

ARMENIA AND TURKEY

Sir, - In response to Andrew Mango's review, Peter Balkanian (Letters, October 1) apparently regards his book on the Armenian massacres as a masterpiece of scholarship: "I make use of a wide range of US State Department documents, British Foreign Office Records, German and Austro-Hungarian Foreign Office records... More than 1.100 footnotes in a twenty-eight chapter book with an extensive bibliography". Have I been reading the same book?

There are very few references to German and Austro-Hungarian records, and the references are second-hand, ie, lifted from another author; even the spelling of proper names is defective (for example, page 412: "Der Zusammenbruch des Ottomaschen Reiches" or, page 167: "Maj. Gen. Fritz Bonsart von Schnellendorf" and, page 207, the Austrian rank of FMLt – a divisional commander – absurdly rendered "Vice-Field-Marshal"). As to British archives, I count eleven uses of them and two of these are quoted from another source. There are rather more American archival references, but not many. The vast bulk of the vastly bulky references consist of English-language secondary sources and, as Mr Balakian disarmingly confesses, he has had to use, for his book on the late Ottoman history, Turkish (and Armenian) documents "in translation". One result of this is that his list of sources is extraordinary one-sided. The reader could hardly work out from it why such authorities as Bernard Lewis from Princeton or Gilles Veinstein from the Collège of France or the late Elie Kedourie of the LSE did not accept Armenian nationalist claims that a "genocide" as classically defined had taken place. Veinstein's very [short essay in *L'Histoire of April 1995*](#) is an admirably fair-minded summary of what the debate is about.

But Balakian is also extraordinarily inaccurate in matters major and minor. Here are some instances, among many more: "Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli" was not around "when the Russians went to war in 1853 in the Crimea"; "Bosnia and Herzegovina" were not "seeking independence in 1876": Byron did not die "fighting at Missolonghi in 1824 for the cause of Greek freedom" (he died of disease, perhaps demoralized by a gold-digging page, one Loukas); p 160: "Within decades after ottoman troops led by Soultan Mohammad II captured Constantinople in 1453, the Ottomans had conquered south-eastern Europe – Albania, Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece, Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Romania and pieces of Poland and the Ukraine" is a grand misstatement, containing four mistakes, indicating such a profound misunderstanding of early Ottoman history that a critic does not know where to begin – the Turks took Constantinople and, later, much of Anatolia from a Christian and Balkan base, not vice versa and if you do not understand that, the whole relationship of the Ottomans to their Christian subjects degenerates into the caricature of oppressiveness that Balakian conveys; p 162: "The Armenian Reform Agreement of February 1914" was not signed as international law in Constantinople – it was never ratified; p 212: "Selimiye" is not "a town on Constantinople's Asiatic side" – it is a barracks; p 320: the Provisional government of 1917 did not "immediately beg[i]n to disengage Russia from the war" nor did it "urge" the Armenians or the Ukrainians "to seek independence", nor did Russian troops evacuate "Turkish Armenians" in "spring of 1917" nor (p 321) were Kars, Batum and Ardahan "heavily Armenian" nor were they ceded (as distinct from occupied by) the Ottoman empire by the "Brest-Litovsk Treaty" – all of this indicating unfamiliarity with even the most elementary accounts of the Russian Revolution; Greeks did not in 1914 make up "the vast majority of Izmir population"

There is one mistake which really blows Balakian's effort sky high. He relies on a forgery that was exposed as such over eighty years ago, the "Naim-Andonian documents". Here he goes, on p 344: the British in the summer of 1921 "released forth-three Turkish prisoners who were accused of perpetrating the Armenian massacres"; he suggest that that this happened because the nationalist Turks had captured British officers. But the fact is that the Law Officers advised that there was no case against these Turks (interned on Malta). Some documents incriminating them had turned up, peddled by one Andonian, on the basis of alleged confessions by one Naim ("massacre the lot but keep it secret", was the general tenor, and on page 346 Balakian reproduce some of this). But the lawyers discarded the documents as a forgery, and German lawyers at the trial of Talaat Pasha's assassin in 1921 also waved Andonian aside (preferring, rather bizarrely, hearsay testimony from a clergyman named, as it happens, Balakian). Taner Akçam, in *Türk Ulusal Kimliği ve Remeni Sorunu* (fifth ed., 2001), discusses the matter. Balakian's own note 29 (P371) refers to Dr Akçam, but self-confessedly he cannot read Turkish and a related footnote (66, p 427) shows no consciousness at all that the documents are forgeries.

One particularly irritating habit is to stray into comparisons with the Nazis that Mr Balakian is simply not competent to make. Thus, p 163, "Not unlike Hitler's... nazification programs for German youth, exemplified in the Hitlerjugend, the Young Turks now launched a program of nationalist indoctrination and paramilitary training for Turkish youth" – a grotesque statement because they had in mind Baden-Powell, and legalized football, hitherto frowned upon because religion disapproved of bare male legs – or "... pan – Turkism was ... influenced by the German nationalism of Herder and Wagner, who were also key influences on Nazi Aryan ideology": Herde, the most Enlightened of men! Is Balakian somehow confusing him with Hegel, while being entirely unfamiliar with both? Or, again, p 181: Like its Nazi counterpart after 1933, the [Ottoman] Ministry of the Interior was the key to orchestrating ... genocide" – this is a nonsense, again revealing total unfamiliarity with the subject. The famous Wansee conference of 1942 was summoned so that the SS and Gestapo machine could overcome possible legalistic objections from the Ministry of the Interior, and a simple glance at Ian Kershaw's classic work on Hitler would have shown Balakian what was what. There is just no comparison possible between the Holocaust and the Armenian massacres of 1915. What happened was a tragedy for Turks and Armenians alike, and it deserves a decent book. Peter Balakian is simply way out of his depth. There is a classical fictional account, Franz Werfel's *Forty days of Musa Dagh*. It is not altogether accurate, historically, but is brilliantly written. The Armenians often cite it, and rightly. But they might remember that Werfel wrote on his manuscript "nicht gegen Türken polemisieren" ("not to be used as a polemic against the Turks"). He understood that the Turkish Republic was doing a great deal for civilization in an exceptionally difficult part of the world, and amen to that. I have yet to meet an Armenian, ex-Soviet or Turkish or for that matter in the Armenian Quarter of Jerusalem, who would disagree.

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