



“You are a Jew; these people are Christians. The (Muslims) and the Jews always get along harmoniously... What have you to complain of? Why can't you let us do with these Christians as we please?”
—Talaat, Minister of the Interior for the Committee of Union and Progress

Chapter 5

THE RANGE OF CHOICES

IN A PROBLEM FROM HELL: AMERICA AND THE AGE OF GENOCIDE, SAMANTHA POWER WRITES: “WE HAVE ALL been bystanders to genocide. The crucial question is why. . . . The answers seemed to lie in the critical decisions—and decisions not to decide—made before, during, and after the various genocide.”⁸⁸ This chapter focuses on the choices made by a wide range of people in response to the genocide—from diplomats to missionaries to ordinary Turks and even members of the Young Turk party. Although some people were actively involved in the genocide—issuing orders, escorting the deportations, attacking women and children, and rounding up Armenian men and executing them—many others either witnessed part of the process, or heard stories about what was happening. Confronted with massive injustice, people had to make a decision. What role would they assume? Would they speak out, and if they did, who would they speak to? Would they risk their lives to rescue men, women, or children? Would they go about their lives, pretending they were unaware? Did they believe the anti-Armenian propaganda? Did they choose to believe it?

Often scholars of history classify people's involvement with injustice into categories, such as bystander, perpetrator, victim, resister, or rescuer. These labels reflect the complexity of human behavior. There is a wide range of choices people can make in the face of quickly moving events. Often people who are in

one role at one time choose to respond differently in another. People who once had the opportunity to make a choice often lose those opportunities as time passes. Writing about individuals who spoke up during genocide, Samantha Power created a new category, “upstanders,” people who stand up to get others to take notice and make a difference. While the people Power writes about were unable to stop the process of genocide, their choices often saved lives. The actions of “upstanders” remind us that if the warning signs are recognized early enough prevention is possible.

During the second decade of the twentieth century, the Armenian massacres were widely publicized. Many people, inside and outside of the Ottoman Empire, were aware of the persecution of the Armenians, Greeks, and Assyrians. What influenced the ways people responded to that knowledge? While some people halfway around the world chose to become deeply involved in trying to protect the victims of the genocide, others who directly witnessed the murder of innocent people did little or nothing.

Albert Camus, a French writer who joined the resistance during World War II, wrote about the choices people make in the face of injustice:

I know that the great tragedies of history often fascinate men with approaching horror. Paralyzed, they cannot make up their minds to do anything but wait, and one day the Gorgon monster devours them. But I should like to convince you that the spell can be broken, that there is an illusion of impotence, that strength of heart, intelligence and courage are enough to stop fate and sometimes reverse it.⁸⁹

This chapter explores responses to the Armenian Genocide and highlights the stories of how individuals challenged silence and indifference.

Reading 1 — REMEMBERING RESCUE

Although many people were aware of the massacres of Armenians, very few reached out to save others. Yet the stories of ordinary Turks who did what they could to save Armenians are recorded in the stories of survivors. Too often, the stories are of nameless individuals, and, as historian Richard Hovannisian observed: “Altruism during the Armenian Genocide of 1915 is a subject that has not been studied.” He and his colleagues are working to understand the complex motivation of individuals who saved Armenians during the genocide. Scholars at the Zoryan Institute, an Armenian research organization that works to educate people about the genocide and Armenian life, believe that much can be learned from sharing the stories of Turkish rescuers.

As the leaders of the Ottoman Turkish government in 1915 were rounding up the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire for mass deportation and slaughter, a number of Turks risked their own lives to help Armenians escape certain death. There is no way to know today how many such individual acts of courage and humanity occurred in those tragic times. Our sources of information are largely anecdotal: family histories transmitted orally, autobiographies and personal memoirs, and the oral testimonies of survivors.

These acts of heroism and kindness stand in stark contrast to the cruelest savagery displayed by the perpetrators of the Armenian Genocide. Their importance is great, for several reasons. First, they are additional evidence of the Armenian Genocide. Secondly, they illustrate that, while there was indeed a genocide, not all Turks supported it. Thirdly, these stories serve to reassure us of the human potential for courage and virtue. While these stories do serve as evidence of goodness, they can not and should not be used to counterbalance the record of evil in some quantitative manner, as there are relatively few documented examples. The quality of goodness they evidence, however, may give some comfort to us all.

What did these people do? As Armenians were being rounded up, forced to sell all their possessions, save what they could carry, for a tiny fraction of their worth, and led off to what was certain death, some individual Turks hid them in their homes, while others helped them escape to safety. It must be noted that these Turks did so in the full knowledge that to be caught helping an Armenian meant summary execution.... In such highly charged circumstances, one can only imagine today the difficulty of helping Armenians escape to a safer location, or keeping secret the fact that a group of Armenians was hidden in one's home. Providing food for them, giving them privacy for bathing and other necessities of life, were all fraught with mortal danger.

Why did they do it? One can only speculate. We know in some cases it was because of long-standing personal friendships. Yet, there are many cases where Turks helped Armenians who were strangers. It seems that basic human decency was a key element, although there are cases where some benefit to the rescuer was involved (e.g., bribes, labor, sexual exploitation, marriage to the rescuer's chil-

dren), as well as forced conversion to Islam.⁹⁰

Members of Kourken Sarkissian's family were among those that were rescued by Turks:

I am the son of genocide survivors. My father is now 90, my mother 82. His father was hanged, his mother raped and killed, and of the nine children in the family, only he and his five year old brother survived.

The story of my mother's family was different, atypical, but not to be neglected for that reason. My maternal grandfather was hanged in front of his family, which included his pregnant wife, my grandmother, and four children between the ages of two and eight.

A Turkish businessman, Haji Khalil, had been my grandfather's partner, and had promised to care for his family in case of misfortune. When a disaster greater than anything either of them could have imagined struck, he kept his promise by hiding our family in the upper story of his house for a year. The logistics involved were extremely burdensome: including my grandmother's niece, there were seven people in hiding. Food for seven extra mouths had to be purchased, prepared and carried up undetected once a night and had to suffice until the next night. Khalil's consideration was such that he even arranged for his two wives and the servants to be absent from the house once a week so that my grandmother and her family could bathe.



Courtesy of the Armenian National Institute

**An Armenian Orphan
after the genocide.**

When two of the children died, he buried them in secret. He took tremendous risks and his situation was precarious, because his servants knew what he was doing. Had he been caught sheltering Armenians, he would almost certainly have shared their fate. Luckily, his household was loyal and discreet, and so I was one of the few children of my generation and neighborhood to grow up with uncles and aunts, all of whom remember the Turk Haji Khalil—may God bless his soul.

I grew up in the predominantly Armenian districts of Aleppo and Beirut, attended Armenian schools and joined Armenian organizations like the Zavarian movement. The dream of a free, independent Armenia and of the nightmarish genocide perpetrated by the Turks became the obsessions of my life. Both from Armenian organizations and from other survivors I learned that Turks had been inhuman monsters, and indeed many had

behaved as such. Yet the memory of Haji Khalil was also part of my consciousness, and so I grew up with a dichotomy, knowing the story of a humane Turkish man, his family and household.

This internalized duality taught me that truth and justice cannot be had easily; they must be searched for I want to extend my hand to the people of Turkey, to ask them to remember that though at one time their state was led by mass murderers, they also had their Haji Khalils, and that it would honor the memory of the latter to acknowledge the overwhelming truth of the genocide, to express regrets, so that the healing process may begin between our two peoples. Because without this healing mass extermination as a tool of political dominance may become more common in the future.⁹¹

CONNECTIONS

- Is it important to understand the motivation of rescuers? Do their actions speak louder than any words or explanations they might share?
- Often entire groups of people are blamed for mass atrocities like the Armenian Genocide. In an essay titled “Intervention and Shades of Altruism during the Armenian Genocide,” Richard Hovannisian writes:

Even in the extreme circumstances of 1915, there were thousands of Turks, Kurds, and others who opposed the persecution of the Armenians. Some of them tried to intervene. The testimony of the victims attests to the fact that kindness and solace were manifest amid the cruelty and suffering, and that the human spirit was never fully extinguished.

How do these stories of break down generalizations and stereotypes? How do they help the healing process?

- Knowing the story of Haji Khalil taught Sarkissian that “truth and justice cannot be had easily; they must be searched for.” How can stories like Sarkissian’s and Khalil’s broaden our perspective on how all people understand truth and justice?
- Kourken Sarkissian says “I want to extend my hand to the people of Turkey, to ask them to remember that though at one time their state was led by mass murderers, they also had their Haji Khalils.” What does he hope will happen through the acknowledgment of Turkish rescuers?

Reading 2 → TRYING TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Ahmed Riza, an early leader of the Young Turks and a member of the Ottoman parliament during and after the genocide, and Ali Suad Bey, the governor general of Deir-el-Zor found themselves, as Turkish politicians, witnesses to the unfolding genocide as well as being part of a government that was responsible. What could they do to stop the atrocities? What were the risks of taking a stand?

At the outset of the genocide in 1915, the Ottoman parliament introduced two bills: The Temporary Law of Deportation, which authorized the deportation of the bulk of Turkey's Armenian population, and The Temporary Law of Expropriation and Confiscation, which allowed the government to confiscate Armenian cash and property and resell it for profit.

There was no debate on the Law of Deportation. It was approved by the cabinet. However, the Temporary Law of Expropriation and Confiscation came up for debate during the fall sessions of the Ottoman parliament in 1915. The debate gave Senator Ahmed Riza an opening. He argued that the proposed law violated basic constitutional protections and pleaded for the government to assume responsibility for the people who were being deported.



Courtesy of the Armenian National Institute

1915, deported Armenian family—two older couples and two young children—living under a tent in the desert.

Senator Riza pleaded with his government to allow the deportees, “hundreds of thousands of whom, women, children and old people, are helplessly and miserably wandering around the streets and mountains of Anatolia, to return to their original places of residence or to settle wherever they wish before the onset of winter.” He then submitted a draft bill that proposed to postpone the Temporary Law’s application until after the end of the war, arguing that the Temporary Law was, “contrary to...the Ottoman Constitution.... [I]t is also inimical to the principles of law and justice.”⁹² Riza’s actions provoked a strong backlash and ultimately no action was taken on Riza’s proposal. Despite the pressure he faced, Riza continued to speak out forcefully. In a later session of parliament, Riza once again took up the issue of confiscated Armenian property. He argued:

*It is unlawful to designate the Armenian assets and properties as “abandoned goods” for the Armenians, the proprietors, did not abandon their properties voluntarily; they were forcibly...removed from their domiciles and exiled. Now the government through its officials is selling their goods. . . . Nobody can sell my property if I am unwilling to sell it. . . . If we are a constitutional regime functioning in accordance with constitutional law we can’t do this. This is atrocious. Grab my arm, eject me from my village, then sell my goods and properties, such a thing can never be permissible. Neither the conscience of the Ottomans nor the law can allow it.*⁹³

In December 1916, Riza continued his resistance when he took on the special organization, which had become primary actors in the genocide. Without raising questions about its actions directly, Riza argued that the law allowing convicts to enroll in the special organization degraded the military. He argued that:

Our nation’s respect for the military, its esteem of and affection for the military corps, is great. Those who are enrolled in it are [expected to] not only protect its rights, but also its honor. . . .

*Parents, who learn of the presence in the army of murderers and criminals, do not want to send their offspring to it; even if they did, they would do it with [feelings of] loathing and disgust. . . . [The convicts’] immorality and wicked attitudes can, however, be contagious for their companions, and corrupt the sense of morality in the Army.”*⁹⁴

After the war, Riza’s first speech in the new Ottoman Senate publicly exposed the dimensions of the massacres. He declared:

*All Ottomans, irrespective of race and creed, shall equally benefit from [the blessings of] justice and freedom during the reign of his Imperial Majesty [the new Sultan, Vahdeddin.] The Sublime Highness, His Imperial Majesty, will not allow that the orphans and widows of those Armenians who were savagely killed off, those Arabs who were hanged and exiled, be overwhelmed by miseries on this earth. There shall be no more people weeping and moaning in places of exile.*⁹⁵

Riza wasn't the only Ottoman politician to try to make a difference. Many Armenian survivors describe the heroic acts of Turks, some of whom were in positions of power, who tried to save their lives. Several witnesses recorded the efforts of a Turkish governor, Ali Suad Bey, to save the lives of Armenians who had been deported and placed under his supervision in Deir-el-Zor [now part of Syria]. An American eye-witness believed that Ali Suad Bey's example makes it clear that, "even if one is prepared for a moment to admit a reason of state for the mass-deportation of the Armenians ... it was surely not necessary for the Turkish authorities to betray basic humanity."⁹⁶ He recalled:

A few months ago, 30,000 Armenians in various camps outside of the town were ... under the protection of the governor, Mutessarif Ali Suad Bey.... I would like to remember this man's name, who has a heart, and to whom the deportees are grateful, for he tried to lighten their miseries.... The mitigating circumstances, under which the Armenians of Der-el-Zor existed, became the cause for a denunciation at the Central Authorities in Constantinople. The "guilty" Ali Suad Bey was sent to Baghdad and replaced by Zekki Bey who is well known for his cruelty and barbarism. I was told horrible things that happened under the rule of the new governor... Ali Suad Bey, this rare example of a Turkish official, had lodged about 1,000 children in a large house, where they were fed at the cost of the municipality.⁹⁷

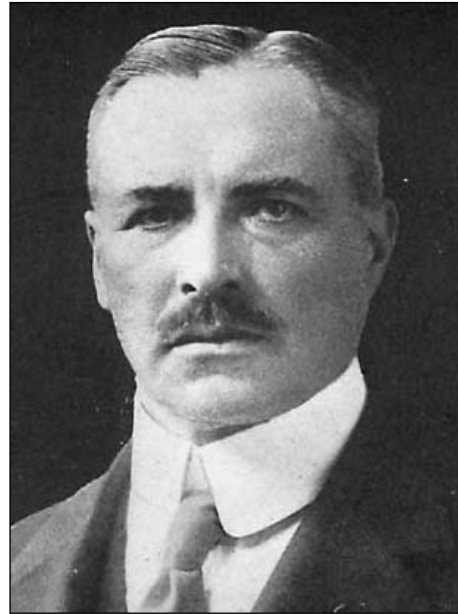
CONNECTIONS

- What risks did Ahmed Riza and Suad Bey take in order to help victims of the massacres? Would you consider them heroes? How do their actions influence the way you think about the choices made by their peers to remain bystanders?
- What kinds of arguments did Ahmed Riza use to try to win support in the Ottoman Parliament? Did they appeal to conscience or law? Which arguments do you find most powerful?
- Did Ahmed Riza's and Suad Bey's actions change policies? Were they able to save lives? Did their actions make a difference?
- Ahmed Riza argued that guilt for the massacres of the Armenians belonged to Turkey alone because the killing was a political crime committed by the Ottoman state. If a crime is committed by a state, who should be responsible for pursuing justice?

Reading 3 ← OFFICIAL POLICY

During the war, German diplomats balanced their personal feelings about the treatment of Armenians with their professional duties. Their reports revealed the attitudes of Young Turk officials toward the Armenians.

Despite intimate knowledge of the Young Turks' intentions, the German Ambassador Baron von Wangenheim pronounced that diplomats had no right to interfere in Turkey's wartime decisions. After being prodded to protest the treatment by the American ambassador, Henry Morgenthau, Wangenheim replied: "I shall do nothing whatever for the Armenians."⁹⁸ As time went on and the killing escalated, some of the consular officials tried to find a way to make their disapproval public, without success. Morgenthau observed: "Of course no Germans could make much impression on the Turkish Government as long as the German Ambassador refused to interfere. And, as time went on, it became more and more evident that Wangenheim had no desire to stop the deportations."⁹⁹ On October 25, 1915, Wangenheim died and was replaced in November by Count Paul von Wolff-Metternich. Almost immediately Wolff-Metternich looked for ways to protest Turkish treatment of the Armenians. In December 1915, he wrote the reich chancellor [a top government official] in Germany that he would like to take a "firmer stance" against the way the Armenians were being treated:



German ambassador Baron von Wangenheim

Courtesy of Clip Art. Some images ©2003-2004 www.clipart.com

Our annoyance about the persecution of the Armenians should be clearly expressed in our press and an end be put to our gushings over the Turks. Whatever they are accomplishing is due to our doing; those are our officers, our cannons, our money. Without our help that inflated frog would be slowly deflated. There is no need to be so afraid in dealing with the Turks. It is not easy for them to switch sides and make peace....

In order to achieve any success in the Armenian question, we will have to inspire fear in the Turkish government regarding the consequences. If for military considerations we do not dare to confront it with a firmer stance, then we will have no choice but, with further abortive protests which tend rather to aggravate than to be of any use, to stand back and watch how our ally continues to massacre.¹⁰⁰

The reich chancellor rejected Wolff-Metternich's proposal, objecting, "public reprimand of an ally in the course of a war would be an act which is unprecedented in history. Our only aim is to keep Turkey on

our side until the end of the war, no matter whether as a result Armenians do perish or not.”¹⁰¹ German Ambassador Wolff-Metternich was recalled to Germany on October 3, 1916, at the request of Ottoman Minister of War Enver, who complained about the ambassador’s protests about the treatment of the Armenians.

Inside Germany, reports on the genocide were severely censored to portray their ally, Turkey, in a favorable light. Historian Deborah Dwork writes that the situation troubled at least one reporter.

*Harry Sturmer, a German correspondent in Constantinople for the major newspaper Kolnische Zeitung, understood that his government’s silence and lack of action amounted to complicity. A veteran of many German military operations, Sturmer was no stranger to the brutality and the misery of war. The murder of Armenians was not a military action, however, and Sturmer knew the difference and knew that his country knew the difference. “The mixture of cowardice, lack of conscience, and lack of foresight of which our Government has been guilty in Armenian affairs is quite enough to undermine completely the political loyalty of any thinking man who has any regard for humanity and civilization.” The genocide of the Armenians was “the meanest, lowest, the most cynical, most criminal act of race-fanaticism that the history of mankind has to show,” Sturmer lamented. And as far as he was concerned, it embarrassed “every German.” He resigned his post and went into voluntary exile in Switzerland.*¹⁰²

CONNECTIONS

- Professor Ervin Staub believes that bystanders play a more critical role in events than people realize.

Bystanders, people who witness but are not directly affected by the actions of perpetrators, help shape society by their reactions....

*Bystanders can exert powerful influences. They can define the meaning of events and move others toward empathy or indifference. They can promote values and norms of caring, or by their passivity or participation in the system they can affirm the perpetrators.*¹⁰³

Germany and the Ottoman Empire had a special alliance. Not only were their armies fighting on the same side, but German officers also assumed the leadership of Turkish forces under the Ottoman minister of war. Would Staub consider them bystanders to the genocide of the Armenians, or did their alliance make them complicit in the crime as well?

- The German reich chancellor rejected Wolff-Metternich’s proposal, objecting, “public reprimand of an ally in the course of a war would be an act which is unprecedented in history. Our only aim is to

keep Turkey on our side until the end of the war, no matter whether as a result Armenians do perish or not.”¹⁰⁴ Compare the way the reich chancellor framed his “universe of obligation” with the way Ambassador Woff-Metternich constructed his. What differences do you find most striking?

- Harry Sturmer said that the mass murder of the Armenians was “the meanest, lowest, the most cynical, most criminal act of race-fanaticism that the history of mankind has to show.” What does he mean by race-fanaticism?
- Law professor Martha Minow describes how “role morality”—a way in which individuals adapt their morality to their profession—influences the way individuals respond to injustice. In this reading, how do individuals balance their “role” and their personal conscience? Which roles do you play? How do they influence your actions? How do you balance your role and your own sense of right and wrong?
- Many German diplomats feared that Germany would be held accountable for Turkey’s crimes. Considering their close alliance, in what ways did Germany share responsibility for the genocide?



Reading TAKING A STAND

Turkish officials often told distorted stories of Armenian resistance to justify mass killing. They hoped their stories would lessen sympathy for the Armenians outside of the country. The story of Armenian resistance at Musa Dagh had the opposite effect. The bravery of the Armenians, against overwhelming odds, rallied international support for them.

In April 1915, orders reached the district of Musa Dagh, the six villages at the base of Musa Dagh, the Mountain of Moses, instructing the Armenian population to leave their homes. They knew that deportation meant near-certain death and they had to do something if they were to survive. Reverend Dikran Andreasian, described what happened next.

Knowing that it would be impossible to defend our villages in the foot-hills, it was resolved to withdraw to the heights of Mousa Dagh, taking with us as large a supply of food and implements as it was possible to carry. All the flocks of sheep and goats were also driven up the mountain side, and every available weapon of defense was brought out and furbished up. We found that we had a hundred and twenty modern rifles and shot-guns, with perhaps three times that number of old flint-locks and horse pistols. That still left more than half our men without weapons.

It was very hard to leave our homes. My mother wept as if her heart would break. But we had hopes that possibly, while we were fighting off the Turks, the Dardanelles might be forced and deliverance come to the country.

By nightfall of the first day we had reached the upper crags of the mountain. As we were preparing to camp and to cook the evening meal, a pouring rain set in and continued all night. For this we were ill prepared. There had not been time to make huts of branches, nor had we any tents or waterproof clothing. Men, women and children, somewhat over five thousand in all, were soaked to the skin, and much of the bread we had brought with us was turned into a pulpy mass. We were especially solicitous to keep our powder and rifles dry. This the men managed to do very well.

At dawn next morning all hands went to work digging trenches at the most strategic points in the ascent of the mountain. Where there was no earth for trench-digging, rocks were rolled together, making strong barricades behind which groups of our sharp-shooters were stationed. The sun came out gloriously, and we were hard at it all day strengthening our position against the attack which we knew was certain to come.¹⁰⁵

Later that day, the residents of Musa Dagh organized a committee for defense of the six communities. Although they were able to hold off the Turkish soldiers and reinforcements, the Armenians of Musa Dagh found themselves surrounded, cut off by land and sea. The defense committee dispatched a run-

ner to Aleppo with the hopes that he might be able to reach the American Consul, Jesse B. Jackson. Their other hope was of a rescue by sea. In desperation, people suggested sending three swimmers out into the harbor with the hope that one would reach a ship passing by the coast. At the same time a group of Armenian women prepared two very large white flags. One was embroidered with thick black English lettering. It read “CHRISTIANS IN DISTRESS: RESCUE.” The other had a large red cross in the center. The flags were hung from tall trees overlooking the harbor.

Reverend Dikran Andreasian described what happened on the morning of the fifty-third day of the siege:

I was startled by hearing a man shouting at the top of his voice. He came racing through our encampment straight for my hut. “Pastor, pastor,” he exclaimed, “a battleship is coming and has answered our waving! Thank God! Our prayers are heard. When we wave the Red Cross flag the battleship answers by waving signal flags. They see us and are coming in nearer shore!”

This proved to be the French Guichen, a four-funnel ship. While one of its boats was being lowered, some of our young men raced down to the shore and were soon swimming out to the stately vessel which seemed to have been sent to us from God! With beating hearts we hurried down to the beach, and soon an invitation came from the Captain for a delegation to come on board and explain the sit-



Project SAVE Armenian Photograph Archives, Inc., Courtesy of Edmond Y. Azadlian

Port Said, Egypt, fall 1915. Armenians originally from Musa Dagh march with their bishop, priests, and deacons in a procession of thanksgiving displaying the signal flag that was instrumental in saving them. They are joined by officials and missionaries.

uation. He sent a wireless to the Admiral of the fleet, and before very long the flag-ship *Ste. Jeanne d'Arc* appeared on the horizon followed by other French battleships. The Admiral spoke words of comfort and cheer to us, and gave an order that every soul of our community should be taken on board the ships.¹⁰⁶

Franz Werfel, a Prague-born writer, was inspired by the story and wrote *Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, published in 1933. The novel became a best-seller in Germany and Austria. Despite the popularity of his work, Werfel was forced to flee shortly after Hitler and the Nazis came to power. The American motion picture company Metro Goldwyn Mayer planned to make a movie based on the novel. The plans were scrapped when the Turkish government protested to the Department of State and threatened to ban all American-made films from Turkey if the film was produced.

In the mid 1930s, Jews in Eastern Europe read Werfel's novel as a warning of their own fate. During the Holocaust, copies of the novel are reported to have circulated as a source of inspiration and a call to arms in some of the ghettos to which the Nazis confined the Jews.

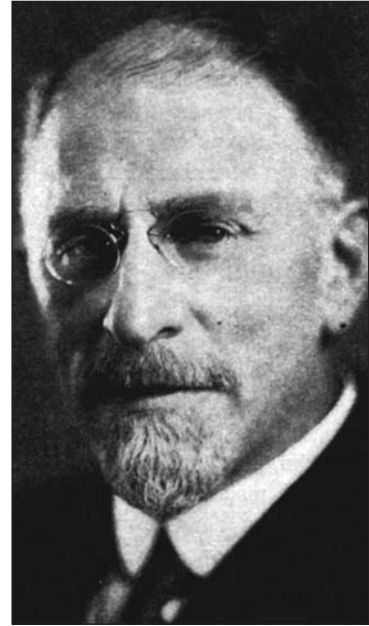
CONNECTIONS

- What inspires people to resist against tremendous odds? What forms can that resistance take?
- Accounts of resistance at Musa Dagh do not focus solely on the military strategy. They often highlight details that may seem less important to outsiders; the democratically elected defense council, the nightly church services in which Armenians of various Christian denominations prayed together. How do those details add to your perception of resistance?
- Why do you think the Armenians in Musa Dagh choose to have the flag read "CHRISTIANS IN DISTRESS: RESCUE." Is it important that the words were written in English? Who did they think would respond to their call for help?
- Why would the Turkish government, after the genocide, take such strong measures to suppress the film *Forty Days of Musa Dagh*?

Reading 5 — THE AMERICAN AMBASSADOR IN CONSTANTINOPLE

The Armenian Genocide did not take place without witnesses. Journalists, missionaries, and diplomats from many countries witnessed the genocide or listened to first-hand accounts. The question was, what to do about it? The problem was particularly troubling to Henry Morgenthau, an American businessman and lawyer who served as the American ambassador to the Ottoman Empire. Pulitzer-prize winner Samantha Power describes the choices he faced as his understanding of the genocide grew. In May 1915, the Allies issued a declaration warning the Turks of the consequences of committing “crimes against humanity and civilization.” Power notes:

The United States, determined to maintain its neutrality in the war, refused to join the Allied declaration. President Woodrow Wilson chose not to pressure either the Turks or their German backers. It was better not to draw attention to the atrocities, lest U.S. public opinion get stirred up and begin demanding U.S. involvement. Because the Turks had not violated the rights of Americans, Wilson did not formally protest.



Henry Morgenthau

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But in Turkey itself America’s role as bystander was contested. Henry Morgenthau Sr., a German-born Jew who had come to the United States as a ten-year-old boy and had been appointed ambassador to the Ottoman Empire by President Wilson in 1913, agitated for U.S. diplomatic intervention. In January and February 1915, Morgenthau had begun receiving graphic but fragmentary intelligence from his ten American consuls posted throughout the Ottoman Empire. At first he did not recognize that the atrocities against the Armenians were of a different nature than the wartime violence. He was taken in by Talaat’s assurances that uncontrolled elements had simply embarked upon “mob violence” that would soon be contained. In April, when the massacres began in earnest, the Turkish authorities severed Morgenthau’s communication with his consuls and censored their letters. Morgenthau was reluctant to file reports back to Washington based on rumors, and the Turks were making it impossible for him to fact-check.

Although he was initially incredulous, by July 1915 the ambassador had come around. He had received too many visits from desperate Armenians and trusted missionary sources to remain skeptical. They had sat in his office with tears streaming down their faces, regaling him with terrifying tales. When he compared this testimony to the strikingly similar horrors relayed via consular cables,

Morgenthau came to an astonishing conclusion. What he called “race murder” was under way. On July 10, 1915 he cabled Washington with a description of the Turkish campaign:

“Persecution of Armenians assuming unprecedented proportions. Reports from widely scattered districts indicate systematic attempt to uproot peaceful Armenian populations and through arbitrary arrests, terrible tortures, whole-sale expulsions and deportations from one end of the Empire to the other accompanied by frequent instances of rape, pillage, and murder, turning into massacre, to bring destruction and destitution on them. These measures are not in response to popular or fanatical demand but are purely arbitrary and directed from Constantinople in the name of military necessity, often in districts where no military operations are likely to take place.”

Morgenthau was constrained by two background conditions that seemed immutable. First, the Wilson administration was resolved to stay out of World War I. Picking fights with Turkey did not seem a good way to advance that objective. And second, diplomatic protocol demanded that ambassadors act respectfully toward their host governments. U.S. diplomats were expected to stay out of business that did not concern U.S. national interests. “Turkish authorities have definitely informed me that I have no right to interfere with their internal affairs,” Morgenthau wrote. Still, he warned Washington, “there seems to be a systematic plan to crush the Armenian race.”

Local witnesses urged him to involve the moral power of the United States. Otherwise, he was told, “the whole Armenian nation would disappear.” The ambassador did what he could, continuing to send blistering cables back to Washington and raising the matter at virtually every meeting he held with Talaat. He found his exchanges with the interior minister infuriating.¹⁰⁷

As Morgenthau became increasingly aware of the conflict between his role as ambassador and his moral outrage, he faced a dilemma. Power elaborates:

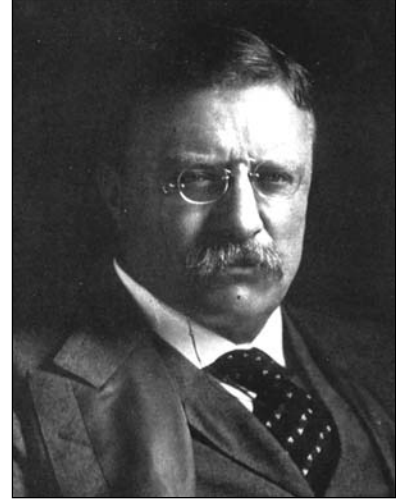
Morgenthau had to remind himself that one of the core prerogatives of sovereignty was that states and statesmen could do as they pleased within their own borders. “Technically,” he noted to himself, “I had no right to interfere. According to the cold-blooded legalities of the situation, the treatment of Turkish subjects by the Turkish Government was purely a domestic affair; unless it directly affected American lives and American interests, it was outside of the concerns of the American Government.” The ambassador found this maddening.¹⁰⁸

Without support from the American government, Morgenthau had to look for help from private sources. He lobbied his friends at the *New York Times* to give the story prominent coverage and helped raise funds for Armenian relief. Power describes this work and its limitations:

The Congregationalist, Baptist, and Roman Catholic churches made donations. The Rockefeller founda-

tion gave \$290,000 in 1915 alone. And most notable, a number of distinguished Americans, none of Armenian descent, set up a new Committee on Armenian Atrocities. The committee raised \$100,000 for Armenian relief and staged high-profile rallies, gathering delegations from more than 1,000 churches and religious organizations in New York City to join in denouncing the Turkish crimes.

But in calling for “action,” the committee was not urging U.S. military intervention. It was worried about the impact of an American declaration of war on American schools and churches in Turkey. In addition, the sentiment that made committee members empathize with their fellow Christians in Armenia also made some pacifists. In decrying the atrocities but opposing the war against Turkey, the committee earned the scorn of former president Theodore Roosevelt. In a letter to Samuel Dutton, the Armenia committee secretary, Roosevelt slammed the hypocrisy of the “peace-at-any-price type” who acted on the motto of “safety first,” which, he wrote, “could be appropriately used by the men on a sinking steamer who jump into boats ahead of the women and children.” He continued:



President Theodore Roosevelt

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“Mass meetings on behalf of Armenians amount to nothing whatever if they are mere methods of giving a sentimental but ineffective and safe outlet to the emotion of those engaged in them. Indeed they amount to less than nothing. . . . Until we put honor and duty first, and are willing to risk something in order to achieve righteousness both for ourselves and for others, we shall accomplish nothing; and we shall earn and deserve the contempt of the strong nations of mankind.”

Roosevelt wondered how anyone could possibly advise neutrality “between despairing and hunted people, people whose little children are murdered and their women raped, and the victorious and evil wrongdoers.” He observed that such a position put “safety in the present above both duty in the present and safety in the future.” Roosevelt would grow even angrier later in the war, when the very relief campaign initiated to aid the Armenians would be invoked as reason not to make war on Turkey. In 1918 he wrote to Cleveland Dodge, the most influential member of the Armenia committee: “To allow the Turks to massacre the Armenians and then solicit permission to help the survivors and then to allege the fact that we are helping the survivors as a reason why we should not follow the only policy that will permanently put a stop to such massacres is both foolish and odious.”¹⁰⁹

Despite the criticism, Morgenthau continued to work tirelessly to aid the Armenians, including an offer to raise money to relocate survivors to the United States. Yet he remained frustrated that he had not achieved more. “My failure to stop the destruction of the Armenians had made Turkey, for me a place of horror—I had reached the end of my resources.”¹¹⁰

CONNECTIONS

- In May 1915, the Allies decried persecution of the Armenians as a “crime against humanity and civilization.” What qualifies as a crime against humanity and civilization? What are the implications of the label? Who is responsible for preventing crimes against humanity and civilization? What do you think are other examples of crimes against humanity and civilization?
- Despite Morgenthau’s pleas, President Woodrow Wilson was determined to remain neutral during the early days of the war. What are the advantages of remaining neutral during a conflict? During the genocide was it possible to remain neutral and act morally? What actions did Wilson take?
- What was Morgenthau’s dilemma? What choices were available to him? Why do you think he made the choices that he did?
- Morgenthau wrote, “Technically, I had no right to interfere . . . the treatment of Turkish subjects by the Turkish government was a purely domestic affair, unless it directly affected American lives and interests, it was outside of the concerns of the American Government.” Do you agree? How do you define American interests?
- When does one nation have the right to intervene in the internal affairs of another sovereign nation? The film *Triumph of Evil* examines the role of international intervention and responsibility during the Rwandan Genocide, including the role of the U.S. government and the United Nations.
- Former President Theodore Roosevelt was very critical of U.S. neutrality in the face of genocide. That criticism extended to assessment of Armenian relief efforts. In 1918 he wrote: “To allow the Turks to massacre the Armenians and then solicit permission to help the survivors and then to allege the fact that we are helping the survivors as a reason why we should not follow the only policy that will permanently put a stop to such massacres is both foolish and odious.” How would you respond to Theodore Roosevelt’s critique of Armenian relief efforts?
- Samantha Power describes Morgenthau and other people who try to make a difference as “upstanders.” What does that term mean to you? What do you think enables people to become “upstanders”?

Reading 6 — TALAAT AND THE LIMITS OF DIPLOMACY

American Ambassador Henry Morgenthau often met with leaders of the Committee of Union and Progress to protest the treatment of Christians in Turkey. Later he recounted the first time he brought up the plight of the Armenians with the Ottoman Minister of the Interior Talaat. Morgenthau recalled:

I began to talk about the Armenians at Konia. I had hardly started when Talaat's attitude became even more belligerent. His eyes lighted up, he brought his jaws together, leaned over toward me, and snapped out:

"Are they Americans?"

The implications of this question were hardly diplomatic; it was merely a way of telling me that the matter was none of my business. In a moment Talaat said this in so many words.

"The Armenians are not to be trusted," he said, "besides, what we do with them does not concern the United States."

I replied that I regarded myself as the friend of the Armenians and was shocked at the way they were being treated. But he shook his head and refused to discuss the matter.¹¹¹

Morgenthau dropped the subject but continued to raise the "Armenian Question" in subsequent meetings. At another meeting Talaat asked Morgenthau: "Why are you so interested in the Armenians anyway?" Talaat continued:

"You are a Jew; these people are Christians. The [Muslims] and the Jews always get on harmoniously. We are treating the Jews here all right. What have you to complain of? Why can't you let us do with these Christians as we please?"...

"You don't seem to realize," I replied, "that I am not here as a Jew but as American ambassador. My country contains something more than 97,000,000 Christians and something less than 3,000,000 Jews. So, at least in my ambassadorial capacity, I am 97 percent Christian. But after all, that is not the point. I do not appeal to you in the name of any race or any religion, but merely as a human being. You have told me many times that you want to make Turkey a part of the modern progressive world. The way you are treating the Armenians will not help you to realize that ambition; it puts you in the class of backward, reactionary peoples."



Talaat, the Ottoman Minister of the Interior.

Morgenthau

“We treat the Americans all right, too,” said Talaat. “I don’t see why you should complain.”

“But Americans are outraged by your persecutions of the Armenians,” I replied. “You must base your principles on humanitarianism, not racial discrimination, or the United States will not regard you as a friend and an equal. And you should understand the great changes that are taking place among Christians all over the world. They are forgetting their differences and all sects are coming together as one. You look down on American missionaries, but don’t forget that it is the best element in America that supports their religious work, as well as their educational institutions. Americans are not mere materialists, always chasing money—they are broadly humanitarian, and interested in the spread of justice and civilization throughout the world. After this war is over you will face a new situation. You say that, if victorious, you can defy the world, but you are wrong. You will have to meet public opinion everywhere, especially in the United States. Our people will never forget these massacres. They will always resent the wholesale destruction of Christians in Turkey. They will look upon it as nothing but wilful murder and will seriously condemn all the men who are responsible for it. You will not be able to protect yourself under your political status and say that you acted as Minister of the Interior and not as Talaat. You are defying all ideas of justice as we understand the term in our country.”

Strangely enough, these remarks did not offend Talaat, but they did not shake his determination. I might as well have been talking to a stone wall. From my abstractions he immediately came down to something definite.

“These people,” he said, “refused to disarm when we told them to. They opposed us at Van and at Zeitoun, and they helped the Russians. There is only one way in which we can defend ourselves against them in the future, and that is just to deport them.”

“Suppose a few Armenians did betray you,” I said. “Is that a reason for destroying a whole race? Is that an excuse for making innocent women and children suffer?”

“Those things are inevitable,” he replied.

This remark to me was not quite so illuminating as one which Talaat made subsequently to a reporter of the Berliner Tageblatt, who asked him the same question. “We have been reproached,” he said, according to this interviewer, “for making no distinction between the innocent Armenians and the guilty; but that was utterly impossible, in view of the fact that those who were innocent to-day might be guilty to-morrow!”¹¹²

In later conversations with Talaat, Morgenthau argued that if humanitarian issues weren’t of concern, what about economic interests. Talaat replied: “We care nothing about the commercial loss.” As much as Morgenthau tried, talk alone was not going to save the remaining Armenian population. Not only was Talaat unmoved, but he tried to influence Morgenthau to give the money raised for Armenian relief to

the Turkish government. Another request went even further. In his memoir, Morgenthau recounts the day when Talaat raised a question about Armenian life insurance policies. He explains:

One day Talaat made what was perhaps the most astonishing request I had ever heard. The New York Life Insurance Company and the Equitable Life of New York had for years done considerable business among the Armenians. The extent to which this people insured their lives was merely another indication of their thrifty habits.

“I wish,” Talaat now said, “that you would get the American life insurance companies to send us a complete list of their Armenian policy holders. They are practically all dead now and have left no heirs to collect the money. It of course all escheats to the State. The Government is the beneficiary now. Will you do so?”

This was almost too much, and I lost my temper.¹¹³

CONNECTIONS

- What arguments does Morgenthau use to try to persuade Talaat to stop the deportation and mass murder of Armenians? How does Talaat respond to each argument? Considering President Wilson’s determination to remain neutral, what other forms of persuasion were available to Morgenthau?
- Talaat assumes that Morgenthau, as a Jew, will be unsympathetic toward Christians and inclined to support Muslims. Compare the way Talaat and Morgenthau construct their “universe of obligation”? How does Morgenthau define his identity?
- What is a diplomat? What is diplomacy? What strategies do diplomats use to get their way? How do the stories of Ambassador Morgenthau and the German ambassador reflect the limits of diplomacy?
- What do the exchanges between Talaat and Morgenthau suggest about the limits of diplomacy in responding to genocide?
- Underline words and phrases in this reading that resonate with you. Reflect on them in your journal. How do they help you understand this particular history? What connections are you making to your own life or other history that you have learned? How does this history connect with current events?
- In his conversation with Morgenthau, Talaat asked for information on Armenian life insurance policies. Victims of genocide have used the courts to seek justice and reparations from corporations and banks that played a role in the genocide. Research how Holocaust survivors, victims of apartheid, and descendants of slaves from the United States are using the law to seek restitution.

Reading 7 — THE EYES OF THE WORLD

Witnesses to the Armenian Genocide shared their stories in journals, newspapers, and even best-selling books. How did those accounts influence the way people understood the events and the world around them? In an essay entitled “Genocide and Traumatic Memory,” American literary scholar Walter Kalaijian probes the way the media’s coverage of the Armenian Genocide shaped the public’s response.

*Not just an unprecedented modern horror, the Armenian genocide was also an inaugural media event. The spectacle of concentration-camp internment, death marches, and mass murder—centrally administered throughout the Ottoman Empire under the watchful eye of the German and Austro-Hungarian alliance—was widely reported in the United States and among other Entente nations of Britain, France, and Russia. In America alone, such newspapers and journals as the New York Times, New York Herald Tribune, Boston Herald, Chicago Tribune, Atlantic Monthly, Nation, Outlook, and Literary Digest covered the story. In diplomatic circles, Viscount Bryce in 1916 submitted a massive government blue paper to the British Secretary of State for foreign affairs; edited by Arnold J. Toynbee, *The Treatment of Armenians* archived eyewitness accounts of torture, rape, and mass murder reported by missionaries, Red Cross volunteers, consular officials, German health workers, and Armenian survivors. The previous year, Toynbee had published *Armenian Atrocities: The Murder of a Nation*, which included Bryce’s address to the House of Lords appealing for British intervention in the Turkish massacres. Quoting from a 1915 New York Tribune editorial, Toynbee underscored “German complicity with the Young Turk Genocide.” “What Germany has done,” according to the Tribune, “is to bring us back in the Twentieth Century to the condition of the dark ages.” German witnesses who dissented from Germany’s denial of the massacres included Dr. Johannes Lepsius, head of the Deutsche Orient-Mission. His *Der Todesgang des armenischen Volkes* (The Walk into Death March of the Armenian People) had a 1919 print run of twenty-thousand copies, distributed, in part, to the Orient Mission and German Reichstag....*

What did it mean in the mid 1910s to pick up, for the first time, any major daily paper around the world and read such headlines as “Armenians Are Sent to Perish in Desert: Turks Accused of Plan to Exterminate Whole Population,” “Turks Depopulate Towns of Armenia,” and “1,500,000 Armenians Starve”?¹¹⁴

Among the countless newspaper stories on the genocide was front-page coverage in the *New York Times* on October 4, 1915. It was followed up with stories in the October 5 and 6. On the fourth straight day of coverage, October 7, an article appeared on page 3. It read:

Viscount Bryce, former British ambassador to the United States, in the House of Lords today said that such information as had reached him from many quarters showed that the figure of 800,000 Armenians destroyed since May was quite a possible number. Virtually the whole nation had been

wiped out, he declared, and he did not suppose there was any case in history of a crime "so hideous and on so large a scale."

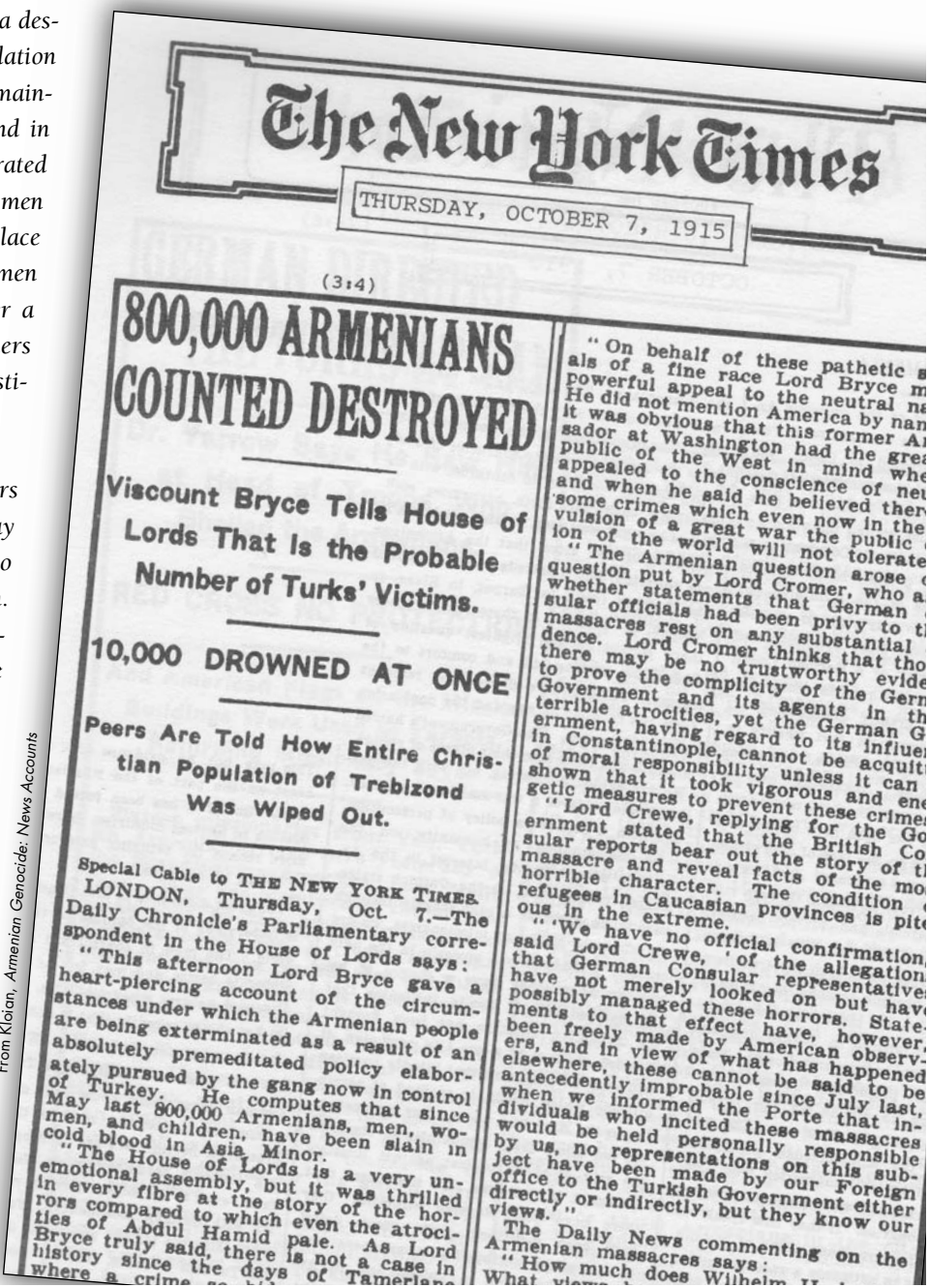
"The death of these people," said Lord Bryce, "resulted from the deliberate and premeditated policy of the gang now in possession of the Turkish government. Orders for the massacres came in every case direct from Constantinople. In some instances local Governors, being humane, pious men, refused to carry out the orders and at least two Governors were summarily dismissed for this reason.

"The customary procedure was to round up the whole of the population of a designated town. A part of the population was thrown into prison and the remainder were marched out of town and in the suburbs the men were separated from the women and children. The men were then taken to a convenient place and shot and bayoneted. The women and children were then put under a convoy of the lower kind of soldiers and dispatched to some distant destination.

"They were driven by the soldiers day after day. Many fell by the way and many died of hunger, for no provisions were furnished them. They were robbed of all they possessed, and in many cases the women were stripped naked and made to continue the march in that condition. Many of the women went mad and threw away their children. The caravan route was marked by a line of corpses. Comparatively few of

Hundreds of articles appeared in newspapers throughout the world describing massacre and deportations.

From Kloian, Armenian Genocide: News Accounts



the people ever reached their destination.

“The facts as to the slaughter in Trebizond are vouched for by the Italian Consul. Orders came for the murder of all the Armenian Christians in Trebizond. Many Mussulmans tried to save their Christian friends, but the authorities were implacable and hunted out all the Christians and then drove them down to the sea front. Then they put them aboard sail boats and carried them some distance out to sea and threw them overboard. The whole Armenian population, numbering 10,000, was thus destroyed in one afternoon.” The Lord Mayor at a meeting at the Mansion House on Oct. 15, will start a fund for the aid of Armenian refugees. Among the speakers will be Lord Bryce, Cardinal Bourne and T. P. O’Connor.¹¹⁵

Hundreds of subsequent articles appeared in the *New York Times* and other newspapers and journals throughout the world.

CONNECTIONS

- As Professor Walter Kalajjian explains, the Armenian Genocide was covered thoroughly in the press of the 1910s. How does media exposure to genocide and collective violence shape the way people respond to atrocity? Does the awareness of genocide and mass violence lead to action? Do people become desensitized to violence?
- Today, more and more people are able to witness genocide and human rights abuses through the media. Does this mean that more people are bystanders to the atrocities? How do you respond to television and newspaper reports of war crimes and genocide?
- Collect a few issues of a major daily newspaper. Are there articles and reports of human rights violations? What language do the articles use? On what page do the stories appear?

5

Reading 8 — SAVING THE ARMENIANS

As stories of Turkish atrocities against innocent Armenians spread through the Western press, activists clamored to get their governments to intervene and stop the abuses. In *The Splendid Blond Beast*, Christopher Simpson describes the choice that Djemal Pasha, one of the Young Turk leaders, offered to the Allies.

At the height of the genocide, a factional split among the Young Turks opened the possibility that Turkey might put an end to the massacres in exchange for an agreement from the Associated Powers to abandon their claims on Turkey and the Ottoman Empire. Djemal Pasha, a member of the triumvirate that ruled Turkey, had settled into Damascus and exercised local control of much of what is today Syria, Jordan, and Israel. In late 1915, while Turkish efforts to exterminate Armenians were at their height, Djemal sought out an Armenian emissary and convinced him to carry an offer to the governments of the Associated Powers. If czarist Russia, France, and Britain would back him, Djemal promised, he would undertake a coup d'état against his Young Turk rivals, end the massacres, and take Turkey out of the war. . . .



Djemal Pasha, Ottoman Minister of the Marine.

Courtesy of Clip Art. Some images © 2003-2004 www.clipart.com

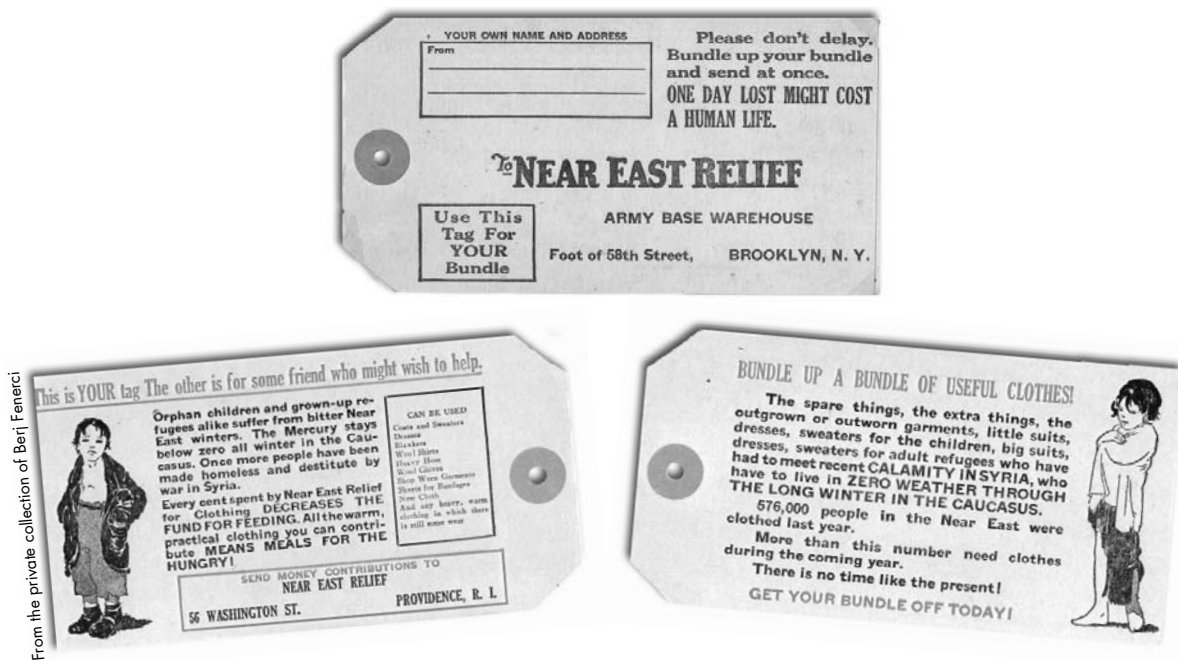
The price for the plan was that the European powers would abandon imperial claims for what is today Iraq and Syria and provide reconstruction assistance to Djemal's government after the war. Djemal, for his part, was willing to concede control of Constantinople and the Dardanelles to Russia.

“Djemal appears to have acted on the mistaken assumption that saving the Armenians—as distinct from merely exploiting their plight for propaganda purposes—was an important Allied objective,” writes David Fromkin, a historian specializing in Ottoman affairs. The Russians favored Djemal's plan and for a time assured him that the other Associated Powers would cooperate. But in early 1916, France rejected Djemal's offer and claimed southern Turkey, Syria, and parts of Iraq. Great Britain followed suit, claiming Iraq on the behalf of a local “Iraqi” government created by London. “In their passion for booty,” Fromkin writes, “the Allied governments lost sight of the condition upon which future gains were predicated: winning the war. . . Djemal's offer afforded the Allies their one great opportunity to subvert the Ottoman Empire from within”—and to save innocent lives—“and they let it go.” Nor did the Allies

exploit Djemal's attempted betrayal of his colleagues for propaganda or intelligence purposes. As far as can be determined, the other Young Turks never learned of Djemal's secret correspondence with the enemy, and he remained part of the ruling triumvirate for the remainder of the war.¹¹⁶

CONNECTIONS

- ❖ Why do you think the Allies decided to reject Djemal Pasha's offer? What factors do you think influenced the thinking of the Allied leaders?
- ❖ David Fromkin writes: "Djemal appears to have acted on the mistaken assumption that saving the Armenians—as distinct from merely exploiting their plight for propaganda purposes—was an important Allied objective." What happens to victims of injustice when their cause is exploited for political gain?
- ❖ Do stories like this one influence your thinking about who is responsible for the Armenian Genocide? Does it make the leaders of France and Great Britain complicit?



Tags for bundles of food and supplies intended for Armenian, Greek, and Assyrian refugees of the deportations, sent through the Near East Relief foundation.

Reading ? → ARMENIAN RELIEF

When major disasters occur anywhere in the world, efforts begin immediately to provide relief for the victims. The mass media are able to keep ordinary people from all over the world abreast of the disaster. The Red Cross, Red Crescent, and other nongovernment organizations raise money and send experts and supplies to the location.

The American reaction to the treatment of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire became one of the largest humanitarian responses in the history of the United States. Fundraising efforts were coupled with a public relations campaign designed to elicit sympathy for the Armenian orphans and refugees. Bureaucracies evolved to handle the distribution of money and materials for the Armenians. In many ways, the relief campaign for the Armenian Genocide provided a prototype for relief work in the twentieth century.

For decades foreign powers condemned the Ottoman Empire for its abuse of minority rights but failed to intervene directly in the affairs of the empire. During World War I, however, foreign observers took measures to provide food and shelter for Armenians, even though they could not convince their own countries to intervene militarily.



Armenian-Syrian Relief “Tag Day” volunteer fundraisers, Haroutune and Vartanoosh Manigian beside their aunt, Aghavni Kazazian, New York City, 1916.

Project SAVE Armenian Photograph Archives, Inc., Photo courtesy of Hermine Manigian.

As early as April 1915, missionaries from Germany and the United States began helping Armenians in various cities of the Ottoman Empire. In September 1915, Ambassador Henry Morgenthau realized the scope of what was happening to the Armenians and urged the U.S. government to help prevent the complete destruction of the Armenian people. In response, the State Department asked the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions to undertake an emergency drive to collect money. James L. Barton and Cleveland H. Dodge founded the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief with the support of President Woodrow Wilson. Through their efforts to raise awareness, the phrase “starving Armenians” became part of everyday speech. The money raised was sent to the American Embassy in Constantinople, which in turn distributed the funds to missionaries and consuls in Turkey. This line of support was temporarily interrupted when the United States entered the war in April 1917. But within a short time the committee, renamed the American Committee for Relief in the Near East (ACRNE) in 1918, reorganized and expanded former operations to include Armenian communities in Russian

Armenia. In 1919, the committee was incorporated by an act of Congress as the Near East Relief (NER).

An article in *The Literary Digest* explained to the public “How Your Gift Is Saving The Armenians”:

There are no starving Armenians in Yerevan...A building and site for the orphanage have been bought by the committee, and is being enlarged by refugee workmen. Dr. G. C. Reynolds, the veteran missionary from Van... is in charge of orphan relief and the orphanage. He conducted a large orphanage in Van. His purpose, he says, is not by any means to gather all orphans into institutions, but to train a hundred picked boys and later the same number of girls, who may become leaders of the Armenian people. There are hundreds of orphanages being well maintained by the Armenians themselves, through their joint Armenian committee. Something like 7,000,000 rubles every six months is spent by this committee.

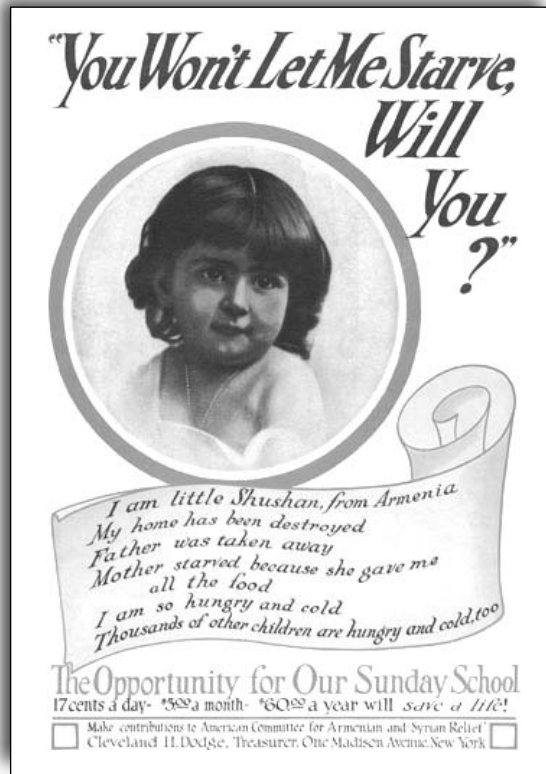
All the work upon the new orphanage is being done by refugees, from the building of the walls to the construction of the beds and the tables and garments. Other relief work for the children is the furnishing of milk for the babies, and the maintenance of a physician, and the opening of a hospital. . . . In the Yerevan district [Russian Armenian] . . . there are approximately 50,000 persons being aided, directly or indirectly, by the American committee. . . .

. . . The outstanding factor in Armenian relief has been the American committee. Its work has been on a large scale, and systematic form. All of it has been supervised by Americans, and the subordinate workers have been men and women trained in American mission schools, and known personally to the missionaries. Professors have not hesitated to become relief agents in villages, or accountants or actual workers in the industrial department. Had it not been for the fact that there were available a force of American board missionaries knowing the language and the land and the people, and with trusted helpers at hand, the wonders that have been wrought in the way of repatriation, rehabilitation, and the maintenance of life, and self respect would have been impossible.¹¹⁷

In July 1918, James L. Barton, the chairman of the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief said that even though \$10 million had already been raised and distributed, the need would continue into the postwar years.

One of the most successful strategies of the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief was a national poster campaign. Using strong graphics and minimal text, the images grabbed the public's attention, sent a message, and offered the average citizen an opportunity to make a difference.

Between 1915 and 1930 American relief organizations raised \$116,000,000 of assistance, delivering food, clothing, and materials for shelter. The committee also set up refugee camps, clinics, hospitals, orphanages, and vocational training programs. It is estimated that during that time the Near East Relief cared for 132,000 orphans from Tiflis and Yerevan in the Caucasus to Constantinople, Beirut, Damascus, and Jerusalem.



Posters intended to raise awareness for the American Committee for Relief in the Near East.

CONNECTIONS

- ✦ Why do you think President Wilson was willing to support humanitarian assistance but unwilling to make a military commitment to intervene to stop the genocide?
- ✦ What is necessary to rehabilitate refugees and survivors of genocide? What needs to happen? Who needs to be involved?
- ✦ Examine the posters for Armenian relief.

Look at the image, and describe it exactly as you see it.

Notice how the posters use shape, images, and perspective to communicate a message. Look for the way the artist uses symbols. What emotion is the artist trying to evoke?

What is the message? To whom is it directed? Is it a single message? Or do others in your class interpret the work in other ways? Finally, make your own judgement about the poster.

Reading 10 — THE STORY OF AURORA MARDIGANIAN AND “RAVISHED ARMENIA”

Articles and accounts of the treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire were widely read in the United States and Europe. One of the most popular accounts of Armenian suffering was *Ravished Armenia*. The book and the film that followed, records the story of Aurora Mardiganian, a teenage survivor, living in the United States in the care of Nora Waln, the publicity secretary of the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief. *Ravished Armenia* was a huge success, educating ordinary Americans about atrocities across the globe. On February 15, 1919, the *New York Times* reported that “many persons prominent in society attended a private showing of ‘Ravished Armenia.’” It continued:

The first half of the picture consists of four reels of scenes showing Armenia as it was before Turkish and German devastation, and led up to the deportation of priests and thousands of families into the desert. One of the concluding scenes showed young Armenian women flogged for their refusal to enter Turkish harems and depicted the Turkish slave markets.

Aurora Mardiganian, whose experiences in Armenia furnished the story on which the picture was founded, and who was injured in an accident that occurred during the making of the picture, was carried into the ballroom on a chair. . . .

“The whole purpose of the picture is to acquaint America with ravished Armenia,” said Mrs. Harriman, “to visualize conditions so that there will be no misunderstanding in the mind of any one about the terrible things which have transpired. It was deemed essential that the leaders, social and intellectual, should first learn the story, but later the general public shall be informed. It is proposed that before this campaign of information is completed, as many adults as possible shall know the story of Armenia, and the screen was selected as the medium because it reaches the millions, where the printed word reaches the thousands.”¹¹⁸



Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

Aurora Mardiganian

Screenings of the film often climaxed in a personal appearance by Aurora Mardiganian herself, who had been given English lessons to help transform her into a spokesperson for her people. Audiences were moved by what they saw and it helped enlist impassioned supporters of the Armenian cause. The attention had its downside. Anthony Slide, author of *Ravished Armenia and the Story of Aurora Mardiganian* writes about the effect of the publicity on Mardiganian herself.

*The pressure was taking its toll on the teenager. In Armenia, she had led a relatively sheltered existence. She had witnessed the horrors of genocide, but was unprepared for the rigors of American society. Its code of behavior was alien to a girl from a different continent and a different culture. She had become a movie star with all the accompanying trappings, but it was unsought-for fame.*¹¹⁹

Aware of the mounting tension, Mardiganian's guardians hired a chaperone and then later seven impersonators to help cover the relentless schedule of speaking engagements. Before long it became too much, Mardiganian made her last public personal appearance with the film in May 1920 and then slipped into a quiet life. Slide writes:

*In the 1920s, interest in both the film *Ravished Armenia* and an independent Armenia dissipated in the United States. Near East Relief produced one other film, *Alice in Hungerland* (1921), in which an American child goes to the Near East and witnesses conditions there. Aurora Mardiganian made no other film appearances, and expressed no interest in continuing her career as an actress. . . . Because of the horrors she had suffered in Armenia, for many years Aurora Mardiganian could not permit a man to touch her, but in 1929, she married and embarked on a new life as an Armenian-American housewife. She died in Los Angeles on February 6, 1994.*¹²⁰

Although no complete copy of *Ravished Armenia* remains, the film is a testament to the power of movies to educate and build sympathy for a cause.

CONNECTIONS

- Why did Harriman and others believe film would capture the public's attention more effectively than words? Do you agree?
- What role can film play in shaping public opinion? How does a film make an event more real for some people?
- Many of the contemporary reports of the Armenian Genocide played into cultural and religious prejudices and stereotypes by contrasting the image of innocent Christian victims and "fanatical" Muslims. How do you think the identity of the victims and perpetrators of the Armenian Genocide contributed to the public's engagement with the plight of the Armenians? How does the identity of victims of injustice influence the way people respond to human rights abuses today?
- Slide describes Mardiganian's fame as "unsought," yet her celebrity status gave the suffering of her fellow Armenians a face with which people could identify. What toll did those experiences take on Mardiganian?

- ☛ Are all forms of persuasion propaganda? Was *Ravished Armenia* propaganda? What criteria would you use to judge? Can propaganda be used for a good cause? Are there other ways to rally people to a common cause?



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90. “Turks Who Saved Armenians: An Introduction,” available at www.zoryan.org.
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92. Quoted in Vahakn N. Dadrian, “Genocide as a Problem of National and International Law: The World War I Armenian Case and Its Contemporary Legal Ramifications,” *Yale Journal of International Law* 14 (1989), p. 268.
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