

THE HISTORY OF IMPERIAL POLITICS AND THE POLITICS OF IMPERIAL HISTORY

GERARD J. LIBARIDIAN 

Abstract

This article constitutes a discourse of the essence of the empire, and on ensuing contradictions in what otherwise had been a commonly experienced history by Turks and Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. This article is a moment of reflection on the author's paradigm of empire, based on his academic research and diplomatic experience. The article addresses three questions: 1) What are empires and what are not, 2) Contradictions in the common history of Muslims/Turks and Armenians and possible explanations for these contradictions, 3) The fate of empires in international politics today.

The author's empire paradigm to these three questions is motivated by two main considerations: (1) How can we explain the fundamental differences between the opposing histories of empires and peoples subject to empires? (2) On an intellectual and scientific level, how can we contribute to efforts that can move us closer to a more thorough history from which we could draw some lessons?

Historical discourse shows that differences will always remain, but even these differences should be aimed at enriching our knowledge and perspectives, and not at ignoring, obscuring or otherwise ignoring aspects of history itself. Contemporary interest in such comparative research goes beyond the methodologies that support the social sciences and the integrity of the profession of historian or other scholars of history.

Keywords: Imperial politics, Imperial history, Ottoman Empire, Young Turk, Genocide, South Caucasus, Turkey, Armenia, nation-state, imperial paradigm.

Introduction

On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Genocide, as commemorative programs and events were being planned around the world, the Turkish government spent a great

* **Gerard J. Libaridian** is a Professor, PhD in History. Now retired, Prof. Libaridian's last academic position was at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, where he held the Alex Manoogian Chair in Modern Armenian History, the United States of America. From 1991 to 1997, he served as adviser, and then senior adviser to the First President of Armenia, Levon Ter-Petrossian, as First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs (1993-1994). Email: glibaridian@gmail.com.

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deal of resources and energy to counter that campaign, including funding academic conferences that would help promote the Turkish position. Against the use of the term 'genocide', supporters of that government used the presumption that the Ottoman Empire was a highly tolerant and benevolent state. The Turkish state encouraged scholars of Turkish descent and others to hold such conferences in Europe and the United States.

Probably in order to maintain the appearance of academic standing and a 'balanced' approach, Armenian scientists were often invited to participate in such conferences. There were many in Armenian academic circles who opposed the participation of Armenian scholars in a conference organized by the Turks, arguing that such participation would legitimize the Turkish position of denial of the Genocide. This author, like few others, decided to participate in such conferences, arguing that the participation of Armenians with their own reports was the best way to introduce the fact of the Genocide and the real policy of the Young Turks to circles otherwise unfamiliar with these issues, especially to young Turkish scholars. Armenian scholars belonging to the second group were subjected to severe pressure by and even received threats from some of their compatriots.

There were some, especially young Armenian scholars, who, under such pressure, withdrew their positive response to participate for fear that it might threaten their future as a scholar or a member of their community.

This author was also invited to such a conference and agreed to attend, despite the horrible pressure by some colleagues. This author gave the following reasons for accepting the invitation: (a) He had something important to say about the characteristics of empires in general, and the Ottoman Empire in particular, and this statement would create a historical framework for moving away from conflicting understandings of history; (b) It was important to spread the word especially to the supporters of the Turkish state, and not to relate only to those who have already moved away from the ideology of the Turkish state, and (c) The conference would provide him with an attentive audience of well-trained groups of young Turkish historians.

The following is the text, with minor editorial changes, of the presentation delivered by this author on June 2014 at such a conference at the University of Cambridge, England, as the keynote address. The meeting was attended by some 60 scholars, mostly young Turks, as well as prominent European and American denialist academics.

This article presents my views on a most difficult and complex subject, one that has been in my thoughts not only as a scholar, but also as a diplomat. As an advisor to the president of Armenia, I dealt intensely with Russia, Turkey and Iran. I came to know their accomplished policymakers and diplomats, as well as their policies. This article is not intended to present new research. Rather, it represents a moment of reflection based on previous scholarly research and actual experience.

This article builds on research and reasoning that analyzes comparatively the political science and diplomatic issues of past and contemporary historical discourses (Libaridian 1999; Libaridian 2004; Libaridian 2005; Libaridian 2011, 82-112; Libaridian 2013, 43-64; Libaridian 2015; Davutoğlu 2014, 21-30; Wallimann, Dobkowski and Rubenstein 1987).

My years in government spanned the last year of the Soviet Union and the first six, possibly most difficult years of independence in post-Soviet states. One could notice,

even at that time, and can certainly do so since then, a resurgence of nostalgia for empire in all three of the major neighbors of the South Caucasus: Russia, Turkey, and Iran - albeit in different ways and to different degrees. All three are former empires whose policies had a major impact on the future of peoples and states, and still do. More on that later.

What empires are, and what they are not

Let us begin with an understanding of empire, since the theme of this conference is the clash between empires during the First World War. What they are, and what they are not. What is to follow may seem banal and self-evident. Yet given controversies regarding the First World War and its aftermath, and given some of the historiography on that period, it appears that we need to remind ourselves of such simple truths.

Empires have occurred in history often enough that we know they are not rare occurrences. Empires are established through conquest and violence, not only against weaker peoples but also against other empires (Behm 2018; Howe 2009; Working 2020). Empires do not have natural borders or borders that are sacrosanct. They are not divinely ordained, however much their rulers claim otherwise. In other words, empires, created by force, do not have a natural right to exist.

Though no nation, tribe, clan, race, ethnic or religious group has a natural right to rule over others, empires took themselves for granted as if they were the norm, sometimes divinely ordained, or legitimized by self-declared religious or civilizational missions. That is the premise and logic of the emperor—in our cases the tsar or tsarina, the sultan or the shah—or of the guardians of a given empire. When historians of empires join in this logic and take for granted the naturalness of empires or of their borders, when they assign any sanctity or legitimacy to the shifting borders of empires at any given time, they are conferring to some a right to rule over others. They end up writing history abstracted from the lives of real people, just as court chroniclers of empires and kingdoms did.

One would have difficulty finding a single principle that can account for all the changes to borders of empires. The historian who ascribes any historical legitimacy to the borders of an empire at any fixed time runs the risk of finding himself or herself at a loss when looking for the same legitimacy of borders that had been changed a decade earlier, or was to be changed a decade later. Such shifts could have even been voluntary: just think of the exchange the Ottoman Sultan approved in 1878 with Great Britain, turning over Cyprus to Great Britain in return for the latter's support for revising the Treaty of San Stefano.

This is not to say I do not understand why empires are created, always at someone else's expense, nor why they defend their borders, especially when they cannot expand it. That defense may involve appeal for the help of other states or empires, appeals for which Armenians were and are still condemned, appeals which are sometimes used to justify the Ottoman state's treatment of Armenians. One can easily remember such appeals, for instance those of Sultan Mahmud II, first to France and Great Britain, and then to Russia against Ibrahim Pasha's forces in Egypt. I am arguing only that the

historian must create a distance between himself or herself and the institutions and subjects they study, a methodology that underlies the social sciences. Otherwise, the historian will assign values to parties to conflicts that were devised by the holders of imperial power, take those values for granted, and thus legitimize the logic of empire.

It is not clear to me what is the natural or ideal order of things, what political configuration provides the most viable and fair basis for legitimation of states. Surely, empire is certainly not one of the choices. Yet history gives us many examples of empires built on a variety of principles of legitimation, and of historians who have bought into that justification. All of which is not to say that serious attempts are not being made to find new ways to build new empires. Even the simplest principles of international law, such as the right to self-determination, can be used to break up empires. This was the case with the Soviet Empire, or looking at Russia alone, with the start of new ones, as in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Crimea.

I am not advocating the nation-state as the ideal system of world community. As in all systems created by humans, the nation-state has more than its share of problems. First, it is difficult to define which “nation” is to make the “state.” Second, what is one to do with the “others?” Third, which elites define the character of that state? So much has been inflicted on peoples, and on ethnic and religious groups, to create the nation-state and in its name. It seems unnecessary to bring examples of states that imposed demographic homogeneity, usually with violence, to make populations conform to some vision of the ideal nation-state. Nonetheless, the nation-state is today the ostensible basis of the system of international security developed in the last century or more. Secondly, it is the framework within which peoples still subjected to foreign domination employ to achieve their secure place in that same international community.

It is possible to argue that I am committing a deadly sin, especially for a historian, when arguing in support of principles and expectations that were not at play at the time empires were committing their sins against the peoples and groups they dominated. I will plead guilty to that charge. However, there is no evidence that peoples subject to imperial and foreign rule accepted their subjected status for long, even if they did not have or develop strategies to do anything about their subjugation. We know what happened when they did employ any kind of strategy. More importantly, my assertion here serves the purpose of making an important and contrarian point. Many historians are steeped in that crime when they assess the role of empires and policies of imperial governments by projecting into such policies the norms and standards of the nation-state, norms and standards which are bad enough. I am referring specifically to their assessment of historical processes based on their assumption that the borders of any empire at any given time—and “concepts of security” based on such borders—have the same legitimacy as what we assign to nation-states today.

One of the problems in current historiography and discussion of empire, especially in the context of the Ottoman case that impacted so much of subsequent Near Eastern history, is that which is not stated, that which is taken for granted by some scholars and which as a result, provide for a very confused set of rules for the discussion. One such unstated assumption is that it was natural for the Ottoman Empire to become the Turkish Republic of today, that it indeed was manifest destiny. And that anything that was done

to reach those goals was not only a rational act that could be explained, but also a legitimate act that must be assessed by its usefulness to bring that goal closer to reality.

Although there exist organic, legal, geographic and other connections between the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey, the Ottoman Empire was not a nation-state. Standards of achievement or failure relevant to the creation of the Turkish Republic, good or evil, cannot be projected back and applied to the behavior of the Ottoman Empire in a manner that explains away, justifies, or takes as a good thing anything that made it possible for the Ottoman Empire to be transformed into the Turkish Republic. History is not just the story of dominant states and dominant peoples, derived from what survives of imperial records. We have to account for the cost of this transformation to subjected peoples and groups. If the historian looks at threats to the territorial integrity of the Ottoman or any other empire as if they were late twentieth century nation-states with expectations that their territorial integrity be respected, then historians should also expect those empires to have respected all conventions and treaties that we now have that protect citizens and groups within those empires in the name of these citizens' human, political and other rights. We cannot get away with picking and choosing our principles and applying them selectively—or at least we should not be able to. The First World War and its aftermath cannot be reduced to the heroic struggle of what were to become “Turks” against foreign occupiers. For the Ottoman Empire, it was also the conscious and planned war against many of the peoples it ruled over that made that republic a Turkish republic.

Two more considerations in this first section.

First, my reference to the use of the term court chroniclers does not apply, obviously, to all historians. There are many who have defied that paradigm and included a critique of empire in their analyses. However, the majority still abide by the rules of the court as certainly do official histories and histories taught in schools to future citizens of these states.

Second, the choice between being a critical historian and a court historian, conscious or otherwise, is often made through the use of terminology that predetermines the conclusion and tends to obviate any serious discussion of the issue. The use of terms applied to those who oppose empire as “nationalists,” “secessionists,” “rebels,” “extremists,” “*komitacis*” and “terrorists” signals not only the recognition by the historian of a central authority, which is fair enough, but also confers on that authority a legitimacy which that authority claimed but which cannot be assumed by the historian. These terms allow historians to get away with ignoring or demeaning of the historical record left behind by the subjects and victims. This comes in different forms, including personal testimonies, memoirs, archives, and historical writings. What do we call those who use every available means to suppress the revolts of the subjugated? The good guys?

It is similar with the term “minority.” In whichever way one group was transformed into a numerical majority or minority on a piece of land, a people living on their historic homeland, yet turned into a minority (numerically speaking) will not conceive of themselves as a minority. The sense of belonging to a land is a very personal and communal experience and cannot be reduced to statistical considerations. In regards to Palestinians, Kurds, and Armenians, or for that matter, Native Americans, analyzing

authority as opposed to subjects' relations with language, based on the concept of "minority," brings about a distortion of history of monumental proportions.

Maybe it is necessary to use and treat peoples in such terms to maintain, in the case of the Ottoman Empire, to maintain the myth of the immaculate conception of the Republic of Turkey. That makes perfect sense as state ideology but it has little to do with the craft of history. When such concerns are incorporated into, or taken for granted in the historical analysis, we end up with bad history.

To reduce a people living on its own historic homeland into a numerical minority requires, to say the least, the application of deleterious policies over a period of time. To conceptually do so in our writing of history requires a few words that deny such peoples their peoplehood, and their right to history. It is also denial of the essences of empire, domination and exploitation, while claiming to study it and taking its legitimacy for granted. These approaches become commonplace and almost normal because the future of these peoples has already been taken away from them.

The text that accompanied the invitation to this conference refers to the impact of "nationalist rebellions" on the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and their possible collusion with foreign powers. But it does not refer to the Young Turk and earlier Ottoman rulers who perfected policies that reduced peoples to minorities. The *İttihad ve Terakkî* must have known certain things about nationalist rebellions that the Canadians do not know when dealing with the Quebecois, or the British when dealing with the Irish or Scots. Such terms and assumptions take for granted the writing of history as if history is an art form that serves to legitimize the security argument advanced by imperial rulers. And in so doing, it perpetuates the securitization of the state as an absolute value, independent of the well-being and fate of its subjects or citizens.

Issues and controversies: the triangle

Once the imperial mindset becomes dominant in historiography and in the teaching of history, we are bound to part our ways in history writing, so to speak. Considering what the subjects of an empire (individuals, groups, or peoples) will remember and how they will write their history, especially when in calamitous and fateful situations, these groups and people will be overwhelmed by their own victimization. It may be that the best way to illustrate what I mean is to discuss an issue which is still hovering over us. That which is now crassly and misleadingly called the "Turkish/Armenian issue," a term that hides more than it reveals.

This is a multi-layered set of issues, in fact, where individual and collective memories, fundamental differences in the writing and teaching of history, and the political import of that history interrelate and affect each other (Burton 1994; Satia 2022; Price 2006, 602-627). At the bottom of the set of issues inferred by that expression you would probably find the individual Armenian meeting an individual Turk for the first time and asking a question such as "why did you kill us?" Somewhere at the top is the problem of relations between the Turkish Republic and the Republic of Armenia, that is, relations between two internationally recognized states. In between are two sets of issues. First, those issues raised by scholarship on the factuality of the 1915 Genocide of the

Armenians by the Young Turk Ottoman government. Second, the issues raised by the campaign for the international recognition of that Genocide, waged especially by Diasporan organizations. As most readers would be aware, since the 1970s, Diasporan organizations have focused on that issue as their most important external agenda item. It is an issue that in a way also colors intra community agendas.

But since it all begins with what happened in history, let us look for a moment at that history. I do believe that to understand this period and the subsequent controversies it engendered, and to move beyond the inadequate paradigm of a “Turkish/Armenian” issue, we need to account for the role of the Great Powers, or the Western empires, in the events of this period. Indeed, we would be unable to understand history adequately and overcome the gap between two different and opposing narratives if we left the European imperial dimension out of the equation and reduced the issues to a “Turkish,” versus an “Armenian” confrontation, as simple, almost comforting for many, as it may sound. But adding a third party to the conflict is not sufficient. We also need to delineate the conflicting role each of the three parties played in that era.

The module I have developed to present a very complex situation in relatively simple, though I do not believe simplistic terms, is a triangle, as opposed to a straight line with two opposing ends. Each dimension or angle represents one party to the conflict: The Ottoman state, the Great Powers and the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire. The key here is to understand that each angle, or each party to the conflict, plays two different and contradictory roles with regard to the other two angles or parties, without implying an equality in the power and resources of each. Here is what I mean.

The first angle or dimension is commonly known as the “Turkish” side,” that being in fact the Ottoman state and those who governed in its name, which is different from the “Turk.” On one hand, the Ottoman state persistently was a victim of Great Power aggression throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. (This was, of course, after the Ottoman empire itself had encroached on the lands of many European powers.) On the other hand, the Ottoman Empire itself was an empire. Ostensibly in the name of a religion, a dynasty was ruling not only over a large number of its own coreligionists of various ethnic backgrounds, but also over a variety of peoples who did not belong to its religion, tribe or clan. That rule was discriminatory by definition, made on the basis of religion, notwithstanding its qualified toleration of—though not equality with—non-Muslims.

As time went on, that empire also lost its sense of fairness or efficiency. It became brutal beyond the call of duty and of the parameters set by Islam. The empire and its regime therefore became unacceptable to a number of groups, including many Muslim groups, and even to those that had started identifying themselves as Turks, not just as Muslims. The paths toward a freer society were many, the interaction and dynamics between these various ethnic and religious groups complex. This is not the place to describe these processes. But clearly the Ottoman state emerges as both victim and victimizer. It was the victim of great power imperialism, and too the victimizer of a large number of peoples and groups that itself ruled over.

Now for the Great Powers. I have already alluded to their role as empires that tried to expand their influence and control at the expense of others, including that of the Ottoman Empire. Clearly, they were in the role of victimizers. There is no need here to

expound on that dimension. Yet the most liberal, enlightening, and liberationist ideas of equality and freedom were produced in those countries. These ideas were liberating, giving form and language to, and legitimizing yearnings for freedom and equality, first to their own peoples, and then to peoples and groups elsewhere. This included those under Ottoman rule. Thus, in addition to their nefarious role as brazen conquerors, the states of the Great Powers also appear in history as the places where science, progress and political liberalism prevailed. In opposition, they characterized the empires and peoples they victimized as examples of backwardness, traditionalism, unscientific if not irrational modes of thinking. Whatever the reason why these Great Powers introduced such liberal and liberating discourse in their domestic and foreign policies, peoples in otherwise oppressed environments took their words and slogans seriously. This duality of the role of Western imperial powers, as victimizer of the Ottoman Empire and as the hope for liberation of the latter's victims, is also expressed in the different ways in which the West interacted with Armenians. Some Great Power actors were genuinely concerned with the fate of Armenians and others in the Ottoman Empire. Others merely used it to extract territories and other benefits from the Ottoman Empire. It is difficult to delineate where one begins and the other ends.

Finally, there is the dual role of Armenians, a people who had lived and developed a civilization for millennia in their own homeland, most of that homeland being under Ottoman rule for last few centuries. It is generally recognized that Armenians in the Ottoman Empire were at best second-class subjects. In fact, the much-heralded economic well-being of a segment of the Armenian population, especially in cities, has been used to ignore the utter depravity and abject poverty of most Armenians who lived in the rural areas of the provinces in historic Western Armenia (the Eastern provinces of the Ottoman Empire). Here I am referring to the underlying and fundamental agrarian issue and devastating local conditions that eventually gave rise to the Armenian revolutionary parties.

Yet in their meanderings for a savior—from reforms in the Armenian millet system to the larger *Tanzimat* era reforms in the empire, neither of which provided relief—Armenians ended up with high expectations from the Great Powers, the source of the principles of egalitarianism and modern national identity. Having given up on the possibility of internal reform, in 1878, the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul appealed first to the Russians, and then to the European powers for help. These were the same Great Powers that were trying to dismember the Ottoman Empire, except that they could not agree on how to do it, as opposed, let us say, to the 1884 partition of Africa. It is also paradoxical that by associating with the West, a Christian West, educated, urban, and active Armenians developed a sense of civilizational superiority over Muslims, whom they associated with backwardness. It is possible that this was a countermeasure to the sense of superiority that even the humblest Muslim could have toward any Christian, a sense that was an integral element to the Ottoman system.

Here is what happened then, and what has been perpetuated in historiography, for the most part. The Ottoman state and those in power, increasingly identifying themselves as Turks, focused exclusively on the victimizing dimension of the Great Powers. That eventually became the basis of what is known as the “Great War of Liberation,” the founding legend of the Turkish Republic. In this context it was convenient, maybe even

necessary, to demean the egalitarian and liberal political notions emanating from the West, to forget the nature of the Ottoman state as an empire itself with its own victims, and to confound Armenian grievances with Great Power imperialism. Legitimate grievances were ignored ostensibly because such grievances were used by the Great Powers to dismember the Ottoman Empire. Undoubtedly many of the Young Turk groups within the Ottoman power structure made use of Western ideas. In the end, however, it was the “big fish eat small fish” rationalism of social Darwinism that prevailed and determined the outcome of history, and not the part that includes liberty, fraternity, and, generally speaking, equality. The Ottoman/Turkish part of the triangle looked at Armenians and other non-Muslims as allies of the victimizing Great Powers, but would not see the position of Armenians as an oppressed, even massacred people who may not have had any choice but to appeal to the Great Powers for help. The Ottoman leaders never shied away from working closely with one or another of the Great Powers, from using one against the other when it was useful to them. What they resented is when their subjects tried to get into the equation. The reason for that is that those in power in the Ottoman Empire were trying to resolve a different problem than their victims. More on that later.

By and large, the Great Powers saw the Ottoman Empire as a major morsel, and Armenians and others as excuses to morally ground their interventions. No doubt many segments of Western societies sympathized genuinely with the plight of Armenians as victims. More importantly, it was also not always easy to see a clear line of demarcation between where humanitarian concerns ended and realpolitik inspired by imperial rivalries began. But it was ultimately the imperial framework within which Armenians—the dominant Christian people in the Eastern provinces (or historic Western Armenia)—were placed. This framework determined the policies of the Great Powers.

For their part, Armenians defined their position as victims of Ottoman policies, and posed their association with Great Powers and the West as a strategy for survival, if not liberation. Under the circumstances, they were not positioned to extract reforms that would have obviated the need for appeals to the Great Powers, and accounted for the victimization of the Ottoman Empire by their ostensible allies, the same Great Powers, especially the Russians, the French, and the British. This is not to say that there were no Armenians who understood the dual role of the Ottoman Empire, or at the least were aware of the Ottoman/Turkish state perception of the Great Powers as victimizers.

On the contrary. The tragedy was that fear of imminent destruction of the economic base of the Armenian homeland, the intermittent massacres of Armenians, the unwillingness and/or inability of reformist Ottomans to address the agrarian issue (including Young Turks), and lawlessness in these provinces had created an existential threat which called for some form of immediate intervention. But as have seen, for the ruling elites in that state, any such intervention was seen strictly as a form of further victimization of the Ottoman state. Thus, each party played a complex role in the making of history and of its outcome but each reduced the other into a single role at the time (Drayton 2011; Pitts 2012). And we know what the result of that multiple reductionisms was.

What is almost as dramatic is that by and large, historians and other social scientists studying this period have followed the same pattern that political leaders did when

making that history. I am not referring here to the controversy surrounding the use of the term genocide. That problem is limited to the question of characterizing what the deportations and massacres of Ottoman Armenians during the First World War amounted to. I am referring to the historical context within which 1915 took place, regardless of what one calls it. As readers are probably aware, 1915 is one of the euphemisms used to avoid the term genocide, the term which best describes the character of Ottoman policy.

Most Turkish scholars and many others have written their works fully aware of the role of the victimized Ottoman/Turkish state, but neglected its oppressive and brutal nature. At the same time, they have highlighted the role of Armenians as an excuse for the Great Powers to pursue their schemes, while ignoring the plight of the Armenians that compelled them to appeal to the Great Powers to begin with (Libaridian 2005, 2011). Official Turkish historiography has created this model. But even those who have looked at the Armenian situation have focused largely on the aspect of victimization. Yet the larger context of the socioeconomic crisis among the Armenian rural population, which amounted to an existential threat, has been ignored.

Armenian and many other scholars have stressed that same existential threat I described earlier. Yet the threat has been usually framed in ethnic, nationalist and administrative terms, rather than the socio-economic crisis that dominated Armenian discourse prior to the First World War. And most Armenian scholars have ignored the victimizing policies of the Great Powers, the same policies that were perceived by Ottoman elites and rulers as the main threat to the state they controlled, the Ottoman Empire. Thus, a good portion of the divergence in histories can be traced back to the politics of empire(s), to the one-dimensional view of the role of these different parties relative to the others.

It is possible to further crystalize the conflicting renderings of history by recognizing the fact that Ottoman leaders and later the *İttihad ve Terakki* and other Young Turks, were trying to resolve a different problem than what Armenian leaders had in mind. The challenge to Ottoman and *İttihad* leaders was this: How to preserve the state and maintain their domination of it, as an empire, if possible, whatever the cost to its subject peoples. The challenge for Armenian organizations speaking on behalf of the Armenian people was, how to preserve its people and their land-based communities in their historic homeland, with a minimal degree of security and well-being.

For each, it appears, it was essential that they see the other in a single dimensional framework. Still, the Ottoman state and its government at the time, with its obsession with state survival, was responsible not only for genocide, but also for the many Muslim deaths in Anatolia that resulted from that government's decision to enter the war. Few deaths of Muslims in Anatolia or anywhere else can be placed at the feet of Armenians at any time. Such losses of life are the result of an imperial decision by a government acting in the name of an empire that was soon to become a "nation-state," in the name of Muslims, in the name of Turks, and whatever else the group that had usurped power could muster to pursue its diplomatic games and war objectives.

In the end, we need to look at a missing dimension of the conflict between the Ottoman leaders and the Armenians. Ottoman leaders were actually quite well aware of and dreaded the liberal/reformist solutions Armenian leaders proposed for the Ottoman

state. These included parliamentarianism, equitable representation in government for all, and administrative, agrarian and social reforms. Thus, for the *İttihad*, there was not only an ethnic/religious dimension to their Armenian problem, but also a political one. Armenian approaches, i.e., demands for domestic reforms, also constituted a threat to the statist, conservative, military-based, and Turkish nationalist state they imagined and they wanted to leave behind. That is, political organizations representing Armenians were seen as a progressive social and political force that challenged the *İttihad*/Turkish vision of the future of the empire. Armenian political parties constituted the left wing of whatever was left of the Ottoman political spectrum. Armenians comprised the last constituency of parliamentarianism in the Ottoman Empire. Paradoxically, Armenian political parties opted for empire, seeing the dangers of a Turkish nation-state, yet they strove for a reformed empire. And that may have been seen as great a threat to the emerging Turkish state, as imagined by the *İttihad*, as any other dimension represented by Armenians. Armenians were organized at the grass roots level. Until 1908, they were led by political parties that were socialistic and revolutionary until 1908. And they then found salvation in liberalism and representative government after the Young Turk Revolution, which promised to restore the 1878 Constitution.

Imagine how different the history of the late Ottoman Empire would have been written by Turkish and Western historians if the demands made by Armenian organizations—equality, agrarian reforms to improve the lot of the peasantry, administrative and judicial reforms, government by representation and through the rule of law, elimination of usury and illegal and extra-legal taxation—were made by some Muslim/Turkish group(s). It is not good history when the historian dismisses such realities just because the historian, just as the Ottoman government, had determined that the welfare of peasants and others were not their concern when the latter were Armenians. The historian becomes a court chronicler when he or she takes for granted the form and regime of the state she or he is supposed to study, and when he or she considers anything that might have improved the lives of Ottoman subjects, while diminishing the power and privileges of the ruling ethnic element and class as a threat to the state, just as the state did in its time.

This is a significant, if not crucial, dimension that argues for the integration of the “Armenian” issue into the history of the Ottoman/Turkish history, rather than extraneous and inimical to it. Imagining the “Armenian” as an alien element to the history and politics of the Ottoman Empire—one that had to be, and was excised at the end—represents an alienation that makes possible the simplified, nationalist narratives on both sides. These narratives seem irreconcilable. How could we resolve the monumental differences between narratives when historians ignore the attempt of Armenian political parties to integrate the resolution of the so called “Armenian Question” within the Ottoman political spectrum, and within the context of the reinstatement of the 1878 Ottoman Constitution? Here two questions can be raised: Who abandoned the Ottoman constitution? And who, in the end was the greatest threat to the Ottoman Empire?

There is need for a process toward the integration of these narratives, at least the critical elements of the narratives that have not only diverged but also contradicted each other (Kennedy 2015, 5-22; Kramer 2011). To begin with, the framework for such an integrated history could be the development of a narrative that has the necessary

intellectual distance from those dictated by the perceptions of the actors at the time; instead, a narrative which is based on the complexity of history, beginning with the duality of the position of each player. Most importantly, historians and other scholars on one side should not ignore the socioeconomic conditions and existential crisis that engendered Armenian nationalism. Historians and other scholars on the other side should not ignore the nefarious role played by the Great Powers in contributing to the crises of the Ottoman state, and the criminal responses such a role elicited from its Turkish leaders.

As indicated earlier, it is not the intention of this author to discuss the question of different characterizations of Ottoman policies regarding Armenians during the First World War. While we need to recognize the distinction between what happened and what its characterization means today, I just want to add one point to end this second segment of the discussion: From the historian's point of view, the campaigns for the recognition of the Genocide committed by the *İttihad* government beginning in 1915, and the campaign of denial of that Genocide, both constitute sub-text beneath the conflict inherent in the two opposing renderings of history.

The fate of empires in international politics today

The above is not mere academic discussion. As indicated earlier, we are witnessing a nostalgic return to the idea of empire, albeit in new as well as old forms. Most recent events have proven that the governments of three former empires that in the last three centuries constituted the most relevant powers in the region—Turkey, Russia and Iran—are manifesting behavior that transcends the nostalgic sentiment. In some cases, they have graduated from the sphere of sentimental attachment to actual policies of re-creation of empires, in some form or another. Particularly in Russia and Turkey, we now have governments that consider their imperial heritage positive capital that justifies renewed attempts at domination over their neighbors. This nostalgia is not so much due to the greatness of these empires. Rather, it is the failure of political imagination on the part of major players on the world stage—the US, Russia, Europe and China—who did not know how to benefit from the window of opportunity for the new world order created by the collapse of the Soviet Union.

For a variety of reasons, empires lose their vitality and ability to maintain the status quo. Others with more advanced technology and resources haunt and replace them. What follows after the collapse of an empire is as important as what happened during the imperial period. Peoples, nations, and states that emerge from such collapses may or may not develop a serious critique of empire.

But the inheritor or dominant state is often far more reluctant to be critical of the imperial tradition. After all, it is empire that secured the beautiful and sumptuous palaces, cathedrals, and mosques that adorn their capitals and other cities, the ones they now take for granted, and which tourists flock to visit. It is empire that gave them a sense of grandeur, superiority, exceptionalism, special missions, or manifest destiny. To question the “naturalness” of all that may be unpatriotic, to assert that much of that wealth was the product of the exploitation of other peoples and lands and sometimes of their own

people, is to take the fun out of history, at least for those historians who live vicariously the glory that was through the writing of history. While critique of empire as such has happened in societies with long traditions of democracy within the metropolis, critical assessments are rare in those who hold onto a single legitimizing narrative of their nation. Empires create subjects in their time and panegyrists. They also seem to bedazzle historians who, in essence, then become court chroniclers.

Thus, it is not commonplace to find Iranian historians and social scientists with critical views of the grandeur of Persian empires, Russian scholars who question the Romanov and Soviet empires, and Turkish colleagues who have looked seriously at some of the repressive and oppressive, certainly imperialist dimensions of Ottoman rule. Imperial mindsets survive empires in a variety of forms, as do imperial rivalries in collective memory. They survive in historiography and in policymaking, often long after empires are gone. In fact, historians become the memory makers who sustain empire, as suggested by a colleague.

Now back to the supposed end of empire. When the USSR collapsed in 1991, it seemed to some that there now was a power vacuum in some parts of the world. Let's take the South Caucasus, a region I know better than I know others. So, we reach the end of 1991 and there is no longer a USSR. During these years, a former superpower has been reduced to less than a third-rate power, except for its nuclear arsenal. What did neighboring former empires Iran and Turkey do? They sensed a vacuum and reverted immediately back to their imperial past. They thought of the South Caucasus region as a prize to be re-won, a region where they could reassert their influence, even if as a shadow of their former selves. This was the beginning of the nostalgia for empire, which went nowhere because the absence of Russia in the region was a temporary setback, if not an illusion.

Had there been a serious critique of the imperial past of these states from within, there may have been an alternative model of behavior. Iranian policymakers and scholars looked upon Persian rule over the South Caucasus until 1828 as a period of benevolent government, in which Armenians and Muslims did not fight (as they were now doing in Karabakh), and where a fatherly and benevolent metropolis had managed differences wisely. Turkish scholars argued that the Ottoman millet system had been most benevolent in its toleration of the existence of non-Muslims as a favor, and that the Ottoman period was a good one, even if at the end even some of their subject peoples were denied their existence. And they implied, as did policy makers, that the extension of Turkish influence on the new republics could be the basis for peace, security, and stability in the South Caucasus. Just as the Iranians had argued. Except that the Iranians had argued in favor of the restoration of an Iranian influence based on an economic common space, and they were quick to realize they were overreaching. Turkey, more attuned to NATO terminology, promoted the idea of a common "security" space. But the imperial past was not an illusion for Russia and Turkey, the other two so-called nation-states. It was a model that was suggesting certain neo-imperial policies.

We know that none of that came to pass, although Iran kept a consistent presence in all three republics, and Turkey made headways in Georgia and Azerbaijan. But in the end, none of that translated into a new Iranian or Turkish sphere of influence over the whole region (Libaridian 2013, 2015). The latter may have happened if Turkey had resolved its problems with Armenia for the sake of greater stakes in the region.

Fast forward to a decade or more. Russia has come back with a vengeance. Not that it was absent during this period. It is just that Russia was biding its time, trying to find the right leader, the right moment, and the right justification. So now we have a slightly different situation in two ways. The vague notion of influence is replaced in Russia and Turkey with a genuine sense of nostalgia for the lost empires. In Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan we have leaders whose visions roughly correspond to lost empires, Russian/Soviet and Ottoman, respectively. And make no mistake about it, these are visions fed by nostalgia, but not limited to it. History—which includes the mess these empires left behind them—is being used to promote policies that are inspired by visions of empire redux in the name of whatever can be used. This includes protection of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers, if not inherited natural rights over peoples and territories. And Turkey is flaunting its past Ottoman benevolent rule as a reason to attempt to determine a larger place for itself under the sun.

Conclusion and discussion

To end this article, I need to raise two questions: What is the responsibility of historians and social scientists in the resurgence of imperial solutions to current problems? Could things have been different in Russia and Turkey had historians and other social scientists been more critical assessors of imperial history, especially when educating the new generations in schools?

To summarize: First, we do not do well as historians when we take for granted the values of the people and institutions we are supposed to study. Second, to the extent that conflicts in the presentation of history are engendered by actual differences in the understanding of history and not by politics, we should find ways to bridge those conflicting narratives by (a) better understanding our own prejudices and biases; (b) strengthening our tools that expand the areas where we apply intellectual integrity; (c) filling in the lacunae in our knowledge and not judging other scholars by their ethnicity; and (d) not expecting that we ‘split the difference’ in order to reach what might be called a “historians’ historical compromise on history,” as opposed to a genuine integration of disparate histories. And third, what we say about the past may have an impact on the future. Successor states to empires that hold nostalgic feelings and impulses for empire may be relying on us to legitimize the imperial past and justify current policies. What we say and what we write matters not just for the past, but also for the future.

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