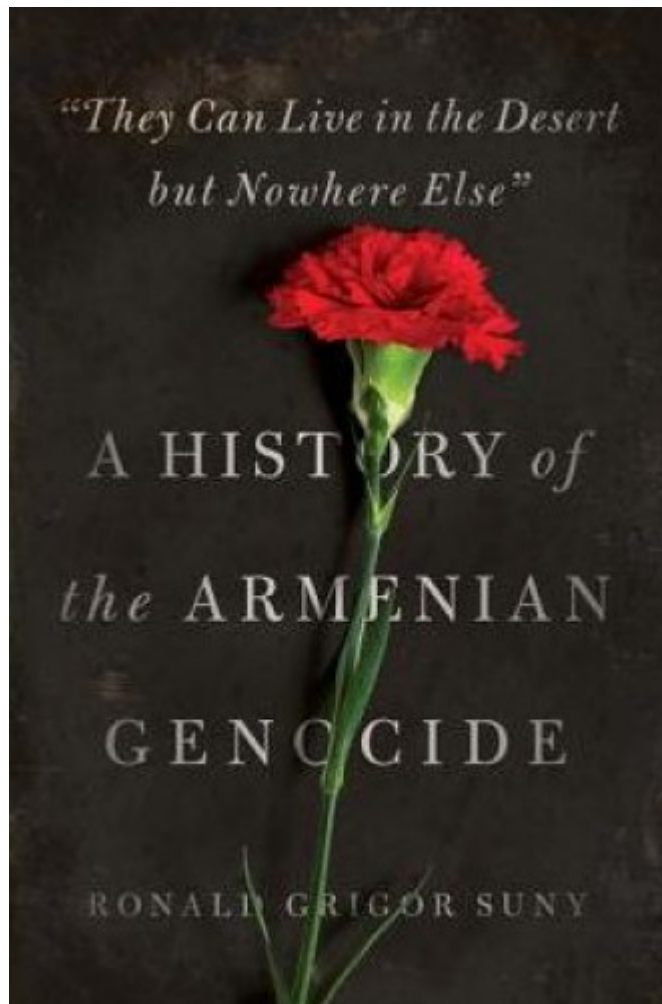


"They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else," by Ronald Grigor Suny

reviewed by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [April 29, 2015](#) issue

In Review



"They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else"

By Ronald Grigor Suny
Princeton University Press

A century ago, at the height of World War I, the Ottoman Empire decided to eliminate its substantial minority of Armenian Christians. In the ensuing massacres and deportations, at least a million people died, probably more. Outside Turkey few

deny the scale of the violence or the intent of the perpetrators. This was a deliberate genocide, comparable in kind to the Jewish Shoah of the 1940s.

Beyond that bare fact, much remains to be debated. Above all, why did the Turks make such an appalling decision when the Armenians had for so long been productive and loyal imperial subjects? Had the genocide been plotted for decades beforehand, or did it arise from circumstances immediately surrounding the final decision? (That debate is, of course, familiar to scholars of Nazi atrocities against the Jews.) What role, if any, did Islam play in the violence, which was overwhelmingly committed by Muslim soldiers and militias against a solidly Christian populace?

Making that question more acute is the comparable violence that the regime inflicted in these same years on some other Christian minorities, especially the Assyrians. Should we classify such actions alongside other acts of jihad against unbelievers? The regime that ordered the massacres was anything but Islamist, and since the coup of 1908 it had been committed to a speedy modernization of the crumbling empire. Should we attribute the crime to fundamentalist religion or to intolerant modernizing nationalism?

Study of the Armenian genocide has attracted many fine scholars, but Ronald Grigor Suny's book stands out for many reasons, not least the author's extensive use of archives and his strictly current survey of the literature. An experienced historian of the Soviet Union, Suny does a fine job of critically navigating among the various myths and claims surrounding these events. His discussion of the controversies is judicious and convincing. This is an excellent book, a cogent piece of scholarship. It has much to offer anyone interested in contemporary debates about religious freedom and human rights worldwide.

Readers might be surprised to find that Suny begins to discuss the events of the genocide—the deportations and killings—only two-thirds of the way through the book. That allocation of space is an excellent decision on the author's part. It reflects his awareness that any worthwhile account of the events of 1915 has to be rooted in earlier eras of history, deep into the previous century. Throughout, Suny places the events of 1915 firmly in the context of nationalist and separatist politics. He is very good on the emergence of new kinds of national consciousness among both the Armenians and the Turks; his account of emerging Armenian consciousness is as good and as concise as anything I have seen.

Turks reconstructed their identities on the basis of who they were themselves and who their deadly foes were. As Suny shows, throughout the late 19th century an increasingly embattled Turkish elite was rethinking its ideologies of power in the face of an overwhelming threat from Western Christian powers. In order to retain their grip on the empire's territorial core, the court and the ruling elite redefined their concepts of loyalty so that Christian minorities were stigmatized as aliens and traitors, very much as Germans later viewed Jews. Religious rivalries played some role in that new formulation, but they were outweighed by xenophobic nationalism linked to new racial concepts. By the turn of the century, some Turks used biological metaphors to describe minorities as germs requiring scientific eradication.

New patterns of hatred became horrifically apparent in the massacres of Armenians carried out in 1894 and 1895 by order of the appalling sultan Abdul Hamid II, which claimed a quarter of a million lives. Although largely forgotten today except by specialists, the Hamidian massacres attracted global horror and laid the foundation for emerging concepts of international law and human rights. In the United States, these atrocities were actually labeled a holocaust.

In the aftermath of the violence, Western powers spoke ever more openly of protecting Ottoman minorities. That concern, though, aroused Ottoman fears that the Armenians would provide an excuse for Western invasion. Paranoia induced massacre, which in turn fueled paranoia. That cycle continued until the creation in the 1920s of the new Turkish state, which had very few Christians left to persecute. Turkey had achieved a final solution to its Christian problem.

Paranoia, though, is not entirely the correct term. The Ottomans had genuine outside enemies. Suny places the genocide in the context of international affairs and Great Power rivalries, with consequences that pose difficulties for historians of the era.

Let me pose the problem. If you describe that international dimension, as I have done in my own writings, you will find yourself arguing that by 1914 the Turkish Empire stood in imminent peril of annihilation, with the certainty that various minorities—above all the Armenians—would soon be given the status of independent nationhood. Worse from the Ottoman standpoint, any likely new order would just as certainly involve the subjugation and dispossession of ethnic Turks and Muslims. At that point it is very important not to present the argument in a way that would convey justification for the massacres, or as a statement that the Turks were

legitimately acting in self-defense. The massacres and atrocities are unpardonable by the standards of any culture or faith. Yet it is legitimate to stress, as Suny does, just how dreadful were the prospects that the Turks faced at the time.

Since 1798 the once sprawling Ottoman Empire had been massively reduced in size by predatory European Christian empires. From the 1840s most observers felt that it was only a matter of time before those empires—most obviously, the Russians—took over the remaining territories, including Anatolia and the great prize of Constantinople.

This, incidentally, is one area in which we do see the influence of religion on policy making. Right up to the fall of the imperial regime in 1917, Russian elites were fascinated by messianic prophecies that a czar would soon liberate the former Byzantine capital and that this new Constantine would restore the mighty Christian empire. And the Russians framed their ambitions in terms of the protection of Christian subjects, chiefly the numerous and widespread Armenians.

The Ottoman Empire survived only because of the protection exercised by Britain and France, which had no wish to see such an expansion of Russian power. That balance of power collapsed in the years before 1914 as Britain, France, and Russia formed a common front against Germany. When war broke out and the Ottomans joined the Germans, it was virtually certain that the victorious Allied coalition would partition remaining Turkish territories, creating a free Armenia. Perhaps there would remain a rump Turkish state, and remaining Muslims would survive only as colonized people under European rule. Other former Ottoman provinces, including Libya and Algeria, had recently fallen under the sway of European empires. In early 1915 twin invasions by Russian and British forces made the prospect of the conquest and partition of Anatolia seem imminent.

It is easy to understand, then, why in April 1915 the Turks began the destruction of the Armenian people—understand, not forgive. In this view, the genocide looks like the natural conclusion of events that were proceeding with near-mathematical precision.

We can admire Suny's book as a work of sober history, but it also raises questions of contemporary relevance. Above all, it tells us much about the circumstances that lead to persecution, and by no means just persecution of Christians. As we learn from the Armenian experience, the key variable is not the existence or beliefs of any

single faith, but the desperation and perceived vulnerability of rulers. Persecutors are motivated by fear, which may or may not be rooted in reality. Grotesque as it may sound, perpetrators commonly view their acts of persecution and massacre as self-defense, either against the victims or against their presumed external allies.

Once we have grasped that fact, though, the appropriate policy responses are by no means obvious. Should outside powers seek to intervene to forestall persecution, or even threaten direct intervention to save the threatened minority? Surely they cannot just stand idly by. But the Ottoman experience suggests that perceived meddling might push simmering hostility over the edge into outright murder. When states witness persecution occurring in other countries, one principle they should follow is that of the Hippocratic Oath: first do no harm.

It would be too much to ask of Suny's book that it should provide an easy solution to these vexed policy questions. We should be grateful that it places the historical events on such a firm foundation, beyond the reach of easy myth making.