

From the Ottoman Empire to Post-1923

The Catastrophe as Seen by the Angel of History

DENIZ YONUUCU and TALIN SUCIYAN

ABSTRACT The author of *The Armenians in Modern Turkey*, historian Talin Suciyan, puts the Armenian genocide survivors at the center of her research to provide a new perspective on the history of the Turkish Republic. Suciyan analyzes the experiences and lives of its Armenian population several decades after the genocide. In this interview, Deniz Yonucu speaks with Suciyan on her research and innovative anthropological approach to understanding the paths that led to the annihilation of Armenians, the effects of the genocide in modern Turkey, and the importance of focusing attention on the experiences of survivors after catastrophic experiences of genocides. The *survivor* as described in this interview is neither a wretched of the earth, who is forced to live a tortured life, nor a subaltern whose voice cannot acquire speech. The survivor instead is an existence whose past, present and future is constantly denied, and therefore robbed from her.

KEYWORDS survivor, Angel of History, Ottoman History, Armenians in post-genocide Turkey, denial habitus

A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed.

—Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” thesis 9.

Historian Talin Suciyan’s first book, *The Armenians in Modern Turkey: Post-genocide Society, Politics, and History*, was originally published in English in 2015 and later published in Turkish by Aras Publishing in 2018.¹ From archival documents and a large number of never-utilized Armenian and Turkish primary sources—including memoirs and diaries—Suciyan argues that the Armenian genocide did not end:

CRITICAL TIMES | 3:2 | AUGUST 2020

DOI 10.1215/26410478-8517751 | © 2020 Deniz Yonucu and Talin Suciyan

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it continues today. Her book sheds light on how and in what forms the effects of the genocide manifest themselves in modern Turkey, how this terrible atrocity has been embraced by the Turkish ruling elites to this day, and what it means to be an Armenian in Turkey from an anthropological perspective.

In one of his best-known essays from the Nazi era, “On the Concept of History,” Walter Benjamin argues that “the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule.”² In order to understand our society, we need to focus our attention on the experiences of the oppressed as well as those of the survivors, who have suffered the darkest forms of human-made catastrophes. Benjamin could not survive the Holocaust. His legacy urges us to look deeply at the threshold between life and death where, as we elaborate in this interview, the survivor has been condemned to exist. The *survivor* as described in this interview is neither the wretched of the earth, who is forced to live a tortured life, nor the subaltern whose voice, put in Rancièrian terms, cannot acquire speech and remains as noise. The *survivor* is instead an existence whose past, present, and future is constantly denied, and therefore robbed from her.

Putting the Armenian genocide survivors at the center of her research in *The Armenians in Modern Turkey*, Suciyan provides a new perspective on the history of the Turkish Republic and analyzes the experiences and lives of its Armenian population several decades after the genocide. The history of the Armenians in Turkey is the history of Turkey. As Suciyan aptly demonstrates, this history is not an exception to Turkish history but rather is central to it. Her second book manuscript, titled *Either Save Us from This Misery or Order Our Death (Ya Derdimize Derman Ya Katlimize Ferman): Tanzimat of the Provinces*, focuses on the surviving archives of the annihilated. There she shows how the Tanzimat project (1839–76), celebrated in Turkish and Ottoman mainstream historiography as the milestone of Ottoman modernization and centralization, turned its Armenian population into outcasts. We spoke with Suciyan on her research and innovative anthropological approach in order to better understand not only the practices of the Ottoman and Turkish ruling elites but also their complicity with certain segments of the non-Armenian population. The interview took place in her office at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, where she teaches Ottoman and Turkish history.

Deniz Yonucu: *Talin, drawing on archival documents, reports from eyewitnesses, and oral history narratives, your book demonstrates how Armenians from various class, regional, and political backgrounds were left with the horrific reality of the genocide in the decades that followed it. You also show how Turkish ruling elites and local populations have maintained this catastrophe through denialism to date. These documents and reports give proper answers to the seemingly paradoxical question, “How come Turkish ruling elites, who until very recently claimed there was a radical rupture between the Ottoman Empire and Turkish*

Republic, nonetheless deny the Empire's biggest crime?" The evidence clearly shows that the Turkish ruling elites have continued to view Armenians as the enemies of and potential threats to the Turkish nation-state and have acted accordingly. For example, a decision by the Cabinet of Turkey brought the remains of Talaat Pasha (one of the principal organizers of the Armenian genocide) from a Berlin cemetery to Istanbul for a grand reburial in 1943. This is a symbolic event that illustrates the way in which the genocide was appropriated by post-Ottoman Turkish ruling elites. Your book, therefore, depicts not only what you call the "denial habitus" but also the continuation of the anti-Armenian practices and policies throughout the twentieth century. Can you elaborate on that?

Talin Suciyan: Persistent anti-Armenianism is inherent to the habitus of denial. We have not looked at the results of 1915 to determine how much the Republic was influenced by it. How is it that we just accept that this catastrophic event, which irrevocably influenced the entire region and all its ethnic groups, became essentially traceless in the years that followed? A large section of the literature either denies, fails to observe, or deliberately rejects a different writing of the history. Even though research has gradually begun to take a different direction in the past two decades, it is absolutely undeniable that 105 years after the genocide, we are still a long way from where we need to be. Above all, the surviving generation that I place at the center of my research has passed on, making writing history from a new angle even more difficult.

The Ottoman administration recognized, and was very knowledgeable of, the denominational and regional differences of its populations. In particular, they were very aware of Armenian history and administration. They had a keen understanding of the conditions and influences of the Armenian administration in Constantinople in the form of the Catholicosate in Cilicia (Sis), the Patriarchate in Jerusalem, and the Catholicosates in Akhtamar and Echmiadzin. As the Armenians were one of the autochthonous peoples of the region, it makes complete sense that the Ottoman administration knew of their historical presence. This aspect of Ottoman administration may sound foreign to us today, yet, as the Armenian Patriarchate in Istanbul was an Ottoman institution, this understanding of it by the state should come as no surprise. Armenians used the Turkish language fluently and professionally in writing, speech, and print (while using the Arabic or Armenian alphabet). They were consequently an important part of the Ottoman Empire and had a consistent relationship with it for hundreds of years; together with the Rum (Greek), they constituted the largest part of the empire's Christian population within the borders of contemporary Turkey. The majority of Armenians were peasants or artisans, but there was a considerable Armenian presence in the finance sector as well, which gave them great responsibility but limited influence. They had a vivid cul-

tural life with their own institutions all over the Empire. The decision to exterminate Armenians also meant the extermination of the past and the creation of a new starting point for history. The goal was to make a new world, one that featured no Armenian in its past, present, or future.

We still live with the consequences of this decision. The will of this decision was constitutional and persists today. In my book, I have tried to show just how systematic the complicity of the non-Armenian population was. If you want to write a different history of the Ottoman Empire, you need to focus on the Armenians. This is not due to their intrinsic importance but to the state's determination in its decision to annihilate them, a stance consistently supported by its society. This policy has gone uninterrupted over the last hundred years, with incalculable sums invested in denial, and with denial penetrating every aspect of life, thereby perpetuating the original denialist structures. Through this process arose a "nation" where state and society met. By placing Armenians at the center of our discussion, we can learn much more about other groups, too. I would like to say the following: the Armenians possess the oldest and most fundamental knowledge of this land. Instead of waiting for the victims to speak, we can consider how the perpetrators committed their crimes. We do not need to search for concentration camps similar to the ones found in Europe but can simply look around neighborhoods throughout Turkey for the evidence. Seeing the remains of blown-up churches and monasteries in the provinces today is no surprise; in fact, quite the opposite: it is ordinary. The striking part is that the churches, cemeteries, and Armenian quarters have become deserted, empty landscapes. Today Armenians exist through their absence. Merely realizing this fact is an important intervention.

Without questioning their structurally superior positions, academics and intellectuals in Turkey who pretend to be sympathetic to the Armenians have made it their duty to dictate to them what they should do and what conclusions should be drawn from Armenian history and their scientific and artistic contributions. Hence on top of the systematic annihilation of the people, we witness manifestations of outright epistemic violence. The reason why Turkish intellectuals have always cautioned against diasporic Armenians and have labeled them negatively is that diasporic Armenians do not silently accept this epistemic violence; rather, they question it and object to its enactment. Therefore, for progressive Turks, the best Armenians are those who are subjugated by the view of the majority population and who accept Turkish structural superiority. The best Armenians are also the ones who accept that if there is to be a struggle for recognition, it should only be done in ways agreed to by the Turkish majority. Thus, the best Armenians are the ones who are yet again victimized by epistemic violence.

DY: *What you describe is at the core of colonialism and of the political subjectivities informed by colonialism. In your book, you also highlight topics that you consider important for further research. These include relations between the Kurds and Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. You say it is important to see how the Ottoman ruling elites handled these relations. In fact, important research has already been done on the Hamidiye cavalry³ and the role the Kurds played in the Armenian genocide. However, your concern, as far as I understand it, is to go beyond that—to try to understand the “governmentality” of the empire by looking at its management of Armenian-Kurdish relations. Do I understand you correctly?*

TS: Yes, that is exactly what I’m getting at. Actually, I just finished my new research on Tanzimat by utilizing the nineteenth-century archives of the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople. These untapped sources shed light onto Kurdo-Armenian relations as well as Ottoman-Armenian and Ottoman-Kurdish relations, and the changing power relations in the provinces throughout the Tanzimat period. What I learned from this study is that structural transformations that took place as part of the Ottoman modernization project are crucial to understanding the history of 1915. History is not a series of confrontations between good and evil “nationalist intoxications.” To explain genocides and other mass atrocities with reference only to nationalism shifts our attentions away from the structure and its institutions. If we discuss the Hamidiye cavalry without considering its many preconditions in the first half of the nineteenth century, it would be tempting to think that its founding provided the vital basis for a genocide to occur. A significant portion of the Kurdish tribes in 1915 had been active members of the Hamidiye cavalry in the 1890s. Some of the tribal chiefs sent their children to the Tribal School (Aşiret Mektebi) in Istanbul. This shows that the Ottoman administration saw the Kurds not just as armed paramilitary groups but also as administrative cadres who served the interests of the Empire, or, at least, as mediators in the region. The significance of the Tribal School depended not on the final historical outcome but on the motivations of the participants and the state. But what was the larger context of it all? What was the reason for all this? Most would answer by explaining that the Ottoman Empire was in a weakened position after being defeated in wars and, as a result, was placed under the control of “imperialist Western powers.” It is no coincidence that questions about the early nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire’s policies towards its peoples and about which politics were employed against the Armenians and Kurds are either left with major gaps or go unanswered. It is quite striking that more is being published today on Kurdish perpetrators in connection to 1915. We must ask ourselves whose responsibilities are subsequently being mitigated or made invisible as a result.

An important point to consider is that there is a sharp tendency in Ottoman and Turkish historiography to depict historical change through major ruptures.

Hidden within this conceptualization of the historical narrative lies a denialist mechanism. For example, take the year 1946, considered by mainstream literature to be a “very libertarian” one in which politics in Turkey switched to a two-party system. If we were to read about it in Armenian sources, we would instead see clearly that this time was by no means liberal or free. It was a time when many Armenian intellectuals of the first surviving generation fled after the genocide to other countries while others were arrested. As a result, the Armenians, and by extension Turkey, lost a large part of their intellectual base for the second time. Similarly, the predominant literature regarding Tanzimat does not attempt to depict that time as a new order but as a time of progress and reform. When someone discusses the “modernization” of Turkey, the story will always begin with “the reform period of Tanzimat.” This is because we always equate modernization with reform. Up until the 2000s, in the accepted Tanzimat narrative, which was always told from the perspective of the capital, the eastern provinces were never relevant to understanding what Tanzimat and the nineteenth century really meant. The first of its kind to do so was the book *Der verpasste Friede (The Missed Peace)* by Hans-Lukas Kieser.

We see that this was the period when landownership became a burning issue, and the alliances between Kurdish tribal chiefs and the Ottoman administration made it impossible for Armenians to sustain their lives in the villages. Furthermore, the smallest unit of society, the family structure, was turned upside down for Armenians, making living conditions unbearable. This led to famine, starvation, and mass migration. Many changes in the administrative divisions also paved the way for other problems for the Armenians. Instead of looking at the Balkan or Arabian provinces, we can look at the regions of contemporary Turkey where Armenians have lived under two power holders, namely the Kurds and the state, to understand how the “progressive” conditions of the nineteenth century are still experienced in Turkey today. Furthermore, if we seriously consider the question in relation to how 1915 came about, we must also question how the Ottomans collected information on their people starting in the first half of the nineteenth century, how it was used, and what role it played in the newly made administrative divisions. Only then can we understand that the establishment of the Hamidiye cavalry was one of the cruelest outcomes of the futile struggles against inequality and injustice for over half a century. Only then can we comprehend the cause and effect relations at stake.

DY: *Earlier, you said that “history is not a series of confrontations between good and evil ‘nationalist intoxications.’” Can you define more clearly what you mean by “nationalist intoxication”?*

TS: Attributing genocide solely to nationalism prevents us from considering deeply rooted historical and structural developments. The simplistic explanation that genocide originates from nationalism also enables a state to distance itself from responsibility by determining its own nationalism as “good,” and the nationalism of others as “bad” or “evil.” Once the blame in a narrative is shifted to Turkish nationalism, Kurdish nationalism, or Armenian nationalism, the responsibility of the primary organizer, the state, disappears. By simplistically condemning nationalism in order to condemn a genocide, we end up with a “multicultural fast food” that is easier for everyone to consume. People who would otherwise question the state’s decision to commit genocide are relieved to find that “bad” nationalism is actually at fault, something completely different from the nationalism they subscribe to as citizens of a nation-state. It is an easier pill to swallow. Condemning “evil nationalism” and embracing “good nationalism” in a nation-state happens almost by necessity or even as part of a zeitgeist. After all, “good nationalism” is considered the *sine qua non* of a nation-state. Hence, we as citizens are instructed to fight against “evil nationalism” while peacefully supporting its good versions. This is how the state’s true character remains undisclosed: the colonialism, racist attacks, and systematic discriminations it was founded on remain untouched. This binary between good and bad nationalism also serves to obscure various historical factors responsible for genocide, including colonial practices of violence as well as administrative and structural tools of governance. It helps to blur the structural continuities between empire and nation-state. Likewise, nostalgic fantasizing about the “good old times, when we used to live together happily” is not coincidental. Nation-states are neither democratic nor egalitarian institutions, and the illusion that they one day might be so must be reflected in both their future and their past in order to legitimize their very existence. Not only do this illusion and reflection guarantee the nation-state’s legitimacy; this legitimacy also interferes with any attempt at revealing the initial truth behind the state’s criminal structures. It is obvious that those who have established and profit from this legitimacy are well aware of the fact that revealing the deep structures of a crime such as genocide would destroy this legitimacy. Keeping these imaginings alive immunizes the criminals, the masses that participated in the crime, the structures that promoted the crime, the tools used, the crime scene, and the preparation leading up to the crime. This immunity and legitimacy create a habitus that ensures the reproduction of denial on a daily basis. In this narrative, the victim can only exist alongside nationalism as a perpetrator; the victim’s legal, political, social, economic, and cultural struggles can only be read in the framework of nationalism. In the case of Ottoman Armenians, their more than a half-century-long struggle for justice and equality is almost exclusively referred to within the context of nationalism, whereas the issue was absolutely structural, like land ownership, like unfair taxation, like unequal treatment before the law,

like the arbitrary exile of Armenian villagers from their villages, and the ban on practicing their handcrafts, and much more. However, there is no one to object to this narrative of reversal of the victim to perpetrator, once the victims are physically annihilated.

DY: *What you are saying is vital. You say that it is crucial to understand the structural relations that conditioned the genocide. This, as well as the way in which this structure continues and is reproduced, is extremely significant. As you often emphasize in your book, one aspect of this is denial.*

By denying the very presence of the survivors, by eliminating them in a certain way and silencing them, the nation-state ensures that the structural relationships and the political realities ruling elites created will continue. By blaming “bad nationalism” alone for the genocide, the Armenians, as you so aptly put it, are accused of being party to this nationalism, one of many such nationalisms. At the same time, this seemingly critical and egalitarian position levels the Armenians with all the other identities in Turkey and obscures the fact that the Armenians know the profoundest truth about the genocide and thus also about the Turkish state and its formation.

TS: The survivors were of the generation who knew their land best. The reason for the expulsion of Armenian survivors from the provinces was to hinder the persistence of that knowledge in everyday life there. The Armenians who were pushed out of the provinces to Istanbul could be surveilled there by the communal mechanisms and state institutions in place. This state-society alliance of control was considered “safer” than the continued existence of Armenians in the “distrusted provinces.” Those who decided in 1915 that the Armenians could live in the desert and nowhere else also decided that Armenians in post-1923 Turkey could live only in a panopticon. In light of this, the intellectuals of Turkey could pose questions such as: If the Armenians were an autochthonous people of Anatolia, why is the only remaining Armenian community in Istanbul? Why did the fact that the Armenian population was herded together into Istanbul not raise any suspicions amongst majority intellectuals? If the Lausanne Treaty really was legally enacted, why did Armenians not have the right to establish schools or monasteries or run their churches in Kayseri, Yozgat, Malatya, or Muş? We are still waiting for these simple questions to be asked.

DY: *These are very important, stimulating remarks and questions. You say that the Armenians who went from the provinces to Istanbul in the years after the genocide occupied the lowest place in the social hierarchy. These people witnessed the cruelest violence that can be experienced in this world. They looked death in the eye and then were exposed to the violence of the Ateşoglu-Yıldırım gangs, which literally made life hell for them. After they*

were forced to leave the provinces and settle in Istanbul, they found themselves in a foreign world. They were foreign both to the city and its Armenian community. They were also impoverished, and their survival was only by sheer accident. Walter Benjamin reminds us that if we want to understand the past and society, we must pay attention to the oppressed, those whose voices are never heard. In the first chapter of your book, you convey to us the voices of those Armenians who came from the provinces, lived in Istanbul, in Gedikpaşa, worked in the small shoe factories, who were foreign to the Turks and Armenians of Istanbul, and who had lost their language. What do the stories of these people at the bottom of the social hierarchy tell us overall about Turkish society?

TS: To follow Benjamin's argument and take it a step further: if we are prepared to face the incomprehensible experiences of those who have survived, we can open ourselves to entirely new perceptions and experiences by which to understand the world. The effects of this new awareness would be perceptible in every area of our lives: our truths, our opinions, the sources we consult and our understanding of them, our world view, and our way of life. By putting the survivors at the center of research, we support no political program, we serve no state, we offer no argument in our comfort zone, and we do not fulfill any condition of a power relation. With the courage to look into humanity's most difficult experiences, we can attempt to get in touch with the millions of people whose will and self-perception have been stolen or disrupted. At the same time, trying to understand the dynamics behind the will to annihilate teaches us to question the legitimacy of those things which flowed from it. The survivors are different from the subalterns. Our goal cannot simply be to find their voice, as is often the goal in subaltern studies. The survivors are in a sense the angels of history. We can observe them, and we can bring the debris piled up in front of them to the present, but we cannot speak for them, as we cannot see the catastrophe the way they saw and experienced it. As renowned historian Harry Harootunian mentioned in his recent interview on his new book *The Unspoken As Heritage: The Armenian Genocide and Its Unaccounted Lives*, postcolonial theory has little to offer on the genocidal impulse of historic colonial empires. Sidestepping this impulse according to him means overlooking the colonial expropriation which led ultimately to the killing fields of Europe.⁴ Hence, when we place survivors at the center of our study, we are going beyond subaltern studies. Is that not what the people of the region who suffer either from war, genocide, expulsion, or racism essentially need?

In 1922, Istanbul was already a place of immigration. The survivors, as people who had been forced to leave the provinces, who were threatened, whose property was taken, and who faced the potential kidnapping of their daughters, flocked to Istanbul. The trip was made by those who were able to do so. Others could not make the trip as easily, such as the many surviving women who had been kidnapped, raped, Islamized, and consequently trapped in the provinces. Those who made it

to Istanbul stayed in the shelters known as the *kaghtagan* centers (*kaghtagayan*) for weeks, months, or even years. Their lives before 1915 had disappeared along with their families. We are talking about people who not only lost everything but whose very survival exclusively depended on how deeply they were able to cut their ties with themselves and their identity.

Armenians tried to preserve these *kaghtagan* centers through the end of the 1930s. Yet even in the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, and beyond, long after the centers had closed, the migration did not stop. The Armenians who stayed at these centers were provided with food and accommodation but were otherwise expected to support themselves. It took them years to build a relationship with the Armenians in Istanbul. The difference between the Armenians of Istanbul and those who escaped from the provinces was like that between those who were alive and those who had witnessed death and survived. Naturally, the Istanbul Armenians knew what had occurred, as many had lost relatives, such as the majority of their intelligentsia who were deported and murdered. There were no longer any safe places for Armenians; even Istanbul was unsafe. But beyond these facts is the following: the Armenians in the provinces lived in the “Yergir,” their historical homeland for generations. Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, these Armenians were known in Istanbul as *bantukhd*, migrant workers. Armenians from the provinces were known to their urban counterparts for the unending oppression they had to endure in the villages. However, the Istanbul Armenians did not know about village dynamics or what it was like to experience the harsh conditions and oppressive circumstances those in the provinces had endured for over a century. To understand what that meant, what Armenians from the provinces had survived, took almost a century. For example, consider the author Hagop Mintzuri,⁵ who survived by accident while his entire family perished in 1915. By chance, he had traveled to Istanbul to have his tonsils removed before the deportations began and was not able to return. He spent the rest of his life writing about his village life because although it was gone, it could at least exist in writing, in literature.

For many who left the provinces, life in Istanbul meant new worries, new deprivations, new hardships, and new fights for survival. While they understood that Istanbul was not a cure-all, many took the first opportunity they could to move to another country. Many surviving Armenians emigrated to the United States or Canada, or were migrant workers in Germany. Throughout my schooling in Istanbul, I saw many schoolmates move away with their families. The common denominator of this continuing exile was the *kaghtagan* existence. Regardless of where they went, they did not meet anyone interested in their past, what they had lived through, and what this meant for their current existence. Those who left before the founding of the Republic were themselves in a similar situation, generating a multitude of effects on the subsequent generations. They found themselves in

unfamiliar places, in foreign countries where they could not speak the language, and their lives went in completely unexpected directions. For decades, many lacked a bureaucratic authority to turn to for even the simplest of matters.

The members of the surviving generation remained survivors, whether in Istanbul, the United States, or another land. No one was interested in what it meant to be a person who was taken away from their home, their family, even alienated from their self, and forced to be invisible. In this invisibility a single catastrophe was hidden; the catastrophe only they could see, which was invisible to everyone else.

DY: *A catastrophe that is stared at by the angel of history, yet the violence of progress allows us to pretend it did not happen. Thank you very much, dear Talin, for shedding light into the dark corners of history.*

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Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the editorial team at *Critical Times* for their useful comments and suggestions for revising and extending the original manuscript. We also would like to thank Jessica Ling for her help in editing the manuscript. A different version of this interview was published in Turkish in *Birikim*, no. 360.

Notes

1. *The Armenians in Modern Turkey* was translated into Turkish by Ayşe Günaysu.
2. Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," thesis 8.

3. Regiments established and named after Abdulhamid II, mostly by select Kurdish tribes and Circassians, were responsible for the Hamidian massacres of 1894–96. See Klein, *The Margins of Empire*.
4. Harootunian, “Stirring the Ashes.”
5. For his work in Armenian and Turkish, see Mintzuri, *Kapandı Kirve Kapıları*; Mintzuri, *Küğü Gabri Im Meçs*; and Mintzuri, *Armidan Fırat’ın öte yanı*.

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