

**“One is either for human life or not!”**

Review of Israel Charny's New Book, *Israel's Failed Response to the Armenian Genocide: Denial, State Deception, Truth versus Politicization of History.*

Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2021.

by Tessa Hofmann

Review of **Israel Charny: Israel's Failed Response to the Armenian Genocide: Denial, State Deception, Truth versus Politization of History.** Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2021, 267 p.

Tessa Hofmann

In this extremely remarkable anthology, Israel Charny describes with obvious pain, palpable even after nearly 40 years, how a first conference on the Holocaust and genocide, including the Armenian Genocide, initiated by him and others, was blocked, obstructed, and nearly prevented by the Israeli government in the spring of 1982. National institutions such as Yad Vashem played a decisive and deeply deplorable role in this process.

Promises made were revoked, which naturally put the organizers under enormous logistical and time pressure. Only now, based on newly declassified state records, Charny found that the boycott campaign was essentially spearheaded by the Israeli government itself, while the protest and attempts at prevention of lectures on the Armenian Genocide on the part of Turkey served Israel as a welcome pretext and reason for its interventions. Allegedly, Jewish lives and the escape route of Jews from Iran and Syria via Turkey were threatened by Turkey should the planned conference result in the presentation of six "Armenian" lectures - among a total of 150! The Israel Foreign Ministry demanded of Charny and his colleagues compliance, and as the tension mounted the Foreign Ministry also commanded disinviting all Armenian speakers. This was out of the question for Israel Charny. With exemplary civil courage he resisted all attempts at intimidation.

The international conference, nevertheless well attended by 300 participants, took place despite all Turkish and Israeli interventions and became a milestone in the history

of genocide studies, since it was not only the first academic conference on the Holocaust, but also on genocide research. And for the first time, renowned Armenian scholars addressed the genocide committed against their ancestors on such an occasion.

But what motives underlie the Turkish and Israeli obstruction of academic and memorial events for genocide victims in the first place? To this day, not only the government of the Republic of Turkey, but also a large part of Turkish opinion leaders deny that there was an Ottoman genocide of indigenous Christians, i.e., of fellow citizens at all; according to official Turkish interpretation, there is no evidence of a state intention to exterminate. Nevertheless, as dissident Turkish academics such as Taner Akçam have pointed out, the state-planned, organized, and executed extermination of Armenians, Greeks, and other indigenous Christians constitutes the founding crime of the Republic of Turkey.

In Chapter 7 of the book reviewed here, Turkish human rights activist, publicist, and publisher Ragıp Zarakolu explains the efforts of his country to deny this crime, which was so central to the formation of the Republic of Turkey, with fear of a return of survivors: Zarakolu writes: "The 1915 genocide became the backbone of the nation and national state building in Turkey. Recognition of the Ottoman Genocide could do great damage to the myths of the state-founding nationalist ideology. I defined another aspect of Turkish denialism as 'Israel syndrome,' that is: 'One day the Armenians may come back to their homeland like the Jews.' Turkish nationalism had this fear before the Israel Republic was born. One of the signers of the Lausanne Peace Treaty, Dr. Rıza Nur, wrote in his memoirs, which were kept at the British Museum, 'Topal Osman mobs were burning and destroying the churches and cemeteries in Pontos region, I approve this, to finish the hope of comeback.'" (p. 172)

The crucial difference between 'mere' expulsion across the nearest state border and deportations to the distant Anatolian interior was already established by the Young Turkish regime during the Balkan Wars: The Greek Eastern Thracians who had merely been expelled to Greece returned undesirably after the end of the war. Of the Eastern Thracian Greeks deported to Anatolia, however, almost one-half died of epidemics, starvation, and forced labor. This genocidal test run served as a blueprint for the

deportations of Armenians that were carried out almost nationwide as death marches behind the smokescreen of the Great War.

Turkish scholars, publicists and human rights advocates who dared to critically research and comment on the genocide(s) of roughly three million Christians in the Ottoman Empire and in Ottoman-occupied northwestern Iran in 1914 and 1918 risk prosecution, imprisonment or exile, as the biographies of Taner Akçam and Ragıp Zarakolu make clear.

But what drove the Israeli government as well as government-affiliated or government-dependent institutions such as Yad Vashem to obstruct an academic or historical-political discussion of the Ottoman genocide since 1982? Israel Charny suspects that the real driving force is the antagonism between those who consider the Holocaust a unique and therefore singular event and 'heretics' who, like Charny himself and numerous other prominent Jews, consider the extermination of European Jews in World War II to be a quite comparable or even repeatable crime. For these 'generalists,' each genocide has both individual unique characteristics, but at the same time also commonalities with other genocides.

The term Holocaust itself, of course, originated in U.S. and European journalism of the late 19th/early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and referred to the Armenian persecutions under Sultan Abdül Hamit II and the Young Turks, which often included the burning alive of Christian victims. Zionist activist Eytan Belkind, who served as an officer in the Ottoman army, described one such holocaust in World War I, which he witnessed: "Armenians were ordered to gather thistles and thorns and pile them up into a high pyramid. Then they tied all the Armenians there hand to hand, about five thousand of them, and arranged them into a ring around the thorn pyramid and set it on fire.... The cries of the unfortunate victims, burning to death in the great fire, could be heard for miles around."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from the letter to the editor by Hannes Stein (Jerusalem), published in the FRANKFURTER ALLGEMEINEN ZEITUNG, 4 August 1998. Eytan Belkind was the brother of the Palestinian-born Zionist Naaman Belkind (1889-1917) and joined him in the *Nili* espionage group founded in 1915 to support the British; it was crushed by the Ottoman authorities in the fall of 1917.

As Elie Wiesel told the German genocide researcher Gunnar Heinsohn in a letter, Wiesel adopted the term Holocaust for the Shoah in 1958, which was initially related to Armenian or Christian victims.<sup>2</sup> Wiesel will presumably have known that the term Holocaust was a paraphrase of the Armenian extermination in earlier decades and frequently used long before Lemkin's design of the term genocide.

The inclusive, generic approach represented by Israel Charny, Yair Auron, Benny Morris, Dror Ze'evi, and other Israeli and Jewish colleagues, respectively, can draw on prominent antecedents regarding the comparability of the two serial World War II genocides: Russian Jewish poet Ossip Mandelstam emphasized the kinship of fate between Jews and Armenians, calling Armenia the "younger sister of the Hebrew Earth." Centuries of persecution and diaspora were meant by this. The Austrian Jewish novelist Franz Werfel also saw in the Ottoman extermination of Armenian Christians a warning to European Jews of the danger they were about to face. For the Polish-Jewish jurist and historian Raphael Lemkin, who became the principal author of the United Nations Genocide Convention, the 'religious genocide' of the Armenians, along with the Shoah, provided the empirical basis for Lemkin's definition of genocide. Of the five offenses that have been considered genocide under international law since 1948, all the rest, with the exception of birth control, were committed against the Ottoman Christians as early as World War I.

I have not only read the book edited and to a large extent also written by Israel Charny with great interest, but find it important and useful reading for all those who deal theoretically or practically with questions of memory culture, history policy, genocide prevention and related educational work. Above all, the personal principles of the author, scholar and distinguished colleague Israel Charny are impressive and inspiring. It consists in addressing even the darkest and most agonizing chapters of one's own national history. "Charny is a brave scholar-one of the rare academics who risks speaking about Israeli crimes such as the State of Israel selling weapons to other governments that commit genocide or about crimes toward the Palestinian people during the War of Independence-the Nakba," writes Yair Auron, author of *The Banality of Denial: Israel and the Armenian Genocide* in his Foreword. (p. XVIII).

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<sup>2</sup> Heinsohn, Gunnar: Lexikon der Völkermorde. Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1998, p. 174f.

Israel's sales of weapons to states that commit genocide or are considered potential perpetrators of genocide or are engaged in wars of aggression have included Guatemala, whose "Silent Genocide" against the Maya took place in 1981-1983, Rwanda, Serbia, Sudan, and currently Myanmar, as well as Azerbaijan, which is apparently seen by Israel as a strategic partner against Iran and whose Jewish population may be playing the role of hostage. The drones that Israel provided to Azerbaijan (along with Turkey) played a crucial role in the war of aggression against the Armenian-populated Republic of Artsakh.

Israel Charny, Yair Auron, Michael Berenbaum, and Ragıp Zarakolu show us the way to achieve such academic and human rights integrity, revealing at the same time the adversities its bearers may face. An exclusive understanding of the genocide of the European Jews leads, as Israel Charny convincingly demonstrates, not only to questionable decisions regarding the Ottoman genocide in terms of remembrance policy; other genocides committed in more recent times are not recognized either. In terms of remembrance and history policy, Israel apparently takes a generally indifferent, passive position when it comes to the suffering of non-Jews. Charny writes: "After seeing previously secret and classified documents of Israel's Foreign Ministry that detail Israel's policy efforts with regard to the inclusion of information about the Armenian Genocide—and for that matter the inclusion of information about any other people's genocide—also in the influential US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, I am shocked to the core by the realization that much of our policy is indeed generated and backed up not only by a misunderstanding of the significance of the Holocaust in relation to other genocides. It is also more generally a powerful entree into understanding much more deeply the construction of genocidal thinking and practice in the human mind and behavior, where we identify open and shut arrogance, disregard for historical truths, and, frankly, ugly efforts to achieve a national/cultural superiority over other peoples" (p. 103).

The justifications for the Israeli government's refusal to 'recognize', or better condemn genocides other than the Shoah appear arbitrary. In November 2018, when the Knesset rejected a motion to recognize the genocide of the Yazidis, the Israeli deputy foreign minister justified his government's rejection on the grounds that - allegedly - the United Nations had not yet 'recognized' this genocide (p. 114). In the case of the refusal

to recognize the Ottoman Armenian Genocide, however, it did not help that the United Nations had already passed a resolution to that effect in 1985.

### **Caveat**

As a German reviewer, I find it difficult to reproduce Israel Charny's criticism of the Israeli government without a cross-reference to my country too. Against the historical background of millions of crimes against the Jews of Europe - the official Israel's doctrine of the uniqueness and incomparability of the Holocaust is in force in German bourgeois media and among mainstream intellectuals. There exist further similarities: Germany has very belatedly recognized, 101 years post factum, the genocide of its Ottoman WW1 ally against its Armenian, Syriac, as well as the Greek Orthodox nationals (usually paraphrased as 'other Christians'), but to this day has not brought about legislative recognition of the first genocide of the 20th century. I am referring here to the genocide of up to 100,000 Herero, 10,000 Nama and an unknown number of San in the then German colony of "Southwest," today's Namibia, in the years 1904-1908. This led to the accusation in the critical German public that the German legislature was pointing its finger accusingly at third states, but was not self-critical enough to measure its own genocidal guilt and responsibility with the same yardstick. It should also be mentioned that, although Germany officially and fully acknowledges its historical responsibility toward the Jews without reservation and accordingly engages in intensive educational work in and out of school, a growing proportion of the population nevertheless believes that it is now enough to admit guilt, repent and atone.

As a researcher and as a human rights activist who has been dealing with the crime of genocide for more than 40 years and who has worked for the reappraisal or 'recognition' of the Ottoman genocide crimes, similar to my colleague Israel Charny, I have been exposed to Turkish disruptive and obstructive maneuvers many times. The *Struggle Committee Against Baseless Armenian Genocide Claims (ASIMKK)*, established in Turkey in 2000, requires, among other things, Turkish diplomats abroad to prevent, if possible, all public events about the Ottoman genocide in their respective jurisdictions. When I, together with a Turkish and an Armenian colleague, submitted a petition to the German Bundestag in April 2000 for legislative condemnation of the Armenian Genocide, the result was a defamation campaign in the largest Turkish daily newspaper, "Hürriyet"; among other things, I was referred to as the head of the German

secret service, who had the special mission of fomenting interethnic hatred among the peoples of Turkey and the South Caucasus. Politicians and academics in Germany with similar ambitions of genocide 'recognition', especially those of Turkish origin, have faced similar experiences of defamation and intimidation. The German government and its authorities generally watched this extraterritorial activity of the Turkish NATO ally impassively. The first Bundestag resolution on the Ottoman genocide, passed in 2005, at least admitted German "complicity" in the "massacres" and "expulsions," as the Ottoman genocide was paraphrased in Germany at the time. Only two months after the Bundestag had pronounced the G-word, so feared by Turkey, in a second resolution on June 2, 2016, government spokesman Seibert, to reassure Turkey, declared this resolution to be legally non-binding.

To conclude, this book by Israel Charny strongly renews the call for recognition of the Armenian Genocide. It is remarkable and inspiring writing.

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