

Reading 1 — EVACUATION, DEPORTATION, AND DEATH

In April 1984, The Permanent People's Tribunal—a public tribunal that hears cases of human rights abuses and tries them according to international law—held a session considering the facts of the Armenian Genocide. After considering arguments, the international panel of jurors, which included three Nobel prize winners and other prominent figures from around the world, ruled that the Turkish government was responsible for the crime of genocide against the Armenians. A section of their report details the genocidal process.

Beginning in January 1915, Armenian soldiers [serving in the Ottoman army] and gendarmes were disarmed, regrouped in work brigades of 500 to 1,000 men, put to work on road maintenance or as porters, then taken by stages to remote areas and executed. It was not until April that the implementation of a plan began, with successive phases carried out in a disciplined sequence. The signal was first given for



Project SAVE Armenian Photograph Archives, courtesy of Garbis Kazanjian, River Vale, New Jersey, and Alice Jernazian Hagig, Dana Point, California, daughter of Rev. Ephraim R. Jernazian.

Survivors of the genocide hold a burial service for the Ourfa Armenian victims whose bones were found strewn around the monastery yard. At the top, the words of Armenian poet Krikor Zohrab in translation say, “We are gone now, but the nation has 400,000 orphans. Save them.”

deportation to begin in Zeytun [Zeitun] in early April, in an area of no immediate strategic importance. It was not until later that deportation measures were extended to the border provinces.

The pretext used to make the deportation a general measure was supplied by the resistance of the Armenians of Van. The vali [governor] of Van, Jevdet, sacked outlying Armenian villages and the Van Armenians organized the self-defense of the city. They were saved by a Russian breakthrough spearheaded by the Armenian volunteers from the Caucasus. After taking Van on May 18th, the Russians continued to press forward but were halted in late June by a Turkish counter-offensive. The Armenians of the vilayet [region] of Van were thus able to retreat and escape extermination.

When the news of the Van revolt reached Constantinople, the Union and Progress (Ittihad) Committee seized the opportunity. Some 650 personalities, writers, poets, lawyers, doctors, priests and politicians were imprisoned on April 24th and 25th, 1915, then deported and murdered in the succeeding months. Thus was carried out what was practically the thorough and deliberate elimination of almost the entire Armenian intelligentsia of the time.

From April 24 onwards, and following a precise timetable, the government issued orders to deport the Armenians from the eastern vilayets. Since Van was occupied by the Russian army, the measures

applied only to the six vilayets of Trebizond (Trabzon), Erzerum, Bitlis, Diarbekir, Kharput, and Sivas. The execution of the plan was entrusted to a “special organization” (SO), made up of common criminals and convicts trained and equipped by the Union and Progress Committee. This semi-official organization, led by Behaeddin Shakir, was under the sole authority of the Ittihad central committee. Constantinople issued directives to the valis, kaymakans [district governors], as well as local SO men, who had discretionary powers to have moved or dismissed any uncooperative gendarme or official. The methods used, the order in which towns were evacuated, and the routes chosen for the columns of deportees all confirm the existence of a centralized point of command controlling the unfolding of the program. Deportation orders were announced publicly or posted in each city and township. Families were allowed two days to collect a few personal belongings; their property was confiscated or quickly sold off. The first move was generally the arrest of notables, members of Armenian political parties, priests, and young men, who were forced to sign fabricated confessions then discreetly eliminated in small



From the private collection of Berj Fenerci

Special organization gangs known as “chetes” or “shotas.”

groups. The convoys of deportees were made up of old people, women, and children. In the more remote villages, families were slaughtered and their homes burned or occupied. On the Black Sea coast and along the Tigris near Diarbekir boats were heaped with victims and sunk. From May to July 1915, the eastern provinces were sacked and looted by Turkish soldiers and gendarmes, SO gangs ("chetes"), etc. This robbery, looting, torture, and murder were tolerated or encouraged while any offer of protection to the Armenians was severely punished by the Turkish authorities.

It was not possible to keep the operation secret. Alerted by missionaries and consuls, the Entente Powers [Allied] enjoined the Turkish government, from May 24, to put an end to the massacres, for which they held members of the government personally responsible. Turkey made the deportation official by issuing a decree, claiming treason, sabotage, and terrorist acts on the part of the Armenians as a pretext.

Deportation was in fact only a disguised form of extermination. The strongest were eliminated before departure. Hunger, thirst, and slaughter decimated the convoys' numbers. Thousands of bodies piled up along the roads. Corpses hung from trees and telegraph poles; mutilated bodies floated down rivers or were washed up on the banks. Of the seven eastern vilayets' original population of 1,200,000 Armenians, approximately 300,000 were able to take advantage of the Russian occupation to reach the Caucasus; the remainder were murdered where they were or deported, the women and children (about 200,000 in number) kidnapped. Not more than 50,000 survivors reached the point of convergence of the convoys of deportees in Aleppo.

At the end of July 1915, the government began to deport the Armenians of Anatolia and Cilicia, transferring the population from regions which were far distant from the front and where the presence of Armenians could not be regarded as a threat to the Turkish army. The deportees were driven south in columns which were decimated en route. From Aleppo, survivors were sent on toward the deserts of Syria in the south and of Mesopotamia in the southeast. In Syria, reassembly camps were set up at Hama, Homs, and near Damascus. These camps accommodated about 120,000 refugees, the majority of whom survived the war and were repatriated to Cilicia in 1919. Along the Euphrates, on the other hand, the Armenians were driven ever onward toward Deir-el-Zor; approximately 200,000 reached their destination. Between March and August 1916, orders came from Constantinople to liquidate the last survivors remaining in the camps along the railway and the banks of the Euphrates.

There were nevertheless still some Armenians remaining in Turkey. A few Armenian families in the provinces, Protestants and Catholics for the most part, had been saved from death by the American missions and the Apostolic Nuncio. In some cases, Armenians had been spared as a result of resolute intervention by Turkish officials, or had been hidden by Kurdish or Turkish friends. The [majority of the] Armenians of Constantinople and Smyrna also escaped deportation. Lastly, there were cases of resistance (Urfa, Shabin-Karahisar, Musa-Dagh). In all, including those who took refuge in Russia,

the number of survivors at the end of 1916 can be estimated at 600,000 out of an estimated total population in 1914 of 1,800,000, according to A. Toynbee.

In Eastern Anatolia, the entire Armenian population had disappeared. A few survivors of the slaughter took refuge in Syria and Lebanon, while others reached Russian Armenia.⁶³

CONNECTIONS

- ❖ Why was the Committee of Union and Progress able to use the story of Armenian resistance at Van as an excuse to begin widespread deportation and mass murder? What is a pretext? How is a pretext used to cover the truth?
- ❖ The report notes that: “The execution of the plan [of genocide] was entrusted to a ‘special organization’, made up of common criminals and convicts trained and equipped by the Union and Progress Committee [the Young Turks].” How did the use of a “special organization” create a cover for the government’s plans?
- ❖ In 1915 German officer Liman Von Sanders rejected a deportation order for the Armenians and Greeks of Smyrna and the central government backed off. What questions does the story raise for you?
- ❖ The genocide unfolded in several stages. List the turning points in the process that led to mass murder?
- ❖ The treatment of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire had been of international concern long before the deportations began. Given that attention, how is it possible that no country intervened and that the genocide was not prevented?
- ❖ Reread the description of the genocide. What choices had to be made to make the genocide possible? Who made those choices? When was prevention possible?
- ❖ Based on the description of the genocide, is it possible that people did not know what was happening to the Armenians? If people knew, how do you explain why more people did not try to stop the deportations and massacres? What options were available to leaders, to ordinary people, and to other governments?



To view an interactive map of the Armenian Genocide including the principal routes of deportation, massacre sites, and concentration camps, visit www.armenian-genocide.org. A chronology of the genocide is also available on the same website.