

Rezensionen – Comptes rendus – Reviews

Ihrig, Stefan: *Justifying Genocide: Germany and the Armenians from Bismarck to Hitler*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016, 460 pp., ISBN 978-0674504790.

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Hitler apparently got it wrong when he asked, in a popularly cited question: “Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?” Stefan Ihrig, professor of history at the University of Haifa, argues in his latest book, *Justifying Genocide: Germany and the Armenians from Bismarck to Hitler*, that there was actually a broader awareness in Nazi Germany of what happened to Ottoman Armenians in 1915. Ihrig’s book is about how the extermination of the Armenians was intellectually processed and politically justified – “justification” being Ihrig’s key analytical term in this regard – in a society that would go on to commit, support, and justify yet another genocide.

Justifying Genocide is told in 15 chapters in addition to a prologue, an introduction, and an epilogue. In his Prologue, Ihrig introduces Franz Werfel, the Nobel laureate author of the *Forty Days of Musa Dagh*. For Werfel, himself a Jew, the Armenians were the “stand-in Jews” (*Ersatzjuden*) of his story, also an indirect warning of the rise of Nazis. In the Introduction, Ihrig explains why his book is about “Germany and its road toward the Holocaust” (p. 6) rather than about the Ottoman Empire, Turks, and the tragic fate of the Armenians in Anatolia. In many ways, Ihrig brings the history of the Armenian Genocide home – first to Germany and then to Israel, where he lives. In Chapter 1, Ihrig traces the origins of German anti-Armenianism in Bismarck’s foreign policy doctrine, in which Armenian suffering was – in Bismarck’s famous words – not worth the life of a single “Pomeranian musketeer” (p. 23). Ihrig goes on in his Chapter 2 to discuss the official and public discourse about the massacres of Ottoman Armenians in 1890s. He convincingly underlines the political continuity from Bismarck to Wilhelm II, in which Armenians served as “the sacrificial lamb [...] of intensifying Ottoman-German relations” (p. 32). This is also when the German public saw the gradual emergence of racial and anti-Semitic depictions of Armenians (p. 46, 57) and a new “genocide language” (p. 55). In Chapter 3, Ihrig establishes how the anti-Armenian “racial prism” (p. 59) fully replaced the previous pro-Armenian “religious prism” (p. 80). These racial stereotypes started to justify anti-Armenian violence (p. 64) whereby the image of Armenians as the

“Jews of the Orient” (p. 74) was becoming an ever more popular discourse. (pp. 76–77). The developments from the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 to the eve of World War I are summarized in Chapter 4. From the Belgian atrocities of 1914 (p. 95) to the Armenian Genocide of 1915, Chapter 5 discusses the German culture of “military necessities”. Civilian populations were seen through the notions of total war as potential combatants and collaborators (p. 96). The struggles of Max Erwin von Scheubner-Richter, the German consul in Erzurum, against the deportations and massacres of Armenians in 1915 are told in Chapter 6. In numerous alarming reports and requests to the rather reluctant German embassy in Constantinople, Scheubner documented the horror of the deportations as “a policy of violent extermination” (p. 123). In Ihrig’s judgement, Germany was “guilty in failing to stop the Young Turks” (p. 134). In Chapter 7, Ihrig returns to the public debate in Germany. Although circumscribed by censorship, the Armenian deportations were discussed through different channels and on different occasions, and more importantly, as Ihrig argues, increasingly in genocidal terms. The question “What Germany Could Have Known” is further discussed in Chapter 8. While German officialdom “knew almost everything” (p. 157), most of the press was “aggressively agitating against the Armenians” (p. 157). Nevertheless, as Ihrig concludes, “even the most naive reader must have realized that something of note had happened to the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire” (p. 185). After the defeat in 1918, anti-Armenianism was once again combined with anti-Semitism in revanchist stab-in-the-back myths (p. 187–189). Ihrig shows in Chapter 9 how a “fully fledged ‘genocide language’” (p. 195) was established in a great debate on the Armenian Genocide. The German Foreign Ministry’s efforts to whitewash the German responsibility (p. 210) created a series of cross-paper debates in national and provincial newspapers that further contributed to the general knowledge of the Armenian Genocide (pp. 214, 219). Once Germany’s role was whitewashed, a “denialist backlash” (p. 220) took over the debates in 1920 with countless incarnations of old anti-Armenian stereotypes. Ihrig explores in Chapter 10 the “media event” (p. 229) that took place after the assassination of Talat Pasha by an Armenian in Berlin, March 1921. Although this episode started with success for denialism (p. 233), it became impossible after the sensational trial of Talat Pasha’s assassin Soghomon Tehlirian to deny the extent and intent of the genocide. In Chapter 11, Ihrig retells in great detail how Tehlirian’s defense attorneys were able to illustrate the jury (and the public) that Talat Pasha was responsible for the “systematic management” of the mass murder of Armenians (p. 257). While anti-Armenian newspapers tried to justify the massacres, many other newspapers came to terms with the shocking reality of the Armenian Genocide (p. 266). Although what Ihrig calls a “pre-Lemkin definition of genocide” was established in the debates surrounding the Talat Pasha Trial (p. 271), as Chapter 12’s title puts

it, racial arguments about Armenians and the national tropes of “stab-in-the-back” led rather to “The Victory of Justificationism” (p. 275). Genocide was already considered by many Germans, as Ihrig illustrates, as a “universal phenomenon” that could readily be committed against Europe’s own “foreigners”, namely Jews (p. 294). Chapter 13 turns to the intellectual history of racial and racist literature and explores how an “Armenian-Jewish conflation” was intellectually constructed in 1920s and 1930s. The so-called “Armenoid” race was increasingly depicted as similar, same, or even worse than as the “Jewish race”, both associated with the “lesser”, “Oriental”, or “Near Eastern” races (pp. 306–307). Many emerging Nazi ideologues, including Hitler, used to refer to Armenians as a lesser race similar to Jews (p. 318). In Chapter 14, Ihrig summarizes his previous research on how the Nazis perceived Kemalist Turkey as a “postgenocidal wonderland” (p. 320). The Nazi personality cult about Atatürk (p. 327) went on to celebrate the annihilation of Armenians and the population exchange of Greeks (p. 331). The final Chapter 15 delivers “cumulative evidence” that implies that the Nazis were aware of and influenced by the Armenian Genocide (p. 334). Ihrig demonstrates how a complex of people epistemically connects the Armenian Genocide to the Holocaust (pp. 333–338, 352). Thanks to “Turkish lessons”, as Ihrig argues, the Nazis knew that war could create an opportunity and cover for genocidal measures without facing international punishment or domestic outrage (pp. 353–354). Ihrig draws the conclusion that the Armenian Genocide and the Jewish Holocaust are “intimately and directly linked” in German experience and knowledge (p. 357). The Epilogue closes the narrative circle by going back to Franz Werfel and his *Forty Days of Musa Dagh* which is considered a literary testament of genocidal struggle and survival by both Armenian and Jewish genocide survivors (pp. 364–369).

This excellently written book covers diverse aspects of anti-Armenianism in Germany within a complex but well-structured narrative. The general contextualization of Ottoman and Turkish history could have surely profited from a denser engagement with the recent scholarship in Ottoman history, but Ihrig mostly keeps a safe distance and sticks to German discourses. A chance to discuss the relationship between German Orientalism and anti-Armenianism is, however, unfairly dismissed by Ihrig (p. 60), implying that the latter was more similar to anti-Semitism and, thus, something else or even something worse. On the contrary, anti-Semitism (as well as anti-Armenianism) has always been part and parcel of Orientalism. Only few mistakes in the book caught my attention. It was, of course, Shakib Arslan, the former Ottoman deputy of Hauran and a close associate of Enver and Talat, and not “Şefik Arslan” (p. 274), who wrote an open letter to Johannes Lepsius. Walter Rößler, German consul in Aleppo, is twice mentioned as the German consul in Adana (pp. 130, 352); the latter was, in fact,

Eugen Büge. Recent studies of the Turkish-German revanchist milieu in post-war Berlin could have been used to provide a more vivid context on the German public debates. One of the most vocal anti-Armenian public figures, Hans Humann, was not only an old friend of Enver Pasha, as Ihrig rightly notes, but was also intimately linked to underground and propaganda activities of the fugitive Young Turk leaders in Berlin. Theodor Wolff and his *Berliner Tageblatt's* editorial turn from pro-Armenian to anti-Armenian reporting (pp. 211–213, 231, 233) was perhaps indeed the outcome of an alleged interview which Wolff conducted with Talat Pasha, as it is told by journalist Arif Cemil (Denker) who claims to have arranged this secret meeting. But such details do not take anything away from the book's main thesis that the Armenian Genocide was well-known but politically justified in the German public discourse and ever more in racial arguments.

Most importantly, Ihrig offers a subjective and discursive understanding of genocide. Although the term “genocide” was coined by Raphael Lemkin in 1940s, the way the incidents of 1915/16 were framed both by pro-Armenian and anti-Armenian authors in Germany left no doubt that they were all referring to (or justifying) an idea of a genocide. This is a very important intervention that extends the analytical use of genocide in historical contexts. Ihrig correctly asserts that his “book is more about the discourses and the realities these discourses created than about the realities on the ground” (p. 8). Therefore, historians should be cautioned not to simply project German racial discourses onto the minds of the Young Turk leadership and their local accomplices who most certainly had their own genocide discourses. Unfortunately, there is no theoretical discussion of how genocide discourses are constructed and meditated, and how to deal with such discursive realities. For example, Ihrig shows that the 1890s massacres of Ottoman Armenians were already discussed in “genocidal terms” (p. 38). This is an important observation, but does it make this “string of massacres” (p. 34) a genocide? Even more, how do we deal with public authors' cognitive and factual relativism based on their (pro-Armenian or anti-Armenian) predispositions? The issue gets even more perplexing, because Ihrig takes – for good reason – a very critical stand against the moral relativism in genocide denials and justifications. For example, Tehlirian's emotional court-room testimony on how he witnessed the murder of his family during the Armenian Genocide is told in great detail and with acknowledgement, but only to be revealed, as an aside, to be a false testimony (p. 263). But how should we deal with manipulated and manipulating discourses, not only in cruel cases of genocide denialism and justification, but also when these genocide discourses were on the right end of the moral compass? In this

post-truth age, such complex considerations deserve more theoretical discussion than a straightforward moral contention.

Despite the lack of theoretical discussion, Ihrig's book's intellectual merits will find well-earned attention not only in the growing body of comparative, cultural, and global approaches in genocide studies, but also in the intellectual histories of anti-Semitism. For comparative and complementary insights into Turkish genocide discourses, I advise students of Armenian, Turkish, and Ottoman studies to read Ihrig's book in conjunction with Fatma Müge Göçek's (2015) *Denial of Violence: Ottoman Past, Turkish Present, and Collective Violence against the Armenians, 1789–2009*. All in all, Ihrig conducted rich empirical research on the "dark intellectual history of genocide" in Germany (p. 302) that is unlikely to be surpassed in its comprehensiveness. *Justifying Genocide* is a timely contribution to various fields and offers complex and thought-provoking arguments. Both specialist and non-specialist readers will find it accessible and engaging.