

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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BOOKS

A witness in the killing fields of Turkey ★★★★★



A descendant of Grigoris Balakian translates the author's seminal and wrenching account of the Armenian genocide

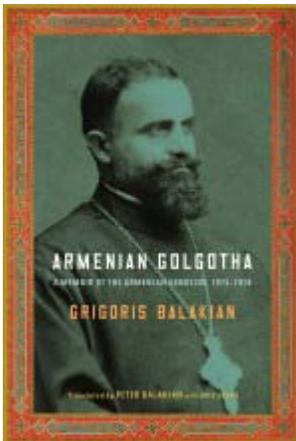
Reviewed by Keith Garebian

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More than one million Armenians were exterminated by the Ottoman Turks in the first genocide of the 20th century, in what Raphael Lemkin (a Polish Jew and legal scholar who invented the term after the Second World War to describe race-murder) regarded as the template for genocide in the modern era, and what we can now see as the paradigm for the Jewish Holocaust and for genocides in Ukraine, Cambodia, Rwanda, the Balkans and Darfur.

My father was Armenian, and one of a multitude of orphaned victims of the Ottoman scourge. He was not yet five-and-a-half when pan-Turkic ideology flamed into race-murder on April 24, 1915. He barely remembered his own father's face. He certainly did not remember any of his grandparents or their names. What he remembered of his mother was a woman dying as much of a broken heart as from starvation and thirst in the desert leading to Der Zor (widely known as “the Auschwitz of the Armenian genocide”).

- **Armenian Golgotha: A Memoir of the Armenian Genocide, 1915-1918**, by Grigoris Balakian, Translated by Peter Balakian with Aris Sevag, Knopf, 505 pages, \$42



My father had an older sister who survived with him, but their youngest sister was given to a Kurdish farmer and his barren wife, and their other sister, a girl also younger than my father, was abandoned to her fate during the nightmarish trek. He could not remember her name when he recounted the tale to me near the end of his life. Children themselves, he and his eldest sister had had no alternative but to abandon this little girl whom they could not feed or care for while they were forced to eat grass or animal excrement. His final image was of a little starving girl, with curly hair, crying by herself beside an inhospitable tree, where she was probably soon taken as prey by scavenging dogs or wolves.

There is irony in the fact that my father was named Adam, though I believe he had his own views on Original Sin. For him, the fall of man was dated April 24, 1915, when hundreds of thousands of Armenians were forced from their homes to be tortured and slaughtered by Turks. My father survived, but his survival, like those of other Armenians who after the First World War dispersed to other countries – defeating the Ottoman plan to exterminate their race – carried burdens of traumatized hearts.

The Ottoman plan for ethnic cleansing was brilliantly evil. The Turks eliminated the intelligentsia so that Armenians would have no active leaders. They eliminated able-bodied men so that Armenians would have no militia. They eliminated the old so that Armenians would have no memory. They eliminated the young so Armenians would have no future.

They were wrong in the final calculation. Memory and hope for the future live in seminal texts such as Grigoris Balakian's *Armenian Golgotha*, a massive memoir first published in Armenian in 1922 and now making its debut in English via the graces of Balakian's distinguished great-nephew, author Peter Balakian.

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The long narrative starts in August, 1914, at the outbreak of the First World War. Born in 1876 in Tokat (a small, multicultural Turkish city), Balakian, whose father was a merchant and whose mother was a writer, is in Constantinople after having studied engineering in Saxony and theology in Berlin, making him fluent in German. Russia has declared war on the Ottoman Empire, and the Muslims have proclaimed *jihad* against Christians to incite religious war against the Allies, but also inflaming anger toward Armenians, who are resented for their skills and crafts and regarded the way Jews would be in Nazi Germany: as despicable vermin contaminating the nation.

Draconian laws go into effect, radically curtailing Armenian civil liberties and rights. In February, 1915, interior minister Mehmet Talat informs German ambassador Hans Freiherr von Wangenheim that he is going to resolve the Armenian Question by eliminating the Armenians. As the Germans observe developments, Balakian, along with about 250 other cultural leaders, is arrested and deported to a prison in central Turkey.

Deportation was, of course, a code word, just as the phrase “take care of the Armenians” was a euphemism. By the end of 1915, three-quarters of the Ottoman Armenians were wiped out, and in many villages and towns, entire Armenian populations were massacred. Balakian does not censor the horrors: children forcibly Islamized; political leaders hanged; death squads, armed with axes, cleavers, knives and rocks, cutting and hacking away at arms, legs and necks, then throwing the bodies into ditches and covering them with lime; young girls beheaded like sheep when they do not submit to sexual advances; suckling infants dismembered; faint screams of children being eaten alive by wild animals after having been abandoned. The sequence of atrocities is the Armenian Passion in the religious sense of suffering, and Der Zor (where the killings exceeded 400,000) is the ultimate place of skulls, or Golgotha.

Balakian's prose is hot, unlike Primo Levi's (in *Survival in Auschwitz*), which is as cool as a scientist observing laboratory test tubes and chemicals. It recreates wrenching moments: a scene of schoolboys pleading with him to be rescued from Turkish mobs; a train ride generating tormented anxiety and melancholy; a German nurse who embraces the decapitated body of a six-month-old infant; Armenians kissing skulls of the dead; four elderly Armenian women uttering a vehement curse worthy of a tragic Greek chorus. The prose is not overheated, however, except when Balakian is pious (quoting from the Scriptures) or sentimental (indulging in purple prose or paeans to nature).

Weighted with eyewitness accounts and distinguished by Balakian's prodigiously sharp memory, this book is not a scholar's history, of course, but an educated prelate's, with an enviable grasp of Ottoman and European history. It explains

German and European imperialist designs on Turkey and Turkish resentment, and how Turkey exploited the chaos of war (as Peter Balakian shows in his introduction).

But the author points his finger as well at his own people, condemning a minority of Armenian traitors, but also revealing how the Armenians' openness of mind and heart victimized them. Many Armenians found it hard to believe that they could be so viciously hated. There were a few brave uprisings – in Zeytoun, Musa Dagh, Van and Sardarabad, for instance – but the Ottomans used these isolated cases as a pretext for their atrocities.

Despite times of utter despair and pessimism, Balakian survives after living like a wild animal for almost four years in mud, rain and snow. Three things help him: his patriotism, of course; his role as unofficial leader of the deportees; and his knowledge of German. In the course of his adventure, he poses as a German worker on the Berlin-Baghdad railway, a German Jew, a German engineer, a German soldier and a Greek vineyard worker.

But there are also good-hearted, sympathetic Turks who come to his rescue and to that of some other fortunate Armenians. So his book is not a wholesale condemnation of Turks, though it probably won't be read by most Turks, who still can't accept responsibility for one of history's greatest crimes against humanity. It should be, of course, for how could a people be expected to understand and atone for a story they have never been officially permitted to know?

Keith Garebian is completing Children of Ararat, a poetry manuscript on his father and the Armenian genocide.