.” He argues that “no authentic documentary evidence exists to prove the culpability of the central government.”

This is not correct. During the period in question, 1915-16, the Ottoman Empire was controlled by the Young Turk party, whose leadership triumvirate consisted of Enver Pasha, Talaat Pasha, and Djemal Pasha. Here are their own words.

Enver (1916): “The Ottoman Empire should be cleaned up of the Armenians and the Lebanese. We have destroyed the former by the sword, we shall destroy the latter through starvation.”

Talaat (1915): “Turkey is taking advantage of the war in order thoroughly to liquidate its internal foes, i.e., the indigenous Christians, without being thereby disturbed by foreign intervention.”

Djemal, upon viewing the deportations: “I am ashamed of my nation.”

In 1926, Mustafa Kemal (or Atatürk), head of the modern Turkish Republic, said: “These leftovers from the former Young Turk Party, who should have been made to account for the

millions of our Christian subjects who were ruthlessly driven en masse from their homes and massacred, have been restive under the Republican rule.”

In 1919, Henry Morgenthau, the U.S. ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, recalled: “When the Turkish authorities gave the orders for these deportations, they were merely giving the death warrant to a whole race; they understood this well, and, in their conversations with me, they made no particular attempt to conceal the fact.”

CHARLES GARO ASHJIAN  
*Newark, New Jersey*

#### TO THE EDITOR:

Guenter Lewy's article explores why the 1915-16 massacre of 650,000 to 800,000 Armenians might not be considered genocide. There are two main problems with his thesis. First, he overlooks the fact that Armenians were massacred repeatedly in the Muslim Middle East throughout the late-19th and early-20th centuries. The ideology that drove this violence was rooted in the established relationship of the Muslim community toward non-Muslims. As Bat Ye'or, Andrew Bostom, and others have documented, these practices were sanctioned by fourteen centuries of Qur'anic practice.

As Christian “dhimmis” in the Ottoman Empire, the Armenians enjoyed “protection” while being subject to discriminatory taxes, unequal treatment under Islamic law, restrictions in religious expression, and submission to ritual humiliation. Any breach of this contract on the part of non-Muslims could lead to death by the sword.

Second, Mr. Lewy is oddly fixated on the question of whether the genocide of 1915-16 was explicitly “planned.” But the fact that Armenians were seen as allied with the Turks' political enemies does not make the butchery of men, women, and children any more explainable. By Mr. Lewy's standard, one could say that the Holocaust was not planned, either, but simply grew out of meetings between Hitler and other leaders as the war developed. After all, many Nazis viewed the Jews as “political enemies” of Germany.

BETTINA FEHR  
*Dallas, Texas*

#### TO THE EDITOR:

Guenter Lewy writes that the best way to judge the Armenian tragedy is to conclude that the Ottoman government's “primary intent” was “undoubtedly” not to commit genocide but to remove the Armenians from strategic locations, thereby denying support to Armenian guerrilla bands who had allied themselves with the Russians to wage war against the Turks. Succinctly put, it was a matter of self-defense. But it is very strange that the government thought the best way to solve its guerrilla problem was to murder the men and deport the women and children, raping and abusing them on the way.

What are Mr. Lewy's reasons for his conclusion? For one, some Armenian communities were spared deportation. But this does not show that there was no plan for genocide, only that the Turkish government was (as Mr. Lewy describes it at one point) “incompetent and inefficient,” and could not carry out its own plan.

Mr. Lewy also writes that some of the Turkish gendarmes were nice enough to protect and feed the Armenians. But this is like saying there was no plan of genocide by the Germans because some German officials saved Jewish lives.

According to accounts from the U.S. ambassador Henry Morgenthau, the historian Arnold Toynbee, the humanitarian Johannes Lepsius, and others, the Turkish government had plans to annihilate the Armenians in their ancestral lands. Mr. Lewy wants more evidence. Perhaps if the Turkish government were more willing to open its archives for investigation, instead of, as Mr. Lewy notes, “threaten[ing] retaliation against anyone calling into question its own version of events,” the issue could be settled once and for all.

JULIET DILANCHYAN-  
SETIAN  
*Dana Point, California*

#### TO THE EDITOR:

I have little doubt that, were he alive, the great Raphael Lemkin, who coined the term “genocide” and whom Guenter Lewy quotes at the beginning of his article, would be leading the protest not only against Mr. Lewy's denial of the Armenian genocide but against COMMENTARY for agreeing to publish it. How the great have fallen! It was from COMMENTARY that I, like many others, first learned of the Armenian genocide in a classic article by Marjorie Housepian in September 1966, “The Unremembered Genocide.” Over and over again Lemkin treated the murders of the Armenians decisively as genocide.

Mr. Lewy provides the deniers of genocide with at

least two new rhetorical tools. First, set out the picture of denial that you want to create (“no authentic documentary evidence exists to prove the culpability of the central government . . . for the massacre”). Later, make a point of giving a small taste of some of the real facts to prove your open-mindedness and reliability (“It is true that no written record of Hitler's order for the Final Solution of the ‘Jewish question’ has ever been found, either”) and then minimize the significance of this information, rolling back to the original thesis of denial.

Mr. Lewy's second strategy entails assigning appreciative, respectful adjectives to denialist statements (“documentary evidence suggests that the Ottoman government wanted to arrange an orderly process of deportation—even a relatively humane one”) and subtly denigrating references to evidence of the genocide (“the book [presenting telegrams by Talaat Pasha ordering the killing of all Armenians irrespective of sex or age] is considered a forgery . . . by practically every Western student”; “these trials [which found members of the regime responsible for the massacres] suffered from serious deficiencies of due process”; “all of the original trial documents are lost, leaving nothing but copies”).

Is Mr. Lewy aware that the Ottoman rulers in Palestine ordered and carried out the expulsion of Jews from Jaffa-Tel Aviv in 1914 (with more than 500 expelled) and again in 1917 (when several thousand were deported)? A serious number of deaths resulted from these forced uprootings, and the worst that was

feared never came to be thanks only to international intervention. Who ordered the expulsions? Djemal Pasha, one of the triumvirate responsible for the Armenian genocide. On what grounds? Did the Jews of Palestine line up to join the Armenian rebels or the Russian army in the Ottoman-ruled city of Van? The Ottoman authorities stated in a Hebrew newspaper in 1915 that “it is only the Zionists and Zionism, that corrupt and incendiary mad rebellious element, . . . which we must vanquish.”

The Ottomans also expelled nationalist Arabs from Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria. And a fate similar to that of the Armenians befell the other Christian populations of Ottoman Turkey, like the Assyrians and the Greeks. The Ottomans were on a rampage to get rid of any and all who were not like them.

ISRAEL W. CHARNY  
*International Association of  
Genocide Scholars  
Jerusalem, Israel*

TO THE EDITOR:

After reading Guenter Lewy's article documenting the terrible deaths suffered by Armenians at the hands of the Turks, but arguing that they were not victims of genocide, a phrase came to mind: “a distinction without a difference.”

TOM BASTIEN  
*Denver, Colorado*

TO THE EDITOR:

Shame on COMMENTARY for aiding and abetting Guenter Lewy in his denial of the Armenian Holocaust. Those who dishonor the dead and their descendants by supporting the makers of official histo-

ry are, as Simone Weil said, taking “the murderers at their word.”

DAVID DONABEDIAN  
*New York City*

GUENTER LEWY writes:

The strident, not to say vitriolic, tone of the letters reacting to my article demonstrates once again the great difficulty of conducting a dispassionate discussion of the tragic events of 1915-16. The letters are rich in phrases like “absurdist” and “outrageous,” but short on relevant historical facts. I am less than impressed by the unanimous vote of the International Association of Genocide Scholars that the Armenian case “was one of the major genocides of the modern era.” The great majority of these self-proclaimed experts on Ottoman history have never set foot in an archive or done any other original research on the subject in question.

Peter Balakian, Dennis R. Papazian, and Charles Garo Ashjian insist on the “culpability of the central government” for carrying out “a plan of extermination,” but they fail to support this charge with credible evidence. The reports of diplomats and missionaries on the scene document the horrors of the deportation process, but contain little solid information about who carried out the killings or who ordered them. Given the very large number of deaths and the observed complicity of many local officials in the murders, it is not surprising that not a few of these witnesses concluded that the high death toll was an intended outcome of the deportation decision. Still, well-informed as many foreign officials were about the events unfolding before their

eyes, their insight into the mindset and the real intentions of the Young Turk leadership was necessarily limited. Indeed, to this day the inner workings of the Young Turk regime, and especially the role of the triumvirate of Enver, Talaat, and Djemal, are understood only very inadequately.

The fact that large numbers of Armenians lost their lives does not prove the existence of a premeditated plan of annihilation, and in and of itself tells us nothing about who is to be held responsible for these deaths. As I showed in my article, large numbers of Turkish civilians died as a result of severe shortages of food and epidemics, while large numbers of Turkish soldiers, especially the wounded in battle, perished for lack of adequate medical care and as a result of neglect and incompetence on the part of their own officers. Yet these deaths surely do not prove that the Ottoman government—ultimately responsible for all of these conditions—sought and intentionally caused the death of its own people and soldiers. Objective results are not the same as subjective intent.

Peter Balakian asserts that the record of the postwar Ottoman courts-martial, containing “the confessions of government and military officials,” has been “validated by meticulous scholarship.” However, as I demonstrate in my book, *The Armenian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey: A Disputed Genocide*, the person whom Mr. Balakian (in his own book *The Burning Tigris*) credits with this work of validation, Vahakn Dadrian, is himself guilty of willful mistranslations, selective quotations, and other serious violations of scholarly ethics. Hilmar Kaiser, a historian

who is strongly pro-Armenian in his approach, charges Dadrian with the same misdeeds and has concluded with considerable understatement that “serious scholars should be cautioned against accepting all of Dadrian's statements at face value.” The fact that Mr. Balakian in his book calls Dadrian “the foremost scholar of the Armenian genocide” speaks volumes.

The British historian Andrew Mango has written that some of Balakian's assertions “would make any serious Ottoman historian's hair stand on end,” and I join in this appraisal. Mr. Balakian should know that the Armenian revolutionary movement predated the massacres of 1894-96, and that the revolutionaries' inflammatory propaganda had helped bring about the mob violence. According to the American journalist Sidney Whitman, who witnessed the events, the pamphlets of the revolutionaries had called for an uprising to throw off the Turkish yoke. The Turks had taken these threats seriously, and this had led to the horrors and “the suffering of the innocent for the guilty.” The strategy of the revolutionaries, as William L. Langer has convincingly argued, was to provoke the Turks to commit excesses, which would draw the attention of the Christian world and bring about European intervention on behalf of the Armenians. In information meant for foreign consumption, the revolutionaries portrayed their armed struggle against the Ottoman regime as defensive violence, while their own publications celebrated the heroic fight for national liberation.

Mr. Balakian misrepresents my description of the

deportation decision. I refer to the “many decrees commanding protection and compassionate treatment of the deportees,” which indeed show a formal commitment to “a relatively humane” process (the word “relatively” is omitted by Mr. Balakian). But, of course, published decrees are not self-executing, and the actual course of the deportations bore little resemblance to the benevolent procedures contained in the law. My article speaks of the harrowing trek over mountains and through deserts where massive numbers of Armenians died of starvation and disease or were murdered. I note the callous attitude of the Ottoman government to its own people, which makes it unsurprising that this government showed little concern for “the terrible misery” that would result from deporting the bulk of the Armenians from their historical communities. To equate my position on these horrors with that of the Holocaust-denier David Irving makes for a rousing close to a letter already rich in abuse but is sheer demagoguery.

The pronouncements of Enver and Talaat indicating their destructive designs against the Armenians, which Charles Garo Ashjian quotes, are probably taken from *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story*, first published in 1918. Yet this book had a strong propagandistic motive. It was written, as Morgenthau explained in a 1917 letter to President Woodrow Wilson, to convince the American people “of the necessity of carrying the war to a victorious conclusion.” The book puts words into the mouths of various players that, with few exceptions, do not appear in the sources utilized

by Morgenthau. The memoir portrays Talaat and Enver as ruthless villains, but in his diary, available at the Library of Congress manuscript collection, Morgenthau repeatedly praises the two ministers for their kindness. He had frequently invited them for meals at his home and gone riding with them in the countryside.

The demonization of Talaat and Enver in Morgenthau's book through the use of allegedly verbatim comments was a politically inspired device, probably the brainchild of the journalist Burton J. Hendrick, who ghost-wrote the book and received a share of the royalties. A highly favorable appraisal of Talaat is preserved also from the pen of William Peet, the American head of the international Armenian relief effort in Constantinople, who recalled that Talaat Pasha always “gave prompt attention to my requests, frequently greeting me as I called upon him in his office with the introductory remark: ‘We are partners, what can I do for you today?’”

According to Bettina Fehr, my article “explores why the 1915-16 massacre of 650,000 to 800,000 Armenians might not be considered genocide” and “is oddly fixated” on whether this genocide was “planned.” In fact, I speak of a *total* loss of life of around 650,000—the result of starvation, disease, and murder. We cannot know how many died from each of these causes, nor is there a way of separating out the Armenian deaths due to the guerrilla warfare waged by the Armenian revolutionaries. It was the Armenians’ “unflagging devotion to the cause of the Allies,” in the words of Boghos Nubar, the

leader of the Armenian delegation to the postwar Paris peace conference, rather than any plan to destroy the Armenian community, that in my view explains the harsh reaction of the Ottoman regime. Whether the Holocaust grew out of a long-held plan by Hitler to destroy the Jews or developed incrementally as a result of gradual radicalization on the part of the Nazi leadership remains the subject of scholarly debate. In any case, large numbers of Armenians were not just “political enemies” but actively fought on the side of Turkey's wartime foes.

I agree with Juliet Dillanchyan-Setian about the importance of fully opening the Turkish archives. In January 1989, the Turkish foreign minister announced that the files would be opened, and many scholars, including some Armenians, have since been able to work with various Turkish documents. Yet there is evidence that some authors deemed politically reliable are granted privileged access long before the same materials are made available to others less favored. The principle of full access on an equitable basis, I hasten to add, should hold also for Armenian archives. For example, the archive of the Dashnak party, held in Boston, is said to be closed to those opposed to the Armenian point of view.

Where Israel W. Charny detects a design on the part of the Ottomans “to get rid of any and all who were not like them,” I see various security measures, some more justified than others. Yet since even Mr. Charny stops short of calling these occurrences “genocide,” I fail to discern the relevance of

these other expulsions to the allegation of Armenian genocide. Moreover, Djemal Pasha, who according to Mr. Charny was “one of the triumvirate responsible for the Armenian genocide,” in fact saved thousands of lives by diverting Armenians to southern Syria and Lebanon where there were no massacres. Djemal also ordered an effective relief program, as a result of which the vast majority of the deportees survived. These various interventions, aimed at moderating the hardships of the hapless Armenians, at the time earned him the nickname “Pasha of Armenia.”

David Donabedian accuses me of dishonoring the dead and their descendants and faults COMMENTARY for “aiding and abetting” my “denial of the Armenian Holocaust.” Such language, unfortunately all too prevalent, is used against anyone who dares question the Armenian version of the calamitous events of 1915-16. Distinguished scholars of Ottoman history like Roderic Davison, J.C. Hurewitz, Bernard Lewis, and Andrew Mango have rejected the appropriateness of the genocide label for those occurrences. Yet, ignoring this formidable array of learned opinion, Armenians and their supporters among so-called genocide scholars continue to assert with superb arrogance that the Armenian genocide is incontrovertible fact and “established history” that can be denied only by lackeys of the Turkish government or morally obtuse individuals. Unless and until there is a change in this attitude, I see little hope for ending this almost century-old conflict.