

Reading 2 — UNDER THE COVER OF WAR

Historians Deborah Dwork and Robert Jan van Pelt note: “The genocide of the Armenians was made possible by two events: the final collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the first decade of the twentieth century and the advent of total war in the second.”⁶⁴ During the early months of World War I, Young Turk leaders continued to target the Christian population of the empire—Armenians, Greeks, and Assyrians. Behaeddin Shakir, a member of the central committee within the Committee of Union and Progress, outlined a rationale and structure for the forthcoming genocide in March of 1915.⁶⁵ He claimed that the Armenian Revolutionary Federation was preparing an attack and that the Armenians stood in the way of the central committee’s “patriotic efforts.” Shakir wrote:

*Unable to forget the humiliations and the bitterness of the past, and filled with an urge for vengeance, the Cemiyet [central committee of the Committee of Union and Progress], full of hope for the future has reached a decision. The Armenians, living in Turkey, will be destroyed to the last. The government has been given ample authority. As to the organization of the mass murder, the government will provide the necessary explanations to the governors, and to the army commanders. All the delegates of the Ittihad ve Terakki in their own regions will be in charge of this task.*⁶⁶

Throughout the late winter and spring, follow-up telegrams were sent to local officials with rationalizations for the deportation and murder of the Armenians. Arrests of Armenian leaders began in several regions as well as mass deportations of the Armenians from Zeitun and Erzerum. In late May, a law legalizing the deportations was enacted without debate in the Ottoman Parliament. By June, notices were hung in villages and towns throughout the empire meant to justify the government’s plans to ordinary people.

Our Armenian fellow countrymen, who form one of the Ottoman racial elements, having taken up with a lot of false ideas of a nature to disturb the public order, as the result of foreign instigations for many years past, and because of the fact that they have brought about bloody happenings and have attempted to destroy the peace and security of the Ottoman state, of their fellow countrymen, as well as their own safety and interests, and, moreover, as the Armenian societies have now dared to join themselves to the enemy of their existence, our Government is compelled to adopt extraordinary measures and sacrifices, both for the preservation of the order and security of the country, and for the continuation of their existence and for the welfare of the Armenian societies. Therefore, as a measure to be applied until the conclusion of the war, the Armenians have to be sent away to places which have been prepared in the interior vilayets [provinces], and a literal obedience to the following orders, in a categorical manner, is accordingly enjoined upon all Ottomans:

1. With the exception of the sick, all Armenians are obliged to leave, within five days from the date of this proclamation, and by villages or quarters, under the escort of the gendarmery [police force].



THE WAR FRONTS OF WORLD WAR I

With World War I being fought on numerous fronts, the Young Turk government found in the war a nationalist rationale—and shield—for their deportations of the Armenians.

2. Although they are free to carry with them on their journey the articles of their movable property which they desire, they are forbidden to sell their landed and their extra effects, or to leave them here and there with other people. Because their exile is only temporary, their landed property will be taken care of under the supervision of the Government, and stored in closed and protected buildings. Any one who sells or attempts to take care of his movable effects or landed property in a manner contrary to this order shall be sent before the Court Martial. They are only free to sell to the Government, of their own accord, those articles which may answer the needs of the army.

3. To assure their comfort during the journey, hans [inns] and suitable buildings have been prepared, and everything has been done for their safe arrival at their places of temporary residence, without their being subjected to any kind of attack or affronts.

4. The guards will use their weapons against those who make any attempts to attack or affront the life, honor, and property of one or of a number of Armenians, and such persons as are taken alive will be sent to the Court Martial and executed. This measure being the regrettable result of the Armenians having been led in error, it does not concern in any way the other races, and these other elements will in no way or manner whatsoever intervene in this question.

5. Since the Armenians are obliged to submit to this decision of the Government, if some of them attempt to use arms against the soldiers or gendarmes, arms shall be employed only against those who use force, and they shall be captured dead or alive. In like manner, those who, in opposition to the Government's decision, refrain from leaving, or hide themselves here and there, if they are sheltered or are given food and assistance, the persons who thus shelter them or aid them shall be sent before the Court Martial for execution.

6. As the Armenians are not allowed to carry any firearms or cutting weapons, they shall deliver to the authorities every sort of arms, revolvers, daggers, bombs, etc, which they have concealed in their places of residence or elsewhere. A lot of weapons and other things have been reported to the Government, and if their owners allow themselves to be misled, and the weapons are afterwards found by the Government, they will be under heavy responsibility and receive severe punishment.

7. The escorts of soldiers and gendarmes are required and



An Armenian mother and child, fleeing from death. This photograph was taken by Armin T. Wegner, an eyewitness to the Armenian Genocide.

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are authorized to use their weapons against and to kill persons who shall try to attack or damage Armenians in villages, in city quarters, or on the roads for the purpose of robbery or other injury.

8. Those who owe money to the Ottoman Bank may deposit in its warehouses goods up to the amount of their indebtedness. Only in case the Government should have need thereof in the future are the military authorities authorized to buy the said goods by paying the price therefor. In the case of debts to other people it is permitted to leave goods in accordance with this condition, but the Government must ascertain the genuine character of the debt, and for this purpose the certified books of the merchant form the strongest proof.

9. Large and small animals which it is impossible to carry along the way shall be bought in the name of the army.

10. On the road the vilayet, leva, kaza and nahieh [province, county, district, village and cluster] officials shall render possible assistance to the Armenians.

25 June 1915 ⁶⁷

Witnesses recorded the atrocities of the deportations. Deportations to the desert meant death, either by starvation or through the butchery of special battalions created by emptying the jails of former prisoners and impoverished Kurdish tribesmen. Kurds and other Muslims became the beneficiaries of Armenian property when a second law, the Law of Expropriation and Confiscation became national policy.

CONNECTIONS

- ❖ Deborah Dwork and Robert Jan van Pelt note: “The genocide of the Armenians was made possible by two events: the final collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the first decade of the twentieth century and the advent of total war in the second.”⁶⁸ What is total war? Why would the staggering brutality of World War I make the Armenian Genocide possible?
- ❖ What did the Young Turks hope to teach ordinary people about the Armenians through their public notices? What words and phrases stand out? How did they hope the notices would influence the way people think about the deportations of Armenians? How might an Armenian individual or an Armenian group respond to the decree?
- ❖ How do you explain the differences in tone and content between the two government statements about the Armenians? Who is the intended audience for each?

- ❖ By the time the deportation order was posted thousands of Armenian leaders from across the empire had been separated from their families and murdered. How does this order try to explain those executions?
- ❖ Just before the United States entered World War I, President Woodrow Wilson told a friend: “Once [I] lead this people into war and they’ll forget there ever was such a thing as tolerance . . . a nation cannot put its strength into a war and keep its head level; it has never been done.” What makes it difficult to keep a nation’s “head level” during war? How might the outbreak of the war have influenced ordinary people’s responses to the deportations?
- ❖ Compare the language of the order with the reading “Describing the Genocide” as well as other survivor and witness accounts. How is language used to cover what really happened?
- ❖ How do the messages in this order compare with the myths and rumors that had been spread through the Young Turks’ propaganda?
- ❖ Look carefully at the photograph of the Armenian mother and child on page 89. What can you learn about their situation by studying the image? What questions are you left with? Armin Wegner, the photographer who took the picture, wrote a longer caption for the photograph which he called “Mother and Child.” His caption reads:

Fleeing from death. An Armenian mother on the heights of the Taurus Mountains. Her husband has been killed or slaughtered, thrown into prison or driven to forced labour. On her back she carries all that she owns, i.e. what she could take with her, a blanket for sleeping or to use as a tent to protect against the sun, some wooden sticks, and then, on top of everything else, her baby. How much longer can she carry this weight? ⁶⁹

How do Wegner’s comments influence the way you respond to the photograph? What context does he add that you could not learn from looking at the photograph on your own?