GERMANY AND THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE OF 1915–17

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Was the Armenian genocide a genuine project of the reigning Young Turks, or was there driving German agency and doctrine, *talim-i Alman*, as many said on the ground? Was Turkey’s ally in World War I instrumental in, and co-responsible for, the Armenian catastrophe? Was there a road, a German road, from the Armenian death camps in the Ottoman Syrian desert in 1915–17 to the eastern European extermination camps in 1942–45? Did the Old World’s seminal catastrophes after July 1914, its *descente à l’enfer*, follow the compelling logics of good and evil forces, with the German state being a main actor of evil?

United States Ambassador Henry Morgenthau and the Entente powers, like some later historians, “overplayed the influence of Germany in Istanbul,” British historian Donald Bloxham recently stated, while Vahakn Dadrian, a pioneer of Armenian genocide studies, insisted on “German complicity, namely, the willingness of a number of German officials, civilian and military, to aid and abet the Turks in their drive to liquidate the Armenians.” Others have argued similarly.¹ The German debate is as old as the famous question of guilt for the beginning of the “Great War.” Whereas the general *Schuldfrage*, after heated discussions during and shortly after the First World War, came largely back into academic debate a few decades later—remember the Fischer debate—German involvement in the Armenian genocide began to be discussed only again at the end of the twentieth century.

It was not historians employed at universities, but a retired journalist, Wolfgang Gust, who recently edited the German state documents with regard to the Armenians in the 1910s. This is a highly important documentation of the Armenian genocide that, at the same time, sheds a great deal of light on our main issues—Germany’s involvement in the Armenian genocide and the extent to which the experience of this genocide influenced German political thinking up to World War II.² Is there a historical record of concrete German–Ottoman interaction leading to the deportation, forced starvation, and massacre of the Ottoman Armenians of Anatolia and European Turkey? How did official Germany react when faced with the destruction of Anatolia’s (not only Armenian) Christians? What was the impact of the experience of the Armenian genocide for Germany and Germans after World War I? And finally, was there a road from Der ez-Zor to Auschwitz?

Ally of a dictatorial and “revolutionary” regime

First, let us understand the background for the German–Ottoman war partnership concluded in 1914, which proved a decisive setting. Sporadic German–Ottoman interactions
intensified after the Congress of Berlin, which Chancellor Bismarck convened in June 1878. The young Sultan Abdulhamid II sought alternatives to British support for the late Ottoman status quo, after the British won a foothold in Cyprus at the Congress and then, in 1882, invaded Egypt. The Germans sent a military mission to the Ottoman Empire in 1883 in order to reorganize the Ottoman army, which had collapsed in the Russian–Ottoman war in 1878. Colmar von der Goltz was a leader of that mission; his seminal book *Das Volk in Waffen* (The People in Arms) was translated into Ottoman. Both German military doctrine and German arms began to permeate the Ottoman army. Even more importantly, a huge politico-economic project began to crystallize at the end of the 1880s.

The famous *Bagdadbahn* (Baghdad railway), financed by the Deutsche Bank, a project of economic and industrial penetration, was for its promoters an alternative to the colonialism–imperialism as practiced by Germany’s senior rivals, Great Britain and France. Rightly or wrongly, the Wilhelmian elite, the elite of the *Kaiserreich* of Emperor Wilhelm II, felt it was deliberately excluded from enjoying its own portion of *Weltgeltung* and *Weltmacht*, the global power that it claimed to deserve according to its economical and military weight. The Entente Cordiale of 1904 between France and Britain, including Russia in 1907, was felt as an alliance among established powers that proved again unwilling to integrate newcomers. Not only German right-wing and liberal nationalists, but also socialists, contributed at that time to both anti-Russian and anti-British feelings and to the conviction that Germany deserved a brilliant, world-shaping future, a fatal *Grossmannssucht* according to Marion Dönhoff.

The *fin de siècle* cooperation with the Ottoman Empire germinated as an answer to German ambition and frustration. Bismarck himself had been skeptical about German involvement in the “Orient” because he judged the Oriental Question to be a bottomless pit and Article 61 of the Berlin Treaty, intended to protect the Armenians, as purely “cosmetic.” The largely agrarian Ottoman Empire suffered an existential crisis that had begun in the late eighteenth century, and dramatically worsened during the 1870s and the Russian–Ottoman war of 1877–78. Marked by the loss of territory in the Balkans and eastern Asia Minor, the young sultan Abdulhamid II was determined to save the state by means of reform, a more authoritarian rule, and state-sponsored Islamism. The politics of Muslim unity concerned an imperial interior that, since the Berlin Treaty, had been demographically much more Muslim and geographically more Asiatic. In diplomacy, the sultan exploited the growing inter-European concurrence and German ambitions.

Abdulhamid risked diplomatic isolation when the press in the West depicted him as the *sultan rouge*, the ruler responsible for large-scale anti-Armenian massacres in 1894–96. The main massacres in Anatolia in autumn 1895 began precisely after the sultan had signed, under international pressure, a reform plan for the Ottoman eastern provinces of Asia Minor, according to Article 61 of the Berlin Treaty. They cost the lives of about 100,000 Armenians, mostly men and boys, who were killed in a wave in pogrom-like violence perpetrated by individuals who had organized in mosques and whom the local authorities tolerated or encouraged. The Armenian massacres of the *fin de siècle* were to remain in western cultural memory, up to World War II, the pivotal reference for mass violence against civilians.

Sultan Abdulhamid was particularly content in October 1898 to receive the German Kaiser Wilhelm II. By then, British-led diplomacy had failed in orchestrating a strong response to the mass violence that had deeply shocked the West. British diplomacy and
transnational humanitarians argued that the reforms agreed upon in Article 61, guaranteeing safety for the Armenians in the Ottoman eastern provinces, their main region of settlement, needed urgently to be implemented. Among the humanitarians, one of the most articulate, a vociferous critic of European diplomacy, was the German pastor Johannes Lepsius. 9

The reform plan of 1894–95 was not implemented despite or, fatally, because of the massacres. Germany was in the forefront of those powers that ostentatiously put their interests above an international consensus on reforms for a safe Ottoman, including Armenian, future. During his visit in Istanbul in 1898, Wilhelm II was given the provisional concession for the continuation of the railway project, which had started 10 years before, extending as far as Baghdad. Although the Young Turks in opposition criticized German support for Abdulhamid, the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 did not put into question the Ottoman–German friendship. The American railway project (the Chester Project) for the eastern provinces failed because the Ottoman government wanted to prevent trouble with the Germans.10

The German economic politics of the Bagdadbahn reached their peak in the beginning of 1914. On 8 February 1914, the Ottoman government signed a new reform plan for the eastern provinces drafted by the jurist André Mandelstam, chief dragoman at the Russian Embassy, and thoroughly revised with German participation, after Germany had abandoned in 1913 its hitherto anti-Armenian stance. The “Armenian Reforms,” as the plan was shortly called, in its final version divided the eastern provinces into a northern and a southern part; put them under the control of two powerful European inspectors, to be selected from neutral countries; prescribed to publish the laws and official pronouncements in the local languages; provided for a fair proportion of Muslims and Christians in the councils and the police; and demobilized the Hamidiye, an irregular Kurdish cavalry that, since its creation in 1891, had threatened non-Sunni groups of the eastern provinces. The close Russian–German collaboration had been the key to this great moment of Belle Époque diplomacy that promised to solve the so-called Armenian question, a crucial part of the so-called Eastern question. Lepsius himself had contributed to the negotiations; he now stood side-by-side with a German “Orient” policy he hoped would incorporate both economic penetration and the evangelical aims of his Deutsche Orient-Mission. In a similar vein, Paul Rohrbach, a member of the executive board of the Deutsche Orient-Mission, propagated German “ethical imperialism.” In those months, two German–Ottoman friendship associations were founded, the Deutsch–Türkische Vereinigung by Ernst Jaeckh, and the Deutsch–Armenische Gesellschaft by Lepsius, both sponsored by the German Foreign Office.11

The Ottoman government, a dictatorial regime controlled by the Young Turk Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) since 1913, signed the Armenian Reforms under pressure. It felt these to be a blow against its goal of “national sovereignty.” In spring 1914, it began to implement a diametrically opposed, Turkist, agenda of demographic engineering in Anatolia. The men of its newly founded Special Organization terrorized and expelled some 150,000 Rûm (Greek- or Turkish-speaking Ottoman Christians) from the Aegean littoral. When, on 6 July, the Ottoman Parliament discussed the expulsions, Talat, minister of the interior and member of the CUP’s central committee, using evasive language, emphasized the need to settle the Muslim refugees of the Balkans in those emptied villages. If he had sent them to the vast deserts of Syria and Iraq (as he did a year later with the Armenians), they would all have died, he added.12
The international crisis of July 1914, after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria in Sarajevo, saved the regime from a diplomatic backlash against the expulsion and gave it the opportunity to win a formal ally. Even though a German military mission led by Liman von Sanders had already been in Istanbul since 1913, German diplomats did not seriously consider an official alliance with Turkey until right up to the outbreak of World War I, and even as late as mid-July 1914, Germany rejected an Austrian proposal for such an alliance. This changed, however, at the end of July, after war minister Enver Pasha made a proposal to Wangenheim. Fears had arisen of an Ottoman alignment with the Entente, and Emperor Wilhelm stressed reasons of opportunity.13

The secret alliance was concluded on 2 August 1914. Under its shield, the Young Turk regime began to implement its own interior agenda and, despite being the junior allied partner, improved its bargaining position vis-à-vis a senior partner eagerly anticipating Ottoman action against Russia. At the same time, the Young Turks were proud of their alliance with a great power which they admired.14 They felt pressed to show themselves to be a valuable military ally and to obey the compelling geodynamics as seen from Istanbul–Berlin.

**Germany and the implementation of the Armenian genocide in 1915**

What was the impact of war exigencies upon the CUP’s interior agenda and the implementation of this agenda? For General Joseph Pomiankowski, the Austrian military attaché in Istanbul, a frequent companion of Enver Pasha, the regime’s intention to eliminate the Armenian question and the Armenians themselves had “an important influence” upon the regime’s decision for war on the side of the Triple Alliance, and was a matter of internal politics into which the CUP rejected any immixture.15 The Germans who had been involved in the reform negotiations did not anticipate, let alone actively prevent, this worst case. On 6 August, Wangenheim accepted six proposals, among them the abolition of the capitulations and “a small correction of her [Turkey’s] eastern border which shall place Turkey into direct contact with the Moslems of Russia.”16 Strong panturkist and panislamist propaganda, soon to be coupled by jihadist propaganda made in Germany, began to appear in the Ottoman press in early August. This discourse, together with the suspension of the reform plan and the recall of both inspectors mid-August, alienated and intimidated the Ottoman non-Muslims. In contrast to Germany, Russia insisted on the continuation of the Armenian Reforms in the case of an alliance, after Enver had started deceitful talks with Russian representatives on an alliance with the Entente on 5 August.17

Bahaeddin Şakir, a senior CUP member and chief of the Special Organization, invited the leaders of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), who had been meeting in Erzurum since late July, to lead an anti-Russian guerilla war in the Caucasus, aimed at preparing the Ottoman conquest. The ARF stated, however, that all Armenians had to remain loyal to the country in which they lived. Despite the ARF’s refusal, attempts at revolutionizing the Caucasus began in early August. In September, the regime announced the abrogation of the capitulations, closed down numerous foreign post offices in the Empire, and succeeded in obtaining large sums of money from Germany in order to prepare for attack. Though the Empire officially entered the war only in November 1914, the Ottoman army began in early August to mobilize and requisition to a degree it had never done before. The requisitions hit, in particular, the non-Muslims in the eastern provinces.18
On 2 October, Enver stated to his confidant Hans Humann, the navy attaché of the German Embassy, that the great mobilization “had to advance the people’s völkisch [ethnonationalist Turkist] education,” part of which was a paramilitary education of the youth that had already begun in early 1914. On 11 November, when the Ottoman Empire officially entered the war, a CUP circular declared that the Muslims had to be liberated from the infidels and that the national ideal was driving the Turks to destroy the Muscovite enemy in order to obtain a natural frontier that would include all branches of the Turkish race. The ruling single-party of a huge empire used both Islamist and radical völkisch language, a striking foretaste of something more extreme than Wilhelminian Germany. Orientalists in the service of the German Foreign Office contributed to the ideological polarization by fabricating holy war propaganda. Max von Oppenheim, the author of a seminal memorandum entitled Revolutionizing the Islamic Possessions of our Enemies, dated October 1914, used highly derogatory language when speaking of the Armenians and other Oriental Christians, as if German diplomacy had not reassessed its attitude toward the Armenians in 1913–14 and exactly criticized such language. 19

While units of the Special Organization began in September to terrorize Armenian villages on the side of and beyond the eastern frontier of Russia, German-led naval attacks against installations on the Black Sea initiated open anti-Russian aggression at the end of October. In reaction, Russia declared war and its Caucasus army crossed the frontier at Erzurum, but stopped before Turkish defenses. Unsatisfied by his generals’ defensive attitude and accompanied by his German chief of staff Bronsart von Schellendorf, but against the advice of Sanders, Enver Pasha himself took the command for an offensive towards the Caucasus. At the end of 1914, however, his campaign failed catastrophically in the mountains of Sarıkamış. Tens of thousands of soldiers perished, and epidemics began to spread. 20

In January and February 1915, the campaigns by Rauf Bey and Enver’s brother-in-law Jevdet, with irregular forces in Northern Persia, failed in similar fashion. As a consequence, the panturkist dream, which had galvanized the mobilization in August 1914, had turned to trauma in spring 1915; the long eastern front was brutalized as irregulars and regulars, militias and forces of self-defense spread violence; most Christians had lost any trust in the government; and the catastrophic, frustrating situation at the long eastern front infuriated CUP leaders. Armed Christian forces relied, where possible, on Russian help in those zones. Best known is the Russian relief of the Armenians in Van, who, since 20 April, had resisted Jevdet’s efforts of repression. 21

In contrast to the east, the Ottoman army in the west commanded by the German General Sanders won its first decisive victory against the Entente offensive at the Dardanelles on 18 March. In this double strategic and psychological setting in spring 1915, the regime decided on a policy of complete Armenian removal that was implemented by extermination. Exploiting a distorted version of the Van events and the situation on the eastern front, propaganda was spread throughout Anatolia of a general Armenian uprising and of scorpion- and serpent-like Armenian neighbors. The Ministry of the Interior under Talat coordinated the removal in three main steps: 22 first, there was the arrest of Armenian political, religious and intellectual leaders, beginning with those in Istanbul on 24 April; second, from late spring to autumn, the Armenian population of Anatolia and European Turkey was transferred to camps in the Syrian desert east of Aleppo, excluding Armenian men in eastern Anatolia who were systematically massacred.
on the spot; third and finally, there was the forced starvation to death of those in the camps and the final massacre of those who still survived. A last death march followed to and beyond Der ez-Zor, excluding a large group of Armenians whom Jemal Pasha, governor of Syria, had converted pro forma to Islam and resettled in Syria and Palestine. Among the points that distinguish the murder of the Armenians from that of the Jews in World War II is this exception, as well as the assimilatory absorption of an unknown, but considerable, number of Armenian children and women into the "perpetrator nation." \(^{23}\)

**German reactions to “removal” and mass crime**

From a German perspective, the war on the Ottoman eastern front, though the offensive had failed, absorbed growing Russian forces and made the distressed regime even more dependent on German assistance. Anti-Russian and anti-British propaganda projected a German-led Europe extending its dominance up to Baghdad and beyond. A few so-called democratic, liberal, socialist or “ethical” imperialists between Berlin and Istanbul, such as Jaeckh, Oppenheim, Erwin Nossig, Friedrich Naumann, Helphand Parvus, and Rohrbach, were the leading ideologues in this matter. Whereas Rohrbach, though hesitantly, understood in summer 1915 that, once and for all, the extermination of the Armenians “broke the moral neck of the alliance with Turkey,” the others continued to do their business as if, in terms of political culture, Germany did not risk losing the war and “its soul” precisely because of this moral atrocity. The iron logics of geostategy and georevolution left no consideration for victims and collateral damage, the propagandists argued, the German *Endsieg* needed the alliance at all costs, and with it the anti-British incitement of the Muslim world and Russia’s defeat. \(^{24}\)

Although large-scale anti-Armenian massacres had taken place in peacetime in the 1890s, the centralist policy of 1915 and its extremist ideology would have been inconceivable without a general war that paralyzed internal discussion and international diplomacy. Removal-cum-extirmination in the shadow of war and of a war alliance was possible only with a senior ally that did not set, right from the start, critical political and ethical limits to its alliance. For the German officers and leading diplomats, Armenian removal in the war zones, that is, the eastern provinces, was justified by military reasons. In this sense, German officers on the spot and representatives in the capital communicated approvingly with the CUP officials. There was a similar logic of thinking with regard to the Rûm on the Aegean coast. Greece’s geographical proximity and intended neutrality in the war, however, demanded a more careful policy of removal. It led henceforth not to Greece or to desert, but to the interior of Anatolia. Again, Muslims were resettled in the evacuated Rûm villages. In the case of the Rûm, Germany pressured its ally several times. \(^{25}\)

The provisional law of 31 May, often called the Law of Deportation, officially sanctioned removal and served as a legal cover for beginning destruction of the Armenians. Although it did not limit removal to clearly defined zones and the Entente had publicly warned of crimes against humanity, the German officials still did not anticipate or counter the risk of massive abuse. After, in May, they had approved of limited removal for military reasons, they began to back, on the contrary, the public Ottoman denial \(^{26}\) and made efforts in order to appease friends of the Armenians and experts of the region.

In the Foreign Office in Berlin, Lepsius was shown a telegram of 31 May by Wangenheim, who asked for their understanding with regard to removal. Lepsius, however, was
alarmed and decided to travel to Turkey. The uncritical approval of removal in the eastern provinces was a decisive breakthrough for a regime which, a few months previously, had found itself strictly bound to implement, jointly backed by Germany, a monitored coexistence of Christians and Muslims, Armenians, Syriacs, Kurds, and Turks in eastern Asia Minor. The breakthrough was all the more poignant as, in a few instances, German officers on the ground signed or approved removals. The best documented case is Lieutenant Colonel Böttrich, head of the railway department of the Ottoman general staff. Against the will of the civil direction of the Bagdad Bahn, he signed an order of deportation for Armenian employees of the Bagdad Bahn, though he knew well in October 1915 that this would involve the death of most or all of them.  

As early as mid-June 1915, Humann qualified the extermination as “hard, but useful.” Ottoman officials succeeded in the provinces to create the impression that the removal was German doctrine, and its horrors the consequence of German agency. The lack of human and Christian solidarity struck many Ottomans; Europe’s long-proclaimed ethics and protection of minority Christians appeared to have been sacrificed. “I often notice how embarrassed silence or a desperate attempt to change the subject took hold of their [the German officers’] circles,” wrote the former teacher in Aleppo Martin Niepage, “when a German with deep feelings and an independent judgment came to speak of the dreadful misery of the Armenians.” Officer Wolfskeel contributed to crush the desperate Armenian resistance in Urfa—like Van and the Musa Dagh an exceptional case—describing this on the ground in cool and smug words to his fiancée. Only a few officers, such as Sanders in Izmir and Erwin von Scheubner Richter in Erzerum, locally prevented, or tried to prevent, the anti-Armenian policy.  

Ambassador Wangenheim began to understand in mid-June 1915 that the so-called removal from the war zones was part of a fully fledged program of removal-cum-extinction throughout Asia Minor. “It has come to light that the banishment of the Armenians is not only motivated by military considerations,” he wrote on 17 June to Bethmann-Holweg. “The Minister of the Interior, Talaat Bey, recently spoke about this without reservation to Dr. Mordtmann, who is currently employed by the Imperial Embassy. He said ‘that the Porte is intent on taking advantage of the World War in order to make a clean sweep of internal enemies—the indigenous Christians—without being hindered in doing so by diplomatic intervention from other countries.’”  

Wangenheim felt abused and tricked, and began to send clear-cut reports to Berlin; first and foremost in his mind, however, was Germany’s prestige. “The expulsion and relocation of the Armenian people was limited until 14 days ago to the provinces nearest to the eastern theatre of war,” he wrote to Bethmann-Holweg on 7 July, “since then the Porte has resolved to extend these measures also to the provinces [ … ] even though these parts of the country are not threatened by any enemy invasion for the time being. This situation and the way in which the relocation is being carried out shows that the government is indeed pursuing its purpose of eradicating the Armenian race from the Turkish Empire.[ … ] I have considered it my duty to point out to the Porte that we can only approve of the deportation of the Armenian people if it is carried out as a result of military considerations and serves as a security against revolts, but that in carrying out these measures one should provide protection for the deportees against plundering and butchery.” The last sentences were wishful thinking.  

Later on, during talks with Ambassador Wolff-Metternich, the successor of Wangenheim who had died in autumn 1915, the regime argued that military reasons had justified the
comprehensive removal. Wolff-Metternich intervened more energetically than his predeces sor and wanted public condemnation of the horrors, but was not backed by Berlin. The governmental attitude condensed in Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg’s fatal note of 17 December, saying that "The proposed 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. If the war continues much longer, we will need the Turks even more. I cannot understand how Metternich can make such a suggestion [ ... ]."

In Germany, a few public voices, in particular Lepsius and the socialist deputy Karl Liebknecht, spoke for loyalty to truth and humanitarian action. In lectures and in his report on the situation of the Armenians in Turkey, a brilliant piece of investigative journalism, which exploited sources collected during his travel to Istanbul in July–August 1915, Lepsius gave the German intelligentsia the means to understand what was happening. When Lepsius, in a lecture to German journalists in Berlin in October 1915, complained that the extermination of the Armenians was having a disastrous impact upon Turkey’s economy, the rejoinder from Julius Kaliski, a right-wing socialist, was that the Ottoman Armenians would easily be replaced by Jews. Another socialist proclaimed in his freshly launched journal in favor of the German war effort in the late summer 1915: “We do not want to be influenced in our judgment by considerations for friends or comrades, not even by the pity for poor and persecuted people.” German power, in his perspective, had alone to bring about Russia’s defeat and a socialist world revolution. A collaborator of the Foreign Office published a panegyric of the main CUP leaders after having interviewed them during the high noon of the extermination in late summer 1915 in the Ottoman capital. Another collaborator of the Foreign Office wrote from Istanbul that “this extermination of a rebellious Turcophile and Anglophile human race, which had been stirred up by foreign money, could be the first step towards the amelioration of the economic situation” in Turkey – that is towards a “national economy,” millî iktisad, which suppressed the “compradore bourgeoisie.”

Could Germany have prevented the genocide? General Pomiankowski answered no, because of the constraints of the alliance, including the CUP’s strict separation between internal politics and military matters. He argued that only a timely declaration of war by the United States, which possessed important missionary institutions throughout Anatolia, could have prevented the extinction of the Anatolian Armenian community. Closer to the reality and the possibilities of early 1915 would have been an Entente strategy that seriously considered a landing at the poorly defended coast of Adana or Iskenderun, instead of stubbornly trying and failing to break through at the Dardanelles. An invasion from that coast would have prevented at least the final phase, the death camps in Syria. The political and military authorities of Germany could indeed have prevented the Armenian catastrophe right from the start, if they had possessed in time the audacity to radically reassess their political self-understanding, overstretched war policy, and ill-conceived alliance with the CUP regime.

It is improbable that any European power would have decided, in times of total war, on steps in favor of universal ethics and political self-denial; this hard fact lies at the core of Europe’s unending catastrophe after 1914. However, one could argue that the German authorities could have bargained much better in the summer of 1915 in order to exclude certain groups and regions from removal. Since Germany did not possess the means to control the whole interior, the CUP regime would, in the long run, have found
ways to implement its policy of de-Armenization. Arguably, Germany’s last best chance to prevent the Armenian genocide would have been in late March and early April 1915, when, after the first victory at the Dardanelles, the Turkish elite’s depression turned to chauvinist exuberance and when, combined with events in Zeytun and Dörtyol, the anti-Armenian atmosphere began to condense. German diplomacy was informed in time. “After my return [from Zeytun], Jelal Bey, the Vali of Aleppo, let me know,” the German consul in Aleppo Walter Roessler wrote to both Wangenheim and the Chancellor on 12 April, “that apparently in the Turkish government a current is gaining the upper hand which is inclined to consider all Armenians as suspicious or even hostile. He thinks of this development as a misfortune for his fatherland and begged me to persuade His Excellency the Imperial Ambassador to counteract this trend.”

Emphasizing leading German agency for the first Ottoman victory at the Dardanelles and for the further defense of the Ottoman capital, German diplomacy could then have made clear, once and for all, that it remained committed to the Armenian reforms of 1914, vetoed henceforth any anti-Armenian steps, and did not fear a break in the alliance.

Yet once it understood the extermination, German diplomacy remained egocentric. It worked only to limit damage to prestige, to refuse accusations of guilt and, in the same perspective, to facilitate some humanitarian assistance. In early June 1915, an outraged Roessler asked Wangenheim to intervene for the first deportees arriving in Aleppo, informing him that Jelal was being sacked and that a special CUP envoy had taken power in Aleppo. Jelal had been one of those few high officials who had courageously defended a sense of honor and humanity. Beside some early aid by local agents, German diplomacy began late, in autumn 1915, to facilitate humanitarian help. The Swiss teacher Beatrice Rohner, a member of a German missionary organization, was called to the Ottoman capital for secret talks in November. Helped by local Armenians and backed by German and American diplomacy, in early 1916 she set up legal orphanages in Aleppo and began to communicate illegally with the deportees in the camps. This work was sponsored mainly by American and Swiss sources. The money collected by Lepsius went to his collaborators in Urfa, whose humanitarian work, also for Kurdish deportees, was co-sponsored by the American Near East Relief. This had begun in autumn 1915; it remained backed by American and German diplomacy even after the United States entered the war.

The impact of the Armenian genocide on interwar Germany

The Armenian genocide could have been a tremendous lesson, but to point at the main Turkish culprit, as did Lepsius, did not suffice. At issue was to grasp the lack of German resistance against and response to unexpected, but expectable mass crime next door, whose victims were humans for whom European diplomacy in 1878 and again in 1913–14, this time with central German involvement, had guaranteed security and future. Liebknecht, Lepsius, Rohrbach, and others had felt in 1915 that something had gone wrong in German political and ethical culture, that Germany missed the poignant challenge the Armenians had addressed. Evil, in the sense of a hushed up genocide, entered Germany’s political realm through a backdoor. One could consider this a consequence of an ill-begun war and an ill-conceived war alliance, thus part of the war guilt question. After 1918, most political and intellectual actors, including Lepsius, blended together the questions of war guilt (or co-guilt) and of co-responsibility for the murder of the
Armenians and answered them in the negative. In a Weimar Republic that broadly cultivated the myth of German innocence, the decisive damage of 1914 and 1915 could not be repaired. Even worse, several actors began to rationalize and endorse extermination, referring implicitly or explicitly to the Armenians. In this sense, the underdiscussed, and wrongly discussed, German experience of the Armenian genocide contributed to the acceptance and adoption of exterminatory schemes in the interwar period.

In February 1918 already, Emperor Wilhelm had endorsed paramilitary action against the “Jew-Bolsheviks” in the Baltic referring to “analogy Turks in Armenia.” He again assimilated, as was done so often in the Wilhelmine era, Armenians and Jews, and saw in 1918 the “Russian people at the mercy of the revenge of the Jews.”

Max von Scheubner-Richter, German officer and vice-Consul in Erzerum, had tried to help the victims and to intervene in their favor through German diplomacy in May and June 1915. However, within a few years this seemingly upright man became a fanatic, obsessed by fear of internal enemies that would annihilate Germany. What haunted him was not the Armenian qua Levantine Jew, but the Armenian victim experience. In the general context of German defeat, the Versailles Treaty and inflation, and of a personal trauma as a refugee from Riga, his native town having been occupied by the Red Army, Scheubner-Richter’s ethical references completely broke down. “All illusions on the solidarity of the international proletariat, all illusions that it suffices to be in one’s self peace-loving in order to lead the neighbor to peace, all illusions that a nation is justly dealt with if itself it is righteous, all illusions that foreign nations will not permit the destruction of the German nation [... ] all these stupid dreams and illusions must die.”

Introduced to Hitler by Alfred Rosenberg, himself a native of the Baltics, Scheubner-Richter was one of the first National Socialists in Munich. In Munich, they internalized together the fear of “becoming like the Armenians” and the conclusive idea of preventive annihilation. Their fear and hate of Bolshevik Russia echoed the panturkist resentments against Tsarist Russia before and during World War I.

“A solution of the Jewish question has to be found,” Hitler said at the end of 1922 to a Munich newspaper, probably echoing talks with Scheubner-Richter. “If no solution is achieved, there will be two possibilities, either the German people will be a people like the Armenians or the Levantines, or a bloody clash will follow.”

For Scheubner-Richter in early 1923, the “rise of Germany and the German nation from today’s shame and defenselessness” could only take place “if first of all we remove ruthlessly and completely from Germany and the German lines all those that carry guilt for the destruction of the German national body and for the failure of resistance of the German nation.” Like radical Turkists and pan-Turkists after the Balkan wars, Scheubner-Richter now pleaded for “ruthless cleansing from Germany of all elements that are intentionally hostile and that work against the völkisch union of all German tribes.”

A German officer who had moved among Pan-Turkist officers and perpetrators in Erzurum in 1915, next to the Russian front, knew what these words meant.

The military engineer and interwar author Karl Klinghardt had been in the service of Jemal Pasha. Like many other Germans, a witness to death caravans, massacres, and starvation camps, he suffered from a memory filled with traumatic images. “But I have not spoken about these experiences. Nothing to help. With the brutality of natural events a stroke of human history produced itself. [...] These experiences should forever be silenced.” In a text for Der Orient, he nevertheless wanted to prove that he knew what the “true misery of the Armenians” had been. Arguing against a “propaganda of
consternation,” Klinghardt revealed a fascination with cold-blooded, rational, functional mass killings. “The mass killing was executed almost every time in a quick and functional manner, without any inhibition of blood [Blutscheu], but also without any particular cruelty.” Turkey would have been “damned to a völkisch and national death,” had it not annihilated the Armenians, Klinghardt concluded in 1928.46

“If we abstract from the human aspect,” Dagobert von Mikusch, an early successful biographer of Mustafa Kemal in 1929, wrote with similar logic and a sweeping comparison, “the exclusion of the Armenians from the body of their state was no less a constraining necessity than […] was the extermination of the Indians for the new state of the white people in America.”47 Many German patriots of those years admired the Turkish nationalists, their successful revision of the Paris-Sèvres Treaty in Lausanne in 1923 and their rapid construction of a nation-state based on Turkism. Dazzled by this success, they went on to accept the whole creation of the state in Asia Minor, including preparatory demographic engineering and extermination. In an article of 1929, the renowned orientalist Richard Hartmann saw the killing of the Armenians as part of a racial war, and described Turkey “after the racial wars” as a nation free from “notable völkisch minorities.”48 A healthy homogeneous nation-state, many came to believe, was incompatible with egalitarian plurality. Though they admired the Turkish success and tried to rationalize what had happened to the Armenians, most of them, however, still did so with hesitation, marking distance by referring to “true Asiatic ruthlessness.”49 They were both confused and fascinated by the eliminatory logics—the silent approval of mass killing and the refusal to acknowledge anything criminal in it. “In the Armenian question they [the Kemalists] have covered up for the Young Turks and not explicitly, but tacitly, approved their policy of extermination,” Mikusch stated.50

The Berlin trial against Salomon Teilirian, the killer of Talat Pasha in Berlin in 1921, polarized between right-wing patriots and voices such as the circle of Lepsius, the left-wing newspaper Vorwärts, and students of law such as Robert M. W. Kempner. These welcomed the trial and Teilirian’s acquittal as a step towards international justice for unpunished mass crimes. The context of this trial in Germany and the release “of all Turkish war criminals” in 1922 made another student of law, Raphael Lemkin, aware of the need for a new concept in international law—whence he finally coined the term “genocide.” Rosenberg, in contrast, praised Talat and condemned the “Jewish press of all colors” who had welcomed the outcome of the trial.51 When Rosenberg’s party was in power, it burned Franz Werfel’s 1933 The Forty Days of Musa Dagh, the story of a successful Armenian resistance in 1915. As a symbol of hope, Werfel’s novel was widely read among eastern European Jews; it formed an important link from the Armenian to the Jewish experience of genocide.52

Conclusion

A few differences, analogies and links between the Armenian genocide and the Shoah have been touched upon in this chapter, though comparison is not its main topic. In both cases, young imperial elites and would-be saviors of empire had traumatically witnessed the loss of power, prestige, territory, and homes. In an unstable political situation and fearing imperial and personal ruin, they succeeded in establishing a single-party regime that allowed them to implement policies of expulsion and extermination based on crazy, but calculated social Darwinist engineering. The extermination of the Armenians as part
of a comprehensive demographic engineering, which considered Anatolian Christians to be non-assimilable, turned out to be a brutal but successful model for eliminating the issue of minorities, due to its ethno-nationalistic rationale condoned by Western diplomacy at the Near East Conference of Lausanne in 1922–23. The revisionist Treaty of Lausanne tacitly endorsed comprehensive policies of expulsion and extermination of hetero-ethnic and hetero-religious groups, with fatal attraction for German revisionists and many other nationalists. The reception of this paradigm is the bridge from a Wilhelminian Germany on the whole deeply embarrassed by the genocide of its junior partner, to a Nazi Germany that approved of and adopted it.

For a long time, the international setting in both politics and academia did not allow for calmly exploring possible German paths from the Armenian to the Jewish Genocide. The heated Historikerstreit of the 1980s had its important points, but certainly did not excel in contextualizing and historicizing Nazi Germany’s exterminatory policies. Among other reasons, this deficit had to do then with the striking lack of research into the experiences of the Ottoman Armenians. Contemporary observers, however, had linked both experiences. Lemkin, in particular, pioneer of the Genocide Convention, thought of the death camps in the Syrian desert, the final phase of the Armenian genocide, when he evoked the “heat of the ovens of Auschwitz and Dachau” and the “murderous heat in the desert of Aleppo which burnt to death the bodies of thousands of Christian Armenian victims of genocide in 1915.” For him, a road, crooked though it may be, led from Der ez-Zor to Auschwitz, and in turn from both to the Genocide Convention.53

Notes


2 Internet edition on www.armenocide.de, of which a selection is printed and introduced in Gust (ed.), Der Völkermord an den Armeniern. All PA-AA documents quoted in this chapter have been accessed on this site in December 2009.


5 Norbert Saupp, Das Deutsche Reich und die armenische Frage (Köln: n.p., 1990), 30.


7 Describing persecutions of the Jews, René de Weck, Swiss legate in Bucarest during World War II, referred to the Armenian massacres of the fin de siècle, which were more present to his mind than the genocide of 1915; letter of 28 November 1941, quoted by Gaston Haas, “Wenn man gewusst hätte, was sich drehen im Reich abspielte ... ”: 1941–1943: was man in der Schweiz von der Judenvernichtung wusste (Basel: Helbing und Lichtenhahn, 1994), 82.

9 Johannes Lepsius, Armenien und Europa: Eine Anklageschrift wider die christlichen Grossmächte und ein Aufruf an das christliche Deutschland (Berlin: W. Faber, 1896).

10 Under attack from aggressive young states like Italy and those in the Balkans in 1911–13, and realizing that European assurances of the status quo proved futile in the event of war, Ottoman diplomacy did not focus exclusively on Germany when seeking a formal alliance with a European power. Britain, the diplomatically ideal partner, was rejected, however, since it remained doubtful whether the CUP would have taken Britain’s side in the rivalry with Germany over the Bagdadbahn. John A. Denovo, American Interests and Policies in the Middle East: 1900–1939 (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1963), 58–87; Joseph Heller, British Policy towards the Ottoman Empire: 1908–1914 (London: Frank Cass, 1983), 62–64.


12 Fuat Dündar, Modern Türkiye’nin şifresi. İttihat ve Terakki’nin etnisiye mühendisliği (1913–1918) (İstanbul: İletişim, 2008), 223, 257.


14 Djemal, Erinnerungen eines türkischen Staatsmannes (München: Drei Masken Verlag, 1922), 119.

15 Pomiankowski, Der Zusammenbruch des Osmanischen Reiches, 162–63.

16 Trumpener, Germany and the Ottoman Empire, 28.

17 Aksakal, The Ottoman Road to War, 107–8, 127–30.


21 Once relieved, they themselves acted revengefully against Muslim civilians. Kieser, Der verpasste Friede, 448–53; Bihl, Die Kaukasus-Politik der Mittelmächte, 233.


23 For recent comparative and contextualizing approaches, see The Armenian Genocide and the Shoah, eds Hans-Lukas Kieser and Dominik J. Schaller (Zürich: Chronos, 2002); Bloxham, Genocide, the World Wars and the Unweaving of Europe.
26 Trumpener, Germany and the Ottoman Empire, 209–10.
28 PA-AA/BoKon/171, 18 November 1915.
30 PA-AA/R14093, report to the Chancellor of 10 September 1916.
31 Von Reichenberg, Zeitoun, Mousa Dagh, Ourfa.
33 PA-AA/R14086, 17 June 1915, English translation on the site.
34 PA-AA/R14086.
36 Note on an Embassy report of 7 December 1915, PA-AA/R1408.
40 PA-AA/BoKon/169; see also Roessler’s reports of 3 and 6 June 1915.
45 Leverkühn, Posten auf ewiger Wache, 190.
49 For example, Klinghardt, “Als Augenzeuge der armenischen Katastrophe,” 159.
50 Mikusch, Gasi Mustafa Kemal zwischen Europa und Asien, 83.
53 Letter of July 1950 quoted in The Encyclopedia of Genocide (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-Clio, 1999), 79; “Dr. Lemkin, Father of Genocide Convention, reviews work relating to Turkish massacres,” The Hairenik Weekly, 1 January 1959, 1.