

Nicholas Warndorf,

**Unconventional Warfare in the Ottoman Empire:
The Armenian Revolt and the Turkish Counterinsurgency,**

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Armenians in the Ottoman Empire in general and the Armenian revolutionary activities in particular have been the subject of heated discussions among the historians of the Ottoman Empire. Historians have also devoted numerous efforts to unfold the real causes of the Armenian rebellions that had intensified after the 1890s. It is clear from all accounts that the Ottoman military did not have an easy time while putting down these rebellions. As a matter of fact, Armenian revolutionaries were able to defeat Ottoman forces during the Van revolt of May 1915, capture the city and hand it over to the invading Russian army.

Nevertheless, a strong focus has been put by the historians of the Ottoman Empire on the methods of suppressing the Armenian uprisings. Evaluating the events in line with the Armenian official thesis, historians have since accused the Ottoman military of massacring thousands of Armenians without taking into account whether they were actively supporting the rebels. The casualty rate among the civilians has been particularly exaggerated to attract the attention of the western community to the Armenian cause then and now. Due to lack of statistics, we will probably never know the exact death toll during the Armenian rebellions between 1863 and 1914. Thus, in my opinion, any attempt to put out a more acceptable figure by opposing academic positions will be in vain.

However, in his book, Nicholas Warndorf have done something extraordinary and saved his expertise from falling into a black hole in the study of the Armenian Question. Instead of arguing how many and why so many casualties occurred during the suppression of these revolts, he focussed on how the Ottoman military reacted to the insurgency and whether their counterinsurgency methods were unique. The book gives a kind of state of the art answer to this question and argues that counterinsurgency methods applied by the Ottoman military during the events of 1915 were not of their own invention, but actually derived from western military tactics prior to World War I. In short, the author claims that the Ottomans had learned and adopted, not invented relocation, or *tehcir* in Ottoman parlance (21).

The author, building on Edward Erickson and Justin McCarthy's research tries to argue his thesis in four chapters, excluding the introduction and the conclusion. In the introduction, Warndorf states that he would be assessing the Ottoman military application of counterinsurgency in Eastern Anatolia during World War I with particular reference to the 1915 Armenian revolt in the city of Van. The author argues that "by isolating and/or removing civilian populations from areas of unrest and rebellion", the Ottoman government succeeded in suppressing insurgencies and prevented other Ottoman cities from the same fate as that of Van, which was taken over by the Armenian rebels in May 1915. According to the author, by the "*tehcir* policy/forced migration", the Ottomans aimed at a) responding to internal threats, b) intended to save Muslim subjects from being massacred by the Armenian insurgents, c) repelling an imminent Russian invasion. One of the main arguments of the author here also deserves special mention: although many historians have remained under the influence of the Armenian thesis and believed that the Ottoman Empire tried to knowingly eradicate rural and urban populations of Armenians in Eastern Anatolia, the author is of the opinion that the Ottomans had not targeted any religious and ethnic group in their counter-insurgency efforts. According to the him, the Ottomans felt that they must act and do something radical to stop an imminent Russian invasion, eased by Armenian help and support. Indeed, the Ottoman military had enough evidence for calling Armenians a "fifth column". Here the author would have added a section explaining why forced migration was preferred this time as opposed to the previous Armenian uprisings that took place before World War I. This would have allowed the reader to judge whether Edward J. Erickson, a well known military historian, was right when he asserted that the Ottoman military had neither sufficient military force in eastern Anatolia this time to quell insurgents, nor could have withdrawn its soldiers from the front to the interior for this task.¹ Therefore the forced migration remained the sole remedy to protect the life of both the loyal Armenians and Muslims who were being drawn into conflict with the Armenians.

In the second chapter entitled as "Historiography and Methodology", the author tries to find answers to three important and interesting questions: a) why did the Ottomans act the way they did against the Armenian rebellions? b) how

1 Edward J. Erickson, "The Armenians and Ottoman Military Policy, 1915" *War in History* 15/2 (2008): 141-167.

did America and Great Britain act towards insurgencies in their colonies? c) Did the Ottomans have any knowledge of the western counter-insurgency methods and if so, how did they approach or adapt them? Here, the author underlines the similarities and differences between Ottoman counterinsurgency techniques of the First World War with those of two western empires, namely the British and the USA, who conducted counterinsurgency prior to the Ottomans. Having studied these prior engagements, the author concludes that “the nature of irregular warfare demands drastic measures from any nation” and that the Ottomans were of no exception.

In the third chapter, the author deals with a highly debated subject of the Armenian rebellion in the city of Van. Just to remind the reader, in early Spring 1915, Armenians of Van rebelled against the government forces and succeeded in expelling the Ottoman garrison from the city. When the Russian army entered the city on May 20th, they handed the keys of the fortress to the Russians. This gesture was awarded by the Russians with the declaration of Van as a self-governing province. Aram Manukian of Karabagh originated as the governor. In this chapter, the author details the Armenian activities in the city and their collaboration with Russia, and on the basis of archival evidence concludes that Armenian rebels established an impressive network in the city and posed a real threat to the Ottoman military in the region. Since Russia supplied them with sufficient quantity of weapons and ammunition, he argues, Armenian rebels were encouraged to challenge Ottoman forces, assist the Russian army and threaten the lives of Muslims in and around the city. The findings of the author reveal beyond doubt that the Van revolt of 1915 cannot be categorized as a defence, as Armenian historiography suggests, but it was rather a rebellion in true sense of the word, since the evidence proves that Armenians prepared for the rebellion as early as October 1914 and outnumbered the local Ottoman forces.

In chapter four, Warndorf studies a very interesting topic which has not properly been treated. He sees to the Ottoman counterinsurgency measures and compares them with those of other western powers who had to tackle similar problems in their dominions. In other words, the author asks a very subtle question: what did the great powers do to counter rebels? First of all, Warndorf takes up the British experience during the Anglo-Boer wars. According to the author, what Britain primarily did was to apply excessive power to break ties between guerrillas and civilians. The army burnt farms to deny passing commando units

find food and shelter and resettled civilians into camps, which proved very deadly for the peasants, as the statistics showed. According to the estimates, more Boers died in the camps than the clashes with the British army (107). In 50 or so camps, the fatality rate was also 17% and, not surprisingly, reached 94% among the children. Be that as it may, British policy to remove civilians from their villages proved very effective in the fight with the rebels, and forced Boers into submission (111).

As to the conflict between the Philippines and Americans in southeast Asia, neither the result nor the measures taken by the American forces against the Philippines were any different. On the footsteps of the British experience, the American army also separated civilians from irregular forces and those who resisted faced deportation, imprisonment, arson and confiscation of property. Especially the order of Brig. Gen. Jacob H. Smith to “shoot any male rebel over age 10” became very effective and indeed the last of the insurgent surrendered by June 1902. Interesting though it may be for the scholars of the Ottoman history, American forces deported entire population outside the major cities and herded them into concentration camps. Army forces then systematically destroyed any houses, corps, food storages etc. outside the camps. Warndorf informs the reader that between 200,000 to 700,000 people lost their lives mostly due to epidemics during American counter-insurgency measures implemented (124).

Having analyzed the methods implemented by the British against the Boers and America against the Philippines, Warndorf argues that the Ottomans did not invent irregular warfare and used the same methods as other major powers in countering insurgency. Relocation of civilians was a tactic also employed by the British during the Anglo-Boer war of 1899-1902. The major powers as well as the Ottomans resorted to forced migration to remove the potential threat from the theatre of war to minimize the risk of being attacked from within. Warndorf's study of counterinsurgency measures implemented by the British and the American forces also demonstrates that the Ottoman military was aware of the tactics of Britain and America and drew lessons from their experiences. Interestingly, having compared the motives behind the implementation of such methods detrimental to the rural population, the author concludes that the Ottomans' motive was more defensible: while the Philippines and the Boers did not collaborate with an external enemy, Ottoman Armenians were supported by Russia, then at war with the Ottomans. Russia supplied them with weapons, ammunition,

training and leadership. Also different from the British and the Americans, the Ottomans had fought for their own soil. Compared to the Boers and the Philip-pines, Ottoman Armenian insurgents had posed greater danger to the Ottoman military forces and the civilian population. I may add that there is a consensus among scholars in stating that Armenians acted like a fifth column for the Rus-sians in the Ottoman domains.

The conclusion of the book is also interesting. The author demonstrates that the Ottoman regular forces operated with extreme care to protect the life of civilians subjected to forced migration, and they were very successful in their efforts. There is no evidence that the Ottoman soldiers instigated crimes against the interned. The Ottomans were not after revenge at all. This very important observation is supported by Ottoman archival documents: although sporadic acts of violence were committed by undisciplined irregular troops or Kurdish bandits against the civilians, the perpetrators were put on trial and punished by the army.²

In general, the book offers many detailed, interesting and hitherto un-touched stories of counterinsurgency methods applied by powerful states before World War I. More importantly, this is the first study that compares British and American experiences with those of the Ottomans. The result very clearly indicates that the Ottoman forces conducted the operation more humanely and with-in the law. Despite his powerful arguments against the assertion that what the Ottomans did to her Armenian citizens during World War I were unprecedented and inhumane, the author can be challenged for several of his assertions. First of all, the author is wrong in stating that the Ottomans did not set up camps for de-portees because they had no budget. My study of the forced migration of Arme-nians has demonstrated very bluntly that the Ottomans did construct camps for Armenians subjected to relocation. Jessie J. Jackson, the then American consular of Aleppo, also described the camps, although not in detail.³ He not only men-tioned there were numerous camps, but also named them and provided some information about their administration. As his correspondence has shown, the camps were administered by Armenian priests. Moreover, whereabouts of most deportees were traceable. Camp settlers were allowed to communicate with their

2 Yusuf Sarınoy, "The Relocations (Tehcir) of Armenians and the Trials of 1915 – 16," *Middle East Critique* 20/3 (Fall 2011): 299 – 315.

3 Kemal Çiçek, *The Great War and the Forced Migration of Armenians* (Belfast: Athol Books, 2012), pp. 204-233.

relatives abroad through relief agencies. We can add perhaps that the Ottoman camps for displaced Armenians were not in isolated areas but around major cities.

Thanks to American Ambassador Henry Morgenthau, we also know that the authorities had finally granted them permission to render direct aid through the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief (ACASR) in the camps. Having said so, we cannot agree with the author about his conclusion that the British and Americans chose to utilize camps to secure civilians and fight insurgency while the Turks used forced migration. An example may suffice to prove our point: Eskişehir, Konya and Alayund in the central parts of Anatolia were just three of the camps that the Armenians were held for over a year for security reasons although the intention was to dispatch them to Syria.

Secondly, the author's statement that the Turks used irregular forces to fight the Armenians also needs to be corrected (136). Ottoman military historians are in consensus that *Hamidiye Alayları*, Kurdish light cavalry troops, established by the late Sultan Abdulhamid II in 1891 to fight against Armenian rebels, were incorporated into Ottoman regular army corps just before the Great War started.⁴ Thus, there were no Kurdish irregulars in the Ottoman army during the relocation. Instead it would be acceptable to state that Kurdish militant groups were accountable for any attacks on the Armenian convoys on their way to their new settlements.

Last but not least, the author's use of Turkish literature is very limited and lacking many essential references that would have enlarged the perspective of the author. In spite of these shortcomings, it still deserves attention and must be read by not only students of military history but also those interested in the Armenian question.

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4 Selahattin Tamu, *Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri Tarihi* (1908-1920), vol. III, (Ankara: Genelkurmay Başkanlığı 1971), pp. 171-172; S. İzzet Yeğinatı, *Büyük Harbin Başında II. İhtiyat ve Nizamiye Süvari Tümenleri* (Ankara: Askeri Matbaa 1939,) pp. 14-15.