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Thyssen Lectures IV

The Great War Beyond National Perspectives
Ulusal Perspektiflerin Ötesinde Harb-ı Umumî



John Horne

Nineteen Fifteen and the
Totalizing Logic of the
First World War

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Historians often refer to the First World War as a ‘total war.’ The term was coined in relation to the conflict, first by the French in 1917-1918 and then by the Germans later on as they thought about the causes of their defeat. Both tried to convey how the war drew on all aspects of society – the economy, politics, religion and culture – in the effort to win victory on the battlefield. The term has its problems. The Second World War on any of these counts was more ‘total’ than the First while some earlier wars were, in their own way and by the light of their own time, no less ‘total’. I prefer to use the idea of a ‘totalizing logic’ or set of logics. By this I mean the *ten-dency* of the war to generate ever-greater violence in a self-reinforcing logic that involved more and more of society. This may better help us grasp how and why the First World War seemed to contemporaries (as it really was) so radically new.¹

¹ On definitions, see John Horne, “Introduction”, in Horne (ed.), *State, Society and Mobilization in Europe during the First World War*, 1-18, (Cambridge 1997) and John Horne (ed.), *Vers la guerre totale: le tournant de 1914-1915* (Paris 2010); Roger Chickering, “World War I and the Theory of Total War: Reflections on the British and German Cases, 1914-1915,” in Roger Chickering and Stig Förster (eds.), *Great War, Total War: Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front, 1914-1918*, 35-53, (Cambridge 2000). For the application of the idea to earlier periods, see David Bell, *The First Total War. Napoleon’s Europe and the Birth*

Whichever concept we use, I want to argue in this essay that 1915 amounted to a turning-point. In order to do so, I shall look at three kinds of violence: military combat; economic warfare; and violence against civilians. Each was vital for the ‘totalizing logic’ of the war. Each was marked in 2015 by a key centenary date, all of them within a matter of days of the 22 April when I delivered this essay as a lecture in Istanbul at the invitation of the Orient Institut Istanbul. Each was transnational. Indeed treating the war trans-nationally is now common to how the best history tries to explain it, though official and popular views are still often locked into national frameworks as the current centenary commemorations have thus far shown.²

Let me state at the outset that as a historian who adopts a transnational approach, distance and a sense of tragedy seem to me the best frameworks of understanding for the Great War. Perhaps we should try to imagine it as if it were the War of Troy (not a new comparison, by the way – contemporaries often made it), that is, as a tragedy of epic proportions made by men and women struggling to comprehend and control what they had unleashed, and whose consequences brought a world that few had anticipated. Unlike Troy, however, the direct impact of the Great War remains with us today in a host of ways. This is true of the aspects of 1915 that I shall discuss here – the intensification of violence on the battlefield, the targeting of entire populations by economic warfare, and the tendency to dissolve the distinction between soldiers and ci-

of Warfare as We Know It (Boston 2007); Peter H. Wilson, “Was the Thirty Years’ War a ‘Total War’?” in Erica Charters, Eve Rosenhaft and Hannah Smith (eds.), *Civilians and War in Europe, 1618-1815*, (Liverpool 2012).

2 John Horne, *Réflexions pour un centenaire*, in *La Revue Générale* (Brussels), March-April 2014, 8-21.

vilians. In all three regards we can trace links between the ‘turning-point’ of 1915 and war in our own early twenty-first century.

It is no less true for the geo-political impact of the war. Too often historians still focus on the western front. This ignores the fact that other regions were transformed by what was a world war, including the Balkans, Turkey and the Middle East.³ Even if it is true (and perhaps it isn’t) that the Ottoman Empire was less important than the British Empire for the outcome of the war (the latter being more powerful and a key actor on the western front), the reverse argument is clearly false. The war was *not* less important to the Ottoman Empire than to the British Empire. Perhaps three quarters of a million Ottoman soldiers died, the same as in Britain and proportionate to the population, significantly more.⁴ The war destroyed the Ottoman Empire, resulting in the emergence after a bitter war of independence of modern Turkey, whereas it brought the British Empire to its greatest (if short-lived) extent. The same case could be made for East Africa. The point is that we must be sensitive to the differential impact of the war on various zones of the world and not try to explore its global history in the singular, as if it were just a national history writ large.

3 Of course I do not mean that important new works have not been produced dealing with these areas. But they are still few compared to the multitude of works on the western front and the main ‘western front’ nations, and much research remains to be done.

4 In the current state of research, the military death toll for the Ottoman Empire is the most uncertain of all of the major belligerents. See Antoine Prost, “The Dead”, in Jay Winter (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, 561-91, (Cambridge 2014, 3 vols.), volume 3, Civil Society, (588).

The Great War was the first to be lived in real time by the bulk of the planet, owing to modern communications (telegraph and wireless) and media (notably the press). Few people were unaware of it or did not know that it was transforming their world. But they did not experience it in the *same* way because of the different trajectories of development and subjective timeframes according to which they lived their lives. This was also true, therefore, for the ‘turning-point’ of 1915, which has to be understood in terms of the different temporal and spatial frameworks of the planet.

1. Military Combat

A hundred years before the very day when this lecture was delivered, 22 April 1915, German soldiers opened the taps on canisters of chlorine gas at Ypres in Belgium, unleashing the first major chemical attack in history. The easterly wind wafted thick clouds of the substance, which killed by suffocation, towards unsuspecting Allied soldiers – Canadians, Black West Africans and older French Territorials – illustrating, incidentally, just how cosmopolitan the western front really was, like all the fronts of the Great War. General Foch, commander of French Army Group North (and in 1918 the Allied commander-in-chief) sent a dispatch to General Headquarters that conveyed his own shock and the disarray of the troops who were victims of the attack.

“Yesterday evening, we had a short, sharp surprise. The Germans sent over abundant quantities of a suffocating gas, which produced its effect at a distance of more than a kilometre along the

front from Steenstraat to Langemarck. At 17:00 hours, our territorial soldiers were gassed and the entire front line fell back [...] At the same time, our Senegalese regiment lost its hold on the area as it took serious casualties.”⁵

By using gas, the Germans offended contemporary morality and broke international law, even if other belligerent powers were also researching its use as a weapon. For suffocating gas had been anticipated (it was a product of the chemical revolution of the later 19th century) and was banned by the Hague Convention on Land War of 1907, though technically only chemical bombardment was forbidden, not wind-borne contamination, as on 22 April.⁶ Chemical warfare shocked opinion in 1915 (as it still does in Syria and elsewhere today) because it treated the enemy as an animal, or insect, to be eliminated like a pest. In the climate of national hostility that marked the war, the enemy who transgressed morality (in this case the Germans) was seen as barbaric - the author of an atrocity. Yet while the use of gas became a symbol of the utmost evil for contemporaries (a meaning it has not lost), it turned out in fact to be paradoxical in ways that illustrate the ‘totalizing logic’ of battlefield violence.

The Germans were certainly the first to develop gas as a lethal weapon. The reason why Fritz Haber, the renowned chemist and director of the prestigious Kaiser-Wilhelm-

5 Service Historique de la Défense, Paris, 6N 7, Foch to Commander in Chief, 23 April 1915.

6 L. F. Haber, „The Poisonous Cloud. Chemical Warfare“, in *The First World War* (Oxford 1986); Olivier Lepick, *La Grande Guerre chimique 1914-1918* (Paris 1998); Alberto Palazzo, „Seeking Victory on the Western Front. The British Army and Chemical Warfare“, in *World War I* (Lincoln 2000), for the logic of reprisal.

Institut, worked so hard on the project was in order to create a kind of ‘wonder weapon’ that would break the stalemate of trench warfare that had set in the previous autumn in the west when Germany’s military plan failed. The first great shock of the Great War was to the very idea of warfare itself. Some thinkers had recognized that a major war fought by the leading powers with millions of soldiers and all the resources of advanced industrial economies might last years and prove immensely destructive to the regimes waging it. But most did not assume this – not least because it might remove war as an instrument of politics, which is how it had long been seen. In fact, generals, politicians and public opinion believed the opposite, that massive infantry offensives would prevail (as in the time of Napoleon), that a war would therefore be short, and that it would leave the regimes fighting it largely intact.

In reality, a war of manoeuvre with modern firepower (that is, high explosive shells and mechanized guns that had also been developed since the 1880s) was murderous and unsustainable. The death rates of autumn 1914 were the highest of the conflict. The problem was not just the destructiveness of modern war but also the fact that it favoured the defensive. Men sheltering in trenches with machine guns and artillery could inflict devastating losses on attacking infantry. In the long-term, the answer was the restoration of mobility to modern firepower. That meant the tank, aircraft, better use of artillery in attack and new tactics. All these things were happening by 1918, and they helped shape the outcome of the conflict, though they were not perfected until the Second World War. But for much of the Great War, and certainly in 1915, there was no solution. This helps explain the soldiers’ experience.

For the discovery that only trenches could protect men from firepower led to siege warfare. Of course, sieges are as old as war itself. But traditionally (as at Troy), one side defends while the other side attacks or tries to starve its opponent out. But in trench warfare, where two parallel front lines confronted each other across what the British called ‘No Man’s Land’, each side besieged the other. Each side attacked and defended. Each side was both Trojan and Greek. And coalition warfare between two alliances meant that this happened on multiple fronts – in the west (France), east (Russia), south (Italy) and southeast (Macedonia). Europe was under mutual siege.

The Great War thus invented the ‘front,’ which is where the mutual siege was fought out. The soldiers tried to break the siege by attacks that typically failed while the other side maintained the siege by equally costly counter-attacks. This defined the experience of combat. Because it was so hard to achieve a clear victory, the residual logic of the war was attrition – that is, the belief (or hope) by each side that the enemy had suffered more losses, had been more seriously weakened, and so would eventually fall to a successful offensive.⁷

It was understandable in this context that each side would seek new weapons to help it end the siege by direct attack. The Allies justifiably condemned the Germans as barbaric for using poisonous gas. But they then invoked the principle of legitimate reprisal and used gas in their turn - the British as early as September 1915 at the Battle of Loos. Yet the protec-

⁷ For a study that explains ‘attrition’ as a consciously adopted strategy, see William J. Philpott, *Attrition: Fighting the First World War* (New York 2016). My emphasis is on attrition as a cumulative, unintended logic, often only imperfectly understood, which imposed itself on contemporaries.

tive gas mask meant that gas caused less than four per cent of combat-related deaths in the war. It was never a ‘wonder weapon’ able to end the conflict but became part of the logic of siege warfare. Other awful inventions, such as the flame-thrower, did not even contravene international law. Nor did the relentless improvement of artillery, with its deadly exploding shells that penetrated the ground or fragmented into shrapnel – the biggest killer of all. It accounted for two thirds of combat deaths in the west and probably on other fronts too.

The year 1915 thus confirmed industrialized siege warfare as the dominant soldiers’ experience of the Great War and the main source of death for its slightly more than ten million military victims. This had a particular significance for the Ottoman Empire. The British and French sought to overcome the deadlock of the western front by attacking the Dardanelles, first by sea and then by land. They wanted to break the ring of the Central Powers (and their Ottoman and Bulgarian allies) by a colonial style campaign that would provoke the collapse of military and political will in Istanbul and open the sea route to Russia. The problem they met was not the landings on the Gallipoli peninsula, which were successful, but the impossibility of advancing beyond their bridgeheads. For they faced Ottoman troops who not only defended their homeland with tenacity but who also (with the benefit of German expertise and equipment) fought as if this was the western front. As one French soldier put it after only three weeks at Gallipoli: “So, it’s siege warfare, or if one prefers, trench warfare, exactly as on the French front. I see no end to it.”⁸

8 Fabrice Pappola (ed.), *Les Carnets de guerre d’Arnaud Pomiro. Des Dardanelles aux Chemin des Dames*, 123 (Toulouse 2006).

Of course, there were other kinds of fighting in the Great War that were closer to colonial campaigning or mountain warfare. They occurred in a broad arc around Europe – in Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia. But Gallipoli in 1915, with up to a million men taking part and over a hundred and ten thousand deaths, makes most sense when understood as one of the last fronts that locked Europe into its mutual siege. When it was raised in January 1916, the siege simply shifted to Macedonia (in which Ottoman divisions also took part). Gallipoli became (and remains) a national foundation myth for Turkey and for Australia. But arguably its deeper meaning was that it was one manifestation of Europe's industrial siege. Seen in this context, chemical warfare (which was not used at Gallipoli), for all the horror entailed in its use, assumes its real importance as a symptom of the tendency for ever greater violence on the battlefield in order to break the mutual siege, and thus an expression of this first 'totalizing logic' of the Great War which became apparent in 1915.

2. Economic warfare

The next centenary event is the sinking of the *Lusitania*. On 7 May 1915, the German submarine U-20 found a British transatlantic liner with nearly 2,000 passengers and crew off the southern coast of Ireland. The *Lusitania* was in what the German government had proclaimed an 'exclusion zone' around the British Isles in which all Allied vessels, military or civilian, were liable to be sunk. Without warning, Lieutenant Walther Schwieger, commander of the U-20, fired one torpedo that struck the *Lusitania* near its boiler room, causing a second

explosion, and in eighteen minutes the ship went down with the loss of 1,200 lives (some, neutral Americans). Over 700 people were rescued. Photographs of them, shivering in borrowed rugs in Irish coastal towns, shocked the world. For the Allies, this was yet another case of the wanton German disregard of the laws of war and the lives of innocent civilians. It had the shock of the destruction of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 over Ukraine in July 2014 but on a vastly magnified scale owing to the enmity of a world at war.⁹

Yet in declaring the ‘exclusion zone’ three months earlier, the German Chancellor, Bethmann Hollweg, had justified unrestricted submarine warfare against Allied vessels as a response to the British naval blockade of Germany and its allies, which he considered the real crime. ‘England wishes to treat us like a besieged fortress,’ he declared. ‘It wishes to starve out a nation of 70 million people. Can one imagine a more barbaric way of waging war?’¹⁰ I noted that in traditional siege warfare, the attacker had two options – either to assault the town or fort directly or to starve it into surrender. The new siege warfare that gripped Europe in 1914-1918 gave both sides the indirect option, of depriving the enemy of vital supplies including food.

Most obviously the British, with the largest navy in the world, could deny Germany the resources of the Americas while ensuring that the Entente powers had free access to these. Naval power also enabled the British and French to use

9 For the latest account, see Willli Jasper, *‘Lusitania’: The Cultural History of a Catastrophe* (New Haven 2016).

10 Quoted in Gerd Krumeich, „Le Blocus maritime et la guerre sous-marine“ in Horne (ed.), *Vers la guerre totale*, 175-90 (here 177).

their own colonies while preventing Germany doing the same. Indeed, they stripped Germany of its holdings in Africa, China and the Pacific. But if Britain could use its fleet to throw a cordon around the Central Powers, the Germans discovered that a new weapon, the submarine armed with high explosive torpedoes, could counterattack Allied shipping in the hope of breaking their blockade and of choking off their supplies in turn.

The sinking of the *Lusitania* dramatized this second ‘totalizing logic,’ that of economic warfare. Naval blockade was nothing new; the British had used it during the Napoleonic wars a century earlier. However, the world had moved on. Both the nature of warfare itself and far greater global interdependence after a century of industrialization and commercial development meant that the warring states depended on imports not just for munitions but also for manpower (soldiers and labourers) and food. Britain, in particular, relied on food imports, but so also did Germany.

Hence, even the indirect approach to siege warfare – starving the enemy of supplies – was mutual, with each side attacking and defending, but this time at sea. It, too, applied to the continent as a whole, including the Mediterranean; by 1916, the Allied blockade of the Ottoman coast in Anatolia, Syria and Palestine had begun to exert a calamitous effect on the civilian population.¹¹ The position in international law was less clear than with chemical weapons. The 1907 Hague Convention on Land War had not been accompanied by an equivalent code on naval war, which remained under discus-

11 Eugene Rogan, ‘The Fall of the Ottomans. The Great War’ in *The Middle East, 1914-1920*, 290-91 (London 2015).

sion. The Germans accused the British of blockading not only their enemies but also neutral states (such as Sweden and Holland) and of including in the blockade not just war materials but also food. As Bethmann Hollweg said, the aim was to starve Germany. After the war, Germany claimed that the British blockade had killed 750,000 civilians, especially the young, sick and old. The British argued that they had only enlarged their blockade once the Germans decided to attack civilian shipping. The death toll remains debatable, since the German military regime from 1916 onwards proved inept at managing the supplies that it did have (which included imports from Germany's land neighbours and occupied territories) and distributing them equitably between soldiers and civilians.¹²

However, the key point lies elsewhere. The 'totalizing logic' of naval warfare was the inevitable consequence of the mutual siege of Europe. The only way to break the deadlock on the battlefield was to channel ever-greater means of industrial destruction to the front. But that in turn meant mobilizing civilians for war production and supplying them with food and raw materials – from abroad where necessary. Civilians therefore became military targets, indirectly through the sinking or blockading of the merchant ships that supplied them with food and other necessities or directly as sailors and passengers on civilian vessels. Owing to the logic of their submarine campaign, it was mainly the Germans who attacked civilians directly, as in the case of the *Lusitania*. It was they who ran the bigger risk of being accused of 'atrocities.' But they

12 Alan Kramer, „*Blockade and Economic Warfare*“, 460-90 in Winter (ed.), *Cambridge History of the First World War*, vol 2 *The State*, 471-76.

justified these actions in terms of ‘military necessity’ (many in Germany celebrated at the news of the sinking of the *Lusitania*, including the writer Thomas Mann) and also claimed that the sinking was in legitimate reprisal for the Allies’ attempt to starve Germany into defeat without regard for civilian lives.

There was truth on both sides. The ‘totalizing logic’ of economic production made the ‘home front’ a target and blurred the distinction between combatants and non-combatants. This was what made the sinking of the *Lusitania* not just shocking but also such a bitterly contested incident between the two camps. The Germans justified their act by falsely claiming that the ship carried munitions. In fact the small arms rounds that were part of its cargo were legal under American rules. The real issue was the protection of civilians. This was complicated by the rights of neutrals and turned on the difficulty for U boats of allowing the passengers of targeted vessels to get into lifeboats without making the submarines vulnerable to attack by prolonged periods on the surface. The USA protested vigorously against the loss of American lives in the U boat campaign and in September 1915, the Germans ended their unrestricted targeting of Allied vessels approaching the United Kingdom precisely because it risked bringing a neutral USA into the war against them.

Yet in February 1917 they began it again, running the same risk in order to apply a reverse blockade to Britain in order to starve it into defeat and so enable the Germans to win the war in the west (to raise the siege) before the inevitable corollary of American entry could change the military outcome. They failed. US participation did change the outcome.

But the Central Powers continued to call the Allied blockade a war crime. As I have mentioned, while it certainly added to civilian mortality, as it also did in the Ottoman case, it is hard to separate the naval blockade from other factors such as inefficient food distribution or the collapse of fragile domestic supply networks under the impact of war (as in Russia). Up to a million mainly Muslim civilians from Anatolia perished in the war from food shortages, economic breakdown and (presumably) the influenza pandemic. Yet the image of submarines torpedoing passenger ships (for the Allies) and of children starved by naval blockade (for the Central Powers) translated this second ‘totalizing logic’ of war into an ideological battle waged by both sides, leaving traces long into the post-war period.

3. Violence against civilians

My final centenary event occurred on 24 April. On that date in 1915, the authorities in Istanbul, acting on the orders of the Committee of Union and Progress which in effect ran Ottoman war effort, rounded up Armenian intellectuals and politicians in the capital and began the systematic deportation and associated massacres that in little more than a year killed up to a million people and forced more into exile.¹³ Informed contemporaries knew that this amounted to what would later be called ‘genocide’ because it sought to eliminate the Armeni-

13 Donald Bloxham, „The First World War and the Development of the Armenian Genocide“, in Ronald Grigor Suny, Fatma Müge Göçek and Norman A. Naimark (eds.), *A Question of Genocide: Armenians and Turks at the End of the Ottoman Empire*, 260-75 (New York 2011), for a balanced account of the role of the war in the fate of the Ottoman Armenians. For the events of 24 April in Istanbul, see Grigoris Balakian, *Armenian Golgotha, A Memoir of the Armenian Genocide, 1915-1918*, 56-57, (New York 2010).

ans as an ethnic and religious minority which allegedly threatened the Ottoman Empire as it fought for its survival, and renewal, in the war. Henry Morgenthau, the US Ambassador, called it the ‘destruction of the [Armenian] race’.¹⁴ The German missionary, Johannes Lepsius, termed it the ‘death road’ of the Armenian people.¹⁵ Lord Bryce told the British government in 1916 that 800,000 Armenians had perished by a ‘policy of extermination, something totally beyond our experience.’¹⁶ The sense was palpable that in this war of so many surprises, a new threshold of violence had been crossed.

I mentioned earlier (in arguing against a western-centred vision) that the Great War affected the Ottoman Empire (and thus post-war Turkey) as much if not more than it did the British Empire and indeed many other powers. Nothing shows this more clearly than the extermination of the Armenian minority, which places the Ottoman war experience at the heart of my third and last ‘totalizing logic’, violence towards civilians. By the same token, it means that this same episode is not just part of the longer relationship of the Armenians with the Ottoman Empire and modern Turkey – though it clearly is. It also has to be related to the violence of the Great War. I do not wish to enter here into the debate on whether the extermination of the Ottoman Armenians did or did not constitute genocide. I have no doubt that it did, for if we take the consensus on the scientific use of the term (as originally developed by Raphael Lemkin) – that is, the intention to eliminate a

14 Henry Morgenthau, *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story*, 307 (New York 1919).

15 Johannes Lepsius, *Der Todesgang des armenischen Volkes* (Berlin 1920).

16 James Bryce and Arnold Toynbee, *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, 1915-1916: Documents Presented to Viscount Grey of Fallodon by Viscount Bryce* (London 1916).

people defined by its religion, language and history – this is clear.¹⁷ But stating that it was genocide only gets us so far, since historically there have been several genocides, each with its particularities. What concerns me here is the role played by the Great War in producing this genocide and, reciprocally, the implications of the genocide for the war.

Of course, I am aware of the longer-term factors shaping what happened in 1915-16. The accelerating break-up of the Ottoman Empire, its exposure to the predatory interference by the great powers via the system of ‘capitulations’, the revolution of 1908, the emergence of Young Turk (and Armenian) nationalism, the loss of territory in the wars of 1912-13 and the influx of refugees from Europe, including leading figures of the Committee of Union and Progress, all of that is important. But nowhere did the Great War occur in a vacuum. Like any war, its impact was shaped by prior history. After all, the Greeks were supposedly at Troy because of a dispute between the gods over the apple of discord. Conversely, it is by no means clear that without the war, Armenian-Turkish relations would have taken the catastrophic turn they did. Although by no means providing the entire explanation, the war was a crucial component of the genocide.

For once the war had broken out it generated its own logic of violence against civilians - that is, against people who were not the armed forces of the enemy. In nearly every case, the war was presented as a matter of existential survival for the states fighting it. With deeper participation in politics and the growing force of nationalism over the previous half-century, not just the state but also the media and public opinion re-

17 Suny, Göçek and Naimark, *A Question of Genocide*, 15-52.

sponded to the onset of war with an intensified sense of state loyalty and national identity. This proved especially problematic (in different ways) in the three dynastic empires, Austria-Hungary, Tsarist Russia and the Ottoman Empire, whose painful confrontations with the claims of nation (and social class) had helped cause the war in the first place. Arguably the Ottoman Empire, reeling from defeat in the Balkans and a loss of imperial prestige, and in part already remodelled by Young Turk nationalism (with its liberal inclusive and radical exclusive variants), expressed these contradictions more acutely than any other state.

Nonetheless, the factors that appeared with such force in the Ottoman case were by no means unique to it. Everywhere, the war reinforced patriotism and patriotic identities, which often took a national form. It also generated the image of the enemy as a usually de-humanised opponent – like the savage German submarine killers or the British who starved children. Older ethnic and religious distinctions reinforced this primal antagonism, which drew on the emotion of hatred. Forging the figure of the enemy was a fundamental role of ‘war cultures’ in all the powers participating in the Great War. In Britain (and Australia and Canada), France, Germany and elsewhere, ‘enemy aliens’ (as the British called them), who had been caught by the war on hostile territory, were interned. Enemy businesses were confiscated. Spy fever swept every country as did riots against establishments and people with enemy sounding names or associations. This reaction was instantaneous in 1914. Each of the belligerent powers created not only the figure of the enemy but also the sub-set that consisted of the

‘enemy within’ – the treasonable element who potentially threatened the national or imperial effort with betrayal.

The construction of both the external and the internal enemy was reinforced by the initial experiences of the conflict. For if the war bogged down in the mutual siege of Europe that I have described, its opening phase was made up of invasions and counter-invasions. The Russians invaded East Prussia and Austrian Galicia while the Germans invaded Belgium and France. The Austrians invaded Serbia three times before they conquered it in 1915. In the summer of that year the Austrians and Germans forced the Russians to retreat onto their own territory before the front (and siege warfare) was re-established. And of course the Ottoman Empire invaded the Russian Caucasus and Persia before the defeat at Sarikamish in January 1915 opened the way to a Russian counter-invasion, including the advance on Van, followed by the Allied landings at Gallipoli on 25 April. Each of these invasions triggered waves of distressed refugees while also bringing the enemy onto home territory.

For this reason, they powerfully heightened the feeling that the war was a question of imperial or national survival and they provoked violence against civilians of different kinds and degrees. Myth and hysteria abounded, fuelling the hatred already created by the figures of the enemy and the ‘enemy within’. They stoked accusations of enemy ‘atrocities.’ For example, the German armies invading Belgium and France in 1914 wrongly but genuinely imagined that they faced a mass uprising of civilians – a guerrilla insurrection. Responding violently, German soldiers killed over 6,000 innocent inhabitants in two months. Unsurprisingly, the Allies condemned these war crimes (for such they were) as ‘atrocities.’ Compa-

nable events occurred in other invasion zones.¹⁸ Retreats were equally fraught. As the Russian armies were forced out of Galicia and Poland from May to August 1915, they expelled the frontier populations whom they accused of disloyalty. Three million people, half a million of them Jews, became refugees in Russia, amid much violence. Only the intervention of the parliament against the High Command pre-empted a possible genocide.¹⁹

As the Russian case shows, ethnic, religious or national minorities (and they were often all three) posed a potential problem for how the war effort was imagined. The problem was compounded by the fact that such minorities frequently straddled the frontiers of the warring states. Even in the case of well-established nations this was true. Just think of the difficulty posed for both sides by Alsatians in the German and French armies or Italians in the Austro-Hungarian army. But for multi-ethnic empires, the issue was not incidental to how they fought the war – it was integral. The Ottoman Empire was in no sense unique regarding its Armenian, Assyrian Christian and Greek minorities.²⁰ The difference lay in the fact that those in power (the radicals of the Committee of Union and Progress) already had a singular vision of something that by definition was plural and multinational, and this turned the ‘enemy within’ into a particularly lethal scapegoat. By contrast, the imperial regimes in Austria-Hungary and Tsarist

18 John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (London 2001); Alex Watson, “‘Unheard of Brutality’: Russian Atrocities against Civilians in East Prussia, 1914-1915,” *Journal of Modern History*, 86/4, 2014, 780-825.

19 Peter Holquist, „Les Violences de l’armée russe à l’encontre des juifs en 1915: causes et limites,” in Horne (ed.), *Vers la guerre totale*, 191-219.

20 Joseph Yacoub, *Year of the Sword: The Assyrian Christian Genocide: A History* (London 2016).

Russia in 1915 still sought to reconcile nationality and empire in their war efforts and so reacted against the ‘enemy within’ in a less extreme manner.

The result was that in the Ottoman case more than any other, the image of the enemy was projected intensely not only onto the soldiers and even civilians of the opposed camp but also onto the minority components of Ottoman society itself. In a state already defeated (in the Libyan and Balkan Wars) before the Great War began, the experience of set-back and invasion in the initial phase of the conflict in 1914-1915, which it shared with many other countries, triggered an even more radicalized view of the enemy than elsewhere in part because this was year five of a continuum of military violence and wartime experience, but in part, too, because radical nationalists had seized hold of an empire. Both are responsible for the fact that in the Ottoman case, the ‘enemy within’ came to be seen as an equal if not greater menace than the ‘enemy without’ to which, in any event, it was imagined as closely linked.

Once again, I must stress that I am not assigning sole causal responsibility for the ensuing genocide of the Armenians, or the violence against other minorities, to the war. But I am suggesting that the war was more than context. My third ‘totalizing logic’, violence against civilians, sprang at root from the ways in which the figure of the enemy was constructed when societies went to war. It had been as little predicted or understood in advance as the transformed nature of warfare. In that sense, it argues against a premeditated destruction of the Ottoman Armenians. The scale and depth of the political and cultural mobilization for the war in 1914-1915 was everywhere a surprise, and its integrating effect – its power to

forge a new social cohesion by including a variety of groups in the war effort – was remarkable. But in certain circumstances, it was an equally powerful force for exclusion, especially if the real enemy was felt to be within. That is what happened in the Ottoman Empire.

Does this mean that there was no sympathy by some Armenian nationalists for the Entente cause or that no Russian Armenians fought as irregulars with the Russian army? Of course not, just as the Committee of Union and Progress appealed on both religious and national grounds to potentially favourable minorities on the other side of the frontier, in the Tsarist Empire.²¹ But it does suggest that these actions, which were predictable once the Young Turk leaders (after a good deal of hesitation) had taken the Ottoman Empire into the war, were minor and bore little relationship to what followed – except in the imagination. And there is the nub of the matter. In a war into which the Ottoman rulers entered as a form of national redemption – a military solution to the existential crisis of the empire – the ‘enemy within’ was likely to assume mythic proportions. As Enver Pasha, War Minister in the ruling trio, argued: ‘In this great national mobilisation [...] the great sacrifices that the people have to make must primarily advance the people’s national identity [...]. The people must embrace the idea that it is shameful to do nothing when the fatherland is in danger.’²²

21 On these issues, see Donald Bloxham, *The Great Game of Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians*, 69-96 (Oxford 2005); Mustafa Aksakal, „The Ottoman Road to War”, in *1914: The Ottoman Empire and the First World War*, 153-87, (Cambridge 2008).

22 In a comment to a naval attaché at the German embassy and childhood friend, Hans Humann, on 2 October 1914 (that is, in anticipation of Ottoman entry into the war), quoted in Aksakal, *Ottoman Empire*, 168-9.

If you accept my argument that the ‘totalizing logic’ of violence inherent in the war provided not just the context but much of the causal energy of the genocide, then one priority would be to investigate more closely the mindset and mentality – the ‘wartime culture’ – of those responsible. By this, of course, I mean not just the Young Turk leadership but also the complex elements that made this central tragedy of the Ottoman war possible (to revert to the Homeric perspective). I am in no sense an expert in Ottoman history. But my instinct would be to start with the myth of the ‘Rising of Van’. For in my own work on the German invasion of Belgium and northern France, what emerged most forcefully was the power of the legend of a guerrilla uprising which in reality had not taken place. Faced with a rising tide of violence against Armenians in the countryside committed by the retreating Ottoman Third Army, the Armenian population of Van took elementary steps of self-preservation. But these were transformed in the eyes of the Ottoman regime and the military into a mass betrayal by the ‘enemy within’ as it sought to prepare the way for the advancing Russian forces, which contained some Russian Armenian units, and with which the local Armenians were held to identify. This strikes me as fertile soil for exactly the kind of fearful myth of treason and betrayal that could act as detonator – or at least as one of the detonators – for the destruction of Van by the Ottoman forces and start the expulsion of the Armenians from eastern Anatolia.

However powerful they are, myths and mentalities must find organisational expression in order to acquire real historical agency. So I would then wish to know how the Special Organization, the gendarmes, the army and also the ordinary people on the path of the deportation and massacres (includ-

ing the Kurds) had imagined and de-humanized the Armenians in advance, had constructed the vision of the ‘enemy within’, to the point that they could commit the violence that followed. For it is one of the virtual constants of massacres and a fortiori of genocides that the perpetrators have to imagine themselves in advance as the true victims in order to commit the kinds and levels of violence that, even for wartime, transgress accepted norms.

And I would take it that the evidence one finds of officials who were reluctant to participate and of individuals who gave succour or aid is further evidence that the genocide, whatever its pre-war potential may (or may not) have been, was in fact a direct product of the war – perhaps the most terrible example during the Great War of that ‘totalizing logic’ that could turn an entire community of civilians into the ‘enemy within’ and the subject of its own destruction.²³ As such, the genocide of the Ottoman Armenians demonstrates the links of genocide to war, links which may have been made in the more distant past (since like ‘total war’ all societies probably have the capacity, given the constraints of their own resources, to commit genocide) but which would characterize the Second World War on an even greater scale. In this regard, sadly, the Ottoman Empire turns out to have been absolutely central to the history of the Great War as a whole.

23 Balakian, *Armenian Golgotha*, for multiple examples.

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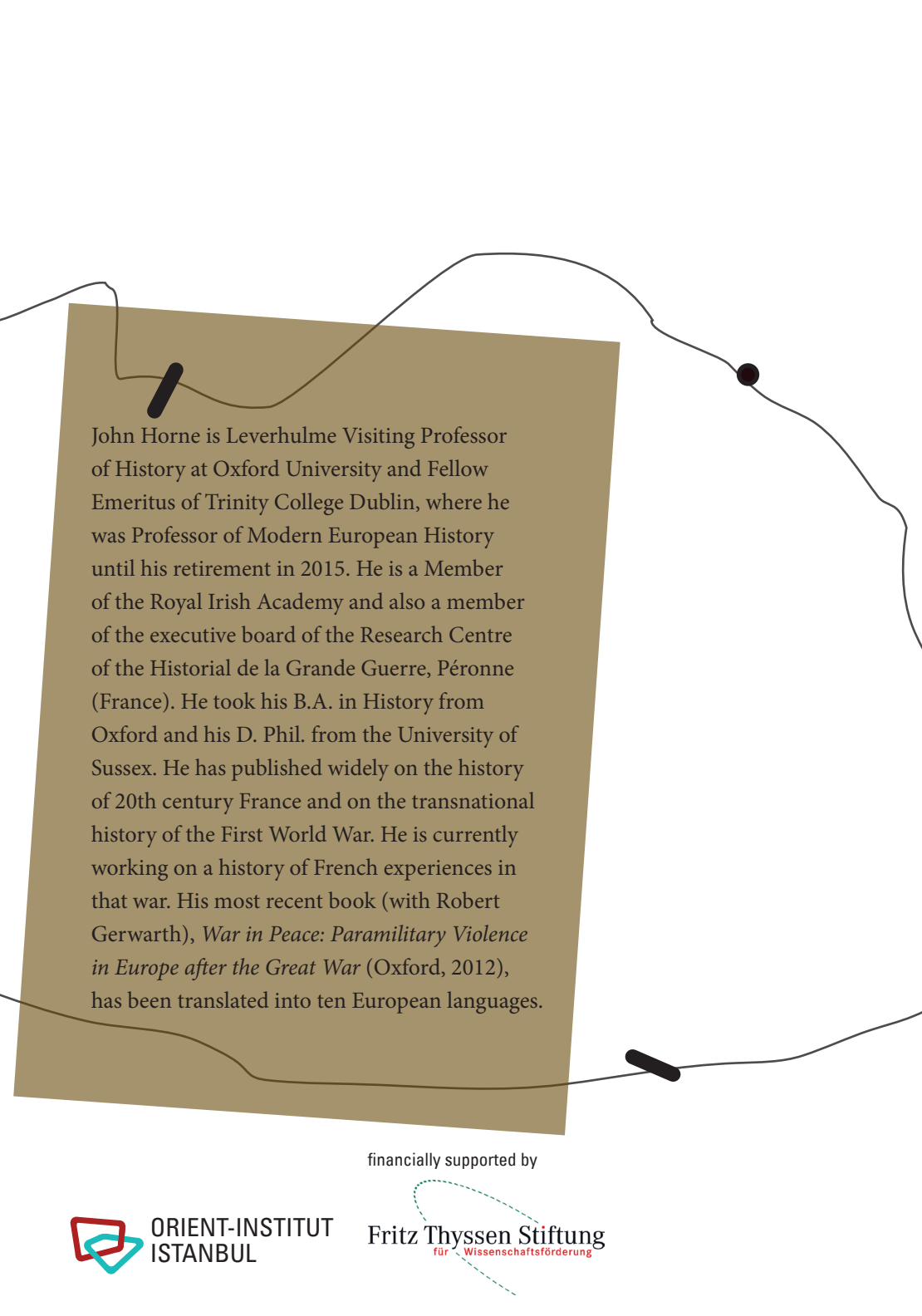
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