

Book Reviews

Bedross Der Matossian

The Horrors of Adana: Revolution and Violence in the Early Twentieth Century. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022. 360 pages.

IN THE PREFACE TO *AMONG THE RUINS*, PUBLISHED IN 1911, Zabelle Yessayan (Zabel Yesayan) notes that, “Once again the vein of the tribe was opened, and once again our blood—still beating with the joy of newly-emerging Liberty—was spilled upon soil made fruitful by our sweat.” In the summer of 1909, Yessayan had been part of a group of Armenian relief workers sent to Adana, a hub in the historical region of Cilicia (Çukurova) on the Mediterranean coast, comprising a mix of ethno-national and religious populations in an Ottoman Empire on the cusp of major changes. Over the course of two waves at the end of April that year, more than 20,000 Armenians and other Christians and around 2,000 Muslims were massacred in and around the city and province.

The Horrors of Adana: Revolution and Violence in the Early Twentieth Century by Bedross Der Matossian (Stanford University Press, 2022) recounts the story of the massacres, their lead-up, and aftermath. Der Matossian is a scholar of the Middle East with a focus on inter-ethnic relations, the Armenian Genocide, and Palestinian history. He serves on the faculty of the Department of History at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

The book is a multi-disciplinary study of a complex episode drawing from a variety of sources. Der Matossian relies on a few key factors for understanding what happened in and around Adana in 1909. He situates the events within the context of the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 and the counter-revolution of 1909. He looks to the “public sphere”—rather, multiple and competing media and other spaces of discourse, both within and outside of the empire, which shaped

perceptions and identity. Der Matossian also gives a rich treatment of rumors and emotions in his account of the Adana Massacres. The humanitarian response to the events is another important component of the book, both locally as well as by Western actors. The international press, meticulously combed by the author, offered widespread coverage of the Adana Massacres. Comprehensive biographies of major figures add to this detailed work.

A simple telling of the story pits Armenian and Turkish nationalist narratives against one another. The history of the medieval Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia, which fell in 1375, was known both to Christian and Muslim populations, made more immediately tangible by the presence of an Armenian patriarchate in the province – the Catholicosate of Cilicia, located in Sis (Kozan). One source of anxiety for the Muslim population was the instrumentalization of this history in order to mobilize and fuel Armenian secession movements. For the Christians, dominance by the Ottoman authorities and the suppressive reign of Sultan Abdül Hamid II was a source of much tension (even though Adana itself had been spared the Hamidian Massacres of 1894-1896, during which around 200,000 Armenians were killed). The curtailing of the Sultan's powers in 1908 by the movement led by the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) was a euphoric moment for all the ethno-national and religious communities of the empire – Yessayan's "newly-emerging Liberty" mentioned above.

It did not last long. Der Matossian demonstrates through his careful analysis of the public spheres how the basis for inter-communal clashes were built in this period. He lays out the inter-play among Armenian or otherwise Christian and Muslim individuals and political movements, the dynamics of external interventions in the empire, and – perhaps most interestingly – the challenges faced by various communities as the economy underwent a period of modernization. This last component is often lacking in works about the Armenians in the late Ottoman period. Alongside irreconcilable nationalist ideologies, religious framings, or Great Power involvements, the empire had been experiencing mechanization, capital influxes, and development as a market at the turn of the 20th century. Some segments of society took greater advantage than others of industrialization, agrarian reforms, and

migration patterns. Such socio-economic factors explain one layer of the anti-Armenian violence of the Ottoman Empire's final decades.

Der Matossian draws a nuanced and balanced picture, often noting the interventions of Ottoman authorities and individuals in support of the targeted Armenian and other non-Muslim populations, and also noting the violence committed by Armenians and others against Muslims. Yet it is not difficult to conclude that key figures and policies of the Ottoman state were ultimately responsible for initiating and continuing the massacres. Mass violence is planned and calculated. The major role played by the local Committee of Union and Progress party leadership in the massacres is substantiated in this work.

The author devotes two chapters to the legal fallout of the Adana Massacres and how, even though numerous individuals were subjected to capital punishment or terms in prison, the main decision-makers did not face meaningful punishment. The Armenian public spheres brought in the Dreyfus Affair as a comparison over the course of the legal proceedings. All involved were evidently aware of the relationships of power, of majority and minority dynamics. A few years later, those dynamics played out tragically for Armenians not only in Adana, and, a couple of decades after that, for Jewish populations not only in France. Der Matossian offers some broader conclusions regarding mass violence, as well as more specifically juxtaposes the Adana Massacres with the Armenian Genocide of 1915, treating the former as its own unique event and not simply a precursor to the latter.

All in all, Der Matossian shies away from the predominant historiographical framing among scholars of Armenian Studies and the Armenian Genocide, which, more often than not, places heavy emphasis on the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire as victims. While in no way downplaying the atrocities which the Armenians and others faced, it is welcome to find a text which takes a deeper look into the agency of Armenian individuals and groups. In this approach, Der Matossian echoes Khatchig Mouradian's *The Resistance Network* (Michigan State University Press, 2021).

The Horrors of Adana is a rich work on an episode which has never before been investigated so closely. It will be best appreciated by those

already familiar with the history and context of that time and place. It is not directed towards a wide audience, nor is it necessarily an introductory text, even with detailed explanations of individuals and events. Indeed, some of the details might be tedious for casual readers. But they are important. They will make this work a significant reference for a long time yet.

The book suffers from some minor technical drawbacks. It contains three maps which could be presented in bigger and clearer print (perhaps they were designed mainly with the e-book version in mind). At the same time, it contains unique images, rarely, if ever, published—a reflection of the greater attention the period 1915-1923 has received in scholarship. The different kinds of transcriptions from Armenian, Turkish, Arabic, Greek, and other non-English sources might, again, make the text less accessible to non-specialists. At the same time, Der Matossian displays impressive capacities in employing such a diverse range of sources – archives from seven countries and ten languages are cited in the book.

Even for readers new to the region and its history, the nuanced and multi-layered presentation of this complex time period is engaging. It also offers much to think about in echoing other places and our own era. Der Matossian compares the Adana Massacres specifically to the Odessa pogroms of 1905 and the violence inflicted upon the Sikhs in India in 1984. The dominant theme of the anxiety of a majority regarding perceived demographic threats from a minority eerily echoes the replacement theory rhetoric current in the public spheres of many places in the West. Moreover, the book points to Great Power perceptions of the necessity of preserving the international order at a high human cost:

“As in the case of the Hamidian massacres, no humanitarian intervention took place to stop the Adana massacres, confirming once more the unwillingness among the European powers to interfere. Their excuse was that, by intervening, they might exacerbate the already dire condition. However, the real reason for not intervening was to avoid destabilizing the international system.” (p. 181)

This line of thinking from 1909 sounds familiar in light of the mixed, inconsistent, and limited response from the international community to the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022. Reactions to events pertaining to the Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) conflict since 2020 reflect a similar mindset.

At the same time, the mechanisms of relief efforts, fundraising, and private interventions by Western individuals, groups, and governments at the time offer blueprints for the development of modern-day humanitarianism, both in 1909 as well as 1915 and later. (Peter Balakian's *The Burning Tigris* (HarperCollins, 2003) for its part presents an account of how public engagement in humanitarian affairs was shaped by the experiences of the Armenians and other persecuted populations in the late Ottoman Empire.) Der Matossian emphasizes how the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire and beyond mobilized efforts themselves, forming relief committees and similar bodies, alongside the aid from European or other sources and, indeed – though late in coming – from the Ottoman government as well.

Besides the long-looming shadow of Great Power thinking, the Adana Massacres and their aftermath offer room for reflection about policies and practices of modern-day Turkey and the region. The Ottoman Empire did not function like a classical Westphalian state – in particular, notions of territoriality and the homogenous implementation of law did not match European models – and its successor states maintain features in this regard. Numerous lines of fracture across Syria, Iraq, and the Levant today testify to the legacy of Ottoman statecraft and the ultimately-lacklustre accomplishments of the treaties of Sèvres and Lausanne, among other arrangements after the First World War.

In addition, the elites of Turkey today continue practices of the last generation of elites of the Ottoman Empire, many of whom became the first generation of elites of the Turkish Republic established in 1923. Turkey is not the Ottoman Empire, but certain mechanisms and norms of functioning have carried on. One theme of *The Horrors of Adana* is the culture of impunity which pervaded the Ottoman state. Although the Adana Massacres are separate from the Armenian Genocide which followed, Der Matossian highlights some matching *modus operandi*:

“The feeling of existential threat, heightened emotions, and suspicions regarding the intentions of the Armenians, as well as geostrategic calculations, became important factors in finding a final solution to the Armenian Question. Faced with external enemies as well as (imaginary) internal ones, the members of the inner clique of the CUP decided the fate of the Armenians through an orchestrated genocide. The architects of the Armenian Genocide were some of the same CUP members who had demonstrated sympathy to the Armenians in 1909. As argued in this book, given the appropriate conditions and political stresses, ordinary men can turn into brutal murderers.” (p. 228)

One may even go so far as to say that the culture of impunity persists throughout the region, given the numerous human rights violations directed by governments in many places in the Middle East over the course of the past century.

The Adana Massacres remain a part of public memory in Armenia and the Armenian Diaspora, commemorated through literature and song. Zabelle Yessayan’s writings are one primary source reporting on the aftermath of the events. Another well-known work is from a collection of poetry called *Bloody News from My Friend* by Siamanto, the pen-name of Adom Yarjanian. Published in 1909, it includes a piece called “The Dance,” recounting what a German woman had witnessed in Adana – the forced dancing, humiliation, molestation, and burning of young Armenian women. The poem ends with the German demanding how she could dig her own eyes out after having witnessed such horrors. Siamanto had fled the Ottoman Empire because of the Hamidian Massacres, but returned, as many did, after the 1908 revolution. He fell victim to the Armenian Genocide in 1915. Yessayan had likewise been abroad and returned when the CUP came to power. She managed to escape arrest in 1915, and eventually ended up in the newly-established Soviet Armenia, where she was targeted during Stalin’s purges of the late 1930s. For scholars of mass violence of the 20th century, there are unfortunately too many case studies to investigate and too many inter-linkages to tease out.

—NAREG SEFERIAN