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A Review of *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America's Response* by Peter Balakian

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Peter Balakian's *New York Times* bestselling book: *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America's Response* provides a detailed interpretation on the mass extermination of Armenians, and how they became subservient during the rise of Turkish nationalism. President Joe Biden's acknowledgement on April 24, 2021 of the Ottoman Turks' mass murder of Armenians during World War I as a genocide is a momentous accomplishment when no prior U.S. president has used this specific term to condemn the event as an act of bigotry. Balakian's book is exceptional, impressive, and pertinent for addressing genocide denial now that the U.S. is more aware how the Ottoman Turks instigated propaganda

to plan for the extermination of the Armenian population during the early 20th century. His main idea focuses on America's involvement in Armenia from the 1890s through World War I to demonstrate that Armenians became victims of oppression based on their efforts to challenge Ottoman authority in Turkey. The central argument of Balakian's book is Turkish nationalists organized an efficient system to evict and murder Armenians. Even though, Americans became greatly informed about Armenian atrocities, Balakian wants readers to realize that his purpose for writing this book is to show the Turks persecuted all Armenians based on their Christian beliefs. Balakian uses excellent graphic imagery to help an individual comprehend the terror and brutality of the Armenian Genocide by emphasizing how "Armenians were rounded up, arrested, and either shot outright or put on deportation marches" (175). This evidence correlates to the purpose behind Balakian's book, since his motive is arguing that Turkish nationalists wanted to control Turkey in order to reestablish Islam as the official religion within the entire country.

As a historian, Balakian does a thorough overview of America's involvement with providing aid to the Armenians by uncovering discussions in the White House, the State Department, and Congress. Americans first knew about mass killings in Turkey from Clara Barton, who led The American Red Cross, to provide international support for Armenians who were displaced by Turkish violence, which caused overwhelming amounts of hunger and disease. Balakian is explicit that Boston became one of the first cities to help Armenians when social reformers convened at Faneuil Hall in 1894 to establish the Friends of Armenia. He

also succeeded at expressing how New York's National Armenian Relief Committee members, Spencer Trask, John D. Rockefeller, and Jacob Schiff, helped fund Barton's efforts to travel with her relief members to the Ottoman world. Balakian's description of Henry Morgenthau, U.S. Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, is significant for conveying his key theme that Armenians gradually faced extermination, and America had to intervene to control a horrifying human rights crisis. Balakian's interpretation of the Armenian Genocide is an eyeopener for all; the Turks considered the Armenians as outcasts and the only solution required total annihilation. Without Balakian's discussion of abolitionists and women's suffrage activists such as Julia Ward Howe, Alice Stone Blackwell, and Isabel Barrows, his book would not have a cohesive argument, since Armenian persecution needed to become noticed to resist Turkish nationalism.

America's response to the Armenian Genocide is an essential aspect of Balakian's book and explains that U.S. citizens prioritized humanitarianism to break away from isolationist beliefs. Balakian addresses Armenian oppression in Turkey by referring to opposition against the sultan's absolute authority in the Ottoman world. He thoroughly expressed that without reports from *The Boston Globe*, *The New York Times*, or *Harper's Weekly*, Americans would not understand the devastation and brutality of Armenian persecution. This corresponds to Balakian's core issue that as time passes, people neglected the Armenian Genocide due to the outbreak of World War I and the demise of the Ottoman Empire. The inhumane treatment of the Armenians by the Ottoman Turks is well researched from Balakian's narrative on the Turkish Killing Squad

Units and their commitment to follow the Ottoman government's commands to eradicate Armenian culture. The overarching theme of Balakian's narrative is reexamining the gradual severity of Armenian persecution from the 19th century through World War I, when the European Great Powers threatened to conquer Ottoman territory. Balakian's additional argument is continuously informing readers about the consequences of human suffering to show that each generation needs to become more cognizant of genocides to prevent destruction of humanity.

Balakian succeeds at discussing the origin of the Ottoman Empire's intolerance against the Armenian people and the beginnings of Turkish nationalism. His purpose is to advocate that Turkish Muslims rather than Armenian Christians deserve equal rights in the Ottoman world. This connects to the central argument of Balakian's book, because his perspective is Armenians were in a precarious situation under Turkish rule as a result of undefined boundaries between the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires. Balakian's critical analysis of Sultan Abdul Hamid II is important for understanding Turkey's transition to a nationalist regime once the Young Turk Movement ended after World War I. As political unity declined, Balakian indicates a mass extermination of Armenian citizens began in response to their demands for social reforms to limit the sultan's power in order to create a representative political system. Balakian's knowledge on the evolution of the Armenian Genocide is remarkable, through his use of balancing narrative with factual evidence to convey that Sultan Abdul Hamid II failed to acknowledge Armenians and all other Christian followers throughout the Ottoman Empire. Balakian's interpretation of Sul-

tan Abdul Hamid II is clear as he describes how Armenian existence in the Ottoman Empire became controversial as nationalist support arose to purify Turkey as a Muslim country.

For the reader of his book, Balakian needs to include more evidence on the tension between Armenian citizens and Sultan Abdul Hamid II, since there is less interpretation about why Greeks and Assyrians experienced fierce attacks by the Turks. Balakian's lack of explanation on the Greeks and Assyrians in his story of the Armenian Genocide refers to the complex history of religious bigotry spreading across the Ottoman Empire after the Middle Ages. In total, Balakian's argument and core ideas are evident through his extensive research on political unrest that emerged from the Armenian Question in the 19th century to systematically kill Armenians. Balakian's analysis of Ottoman propaganda is vivid and re-identifies his central argument that the struggle for the Ottoman Empire became whether or not to grant protection under law for its Christian subjects. The ethnic cleansing of the Armenians is restated effectively by Balakian to show how Turkey is responsible for causing a genocide of the Armenians, who were a minority population as Christians in the Ottoman Empire.

Balakian's key ideas about American aid to Armenian citizens and Young Turkish Nationalists rejecting social reforms are crucial for explaining commonalities with the Holocaust due to Jews also becoming victims of oppression for their religious beliefs. Both Armenians and Jews experienced barbaric treatment, which allows Balakian to emphasize the pain of a genocide as innocent civilians struggled to cope with injury, disease, deportation, and death. The fact that Balakian

equates the Armenian Genocide with the Holocaust demonstrates his point of view that Armenians and Jews were immediately slaughtered, which represents the controversy of violating one's existence in humankind. From Balakian's view, he is helping readers visualize the horror and catastrophic losses from the Armenian massacres to show the Turks should never be forgotten for starting a genocide. This allows Balakian to enhance his narrative on the Armenian Genocide to prove that political regimes have absolute power to exterminate any undesirable minority population. Balakian mentions the Holocaust to make his argument more substantial that Armenians became a threat in Turkey because they advocated for political reforms within the Ottoman Constitution in order to have their equal rights as Christian citizens. Although Balakian draws consistent attention to Armenian persecution throughout World War I, he then reflects on Nazi propaganda during World War II to captivate a reader's attention that Jews and Armenians were equally tortured as enemies of the people.

Balakian wants to challenge people's perspectives on history by recognizing the importance of memory, because millions of Armenian lives were lost during World War I, which exemplifies destruction of human existence. Balakian's communication about trauma and political unrest during the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust represents learning from the past in order to improve the future of history, so mass extermination of any minority group never happens again. This redeveloping theme in Balakian's book strengthens his overall argument that everyone should never forget any genocide throughout world history, or there will be ongoing ignorance, xenophobia, and a

rise in extremist political regimes.

Furthermore, Balakian's additional core issue that is significantly researched involves the emergence of Mustafa Kemal, who continued Turkish nationalism by prohibiting Armenian resettlement in Turkey after World War I. The purpose of Balakian's examination of the Kemalist leadership in Turkey is to prove that Kemal's followers still massacred Armenians to prevent them from having any political sovereignty or independence within their own country. As Armenia's independence became controversial amongst the rise of the Soviet Union, Balakian maintains his concise narrative, with detailed historical evidence, to argue that Kemalist supporters wanted to completely cleanse the Armenian people to expand Turkish autonomy. This evidence pertains to Balakian's earlier reoccurring theme in his book, because the intention is defining that Armenian annihilation became inevitable so Turkey could become superior after losing territory during World War I. The systematic killing of the Armenians exemplifies how the Kemalists had xenophobia, which Balakian discusses, to make a connection with the earlier Young Turk Nationalist supporters, who also followed Muhammad's teachings to instigate violence. These interconnecting historical events make Balakian's story meaningful, since he strives to reiterate that killing or deporting Armenians from their villages symbolizes how their culture nearly became non-existent.

Even after World War I, Turkish military leaders were held accountable for their criminal acts to murder Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, representing that during a genocide, perpetrators of hate and injustice will be interrogated, then sentenced for ruin-

ing humanity. The controversy from the Kemalists is relevant to Balakian's key issue that the Turks could not continue their nationalist ideology without determining a strategy to exterminate the Armenians. This implies that Balakian's theme is informing readers how the Armenian Genocide became an act of evil to purposely dehumanize the Armenians for threatening to reform Ottoman rule in Turkey. Balakian expresses his feelings on this subject matter considerably to argue that genocides take the lives of innocent victims, and it is difficult to overcome despair even after justice prevails. The most influential message of Balakian's story is propaganda can cause genocides when political leaders scapegoat a population, who are likely to organize rebellions against legal policies. This requires all people to think with an open mind and not deny that any genocide happened because Balakian and other genocide scholars are able to precisely retell stories and legacies of people's experiences from any era.

As a well-respected historian, poet, and professor at Colgate University, Peter Balakian's in-depth assessment of the Armenian Genocide represents his passion to offer new insight that America did not ignore the mass murder of the Armenian people. This particular event in human history becomes extremely tragic through Balakian's ability to communicate that Armenians were in danger prior to World War I as the Ottoman Turks feared the collapse of their empire. Balakian's book convinces readers that the Armenian Genocide becomes forgotten in world history due to the start of World War I in Europe and the lack of investigation into Turkey's history of nationalist support before becoming an independent republic. This allows Balakian to use evidence from the American and Ot-

toman press to make his argument that the Armenian Genocide should be remembered as a human rights conflict that evolved into systematic murder. Balakian’s expertise as a scholar of the Armenian Genocide is praiseworthy by sharing his reactions on the many stages of Armenian oppression from the late 19th century through World War I to show America’s patriotic spirit benefited injured and homeless Armenians. Balakian’s story is compelling for all readers because his critical thinking and analytical discussions of human atrocities are apparent by mentioning survivor reactions from the Armenian priest, Krikoris Balakian, and an adolescent girl named Aurora Mardiganian. Balakian’s research on these survivors of the Armenian Genocide creates a convincing narrative that each moment became heart-breaking as Turkish military officials raped women, mutilated limbs, crammed people into crowded train cars, and placed thousands in detention camps. This descriptive evidence made Balakian’s insight on the Armenian Genocide powerful to show that every day became an ultimate fight to survive. Balakian emphasizes self-reflection as a necessity to have as it represents courage to eliminate injustice. As an author of Armenian heritage, Balakian shares how all genocides are traumatic and leave a painful legacy until people show more sympathy for human suffering. His book has a lasting impact on an individual to reassess their existence in society and to make our world have compassion by terminating genocide denial.

Work Cited

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About the Author

Wise Huston Chabot is a graduate student in the MA in History program at Salem State University. His review of *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America’s Response* by Peter Balakian come from the course Turkey and the Armenian Genocide taught by Dr. Alexandros K. Kyrou. Huston received his BA with a major in history and a minor in Near Eastern and Judaic Studies from Brandeis University. Huston has had a passionate interest in history since he was little. He also enjoys playing tennis and discussing current events. His lifelong goal is to aspire to future graduate degrees in a variety of liberal arts disciplines.