

Reading 5 — FOLLOWING ORDERS

Lieutenant Said Ahmed Mukhtar al-Ba'aj, an Ottoman officer, was one of four Arab Muslim soldiers who defected to the Russian Army. The Russians turned the men over to the British, who interviewed them. In December 1916, the officer testified about his role in the deportation of Armenians from Trebizond and Erzerum.

An order came from Constantinople that Armenians inhabiting the frontier towns and villages be deported to the interior. It was said then that this was only a precautional measure. I saw at that time large convoys of Armenians go through Erzeroum. They were mostly old men, women and children. Some of the able-bodied men had been recruited in the Turkish Army and many had fled to Russia. The massacres had not begun yet. In May 1915 I was transferred to Trebizond. In July an order came to deport to the interior all the Armenians in the Vilayet of Trebizond. Being a member of the Court Martial I knew that deportations meant massacres...

Besides the deportation order... an Imperial "Iradeh" was issued ordering that all deserters when caught, should be shot without trial. The secret order read "Armenians" in lieu of "deserters." The Sultan's "Iradeh" was accompanied by a "fatwa" [Muslim legal opinion] from Sheikh-ul-Islam stating that the Armenians had shed [Muslim] blood and their killing was lawful. Then the deportations started. The children were kept back at first. The Government opened up a school for the grown up children and the American Consul of Trebizond instituted an asylum for the infants. When the first batches of Armenians arrived at Gumush-Khana all able-bodied men were sorted out with the excuse that they were going to be given work. The women and children were sent ahead under escort with the assurance by the Turkish authorities that their final destination was Mosul and that no harm will befall them. The men kept behind were taken out of town in batches of 15 and 20, lined up on the edge of ditches prepared beforehand, shot and thrown into the ditches. Hundreds of men were shot every day in a similar manner. The women and children were attacked on their way by the ("Shotas") the armed bands organised by the Turkish government who attacked them and seized a certain number. After plundering and committing the most dastardly outrages on the women and children they massacred them in cold blood. These attacks were a daily occurrence until every woman and child had been got rid of. The military escorts had strict orders not to interfere with the "Shotas."

He continues:

In July 1915 I was ordered to accompany a convoy of deported Armenians. It was the last batch from Trebizond. There were in the convoy 120 men, 700 children and about 400 women. From Trebizond I took them to Ghumush-Khana. Here the 120 men were taken away, and, as I was informed later, they were all killed. At Ghumush-Khana I was ordered to take the women and children to Erzinjian. On the way I saw thousands of bodies of Armenians unburied. Several bands of "Shotas" met us on the way and wanted me to hand over to them women and children. But I persistently refused. I did

leave on the way about 300 children with [Muslim] families who were willing to take care of them and educate them. The “Mutessarrif” of Erzinjian ordered me to proceed with the convoy to Kamack [Kemakh]. At the latter place the authorities refused to take charge of the women and children. I fell ill and wanted to go back, but I was told that as long as the Armenians in my charge were alive I would be sent from one place to the other. However I managed to include my batch with the deported Armenians that had come from Erzeroum. In charge of the latter was a colleague of mine Mohamed Effendi from the Gendarmerie. He told me afterwards that after leaving Kamach they came to a valley where the Euphrates ran. A band of Shotas sprang out and stopped the convoy. They ordered the escort to keep away and then shot every one of the Armenians and threw them in the river.

At Trebizond the [Muslims] were warned that if they sheltered Armenians they would be liable to the death penalty.

Government officials at Trebizond picked up some of the prettiest Armenian women of the best families. After committing the worst outrages on them they had them killed.

Cases of rape of women and girls even publicly are numerous. They were systematically murdered after the outrage.



Family of deportees on the road in the Ottoman Empire, 1915. Armin Wegner, the photographer, described what he saw: “Armenian deportees—women, children and elderly men. Woman in foreground is carrying a child in her arms, shielding it from the sun with a shawl; man on left is carrying bedding; no other belongings or food noticeable among effects being carried. All are walking in the sun on an unpaved road with no means of shelter from the elements.”⁸⁰

The Armenians deported from Erzeroum started with their cattle and whatever possessions they could carry. When they reached Erzinjian they became suspicious seeing that all the Armenians had already been deported. The Vali of Erzeroum allayed their fears and assured them most solemnly that no harm would befall them. He told them that the first convoy should leave for Kamach, the others remaining at Erzeroum until they received word from their friends informing of their safe arrival to destination. And so it happened. Word came that the first batch had arrived safely at Kamach, which was true enough. But the men were kept at Kamach and shot, and the women were massacred by the Shotas after leaving that town.⁸¹

Not everybody went along. Upon taking command of the Third Army in February 1916 General Vehib learned that the unit had killed 2,000 Armenian soldiers. After a complete investigation he court-martialed two men in charge, both of whom had followed the directive to “kill all Armenians in the armed forces.” They were convicted and hanged.⁸²

CONNECTIONS

- ❖ How does Lieutenant Said Ahmed Mukhtar al-Ba’aj describe his role in the deportations? What orders did he receive? What did he know about the deportations before he received his orders? How would you describe his role in the genocide?
- ❖ The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines *perpetrators* as people responsible for committing a crime. Was al-Ba’aj a perpetrator? What choices were available to al-Ba’aj?
- ❖ In his account, where do you find examples of obedience to authority? Do you also see examples of resistance?
- ❖ The sultan’s order for deportation was followed by a religious opinion that came from the Sheikh-ul-Islam—the religious leader appointed by the Young Turk dictatorship. What is the difference between the way people respond to political leaders as compared to religious figures?

Many psychologists have studied the way human beings respond to the roles they are given. Among the most famous experiments are Stanley Milgram’s work on “Obedience to Authority” and Philip Zimbardo’s prison experiment investigating “what happens when you put good people in an evil place?” Zimbardo’s prison experiment is documented on line. Visit his web site at <http://www.zimbardo.com>. Videos of both experiments are available from the Facing History and Ourselves resource library. A Reading describing the experiments can be found on page 210 of *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior*.