

Harutyun Marutyan, Narine Margaryan (eds.), *Հայերի փրկության գործը Մերձավոր Արևելքում 1915-1923 թթ., միջազգային գիտաժողովի նյութերի ժողովածու*. [The Rescue of Armenians in the Middle East in 1915-1923, International Conference Proceedings] Yerevan: Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute Foundation, 2020, 440+16 pp.

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Although the last two decades have seen a steady rise in scholarship on the Armenian Genocide, there still are aspects of the genocide that are neither fully investigated or fully understood. Some of the reasons for this lack has to do with the fact that much energy was spent on producing works that, for the lack of a better term, were dedicated to the search after the elusive “smoking gun” that would prove once and for all that what happened to the Ottoman Armenians was indeed genocide rather than a series of unfortunate events that for some inexplicable reason rendered Armenian life and culture extinct in the Ottoman hinterlands. The works of Vahakn Dadrian, Raymond Kevorkian, and Taner Akcam have been especially instrumental and effective in dismantling some of the persistent and ideologically driven narrative constructs that looked to question the veracity of the Armenian experience or deny basic and verifiable facts altogether. Though defying logic in the spirit of what philosopher Paul Boghossian has called “the doctrine of equal validity,” (a postmodernist philosophical posture which in its barest form posits that both *A* and *non A* are equally valid if not equally true),¹ many of these denialist works erected obstacles in the path of investigating the whole range of the genocidal experience and not just aspects that would help scholars discover said smoking gun. More than simple bad faith scholarship they were often political projects designed to create the illusion that when it comes to the Armenian experience, there are no facts but only interpretations, to paraphrase Nietzsche.² Thankfully the Armenian Genocide scholarship has now moved beyond that limiting paradigm. With the Armenian Genocide now enjoying universal consensus among reputable historians, new research areas have become available for scholars allowing them to understand the complexity of the calamity brought upon the Armenians and other ethno-religious minorities of the empire.

Which brings us to the book under consideration here. The volume, *The Rescue of Armenians in the Middle East in 1915-1923, International Conference Proceedings*, as the title suggests consists of papers presented at an international conference held in Yerevan in 2020. Featuring (bilingual) chapters by a stellar group of genocide scholars and historians, and edited by the Director of the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute prof. Harutyun Marutyan and historian Narine Margaryan, the book is a long overdue attempt to reconstruct

1 Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

2 Fredrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingsdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 267.

the multilayered history of the rescue of Armenian orphans and survivors, a topic that has been lamentably understudied, for reasons discussed above.

The thrust of the book is simple enough – on the whole, it seeks to identify the individuals and institutions (and what motivated them) central in the efforts to save, rescue, and rehabilitate Armenians. The enterprise itself is not new, there have been previous works dealing with the issue and a more recent work, Khatchig Mouradian’s superb monograph on the Armenian resistance network through Ottoman Syria readily comes to mind.³ What is however new is that for the first time, if my memory serves well, there has been a concerted effort to probe the entire scope the rescue efforts from a variety of historical, historiographic, and disciplinary perspectives. Which is not to say everything imaginable has been covered in the book, but being a first, the book opens the field for further investigation into the topic.

The overarching theme of the book is that the brave efforts of foreign missionaries and humanitarians notwithstanding, more often than not it was the Armenians themselves that were agents of their own rescue and rehabilitation, not unlike the argument in Mouradian’s book mentioned earlier. Particularly illuminating on these points are chapters by Raymond Kevorkian, Eduard Melkonian, and Seda Ohanean. Their chapters on Armenian rescue and rehabilitation missions in places like Jerusalem, Mosul, and elsewhere throughout the Middle East, shed new and important light on the issue and in an exemplary fashion reveal the scope of the gap in our knowledge on this very important topic.

Especially useful is the discussion by Marutyan on “rescue” as a term and as a concept. What do scholars mean when they discuss the issue of rescue of Armenians as they were undergoing massacres and dispossession? Drawing upon similar terminology found in the Yad Vashem memorial’s *Righteous Among Nations* conceptual approach to the issue as a point of departure, Marutyan distinguishes between rescue *qua* rescue, i.e. rescue motivated by altruism and for exclusively humanitarian purposes (often risking rescuer’s own life and freedom), and rescue motivated by material gain or attendant “non-humanitarian” motivations. By the latter Marutyan means rescue efforts that were conditional or transactional, i.e. (forced) religious conversions, adoption of children (many of whom would be rescued but lost to Armenian culture), sex slavery, etc. Basing his research on hundreds of interviews with survivors and/or their descendants Marutyan argues, with some merit, that not all rescues were equal. Moreover, of the 600 interviews that form the basis of Marutyan’s argument, nearly all of the rescuees were either children or women, with men having virtually no chance to survive regardless of motivations of would-be rescuers.

While Marutyan’s chapter is the sole theoretical work in the collection, (perhaps unsurprising given his background as an ethnographer), other chapters that follow take readers on a sort of journey through the important and familiar waystations that marked the rescue and rehabilitation operations in the broader Middle East. Chapter after chapter the reader is introduced to equal part fascinating, tragic, and heroic individuals and institutions whose cumulative efforts at rescuing survivors were nothing short of miraculous. Be they the German missionaries, who at great personal risk and in the conditions of state-imposed censorship

³ Khatchig Mouradian, *The Resistance Network: The Armenian Genocide and Humanitarianism in Ottoman Syria, 1915–1918* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2021).

managed to rescue and care for Armenian children during the genocide and in its aftermath in places such as Marash, Mezre, and Haruniye, or Rev. Aharon A. Shirajian and the British Friends of Armenia Society who ran a hostel in Port Said, Egypt tasked with sheltering, rehabilitating, and re-Armenizing rescued Armenian women from Muslim captivity, these are stories that need to be told and retold. And it is one of the main virtues of the collection that by bringing these stories and histories to the reader they at the same time lay the foundation for further and more extensive research.

It will take considerable effort and space to do proper justice to all the chapters found in the book, and nothing short of proper justice is what these chapters deserve. Unfortunately given the space limitations usually imposed on book reviews it is well-nigh impossible. Nevertheless, the collection of articles affords an important new step away from the “smoking gun” paradigm in the scholarship on the Armenian Genocide. The book’s richly textured and well-organized chapters make a valuable contribution to our understanding of the mechanics of genocide survival. It will be of interest to students of the Armenian Genocide, history of humanitarian movements in the Middle East, as well as to anyone interested in lesser known chapters of Armenian life in the aftermath of the Genocide.