ARMENIA, AUSTRALIA & THE GREAT WAR,
By Babkenian, Vicken & Stanley, Peter
(Sydney: NewSouth, 2016), 323pp

Dr Anthony McRoy

The authors state (p. 274): ‘The Australian media have now fully committed to a view of the Great War and especially of Gallipoli, that sees Turks as noble defenders – and, like Australians, the victims of an imperial power (Britain in Australia’s case, and Germany for Turkey).’ It is amazing that such a distortion of history should have reached consensus level. When Australia entered the Great War, it was as a self-governing Dominion, motivated by Commonwealth solidarity with the mother country, and the move had bi-partisan support in her Parliament. There was no goal of territorial aggrandisement on Australia’s part (albeit it was awarded German Papua after the war), nor did it use the war as cover to ethnically cleanse and massacre any ethnic or religious minority. In contrast, Turkey was an independent ally of Germany, which entered the war with the aim of annexing Russia’s Turkic possessions (as well as Iranian Azerbaijan, which it invaded) in the name of Pan-Turanianism, and used the war as a cover to get rid of its Christian Armenian, Assyrian and Greek communities in a deliberate ethno-sectarian purge. There is no genuine analogy, and Australia’s media really needs a lesson in history.

In many ways, this book supplies that need in an unusual way. Most of the evidence for the Armenian Genocide of around 1.5 million Christians comes from survivors, missionaries, German and Austro-Hungarian officials (both nations were Ottoman allies), and US consul George Horton and Ambassador Henry Morgenthau (America was neutral until 1917). The book presents a group of unexpected and largely overlooked witnesses: Australian POWs. The bravery of the Anzacs in the Great War is renowned both in Australasia and the UK, as is their terrible suffering at Gallipoli. However, one does not see any reference to them in regard to the Armenian/Assyrian/Greek Genocide in major publications relating to the issue. In this respect, a tribute to their role in exposing the massacres is welcome and long overdue. Hopefully, the Australian media will take it to heart and revise their bizarre view of the war.

The main chapters of note are the sixth and seventh, the former noting that Ottoman Armenians were among the soldiers captured by the Anzacs at Gallipoli, (p70). Elsewhere, Anzacs, as part of the British forces progressing in Palestine and Transjordan in 1918, encountered large groups of Armenian deportees – e.g. 10,000 in one case, (p77). Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Mills of the 4th (Anzac) Battalion rescued Armenian deportees near Amman and carried a four-year-old Armenian girl on his camel to Jerusalem. In another case, in 1915, 5000 Armenian survivors were rescued by a French vessel, brought to British Egypt, where they were treated alongside wounded Anzacs. In such ways, the reports of the massacres began to reach Australia.

The most fascinating and unexpected feature of this story is that of the Aussie POWs. The narrative begins with Australian submariners from the vessel AE2 prisoners who were interned in Afion Karahissar and learned it formerly was home to thousands of Armenians who has been expelled and massacred, (p 85). A POW from the Gallipoli battle, Lieutenant Luscombe, saw the Armenian deportees from his train as he travelled to his internment place, witnessing their being driven with whips into cattle-trucks, (p 86). When Luscombe arrived in Angora, he found he was to be held in an Armenian monastery whose monks had been massacred by the Turks. A Private Creedon, POW from June 1915 until his death the following April, wrote that ‘The people say that the Turks killed 11/4 million people’, (p89). Captain White, interned in mainly Armenian town of Tel Armen, noticed the absence of the menfolk, and learned of the massacres. The chapter proceeds to give further POW testimony.
This book is fascinating, sobering and moving. It is written in a very lucid and engaging style, and clearly meant for a general audience. Its central message – the witness of Australian POWs – is little known and deserves wide circulation – not least, it seems, to the Australian media. Aussies are rightly proud of the courage of the Anzacs; this book shows they may be equally proud of their compassion.

Dr Anthony McRoy, of dual UK/Eire citizenship, holds a PhD from Brunel University and is Lecturer in Islamic Studies at Union School of Theology, UK. He is the author of From Rushdie to 7/7 (London, 2006) and has contributed to various other publications, as well as writing many articles and reviews. His research interests presently include Islamic Origins, Byzantine-Islamic relations, Shi’ism, late Ottoman relations with its Balkan, Armenian, Assyrian and ethnic Greek subjects, historical and contemporary Jihad, and current Islamic polemics. He is married with three grown up children.

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Armenia, Australia and the Great War by Vicken Babkenian & Peter Stanley. NEW SOUTH, $34.99. Complicating Australia's evolving understanding of the Turks as noble defenders at Gallipoli is the tragedy of the Armenian genocide that coincided with this campaign. Hours before the Anzac landing, Ottoman authorities rounded up 230 Armenian leaders in Constantinople. It was the beginning of the empire's attempt to exterminate the Armenian population. This moving history explores how the persecution of the Armenians intersected with Australia's emerging sense of nationhood, through