

5. Ian Hancock, "Gypsy History in Germany and Neighboring Lands: A Chronology Leading to the Holocaust and Beyond," in *The Gypsies of Eastern Europe*, eds. David Crowe and John Kolsti (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1991), p. 20; Henry Friedlander, *The Origins of Nazi Genocide: From Euthanasia to the Final Solution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), pp. 140–41.

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***The Banality of Indifference: Zionism and the Armenian Genocide*, Yair Auron (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000), 405 pp., \$39.95.**

A prominent legacy of the Holocaust is the debate over the comparative significance of twentieth-century genocides. The most common comparison contraposes the World War II Jewish Holocaust and the World War I Armenian Genocide at the hands of the Ottoman Turks. Another legacy has been to consider the role of bystanders during the Holocaust, the tragic consequences of the indifference or acquiescence of individuals, institutions, and governments. The title of one important work on the subject suggests that as victims of Nazi genocide, the Jews of Europe were "abandoned" by their neighbors and by the non-Jewish world generally.¹

These two questions are intimately linked in Yair Auron's *The Banality of Indifference: Zionism and the Armenian Genocide*, a study of the reactions of the Jewish community in Palestine (the *Yishuv*) to the mass murder of Armenians by the Ottoman Turks. In addressing the first issue, the author observes that most Israelis tend to emphasize the singularity of the Jewish Holocaust, de-emphasizing any similarities with the Armenian or other genocides; most Armenians stress the parallels between the two without denying the uniqueness of the Holocaust. In discussing the second issue, Auron reveals the bystanders' general indifference and acquiescence to the Armenian Genocide, and in particular the continuing legacy of indifference and denial among Zionists in the years before and after the First World War, and in the State of Israel since its establishment in 1948.

The author believes in the uniqueness of the Holocaust, but his central purpose is to raise the question of how Jews, especially Israeli Jews, have related to the tragedies of others. He faults the Zionist movement and the State of Israel not for emphasizing the uniqueness of the Holocaust, but for doing so with little consideration for the tragedies endured by other peoples. He believes that the world should accept the uniqueness of the Jewish Holocaust, but also consider it in the context of other genocides to draw larger conclusions about human nature. He insists that "Israeli society frequently arrives at conclusions, meanings, and lessons of the Holocaust that are essentially Zionist and Jewish," not ones that are universally human (p. 24).

Scarred by recent memories of pogroms in Eastern Europe, confronted by the realities of Ottoman rule in Palestine, and situated in the context of the traditional

Zionist hope for assistance from the Ottomans' German ally, the *Yishuv*'s position was unquestionably precarious before and during World War I. As a result, the official Zionist stance on the Armenian question was "largely muted and self-interested." The official Zionist movement and the majority of the *Yishuv* referred to Armenian genocide atrocities before and during World War I not in terms of universal human rights and unqualified support for the victims, but simply as a fate that Jews had to avoid at all costs. Although individual members and groups within the *Yishuv* and the Zionist movement occasionally expressed sympathy, the Zionist movement was officially motivated by self-preservation rather than altruism: the protection of Jewish rather than human rights, fearing that "the Turks might do to the Jewish community in Palestine, or at least to the Zionist elements within it, what they had done to the Armenians" (p. 75).

The subtitle of the book is inspired by Hannah Arendt's thesis on the "banality of evil," as presented in her original and controversial study of Adolf Eichmann.² If evil is a part of human nature, Auron argues, so too is indifference, a proposition and logic that is not difficult to accept. Auron reminds the reader of what he perceives to be Israeli society's general refusal to acknowledge the existence of evil within its midst and therefore also its indifference to the suffering of others. He suggests that Jews are capable of being perpetrators and bystanders, not only victims. The recent work of Israeli historians such as Benny Morris, which reveals Israeli violations of Palestinian human rights in 1948 (including large-scale expulsions, confiscation of property, and even ethnic cleansing), provides a larger historical context with which readers might approach Auron's book.³

At first glance the scope of this valuable study appears narrow, as it seeks to use the lens of a relatively small constituency (the Jewish community in Palestine before and during World War I) to address universal questions about genocide and human nature. The larger purpose of evaluating *Yishuv* statements about the Armenian Genocide both before and after the establishment of Israel in 1948 and in the context of *Yishuv* response to the World War II Jewish Holocaust becomes clear only in the last quarter of the book. Auron attempts to do this without any reference to the larger, predominantly non-Zionist Jewish world of which the *Yishuv* was also a part. In other words, the author is critical of the narrowly self-interested *Yishuv* reaction to the Armenian Genocide but does not provide a larger Jewish context for consideration of these important questions.

It would have been useful to consider non-Zionist Jewish organizations' reactions to the Armenian Genocide. The author asserts that Zionists outside Palestine as well as Zionist immigrants spoke favorably of the Ottoman government, whereas Jews born in Palestine tended to be critical of Ottoman atrocities and Zionist acquiescence. In comparison to their European-born counterparts, why did Palestinian-born Zionists tend to feel less threatened by their Ottoman rulers and thus more readily expressed their sympathy for the Armenians? And if European Zionists generally ignored the fate of the Armenians, were non-Zionists in the Diaspora equally indifferent? Did

the Armenian question play any role in the very complex and problematic relationships between Zionist and non-Zionist organizations in Europe and America? Is there a difference between Diaspora and Israeli views on the meaning of the Jewish Holocaust and the suffering of others? If there is, what is it about Zionism and the Jewish State that makes this so?

Despite eschewing such issues, Auron's study is a useful and timely contribution to a larger reinterpretation of Israeli history. The Jewish Holocaust as a cataclysmic culmination of modern anti-Semitic ideology and European political movements is central in the Israeli historical consciousness. This is a natural consequence of the centrality of anti-Semitism in the origin and development of Zionism and the Zionist movement over a century ago. But the author asks contemporary Israeli society to move away from "an extreme and almost utter focus on the Jews as victims, and a disregard . . . of [other] acts of genocide in the twentieth century, among them the murder of the Armenians and the extermination of the Gypsies" (p. 373). Jews are not only victims, but have also been self-interested bystanders during the victimization of others, says Auron, and this is the challenge the author presents to modern Israeli and Diaspora Jews.

Notes

1. See David Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941–1945* (New York: Pantheon, 1984). See also the earlier work by Arthur Morse, *While Six Million Died: A Chronicle of American Apathy* (New York: Random House, 1968). Indifference, political expediency, and diplomatic evasion were among the explanations for American apathy toward the plight of the Jews during World War II.
2. See Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1964).
3. See for instance Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); and idem, *1948 and After: Israel and the Palestinians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

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Colonial Genocide, Alison Palmer (London: C. Hurst; Adelaide: Crawford House, 2000), ix + 248 pp., A\$29.95.

This study grew out of the author's doctoral research in sociology at the London School of Economics. It compares what European and white Australian contemporaries themselves referred to as the "extermination" of the Aborigines in the Australian state of Queensland from the 1840s through the 1890s with the military suppression of the Herero and Nama peoples by the German military in German Southwest Africa (SWA—present-day Namibia) from 1904 to 1907. Palmer's goal is to test whether