

**Justin McCarthy, Esat Arslan, Cemalettin Taşkıran, and Ömer Turan: *The Armenian Rebellion at Van*. Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2006. 336 pages. ISBN 978-0-87480-870-4. \$25.00. Reviewed by Yücel Güçlü.**

The fate of the Ottoman Armenians during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has become over the past few decades one of the most controversial chapters in the modern history of the Middle East, and shows every sign of remaining as such. The events surrounding Ottoman-Armenian relations in the period are intricate and do not lend themselves to simple judgments and labels. Too often, these have been perceived in the West largely, and thus erroneously, through the lens of Armenians. The history of the Armenian question is marked by an interaction of diverse parts and should not be diluted. Before the First World War, the province of Van in southeastern Anatolia had a population of about 500,000, while the city of Van itself had approximately 100,000 inhabitants. Armenians formed one-fourth of the population. As McCarthy, Arslan, Taşkıran, and Turan remind us in *The Armenian Rebellion at Van*, Van's historical importance was mainly due to "its position on the traditional natural highways that connected Erivan, Bitlis, Tabriz, and Mosul." The authors have teamed up to provide some missing information and assessment necessary to place the episode of Van from the 1870s to 1919 in its proper perspective and give the English-language reader an opportunity to reach a sound conclusion about the policies and motives of the Sublime Porte toward its Armenian subjects. The authors are all well-qualified specialists on the Ottoman Empire who conducted painstaking archival research and who are armed with the essential linguistic and paleographic tools. For this reason, *The Armenian Rebellion at Van* is most welcome.

The purpose of this book is to fill a substantive gap in the current historiography. In view of the steady flow of publications that expand the bookshelves with studies of the Armenian question, such an intention may at first seem superfluous. But with respect to the effects of the provincial Armenian revolts on the Ottoman government and on its war effort, one still finds major areas that have been incompletely investigated.

The analysis is carefully made and clearly presented. This solid and fascinating study addresses three core themes. First, following the Ottoman-Russian war of 1877 to 1878 Armenians turned their eyes to St. Petersburg, because they reckoned Russia might at any time again be in control of eastern Anatolia. An agitation was in consequence started in Van by the Armenian revolutionary committees, who had contacted their kinsmen in Russia with the object of separation from the Ottoman state. The Armenian revolutionaries rose up at Van in 1896 and 1908 with a view to attracting European intervention. Second, as is amply demonstrated, it was always Armenians

Yücel Güçlü is first counselor of the Turkish Embassy in Washington, DC.

who attacked first. Third, Armenians were helpful to Russians in their invasion of Van district in spring 1915. With regard to the capture of Van, McCarthy et al. emphatically state that “there is conclusive evidence that the rebels did significantly aid the Russian cause.” And they elaborate: “[I]n the First World War the Armenians did exactly what was needed to aid Russian victory: holding down Ottoman units many times the size of the rebel forces, crippling military communications, forcing hundreds of thousand of refugees onto the roads to hinder army movements, and ultimately making the Ottomans abandon strategies that might have won the war in the East.”

Indeed, after Russia’s proclamation of war against the Ottoman Empire on 2 November 1914, Armenians began to cause much trouble behind the Ottoman lines, particularly in eastern Anatolia, where they attacked government buildings, killed gendarmes, and massacred Muslim civilians and burned their villages. They often assaulted isolated detachments and convoys. Armenian revolutionaries were helped by local Armenians. When the revolutionaries were pursued by the Ottoman gendarmes, the Armenian villages were a refuge for them. When they needed rescue, the Armenian peasants rallied around them, hiding their arms in the churches, and running to their aid. Many Armenian churches, it was later discovered, were depots of ammunition. A large number of Armenians also acted as volunteers, informers, and saboteurs for the invading Russian forces. The actuality of Armenian revolts astride the main trunk roads and railways posed a significant military problem in a real sense. These outbreaks, which occurred in numerous places, forced the army to withdraw troops from various fronts for their suppression. The Sublime Porte was therefore compelled on 24 April 1915 to decide to remove the Armenians from strategic zones where they were assisting the enemy and were attacking the civilian population. By this means they were withdrawn from the more or less effective influence of the Entente powers, and were rendered incapable of vitiating the defense of the country and of imperiling national security. The relocation decision did not precede but was the result of Armenian rebellions and subversive activities, which were brought to their climax by the revolt at Van beginning on 15 April 1915.

The investigation in *The Armenian Rebellion at Van* strives to cover more than four decades. The descriptive-analytical account is divided into ten chapters of unequal length, on the following topics: the ruins of Van; the city and province of Van; allegiance, politics, and power; rebellion in 1896; development of the revolution, 1897–1908; the Committee of Union and Progress and the Armenians, 1908–12; Kurdish revolts and the inspectorates, 1912–14; the First World War and the Armenian revolt at Van; destruction and murder in Van; and conclusion. Two-thirds of the book concentrates on the years after 1900. The conclusion is so well done that the reader wishes it were longer than nine pages. The authors treat most of their subject matter thematically rather than chronologically; this makes it easier to control, with advantages of grasping the argument in detail, but has the risk of making it harder for the reader to remember the

circumstances in which any particular event was taking place. They are writing for an audience already familiar with the Ottoman Armenian history, which will need only to be reminded of the crisis, conflict, revolt, and war that were endemic throughout the period.

McCarthy et al. rely primarily on published and unpublished Ottoman, British and American archival sources. Many open and contentious questions are elucidated through fresh references from the vast archives of the Turkish General Staff Military History and Strategic Studies Directorate in Ankara. Meticulous research in the Prime Minister's Office Ottoman Archives in Istanbul has yielded a treasure trove of documentation, which the authors display to good effect. These documents were intended for internal use only, and they are more credible than Armenian publications pursuing a political agenda. As McCarthy, one of a few Western scholars to have done systematic research in the Ottoman archives, rightfully points out, the "reports of Ottoman soldiers and officials were not political documents or public relations exercises. They were secret internal reports in which responsible men relayed what they believed to be true to their governments."<sup>1</sup> Lengthy quotations from these sources form a significant part of the volume's methodological framework. French Ministry of Foreign Affairs records at Centre des Archives Diplomatiques in Nantes and documents of the Archives Nationales in Paris are referred to in endnotes 5 and 39 in chapters 3 and 8, respectively. Unfortunately, the authors did not dig deeper in the French archives. Papers at Quai d'Orsay and Vincennes could have been consulted. Memoirs, autobiographies, and personal narratives of the protagonists of the period are also used—though with great caution.

The authors have mastered a wide variety of secondary literature, produced by writers on both sides of the conflict, that is discussed and evaluated in the endnotes. It is interesting to note that on the revolt at Van in 1915 the archives supplement rather than supersede the printed matter. The book gives full weight to published as well as archival-based information.

The eleven detailed maps are clearly drawn and show only places or boundaries relevant to the chapters they illustrate. They make the reader's task significantly easier. The voluminous endnote file contains multiple archival references in different languages. Bibliographical references, both primary and secondary, provide points of departure for further investigations. The book also includes six useful appendices, nine tables, and a well-organized subject, name, and place index.

The reviewer could detect only one minor factual error in the volume. Altan Deliorman's book *Türklere Karşı Ermeni Komiteleri* is not published by Bogazici Univers-

1. Justin McCarthy, *Conference on the Reality of the Armenian Question* (Ankara: Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Basımevi, 2005), 57.

itesi, but by Bogazici Yayınları. This is, however, a negligible cavil about a masterful book. The only reservation about *The Armenian Rebellion at Van* is that the authors do not utilize Russian archives that are accessible, and the contemporary Ottoman press and the minutes of the proceedings of the Ottoman Chamber of Deputies, which can readily be found at Istanbul. Important records are now available to foreign scholars in the Russian State Historical Military Archive at Moscow and State Historical Archive at St. Petersburg that could potentially shed much light on the whole length and breadth of the Armenian assistance to the Russian armies invading eastern Anatolia in 1914–17. This nonetheless does not detract from the basic value of the book, which will surely pave the way for further research of the Armenian insurgencies in other regions of the Ottoman Empire.

As Turkey negotiates to enter the European Union, this original and comprehensive piece of American-Turkish scholarship is particularly important and relevant. Historical events should always be open to discussion. Truth is discovered, not decreed. Many Armenians work tirelessly to ensure that their concept of history is the only view that is known. They show special preference toward Western writers who agree wholly with or supplement their pro-Armenian arguments, although many of these scholars did not study the Armenian question in depth or were aware of its complexity. They are very critical of those Westerners who adopt a position different from their own partisan stand or those who “abandoned” the Armenian cause. The facts of the matter are thought to be certain beyond dispute. Blind to atrocities perpetrated by Armenians, they almost always fail to examine the Turkish experience of the issue and tend to defend their positions from behind blinders that allow them to see only what they want with no regard for the larger picture. They most often give hardly any attention to the broader Ottoman context. There are two sides to every issue, and the Turkish side of the Armenian question is worth serious consideration.

Beyond its timeliness, as Andrew Mango puts it on the dust jacket, *The Armenian Rebellion at Van* is “a substantial contribution to Turkish-Ottoman and Armenian studies.” Undoubtedly, the authors have finely crafted a book that will stand for years to come as the standard in the field and as a monument to their skills and indefatigability both as researchers and as organizers of research projects. It therefore deserves a wide readership and should find one outside as well as within the scholarly community.