

*Armenian Golgotha: A Memoir of the Armenian Genocide, 1915–1918*, Grigoris Balakian, transl. and ed. Peter Balakian with Aris Sevag (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), xliii ? 509 pp., hardcover \$35.00, paperback \$20.00, Kindle edition \$9.99, eBook \$20.00.

Some fifty years ago I acquired a copy of the original 429 page volume of Hay Goghgot'an (The Armenian Golgotha) published by the Armenian Catholic Mekhitarist Fathers in Vienna in 1922; its subtitle is "Episodes from the Armenian Martyrology," while a second subtitle reads, "From Berlin to Zor, 1914–1920." Der Zor was the final destination in the Syrian desert for those who survived the death marches, and the place where survivors who couldn't escape also succumbed. The author, Grigoris Balakian (1876–1934), was a vardapet, or celibate priest, attached to the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople. At the end of the published volume he provided a detailed three-page table of contents of a projected second volume: "The Life of a Survivor," to be 500 pages long and have forty illustrations; the original print run was 3,000, the price (postage included) was one pound sterling in Britain, fifty francs in France, and five dollars in the U.S., and all proceeds were to go for the relief of Armenian orphans (no discounts were offered). Volume two had indeed been written, but it was published only posthumously, nearly four decades later, in 1959, from a manuscript Balakian's sister had kept.

I can no longer remember where I acquired this handsome volume in red buckram with gold stamping: New York? Cairo? Or possibly from my father? Though I have handled with awe this survivor's account during various packings and unpackings, I never had the fortitude to read it from beginning to end, as I never read my original edition of Arnold Toynbee's *The Treatment of Armenians in the*

Ottoman Empire, 1915–16, published while the Genocide was still under way. One can only guess at the anguish suffered by Peter Balakian during the decade he spent preparing the English-language edition of the memoir of his great uncle.

Grigoris Balakian took orders at the age of fifteen and subsequently served the Armenian Apostolic Church in pastoral and diocesan work, as a prelate in central Anatolia, as delegate of the church in Europe and Russia, as administrative assistant to the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople, and near the end of his life as bishop and prelate in Marseille and southern France. He studied engineering in Germany in the 1890s, returning in 1914 to do graduate work in theology in Berlin. After war broke out he hurried back to Constantinople to warn the Armenian community,

having been told by high-ranking German friends of impending plans for the massacre of Turkey's Armenians. There he was arrested suddenly a few months later along with fellow community leaders and exiled to Çankırı. According to him, he was among the very few of those arrested who were fully conscious of what was really happening. On the nighttime deportation train an Armenian porter brought him paper and asked him to write the names of as many of the other 250 plus exiles as possible. Thus began Balakian's single-minded determination to chronicle the catastrophe. Though on occasion he had to destroy notes and notebooks, his extraordinary memory served him well in recording the gruesome saga.

The present edition includes both volumes. The first is entitled *The Life of an Exile July 1914–April 1916*, and recounts Balakian's experiences and reflections, as well as discussions with fellow captives, Turkish officials, and Turkish villagers, many responsible for orgiastic massacres. This part stretches from the author's Berlin days to his daring escape in April 1916 near Islahiye in the Cilician mountains. The author's words represent the last account of people such as the poet Daniel Varoujan; the writer and parliamentarian Krikor Zohrab (arrested some months after the April 1919 arrests of Armenian intellectuals, along with another Armenian parliamentary deputy, Vartkes Serengulian, both killed near Urfa in July 1915); and the famous musicologist and priest Komitas (who was saved only to go insane after return to Istanbul). The detailed narrative loses sight of neither sheer numbers nor individual personages; its graphic detail extends to the axes, iron bars, and clubs wielded by the criminal bands freed by the Young Turks' Committee of Union and Progress (*Ittihad ve Terakki*) for the purpose, and to the thousands of Turkish and Kurdish villagers incited by early-racist and proto-Islamist hysteria, including a fatwa by the Sheikh ul-Islam, the highest religious authority in the Ottoman state.

Grigoris Balakian regarded Talaat Pasha, Minister of Interior and head of the ruling triumvirate, as the driving force behind the annihilation of the Armenians. Yet many fellow intellectuals were convinced that Talaat was a "great friend" of the Armenians and would arrange to bring the deportees back to Constantinople once he learned what was happening. One had saved Talaat's life; the parliamentarian

Krikor Zohrab was so convinced that he brushed aside offers by Armenians along the way to help him escape. Despite the government's secretiveness and the fact that Balakian was a deportee, the author was quite aware of how the government's plan worked ( p. 78): "Special blacklists of the Armenians to be massacred . . . were prepared by the provincial police authorities [and] a copy of each list was sent to the Ministry of the Interior . . . so that Talaat and the Ittihad Committee would know on a daily basis how many Armenians had been killed and how many were still left." Nearly a century later this detail was confirmed by the facsimile publication of Talaat's "Black Book," in which he tallied deportations and deaths, his figures adding up to almost a million lives.

The second part of the present book (the original volume two) is entitled *The Life of a Fugitive, April 1916–January 1919*. The 1922 table of contents promised to take the narrative to July 1920; it listed forty chapters, but the modern edition contains only thirty-six—nine of these not appearing in the original table. The reverend's escape was accomplished with the help of ordinary Armenians in Cilicia, which was not yet slated for ethnic cleansing. For two and a half years in Cilicia, especially in Adana, he was aided by German engineers working for the Baghdad Railway and Armenian professionals too valuable to be killed. Much of volume two consists of reflective essays on the war, the regime, the fickleness of the Entente, Turkish defeat, return to Istanbul, and the bitter joy of surviving Armenians when the victorious Allied fleet arrived. Balakian departed Turkey permanently on January 4, 1919, as part of the Armenian delegation to the Paris Peace Conference.

He had started the book already in late 1918, sometimes in hiding, while events were still fresh (p. 413). He finished the work probably while pastoral leader of the Armenian community in Manchester, England, but before leaving for France, probably in early 1921. Curiously, not once does he mention the famous writer Yervant Odian, who escaped the April 24, 1915 roundup only to be arrested and exiled that August. Like Balakian, Odian miraculously survived, returning to Constantinople around the same time as Balakian. In the newspaper *Jamanag*, beginning in 1919, he published his account of the horrific events. The styles of these two authors differ: Odian, though famous for theatrical satire, moved his narrative of the Genocide forward through first-person dialogues with those he met during that terrible journey. His tone remains intentionally neutral, unlike the emotional and essayistic Balakian. The nearly simultaneous English-language editions of these memoirs complement one another in presenting the utter savagery of the criminals, the total devastation of the Armenians, and the miraculous luck each author enjoyed in surviving. Peter Balakian provides a careful introduction setting the historical and biographical background; this is followed by a detailed chronological guide covering the years of Grigoris Balakian's life up to the writing of the book. A glossary of terms and a section of short biographies, an index, five maps, and thirty-three photographs

(four of Balakian) complement the memoir. The translation, accomplished mostly by the veteran Aris Sevag, reads easily, even though Grigoris Balakian's original had to be heavily edited, as the translators emphasize, to moderate some of the flowery and fiery rhetoric, though enough of the author's Old Testament style has been preserved.

It should be pointed out that Grigoris Balakian was not, however, "one of only a handful of the original group to survive" ( p. xiii): he himself provides the names and fates of 131 of the original 250 arrested on April 24, 1915 (pp. 62–70), of whom fifty-seven survived. Along with some doctors and a few professionals, most of the survivors were rich merchants able to bribe officials in the capital. More than "a handful" published accounts in the five years following the war.

Throughout, Grigoris Balakian presents details and documents reinforcing his conviction that the arrests and then the systematic emptying of Armenian villages in Anatolia were driven by a premeditated plan to eradicate the Armenians (and other Christian minorities); the killing continued even after it became clear that Turkey would be defeated, and while Talaat, Enver, Jemal, and others arranged their escape to Germany—in 1919 in Istanbul they were tried and sentenced to death in absentia (each was assassinated abroad under varying circumstances in the early 1920s).

We must thank the translators for making this classic of genocide testimony available to English-reading audiences. As an eyewitness document, it underlines the fact that already during and immediately after the campaign of permanent ethnic cleansing, the main outlines of the Turkish policy of total annihilation, including official denial, were apparent to an intelligent observer. Scholars in several fields will value its account of events, but it should also make a complicated and still all-too-unfamiliar history accessible to a much broader readership.

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