

BOOK REVIEW

Muriel Mirak-Weißbach, *Retter oder Täter. Ein General zwischen Staatsräson und Moral: Otto Liman von Sanders und der Völkermord an den Armeniern*. Bremen, Donat Verlag, 2021, 208 S.

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The issue of the Armenian Genocide has attracted the scholarly attention of both Armenian and non-Armenian researchers for many decades. Among the most important subjects in the field was and still is the issue of complicity in the Armenian Genocide. The most intriguing topic of research within the framework of the latter is the issue of German co-responsibility and in particular the German military's role in it. Numerous monographs and articles have dealt with this issue and allow one to argue that the German military did indeed have the main role in the German co-responsibility. It is worth mentioning, briefly, that the position and behavior of German military personnel who served in the Ottoman Empire during WWI and about whom materials are accessible were neither spontaneous nor surprising. German military culture had been taking shape from the unity wars of the 19th century and was reflected in various historical events that followed. This began with the colonial campaigns in China during the Boxer Rebellion between 1900 and 1901, then in German South-West Africa during Herero and Namaqua uprisings between 1904 and 1907¹ and in German East Africa during the Maji Maji rebellion between 1905 and 1907. It ended with the crimes against humanity in Belgium and Northern France during WWI².

It is necessary to bear one thing in mind when dealing with the issue of the German military's role in the Armenian Genocide – understand the general context of the question being researched. These could be the ideological or historical sectors, “personal portraits” of the key actors and other things. In other words, it is important to have a broad picture rather than a mere mention of the relevant facts.

From WWI onward, the issue of German co-responsibility in the Armenian Genocide has been periodically addressed by academicians as well as by the representatives of the public and political sectors. Many accusations have been made against the German Empire and its various representatives. Of course, not all the accusations made can be justified or have real facts to substantiate them. One of the tasks of the researchers who are active in this field is, therefore, to clarify existing information and present true facts, removing false ones.

Among the individuals who have been accused was General Otto Liman von Sanders

1 In 2021 Germany recognized the crimes of the German Empire as genocide. See, <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/politik/deutschland-namibia-herero-voelkermord-100.html>, accessed 14.09.2021.

2 For further information see, for example, Isabel V. Hull, “‘Military necessity’ and the laws of war in Imperial Germany,” in *Order, Conflict, and Violence*, eds. Stathis N. Kalyvas, Ian Shapiro and Tarek Masoud (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 352-377; Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction. Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005).

(hereafter generally referred to as the general). Most probably the severest of such accusations concerning him was made by Admiral Somerset Gough-Calthorpe of the Royal Navy. The Admiral argued that the general “held practically autocratic power as military dictator” when 300,000 Ottoman Greeks were subjected to deportation and massacre and that he oversaw the expulsion of 1.5 million Armenians and 450,000 Greeks from their homes in 1915.³ It is obvious that more research is necessary to obtain a more objective picture of the role that General Liman von Sanders played in the fate of the Armenian people during the Armenian Genocide.

Concerning this, the newly published book *Retter oder Täter. Ein General zwischen Staatsräson und Moral: Otto Liman von Sanders und der Völkermord an den Armeniern*⁴ by Muriel Mirak-Weißbach, an American-Armenian journalist, writer and specialist in English Studies, has broadened the context regarding one of the key individuals of the German military serving in the Ottoman Empire during WWI. General Otto Liman von Sanders was a Prussian cavalry general, a field marshal of the Ottoman Empire and head of the German military mission there from the end of 1913 until the end of WWI. The book is the sort of an adventurous journey through his later life, starting with his arrival in Constantinople on 14 December 1913 and ending with his return to Germany in 1919. Those times included the prewar period with its diplomatic battle concerning his initial appointment as the head of the first army corps, which triggered the “Liman von Sanders crisis.” This was followed by the whole of WWI (the Gallipoli campaign, the Armenian Genocide with special attention to the episodes which “brought” the Armenians as well as Greeks, Jews and him together, as well as his service in Palestine). In the immediate postwar period, he was held prisoner and interned in Malta; then returned home.

In the last three chapters of the book (“Honour,” “The German Tragedy,” “Yerevan 2019”) the author has come to the fore. If the previous chapters were devoted to the general’s life and deeds before, during and after WWI (from 1914 to 1919), then these last three chapters provide opportunity for the analysis, reasoning and finalization of the book’s main goal – depicting the general as the savior of the Armenian as well as Greek peoples and not as the war criminal who was responsible for the deportation and massacres of those same Armenians and Greeks during WWI.

The book ends with Professor Tessa Hofmann’s (Dr. phil., Magistra Artium, Prof. h.c.) and Helmut Donat’s (head of the Donat publishing house and a co-founder of the Working Group on Historical Peace Research) articles, which bring an additional viewpoint to the subject in question. The first article *Otto Liman von Sanders – an approach attempt* deals with the deportations which Otto Liman was involved in (in a positive or negative way) and with the accommodation of Greek and Armenian orphans in Panderma which he organized. The latter is considered in comparison with Turkish orphanages and Turkish state policy towards the non-Muslims orphans.

³ Michelle Tusan, *The British Empire and the Armenian Genocide. Humanitarianism and Imperial Politics from Gladstone to Churchill* (London, NY: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 216.

⁴ Rescuer or Perpetrator. A General between Reason of State and Morality: Otto Liman von Sanders and the Armenian Genocide.

The second article *The Armenian rescuer Otto Liman von Sanders and the “honor of the German army”* is devoted to:

1. The crimes committed by the German army in Belgium and Northern France during WWI;
2. The reluctance to take responsibility for the fate of Armenians of the lands which were reconquered or newly conquered by the Turkish army after the treaty of Brest-Litovsk;
3. The propaganda of innocence (die Unschuldpropaganda) broadcast in Germany and different Germans who agreed to take part in it and who denied to do so (Otto Liman von Sanders, Johannes Lepsius, Walter Rößler vs. Armin T. Wegner, Martin Niepage, Heinrich Vierbücher).

The book’s prologue starts with the case of withdrawal of the honorable status of the general’s grave. The authorities of the German city of Darmstadt made this decision in 2015 (7)⁵ taking into account that “*he was partly responsible for the atrocities committed against the Armenians.*” (9) As Mrs. Mirak-Weißbach states, her interest concerning the fate of the Armenians has a very personal, rather than a purely academic nature: both her parents were survivors of the Armenian Genocide and had been rescued as orphans by Turks.

According to the author there were several questions that she wanted like to find answers to. Among them were: who was Otto Liman von Sanders? What did he do during the WWI? If he really acted against the deportations, where and when did that happen? Why don’t people recognize what he did? etc. (10)

Concerning the prologue, it is worth mentioning another small detail: it claims that “*In 2016, the German Bundestag passed a resolution condemning the state crimes of the Ottoman regime but without clearly labeling them as genocide.*” (7) Indeed, this remark is mostly true concerning the body of the resolution. But the title of the resolution reads (literal translation) *Remembrance and commemoration of the genocide of the Armenians and other Christian minorities in 1915 and 1916*⁶ (*Erinnerung und Gedenken an den Völkermord an den Armeniern und anderen christlichen Minderheiten in den Jahren 1915 und 1916*). It appears to be a quite precise mention of the Armenian Genocide. The aforementioned statement is true for the first resolution, passed by Bundestag in June 2005.

A small nuance should also be mentioned (not as a criticism, but rather as a statement of fact): sometimes it feels like the narrative drifts from the title question – rescuer or perpetrator? (Retter oder Täter?) and becomes more like biographical research concerning the general’s activities in the Ottoman Empire before and during WWI and the period of his internment in Malta. At first glance this could be considered a disadvantage. In reality, however, it provides us with the aforementioned broader picture which helps to better understand the main issue. Taking into account this feature, the current review will mostly be focused on the coverage of those parts which concern the book’s main topic.

The content of the chapter “The Genocide 1915-1917” can be roughly divided in two parts: a brief overview of the Armenian Genocide and the general’s activities to prevent or stop the deportations of Armenian and Greeks. In the transition from one topic to another

⁵ The respective pages of the book are mentioned in the round parenthesis.

⁶ <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/18/086/1808613.pdf>, accessed 14.12.2021.

Mrs. Mirak-Weißbach writes: “It was not the first time that Wangenheim⁷ informed Berlin about the plight of the Armenians, and it would not be the last. But all of his diplomatic initiatives failed, as did Morgenthau’s,⁸ with which he kept clashing. If the ambassadors in Constantinople did nothing or could not do anything, what could the military do?” (44)

The second part of the chapter describes the cases when the general opposed the deportation of Armenians and Greeks and either prevented or stopped them, e.g. in Urfa (March 1916), in the coastal regions of Asia Minor (August 1916) and Smyrna (November 1916) etc. But there was one case, when von Sanders ordered the deportation of Greeks from Ayvalık, but took all necessary steps in order to protect the deportees from severe measures. (50-51)

He also organized the accommodation of Greek and Armenian orphans in Panderma at his own expense. (47)

The chapter “Yerevan 2019” is the most important in terms of the author’s arguments and approaches concerning the role of the general. At the beginning, Mrs. Mirak-Weißbach describes the Tsitsernakaberd Memorial complex and in particular the 100 meter-long Memorial Wall as well as the symbolic tombs of people who did their best to help the Armenian people during the Genocide and to inform the world of this crime, e.g. Johannes Lepsius, Armin Wegner, Franz Werfel, Jakob Künzler, Henry Morgenthau Sr. etc. The author notes that the general is not among them. (90).⁹

The subsequent part of the chapter deals with author’s meeting and discussion with the director of Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute Foundation and some of staff members and invited experts. (91-93).¹⁰ She also discusses, justifying, in particular, Liman von Sanders’ role as the rescuer of Armenians, using the four criteria for awarding the title of Righteous Among the Nations, an official title awarded to non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. (91-92) The approaches of the author in some points are, however, not substantiated.

The rest of this chapter (which also includes a series of photographs) presents a brief presentation of Germany’s role in the Armenian Genocide, as well as British and USA policy. (94-118) When writing about the Germans’ role, the author mentions that there wasn’t a united attitude towards the Armenian Genocide among them: it was either approved of or fought against. The general was among the second group. It is also noted that von Sanders was not able to stop the Armenian Genocide alone. (114)

The chapter “The Honor” begins with the question “Why did Liman von Sanders stand

7 Hans von Wangenheim, German ambassador to the Ottoman Empire in 1912-1915.

8 Henry Morgenthau Sr., US ambassador to the Ottoman Empire in 1913-1916.

9 This cannot be considered to be a surprise. The tombs are of those people who raised their voices or otherwise helped the Armenians during or after the Armenian Genocide. While Liman von Sanders is considered to be an accomplice in the crime of the Armenian Genocide. See for example Edita Gzoyan, «Թուրքիայի միջազգային իրավական պատասխանատուության հարցը Ա. համաշխարհային պատերազմից յետոյ», «Թուրքիայի միջազգային իրավական պատասխանատուության հարցը Ա. համաշխարհային պատերազմից յետոյ» [The Issue of Turkey’s International Legal Responsibility after World War I] *Haigazian Armenological Review* 41 (2021): 95-118

10 It should be specially mentioned that author’s interpretation of the closed discussion with some of the staff members of AGMI and invited experts is mostly unacceptable (93) but will not be referred to within this review. Generally, she does not clarify who is making the particular assertion, wrongly attributing some of them to the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute.

up for the persecuted?” So the main purpose of this chapter is to present the image of the general, introducing him as a person with principles, moral attitudes and a particular nature. One of the key parts of this chapter is the following:

According to his (the general’s –A.M.) understanding of military customs, he adhered to certain norms and codes of conduct and expected the same from others. It is the duty of soldiers to fight the enemy and protect civilians. (122)

Another is:

Liman’s strict adherence to the code of honor explains why he appealed to his high rank when it came to protecting innocent citizens or discriminated minority groups. It may also declare his unconditional defense of the Germans.¹¹ It was the basis of his actions but did not save him from making mistakes. (123)

The second part of the chapter deals with Soghomon Tehlirian’s trial and general’s behavior during it. The last part (Culture and Character) deals with and brings together three people – Otto Liman von Sanders, Johannes Lepsius and Walter Rößler.¹²

In the last chapter of the book “German Tragedy?” (135-137) the tendency to put Otto Liman von Sanders, Johannes Lepsius and Walter Rößler on the same level becomes more obvious. It might have been done intentionally in order to promote the situation where there is at least one leading person from the military establishment, civil society and the diplomatic corps who was pro-Armenian.

The book being reviewed is an attempt to bring together the facts about Otto Liman von Sanders’ life and deeds from 1913 till 1919, with special attention being given to the episodes concerning the saving of Armenians, Greeks and Jews from deportation during WWI. The main goal of this volume is to refute unfair accusations against the general and to present him as a person who carried out his office honestly. Moreover, there is a tendency in the last chapters of the book to make Otto Liman von Sanders equal to Johannes Lepsius and Walter Rößler in the field of pro-Armenian activities. The reason for this may be an attempt to find and/or create (depending on research) a prominent positive personality from the German military in the history of the Armenian Genocide.

Not all the statements and arguments the author puts forward may be accepted but this research is a step forward in the study of the role of the German Empire and its representatives in the Armenian Genocide. In any case, this book may contribute to further discussion and research.

¹¹ This was also reflected in the denial of any accusations against the German military regarding their role in the Armenian Genocide. See, for example, *Deutschland und die Armenier. Ein Wort zu den Beschuldigungen der Entente. Von General d. Kav. Liman von Sanders.* In: *20. Jahrhundert. Dokumente zur Zeitgeschichte* 9 (1919).

¹² German consul in Aleppo from 1910 till 1918.