

The New York Review

The Mass Murder They Still Deny

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A Shameful Act:

The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility by Taner Akçam, translated from the Turkish by Paul Bessemer. Metropolitan, 483 pp., \$30.00

The first reports of massacres reached the US embassy in Istanbul in December 1914. Hundreds of Armenians, a Christian people with ancient roots in Anatolia, had been murdered by rioters in the Bitlis region of eastern Turkey and hanged in the streets of Erzurum. Countless others had died from exposure and exhaustion while laboring as human mule-trains for the Turkish army. By the spring of 1915, much of the country's Armenian population had—so it was claimed by Armenian spokesmen and American missionaries and diplomats—been subjected to mass deportations, wholesale pillage, and rape.

The US ambassador, Henry Morgenthau, initially questioned the veracity of these accounts. Morgenthau was the latest of a series of American Jews appointed to that post on the assumption that Jews formed a natural link between the Muslim Middle East and Christian America. He had come to admire the Armenians as a people much like his own, with a similar ethnic pride and cultural vigor. He knew that their position in the Ottoman Empire had grown increasingly tenuous since the outbreak of war with Russia. He said he was well aware of the Ottoman penchant for savagery. And yet Morgenthau still doubted whether the Turks, for all their cruelty, could have carried out the atrocities ascribed to them. Only when survivors of the horrors began to stagger into his office, haunted and physically maimed, and the *ghimmarish shoghobes* mounted on his desk, did the ambassador finally acknowledge reality. The Turkish government, he informed Washington, had embarked on a policy of "race extermination" of the Armenians by means of "terrible tortures, expulsions and...massacres."

Much like the American officials who, twenty-five years later, were reluctant to respond to evidence of the Nazi massacres of Jews, Morgenthau was at first blinded by the enormity of the crime. Who could believe that, in the twentieth century, political leaders could launch a meticulously planned and exactly executed program to annihilate more than a million of their defenseless neighbors? But unlike his successors at the outset of World War II, none of whom had clear evidence of what the Germans planned to do to the Jews, Morgenthau and other diplomats of his generation had recent proof of the mass killing of Armenians by the Turks. Between 1894 and 1896, Turkish troops rampaged through Armenian villages, ransacking an estimated one million houses and killing as many 200,000. "All the Armenians in sight were killed and their houses and stores robbed," one American diplomat wrote. "Another Armenian Holocaust!" exclaimed a *New York Times* headline in what



Enver Pasha, Turkish minister of war during World War I and a principal author of the program to eliminate the Armenians, early 1900s

may have been the first use of the word to denote genocide.¹

Allied leaders in the early stages of World War I also had access to firsthand information on the massacres, a source largely denied to their counterparts in World War II. Missionaries, many of them American, had been active throughout the Ottoman Empire for nearly a century, building Western-style schools and hospitals. An extensive consular service had been established to mediate between these evangelists and the authorities. Prohibited from proselytizing Muslims, the missionaries concentrated on local Christians, and especially the Armenians, who were traditionally members of the Armenian Catholic Church, which was in communion with the Catholic Church in Rome. Significant numbers of them subsequently converted to Protestantism. Much as Morgenthau likened the Armenians to the Jews, the missionaries and their consular protectors saw them as hardworking, Westernized Christians. They were the first to come to the Armenians' rescue in 1914-1915, and, along with US diplomats, the first to report in detail on their plight.

From the US consulate in Harput, Leslie Davis wrote, "The Mohammedans in their fanaticism seemed deter-

¹Henry Morgenthau's correspondence on the Armenian massacres is available on microfilm at the Library of Congress. See, for example, Reel 7, Morgenthau to the Secretary of State, July 16, 1915. See also his memoirs, *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story* (Doubleday, 1918) and *The Murder of a Nation* (Armenian General Benevolent Union of America, 1974). On the first usage of the word "Holocaust," see Peter Balakian, *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America's Response* (HarperCollins, 2003), p. 11.

mined not only to exterminate the Christian population but to remove all traces of their...civilization." America's representative in Aleppo, Syria, Jesse B. Jackson, observed railway cars crammed with starving Armenian deportees, few of whom, if any, he expected to survive. From the Persian frontier, the Presbyterian missionary William Shedd wrote about the execution of eight hundred villagers, mostly old people and young women, and from the Caucasus, Reverend Richard Hill reported seeing "children...dying by the hundreds" whose "frenzied mothers would...fling them...into the fields, so as not to see the[ir] dying agonies." Other correspondents saw the inhabitants of entire towns driven into rivers to drown or herded into churches that were then set ablaze.

These grisly descriptions reached not only Allied embassies but also the general public, through extensive press coverage of the carnage. In May 1915 the Allied Powers issued a declaration protesting these "crimes against humanity" and vowing to hold Turkey's leaders "personally responsible." A similar process occurred in the United States, though it was still maintaining its neutrality in the war. In response, the nation's leading philanthropists and clergymen, Christians and Jews, joined in creating the Committee on the Armenian Atrocities, which raised a monumental \$100 million for Near East relief.

The fate of the Armenians also figured prominently in the debates surrounding America's entry into the conflict against Germany and Austria-Hungary in April 1917. A large majority of both Houses of Congress demanded a declaration of war against Turkey as well, in order to rescue the Armenians. "The Armenian massacre was the greatest crime of the war," former president Theodore Roosevelt

said, "and failure to act against Turkey is to condone it."²

The United States did not, in the end, make war on Turkey. The son and grandson of Presbyterian ministers and a close associate of evangelist groups, President Woodrow Wilson feared that American intervention in the Middle East would provoke the Turks into massacring the missionaries. Allied forces eventually defeated the Turks and occupied large segments of Anatolia but never sought justice for those guilty of "crimes against humanity." As many as 1.5 million Armenians had been murdered, but outside of the surviving Armenian community, their memory swiftly faded.

While the attempt to obliterate European Jewry and slaughter Gypsies, homosexuals, and other "enemies of the [Nazi] state" was almost universally acknowledged and memorialized by innumerable museums, monuments, and the field of Holocaust studies, the earlier genocide of Armenians was generally overlooked. The reasons for this omission were many: the relatively long time that had elapsed since 1915, for example, and the fact that the massacres were carried out not in the heart of Europe but in the obscure Middle East and Central Asia. But the most basic cause for forgetfulness was the absence of a confession to the crime. "You're lucky it was the Germans who killed you," an Armenian monk in Jerusalem told writer Yossi Klein Halevi, whose father survived the Holocaust. "They are a civilized people. They know how to apologize."³

In contrast to Germany, which has publicly and often obsessively accepted culpability for the Holocaust, paid restitution to its victims, and released documents attesting to its guilt, the Republic of Turkey has never admitted its part in the mass murder of Armenians, much less compensated the survivors. Rather than encourage research on its past butchery, the Turkish government has promoted publications that exonerate it from any wrongdoing and portray the Armenians as traitors to the state who allied themselves with Russia and executed thousands of Turks. In 2003, Turkey's National Assembly passed a law requiring schools to deny that mass murder had taken place and it also provided in Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code that an "insult to Turkishness" was punishable by up to three years in prison. The law requiring schools to teach genocide denial is indeed different from Penal Code 301. The latter

²Roosevelt to Cleveland Hooley Dodge, May 11, 1918, in *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, Vol. 8, edited by Eliot E. Morison (Harvard University Press, 1954), pp. 1316-1318. On *The New York Times's* coverage of the Nazi genocide, see Laurel Leff, *Buried by the Times: The Holocaust and America's Most Important Newspaper* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

³Yossi Klein Halevi, *At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden: A Jew's Search for God with Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land* (Morrow, 2001), p. 156.

was used to prosecute Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk for telling the Swiss press that “thirty thousand Kurds and a million Armenians were killed...and nobody dares to talk about it.” The charges were dropped ten months before he won the Nobel Prize, but the threat of such prosecution continues, and a number of intellectuals have been convicted under Article 301.

Increasing numbers of people have been willing to write about the genocide, though, in Britain and the United States. Beginning with the reprint, in 1989, of Leslie Davis’s harrowing reports from the killing fields of Harput, a succession of English-language books documenting the genocide have appeared. Among them were collections of contemporary press articles and missionary correspondence as well as the testimonies of survivors. There followed several surveys of America’s reaction—or failure to react—to the atrocities, including distinguished works by Samantha Power, Jay Winter, Merrill Peterson, and Peter Balakian. Vahakn N. Dadrian provided an Armenian perspective on the massacres and Donald Bloxham wrote about the diplomacy of the major European powers concerning the killing of the Ottoman Armenians.⁴ All of these studies, however, were mainly about the Armenians’ suffering and the way the world responded to it. Missing was an examination of Turkey’s role in the atrocities, one that drew on Turkish sources to reveal the killers’ motives and methods of operation. The Turkish historian Taner Akçam has now made such an examination in his book *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility*.

⁴Leslie A. Davis, *The Slaughterhouse Province: An American Diplomat’s Report on the Armenian Genocide, 1915–1917* (Aristide D. Caratzas, 1989). Collections of press and missionary correspondence on the atrocities can be found in Richard Kholian, *The Armenian Genocide: News Accounts from the American Press* (Aato, 1988); *The Armenian Massacres, 1894–1896: US Media Testimony*, edited by Arman J. Kirakossian (Wayne State University Press, 2004); and *Turkish Atrocities: Statements of American Missionaries on the Destruction of Christian Communities in Ottoman Turkey, 1915–1917*, edited by James L. Barton (Gomidas Institute, 1998). The best single volume of survivors’ testimonies is Donald E. Miller and Lorna Touryan Miller, *Survivors: An Oral History of the Armenian Genocide* (University of California Press, 1993).

On American policy and attitudes toward the genocide see *America and the Armenian Genocide of 1915*, edited by Jay Winter (Cambridge University Press, 2003); Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* (Basic Books, 2002); and Merrill D. Peterson, *Starving Armenians: America and the Armenian Genocide, 1915–1930 and After* (University of Virginia Press, 2004).

For an Armenian perspective on the massacres, see Vahakn N. Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide: Ethnic Conflict from the Balkans of Anatolia to the Caucasus* (Berghahn, 1995). The interaction between Great Power diplomacy and native independence movements in the Armenian question is discussed in Donald Bloxham’s *The Great Game of Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism, and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

Akçam is hardly new to the Armenian issue or to resistance to the Turkish state. Born in 1953 in Ardahan, a province in northeastern Turkey whose once-sizeable Armenian population was decimated during World War I, Akçam studied economics at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara. His interest in the Armenian question, and in Turkish history generally, originated not in the classroom but as a leader of the leftist—the Turkish government would say terrorist—Revolutionary Path party. Akçam’s extreme anti-Western, anti-NATO activities led to his arrest in 1976 and to a ten-year jail sentence, but he managed to escape to Germany. At Hamburg’s Institute for Social Research and at the University of Hannover, he began his investigation into Turkey’s treatment



Victims of the Turkish massacre of Armenians, eastern Turkey, circa 1919

of the Armenians. In 2004 he published a groundbreaking study, *From Empire to Republic: Turkish Nationalism and the Armenian Genocide*. His new book, written under the auspices of the University of Minnesota’s Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, provides the most comprehensive and penetrating answers to date about why and how the Turks murdered huge numbers of their countrymen.

Those answers proved to be immensely complex and Akçam is meticulous and fair in presenting them. Much of his study is devoted to recreating the particular historical setting in which the Armenian genocide took place. He emphasizes that the decision to embark on a policy of “race extermination” was made neither impulsively nor idiosyncratically. Rather, it reflected successive centuries of Ottoman disappointment, humiliation, and vengefulness.

Lords of one of the vastest empires in human history, stretching from the Saharan Atlas Mountains to the Persian frontier and from the Black Sea to the banks of the Danube, the Turkish-speaking Ottomans were a formidable people, adept at both war and administration. Late medieval and Renaissance Europeans trembled at the mention of the “terrible Turk” who, as late as 1683, could still lay siege to Vienna; but from then on the Ottoman Empire suffered a continual political and military decline, with two voracious empires—the Hapsburg and the Russian—gnawing at its borders.

The deterioration of the Ottoman state had large consequences for the non-Muslim minorities in the empire, and especially for the Christians. Starting in 1536, in a treaty between Sultan

Suleiman the Magnificent and King François I of France, the Sublime Porte (*Bab-ı Ali* in Turkish, the gate of the Grand Vizier’s palace) conferred extraterritorial privileges on European traders and pilgrims in its territories. These concessions or “Capitulations” originally applied only to foreign nationals, but with the weakening of Ottoman power, they served as vehicles for extending European protection to Ottoman Christians. France and Austria were accorded the right to defend Roman Catholics residing in the empire and in 1774, after a disastrous defeat of the Ottomans by Russia, Catherine the Great became the guardian of the far more numerous Orthodox Christians. The Great Powers exploited their newfound status to broaden their control over Ottoman lands, in prepa-

ration for what they assumed was the empire’s eventual dissolution. Muslim Ottomans observed these events with feelings of impotence and disgrace. Conceived as a raiding (*ghazî*) state whose borders were constantly expanding, the Ottoman Empire was now ignominiously shrinking in the face of infidel armies. At the same time, these territorial retreats were accompanied by the abandonment of the centuries-old relationship between the sultan’s Muslim and non-Muslim subjects as mandated by Islamic law. Though defined as *dhimmi* (protégés) of the state and immune from forced conversion and seizures of property, non-Muslims—Christians and Jews, mostly—were relegated to a legally inferior status. They were prohibited from testifying against Muslims in court, from marrying Muslim women, and from building new places of worship. During different periods and with varying severity, *dhimmi* were required to pay a poll tax (*jizya*) and to wear distinctive clothes. At the same time, though, the non-Muslim communities of the empire—whether in Palestine or Mesopotamia, for example—were formally recognized as *millet*s and granted far-reaching internal autonomy in personal matters such as marriage and education. A balance thus existed between the Ottoman authorities and their non-Muslim wards, a combination, Akçam notes, of “humiliation and toleration.”

That equilibrium was steadily unsettled, however, and ultimately overturned by European intervention. Under the Capitulations, Ottoman Christians not only achieved equality with Muslims but had a superior status: they paid fewer taxes, were exempt from military service, and were pro-

ected by European consuls. From the Muslim perspective, the situation deteriorated further in the 1830s with the emergence of the diplomatic and strategic quandary called “the Eastern Question”—in effect, how to deal with the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire so as to avoid a war among Europeans over its pieces. One answer by the Europeans was to demand fundamental reforms of Ottoman law and administration. Hard-pressed sultans in Constantinople proceeded to issue a series of *Tanzimat*, or reorganizations, creating, outside of the Sharia law, a body of modern jurisprudence that transformed subjects with disparate rights into full-fledged citizens. For traditional Muslims who considered the state the agent of divine fiat and its legal system as inviolate and supreme, the *Tanzimat* were nothing less than a cataclysm, an insult to the proper order of the universe. “We have lost our sacred right that our forefathers won with their blood,” Akçam quotes one of them protesting, and anger over that loss was increasingly directed at the Christian beneficiaries of the *Tanzimat*.

Such rage only grew more intense as the century progressed and as the empire ceded control of additional provinces to Europe—Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, Cyprus, and much of the Balkans. Ottoman Christians, and the Armenians in particular, came to be seen by the Muslim majority as a fifth column working to dissolve the empire from within while the European powers took over its appendages. Antagonism toward Christians became particularly strong in the aftermath of the disastrous Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–1878 and the public request of the Armenian patriarch to Russia not to return captured Armenian areas to Turkish rule. “The Armenians are a degenerate community,” Sultan Abdul Hamid II—an advocate of pan-Islamism, declared—and his pronouncement resounded among embittered Muslims. Their pent-up resentment finally erupted in 1894, when a tax revolt in a remote Armenian village set off government-condoned pogroms throughout much of the country. “The Turkish killing of the Armenians is not simply persecution,” the German reformist Friedrich Nauman commented. “On the contrary, it is part of the life-and-death struggle of an old and great empire not willing to die without exerting one last, bloody effort to save itself.”

The same longing to rescue the empire led the Ottomans to embrace religious and nationalist ideologies that they hoped could stop it from unraveling further. But whether pan-Islamic or pan-Turkish, these movements excluded the Armenians. Even the revolution staged by the avowedly secular Young Turks in 1908, and the ostensibly multiethnic Committee of Union and Progress they established, failed to include non-Muslim leaders on an equitable basis. Nor, as Akçam emphatically points out, did all Armenians want to be included. The small but obstreperous Hanchak organization of Armenian nationalists periodically staged attacks against Turkish civilians with the goal of provoking violence and prompting Great Power intercession for its cause. One year after the 1908 revolution, in the Adana region of south-central Turkey, Muslim

rioters, inflamed by rumors of a coup in Istanbul against the new government, murdered at least 15,000 Armenians.

The Adana massacres exposed the flimsiness of the "Unionist" slogan promoted by Turkish leaders calling for "unity of peoples." The resurgence of Turkish-Muslim identity was accelerated by yet another series of Ottoman defeats in Libya and Bulgaria. Hundreds of thousands of Balkan Muslims fled into Anatolia and resettled in Armenian areas. These refugees, Akçam writes, would soon seek vengeance for their suffering by attacking their Christian neighbors. They would also provide an enthusiastic audience for Ziya Gökalp, the ideologue of a united Turkey who, inspired by extreme nationalist writings from Germany and France, began preaching the racist concept of pan-Turanism. Turkey, according to the Unionists, would reassert its rule over all ethnically Turkish populations while ridding itself of "impure" elements. "The enemy's country shall be laid waste," Gökalp vaunted. "Turkey shall grow into Turan with haste."

By 1914, the Unionist government was dominated by the militant troika of Mehmet Telsat, Ahmet Çemal, and Enver Paşa, all of them committed to the "Turkification" of the truncated empire. Entire communities of Greeks and Armenians were to be "cleansed"—driven out of their homes—by state-sponsored seizures and terrorism. A "special organization," anticipating the Nazi Einsatzgruppen, was secretly established under the aegis of the police to carry out the purge. "The transformation of the Islamic world into one of revolution... had been in preparation for some time and had now been put into action," Enver Paşa wrote to officials in Berlin in August after concluding a clandestine alliance with the Central Powers. Nearly 200,000 Armenians had already been uprooted from the Smyrna—later Izmir—region by November 5, 1914, the day that Russia declared war on Turkey and brought it into World War I.

Still, the program to eliminate the Armenians was not immediately pursued but progressed step by step over the following six months. Armenian men were first conscripted into forced labor battalions where most of them eventually died from starvation and exposure or were shot, many after digging their own graves. Next, the special organization rounded up and hanged large numbers of Armenian intellectuals; and it encouraged gangs of released convicts and Balkan refugees to ravage Armenian towns. Large-scale deportations began in the late spring following Russian advances in Crimea and the Caucasus and the British landing at Gallipoli, as battered Turkish troops sought, and found, Armenian scapegoats for their failures. Akçam cites Enver Paşa writing his wife, "If I could tell you of the savagery the enemy has inflicted, ... you would understand the things that enter the heads of poor Muslims." He assured her that the Turks would soon exact retribution. "Revenge, revenge, revenge; there is no other word for it."

Most of the slaughter was organized by officials of the national regime, provincial governors, and the gendarmes. Akçam is at his best in reconstructing the process through which the decisions were made, usually in se-

cret without the knowledge of the cabinet or the parliament. Orders were given to bring the Armenian problem, in Interior Minister Talat's phrase, to "a final end, in a comprehensive and absolute way." Akçam proves baseless the Turkish claims that the Armenian casualties were incurred during an Armenian uprising in the city of Van in eastern Turkey or in the process of relocating pro-Russian Armenians who lived near the front lines in World War I. Some 55,000 Armenians were massacred in Van before the rebellion while most of the Armenians deported lived nowhere near the battlefields. On the other hand, Akçam cites instances in which ordinary Turks, even religious officials, risked their lives to save Armenians. His book is dedicated to one of them, Haji Halil, who hid an Armenian family of eight.

Haji Halil, however, was an exception. All but a few Muslims remained silent throughout the atrocities and some participated in them. In his memoirs, Lewis Einstein, yet another American Jewish diplomat assigned to the Istanbul embassy, tells of watching as an elderly Muslim woman borrowed an officer's pistol and shot a passing Armenian refugee in the head.² Unencumbered by domestic opposition or objections from Turkey's German and Austrian allies, Turkish slaughter of the Armenians persisted until the Treaty of Mudros, signed on October 30, 1918, ended the war in the east.

Akçam devotes the concluding chapters of his book to the immediate aftermath of the war and the various efforts to prosecute those responsible for the massacres. Apart from a few dozen arrests and even fewer convictions under the British, none of these investigations succeeded. Turkish officials destroyed the evidence of their killing, burning incriminating documents as well their victims' bodies. Allied jurists were also stymied by the absence of a precedent in international law for trying people accused of committing atrocities against their fellow citizens. Yet even the obstacles posed by the lack of material proof and legal precedent might have been overcome if political and military upheavals had not convulsed postwar Turkey and clouded the memory of its crimes.

Justice for the Armenians was frustrated by discord between the Allied Powers, particularly Britain and France, whose forces occupied Istanbul after the war. While the British were intent on pressing charges against Turkish leaders, the French feared that the trials would incite agitators against the Allies and refused to give any help to the proceedings. Another impediment was the Turkish parliament, which was soon mired in debates over who had suffered more acutely in the war, Christians or Muslims.

The final and ultimately insurmountable hurdle, however, arose in May 1919 with the Greek invasion of Smyrna, which resulted in the mass killing and deportation of innumerable Muslims from the area. Armenians demanded independence in six Anatolian provinces. These events rallied nationalist forces under the charismatic command of General Mustapha Kemal. Influenced by his Unionist

past and eager to reunite the Turks after years of defeat and fractiousness, Kemal—who later adopted the name Atatürk, "Father Turk"—all but suppressed any further mention of genocide. The massacres, he claimed, were the work of a small and unauthorized clique—a "shameful act," but one for which the Turkish nation bore no collective responsibility.

The Kemalist armies proved victorious, driving out the Greeks and forcing the Allies to sue for a treaty. At the Lausanne Conference in 1923, which established Turkey's permanent borders, the Armenian massacres were not even mentioned; nor were the Armenians allowed to take part (while the claims of the Kurds were disregarded). The question of the Armenian genocide would remain in abeyance for more than eighty years, by which time its denial had become a part of Turkish law and identity. The last of the Armenian witnesses to the crime reached the age of one hundred, and the memories of emaciated children, destroyed villages, and mass graves faded.

Some nations nevertheless appear to be taking a new interest in the fate of the Armenians. Last May, the French National Assembly passed a bill formally denouncing the Armenian genocide. The law was predictably dismissed by Ankara as a device for denying Turkey's admission to the European Union. In fact, prominent French politicians have championed Turkish membership in the EU and, by enacting the law, the French parliament has created an example for other European countries to emulate. France's legislation also increased pressure on

the United States and Israel, both of which have Holocaust memorials but which have consistently feared that they would alienate Turkey if they called attention to the Armenians' suffering.

There is even some sign, albeit modest, of a change of attitude in Turkey, where the recent assassination of the Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink has forced the country to confront the genocide question. Dink, who had received death threats for his writing on the massacres and who was appealing his conviction under Article 301, was gunned down by a radical Turkish nationalist. His funeral, attended by Armenian intellectuals and church leaders as well as by senior government officials, served as a rare demonstration of solidarity and a willingness to reconcile. An estimated 50,000 mourners marched in the streets of Istanbul. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has even suggested that Article 301 might be revised. But that gesture may have more to do with achieving Turkey's entry into Europe than it does with truly grappling with Turkey's past.

Akçam is less concerned with Turkey's international standing than he is with freeing his people from their state of denial. "Only full integration of Turkey's past [with its historical record] can set the country on the path to democracy," he concludes. His courageous and timely book should be read by students and policymakers everywhere, not just in Turkey. In the shadow of Darfur and the Holocaust denial in Tehran, the lessons of Armenia should at last be learned. □

²Lewis Einstein, *Inside Constantinople* (London: John Murray, 1917), p. 231.