



# The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America's Response

By Peter Balakian

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In this groundbreaking history of the Armenian Genocide, the critically acclaimed author of the memoir *Black Dog of Fate* brings us a riveting narrative of the massacres of the Armenians in the 1890s and genocide in 1915 at the hands of the Ottoman Turks. Using rarely seen archival documents and remarkable first-person accounts, Peter Balakian presents the chilling history of how the Young Turk government implemented the first modern genocide behind the cover of World War I. And in the telling, he also resurrects an extraordinary lost chapter of American history.

During the United States' ascension in the global arena at the turn of the twentieth century, America's humanitarian movement for Armenia was an important part of the rising nation's first epoch of internationalism. Intellectuals, politicians, diplomats, religious leaders, and ordinary citizens came together to try to save the Armenians. *The Burning Tigris* reconstructs this landmark American cause that was spearheaded by the passionate commitments and commentaries of a remarkable cast of public figures, including Julia Ward Howe, Clara Barton, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Ambassador Henry Morgenthau, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Alice Stone Blackwell, Stephen Crane, and Ezra Pound, as well as courageous missionaries, diplomats, and relief workers who recorded their eyewitness accounts and often risked their lives in the killing fields of Armenia.

The crisis of the "starving Armenians" was so embedded in American popular culture that, in an age when a loaf of bread cost a nickel, the American people sent more than \$100 million in aid through the American Committee on Armenian Atrocities and its successor, Near East Relief. In 1915 alone, the *New York Times* published 145 articles about the Armenian Genocide.

Theodore Roosevelt called the extermination of the Armenians "the greatest crime of the war." But in the turmoil following World War I, it was a crime that went largely unpunished. In depicting the 1919 Ottoman court-martial trials, Balakian reveals the perpetrators of the Armenian Genocide confessing their guilt -- an astonishing fact given the Turkish government's continued denial of the Genocide.

After World War I, U.S. oil interests in the Middle East steered America away from the course it had pursued for four decades. As Balakian eloquently points out, America's struggle between human rights and national self-interest -- a pattern that would be repeated again and again -- resonates powerfully today. In crucial ways, America's involvement with the Armenian Genocide is a paradigm for the modern age.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Now faded from memory in the shadow of the Holocaust, the Turkish slaughter of more than a million Armenians in 1915-1916 was a virtual template for the 20th-century horrors that followed, and much of what Balakian describes so powerfully is now chillingly familiar: inhuman brutality; mass deportations of helpless civilians (often in overcrowded railroad boxcars); headlines screaming of "systematic race extermination"; activists and intellectuals calling for intervention; and, most devastatingly, the lack of political will in the West to intervene to stop the slaughter. Balakian exposes the roots of the genocide in the "total war" atmosphere of WWI, which combusted with the pan-Turkish nationalism of the Young Turk government, inflamed Muslim rage against "infidel" Armenian Christians, and a long-simmering Ottoman hatred of the Armenians dating to Sultan Abdul Hamid II and his slaughters in the 1890s. Balakian, who wrote so movingly of the impact of the genocide on his own family in *Black Dog of Fate*, also underscores how well known the Armenian destruction was in America through detailed reports by U.S. consuls throughout Turkey and steady newspaper reporting, and how great the response was in providing humanitarian assistance to refugees and survivors. In a horrifying account, city by city, region by region, Balakian quotes firsthand testimony about the decimation of the Armenian population and their towns and culture. Yet he retains the measured tone of a historian throughout; if anything, he lets Woodrow Wilson off too easily for not declaring war on Turkey. But readers will come away sadly convinced that Armenians' brave but doomed stand in Van should be as celebrated as the Warsaw ghetto uprising, and the corpse-strewn Lake Gaeljak as well known as Babi Yar. 16 pages of b&w photos and maps not seen by PW.

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From [Booklist](#)

Culminating in the organized murder of more than one million Armenians in 1915, the Armenian genocide was both a systematized continuation of violence begun in the nineteenth century and a chilling premonition of larger and more systematic European genocide to come. A detailed account of the "hidden holocaust" sewn together from archival research and the testimony of survivors, this selection also documents another tragedy: America's response to the crisis. In the 1890s, led by William Jennings Bryan and Theodore Roosevelt, among notable others, American Protestants felt a sympathy for the plight of their fellow Christians that was both heartfelt and fashionable. It was, argues Balakian, an inaugural moment for the American defense of international human rights. Yet political concerns kept Woodrow Wilson from declaring war on Turkey, and by the late twentieth century, moral clarity sadly erodes in the face of cold war necessity and oil-driven foreign policy. Even today, Turkey denies that a genocide ever took place. In this important book, Balakian proves adept at presenting both human horror and political tragedy. *Brendan Driscoll*

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Review

"In this important book, Balakian proves adept at presenting both human horror and political tragedy."  
(Booklist)

The terrible fate of the Armenians... is brilliantly described. A great service to the history of the Armenians."  
(Sir Martin Gilbert, author of *The Righteous: the Unsung Heroes of the Holocaust*)

"An eloquent account of Turkey's long campaign to rid itself of Armenians....Thoroughly convincing."  
(Kirkus Reviews)

“Peter Balakian tells the powerful and largely unknown story of [Armenian Genocide]. This important and compelling book is long overdue.” (Deborah E. Lipstadt, Ph.D., Dorot Professor of Modern Jewish and Holocaust Studies Director, Emory University)

“The Burning Tigris is an act of acute historical memory, of personal testimony, of prophetic witness - and of high art.” (James Carroll, author of Constantine's Sword and Secret Father)

“A gripping treatment of the official Turkish mass murder...a masterpiece of moral history...it needs to be widely read.” (Paul Fussell, author of The Great War and Modern Memory and Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War)

“Balakian tells a story long ripe for the telling.... He writes with grace and power.” (Jean Bethke Elshtain, Laura Spelman Rockefeller Professor of Social and Political Ethics, The University of Chicago, author of Just War Against Terror: The Burden of American Power in a Violent World)

“[A] fascinating and affecting memoir.” (New York Times Book Review)

“Richly imagined and carefully documented.” (The New Yorker)

“[An] engrossing and poignant memoir.” (San Francisco Chronicle)

“A mighty work, a slow burn of muted eloquence, dense with scholarship...compelling.” (Forward)

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**Peggy Dunn:**

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