

The Armenian Massacre and Its Avengers

The ramifications of the assassination of Talaat Pasha in Berlin

by Rolf Hosfeld

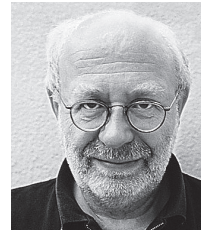
The 1921 trial in Berlin of Mehmet Talaat's Armenian assassin, Soghomon Tehlirian, sent reverberations around the world. Two young law students at the time would go on, respectively, to become the assistant prosecutor at the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal and to give a name to the wholesale Nazi murders—"genocide." The trigger to Raphael Lemkin's development of the legal concept of genocide was the Armenian massacre.

On the ides of March in 1921 the last Grand Vizier of the Ottoman Empire was assassinated in the center of Berlin by an Armenian revolutionary. Mehmet Talaat had fled to the German capital before the World War I Allies occupied Constantinople in 1918 and was living there under a pseudonym. He had had a meteoric rise after the revolution against Sultan Abdul Hamid II in 1908, and especially after the coup of the Young Turks in 1913, to become the most influential man in the Committee of Union and Progress that ruled dictatorially in Constantinople. At the time of his death, Talaat Pasha was already well-known in Germany as the mastermind of the persecution of the Ottoman Armenians, which claimed more than a million lives from 1915 to 1917.

In the Berlin trial of Talaat's assassin, Soghomon Tehlirian, defense lawyers portrayed their client as a modern-day William Tell. Tehlirian was acquitted, on grounds of temporary insanity. Later it became clear that he had acted as an agent of the Armenian "Nemesis" revenge network.

Two young law students at the time immediately grasped the significance of the sensational trial. In Berlin Robert M. Kempner sat as an observer in court; a quarter century later he would become the assistant prosecutor in the Nuremberg war crimes trials of Nazis. In Lvov in eastern Poland Raphael Lemkin began formulating his ideas about how to exact legal accountability for atrocities of such enormity that he called them "genocide." A quarter century later he would be the father of the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide.

After World War I there was a brief period in which some influential Turkish political circles held the taking of responsibility for the country's past to be a necessary condition for political renewal. "Does not the nation have the right to receive a report about the atrocities?" asked Ahmet Djemal in 1920 in his few months as interior minister. "Only in this way will the bloody past be extinguished." Indeed, in 1919 and 1920 a Turkish military tribunal under the leadership of Nazim Pasha began what was then a unique and exemplary process of legal accountability. "What can be expected of us is justice in the name of general human rights," said public prosecutor Mustafa Nazim at the opening of the trial. "The innocent murder victims will rise from the dead again." On the basis of compelling evidence and witness testimony, the court convicted Talaat and sixteen other principals for "crimes against humanity." On July 5, 1919 Talaat was sentenced to death *in absentia*.



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This interlude of openness was soon over, however. When the Turkish nationalist leader Mustafa Kemal “Atatürk” recaptured Constantinople in 1922—even though he conceded to American General James G. Harbord that some 800,000 Armenians had died during the deportations—he dissolved the military courts and had their convictions overruled. Ever since then, successive Turkish governments have denied that any massacre occurred. This year, when the Bundestag put on its agenda the Armenian slaughter and the German Reich’s role in suppressing information about it, Turkish Ambassador to Germany Mehmet Ali Irtemcelik objected. He called the debate a “gross slander on Turkish history” serving “fanatical Armenian nationalism,” one that insulted the many Turks living in Germany and impaired “the integration process.” Former Turkish diplomat Gündüz Aktan added that the Germans should be wary of trying to relativize the atrocities they themselves had conducted by trying to put the “Armenian incidents” in the same category. And a Turkish Member of Parliament from the Republican People’s Party put it to the Germans more acerbically, declaring, “In the Armenian question, we are the accusers.”

Frank Admission of Intent

At the time of its campaign against the Armenians, the Turkish government had far fewer compunctions about stating its intent frankly, at least to its German wartime allies. Talaat literally conceded to German Consul General Johann Heinrich Hermann Mordtmann that the deportations and massacres were intended to do nothing less than “to destroy the Armenians,” reported German Ambassador Baron Hans von Wangenheim to Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg on July 7, 1915. The ambassador further quoted Talaat as stating that the Turkish government wanted to use the world war “to get rid of its domestic enemies—native Christians—through and through, without being disturbed by foreign diplomatic intervention.” At the end of that year German Ambassador Count Paul Wolff-Metternich concluded in a telegram to the chancellor that Talaat himself was undoubtedly the cold-blooded “soul of the Armenian persecutions.”

The reporting of German diplomats recounted so much detail, in fact, that some entire days in the history of the campaign can be reconstructed from the horde of files in Berlin’s foreign ministry. There could have been no doubt in Berlin about what was going on.

The drive began with deportations and massacres in early 1915 in the provinces of eastern Anatolia. Within a few months the great deportations would empty all of Anatolia of Armenians. (The capital city of Constantinople and the port city of Smyrna, or Izmir, were not similarly purged.) By June more than 200,000 Armenians were already being driven out of the upper Euphrates valley and outlying areas.

“This large-scale resettlement resembles massacres,” the German consulate in eastern Anatolia reported at the beginning of June 1915. The manner in which the expulsion was carried out made it tantamount to “an absolute extermination.” At the end of June Consul Heinrich Bergfeld telegraphed from Trabzon: “I share the view of all of my colleagues that the transport of

women and children under the...circumstances described is something that borders on mass murder.” In July, Consul Walter Rößler from Aleppo recorded that daily, for an entire month, bundles of corpses tied together were floating down the Euphrates. “The bodies had all been tied in the same way, two by two, back to back,” he reported, and concluded “that this was not a case of [spontaneous] slaughter, but of killing by officials.”

In the extensive German foreign ministry archives from this period there emerges a detailed record of the places where victims were selected, massacred, and assembled, including the time, scope, mechanism, and the political authorities responsible for the policy of annihilation and the murderous activities of the paramilitary “Special Organization” named *Teskilati Mahsusa* that was specifically set up for this purpose and was subject to the party discipline of the ruling Young Turks Committee.

Until July 7, 1915, one might have supposed that the measures undertaken had been confined to local reactions to the war. After July 7, however, it was clear, Ambassador Wangenheim in Constantinople reported to the German government, that the Turkish government’s deportation policy was “actually pursuing the aim of destroying the Armenian race in the Turkish empire.” The assessment that Turkey’s Armenian policy amounted to a centrally planned policy of annihilation was never subsequently questioned in Berlin’s governing circles, even if military censors and diplomatic offices abroad made an effort to let as little information as possible leak out to the world.

Documented Genocide

By now the existence of the Armenian genocide is well proven. It no longer requires fundamental documentation by historians, despite the assertions of the Turkish government and Ambassador Irtemcelik. Berlin, the patron and closest ally of Turkey in World War I, knew this better than anyone else. “After everything that has happened, the following can be safely assumed,” reported a First Lieutenant Stange—who was well acquainted with the local paramilitary executors and with the role of their allies among the political commissars of the Committee—to the German military mission in Turkey on August 23, 1915: “The expulsion and annihilation of the Armenians was decided on by the Young Turks Committee in Constantinople, was well-organized, and was implemented with the assistance of members of the army and volunteer associations”—*i.e.*, “the Special Organization” *Teskilati Mahsusa*.

The government of the German Reich thus knew all too well what actual conditions were like. “Our sole aim is to keep Turkey on our side till the end of the war,” Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg declared in late 1915, “regardless of whether the Armenians perish or not.” Without the protection of the German Empire, the Turks could not have carried out the mass murder of the Armenians. Individual German officers were even directly involved in the business of deportation, according to information that author Christoph Dinkel published in the 1970s. Germany could have—as Ambassador Wolff-Metternich demanded in November 1915—impressed on a Turkey that was so dependent on Germany “fear of the consequences” and

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could have “expressed displeasure in our press about the Armenian persecutions.” Yet nobody was willing to do this. “To induce a break with Turkey on the Armenian question,” the foreign ministry said, was something we “neither regarded nor regard as correct.”

Official Turkish policy, however, continues to regard any mention of the genocide of the Armenians as a declaration of war on Turkey. In early 2003 the Turkish Education Minister issued a decree to all secondary schools, instructing them to carry out an essay contest on the subject of “the rebellion of the Armenians in the First World War and their crimes.”

It is true that between ten and twenty thousand Turks actually did fall victim to Armenian acts of revenge, mostly in the areas of eastern Anatolia temporarily occupied by Russia during the final years of the war. “Yet the question is not,” according to historian Halil Berktaş, who teaches in Istanbul, “whether they killed relatively few and the Ottomans many. The issue is rather that the activities of Armenian guerilla bands generally took place on a local scale and represented isolated, small actions.” From a historian’s scholarly perspective, it is thus out of the question to speak of a general “rebellion of Armenians in the First World War” that threatened the existence of the Ottoman Empire, according to Berktaş.

Further evidence against this claim is provided by the vehement denial in reports from the German consulate in what was then the eastern Anatolian border town of Erzurum that there was any plan for an Armenian rebellion in the early months of the war when the violence of large-scale depopulation

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actions began there in May and June of 1915. The fact that deportees in the tens of thousands let themselves be led away without resistance by just thirty guards certainly argued against any threat of an imminent “rebellion” in favor of the approaching Russian army. The consul had precise knowledge of those responsible for the deportation. They were not preventing an insurrection; instead, they were following a “militarily unfounded order, in my view attributable only to racial hatred.”

As Ziya Gökalp, the chief ideologue of the Committee and a close friend of Talaat, put it: “In reality, there cannot be a common home and fatherland for different peoples....The new civilization will be created by the Turkish race.” And as Sükrü Bey—the head of the Aleppo deportation authority whose view of a life-and-death struggle for the Turkish nation was shaped by political Darwinism—told the German Consul Rößler at the end of 1915: “The weaker needs to disappear.” Unambiguously, he declared, “The final outcome must be the extermination of the Armenian race.”

The decision in favor of a radical solution to the Armenian question was probably reached in mid-March 1915 at a meeting of the Young Turks Central Committee, as an Allied armada gathered at the Dardanelles, threatening the Ottoman capital. On March 16 Governor Guloglu Sabit Bey told German Consul Paul Schwarz “that the Armenians have to be destroyed and will be destroyed,” because their wealth and their numbers had increased “so that they have become a threat to the ruling Turkish race.”

Systematic Persecution

The systematic persecution began on April 24, as the Allies began their landing action on the Gallipoli peninsula. The decision that they must evacuate the imperiled capital and reorganize the fight from Anatolia made the ruling Young Turk cadres view the Armenians living there as dangerous enemies who had to be brought under control.

By late April such a self-induced paranoid psychosis of purging the “mass of damaging microbes” that “had attacked the body of the fatherland” (Diyarbakir governor Mehmed Reshid) led the radical nationalist faction of the ruling Young Turks Committee to recommend options ranging from punitive violence, political murder, and systematic deportation to annihilation.

Their thinking had long been governed by Turkish ideologies of purity and anti-Armenian stereotypes.

Their main problem was that in the process of nation-building that set in with the revolution of 1908, but especially with the disastrous Balkan wars of 1912/13, the Armenians too were insisting on their autonomy and could not be turned into Turks.

The Armenian genocide and the 1921 trial of Soghomon Tehlirian set precedents for the 20th century. “For the first time in legal history,” Kempner wrote in 1980 in retrospect, the Berlin court recognized the principle (if not *de jure*, then at least through the trial’s overall course and impact on the outside world) “that gross violations of human rights, and especially genocide that is committed by a government can be contested by foreign states, and that [such foreign intervention] does not constitute impermissible meddling in the internal affairs of another state.”

In retrospect, Raphael Lemkin worried that “Tehlirian had appointed himself as the executioner of the conscience of mankind.” In private notes he mused, “Yet can anybody appoint himself to carry out justice? Won’t this kind of justice tend to be ruled by emotions and degenerate into caricature? At this moment the murder perpetrated upon an innocent people held a greater significance for me. To be sure, I still had no definitive answers, but I had the certain feeling that the world had to promulgate a law against this form of racially or religiously motivated murder....Sovereignty, I believed, cannot be misunderstood as the right to kill millions of innocent human beings.”

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