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Perpetrators, Bystanders, and Rescuers Popular Attitudes Towards Ottoman Christians During the Armenian Genocide*

ȘTEFAN IONESCU

WWI Ottoman Empire, especially its Eastern part, was a mosaic of ethnic and religious groups. Inter-group relations during the Ottoman rule varied, from peaceful coexistence to random violence. Especially in the 19th century, the traditional tolerance of Ottoman rulers towards their Christian and Jewish subjects – historically framed into the Millet system – started to deteriorate. The increasing military and economic decline of the Empire, the expansion of Tsarist Russia, the interference of European Great Powers in Ottoman domestic affairs, the rise of ethno-nationalist movements of Christian groups within the Empire and on its borderland (gradually turned into nation states, such as the Balkan states), and the rise of Turkish nationalist movement influenced the evolution of the Empire. Various reformers tried to stop this trend and modernize the state following the models of European powers, but with unsatisfactory results¹.

At the turn of the century, different paths for the future of the Empire were contemplated, varying between pan-Islamism and ethno-national statehood. In 1908, the Committee of Union and Progress (henceforth CUP, formed by intellectuals, officers, etc., also known as the Young Turks) came to power and tried to reform and modernize the Empire, emphasizing political participation by transforming subjects into citizens. At the beginning, CUP displayed favourable attitude toward local minorities and even collaborated with the Armenian political parties. CUP's attitude towards Christian minorities changed significantly after the territorial losses suffered at the end of the Balkan Wars, and after the arrival of numerous Muslim refugees persecuted by the victorious Christian nation-states. Faced with harsh and humiliating defeats at the hand of their former subjects and pressured by the Great Powers' constant interference into the domestic affairs of the Empire, CUP leaders, many of whom hailed from the lost Balkan provinces, gradually became radicalized².

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¹ The Ottoman Millet system was based on religious affiliation and allowed extensive fiscal and judicial autonomy to confessional communities. However, Christians and Jews did not enjoy full equality with their Muslim countrymen. See Donald QUATAERT, *The Ottoman Empire 1700-1922*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005.

² There is a substantial literature on the role of nationalism during the last decades of the Ottoman Empire and its aftermath. See, for instance, Taner AKCAM, *From Empire to Republic: Turkish Nationalism and the Armenian Genocide*, Zed Books, London and New York, 2004; IDEM, *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility*, Metropolitan Book, New York, 2006; Donald BLOXHAM, *The Great Game of Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism, and the Destruction of Ottoman Armenians*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007; Vahakn

In 1914, the Ottoman Empire entered WWI on the Central Powers (Germany and Austro-Hungary) side, experiencing several defeats against Russian armies on the Caucasus front (Sarikamish – January 1915) and struggling to contain the Gallipoli landing (starting in April 1915) of British and French troops attempting to capture Constantinople. The Ottoman siege of the city of Van, defended by local Armenians (April-May 1915), further increased the besieged mentality of CUP leaders. The measures adopted during those days – purging Armenian soldiers from the army, assembling, mass-murdering, and deporting civilians – suggest that CUP leaders decided (when exactly it is still debated, but most probably in the Spring of 1915, following the Gallipoli landing, and perhaps after the Van conflict) to eliminate their Christian minorities (especially Armenians) whom they perceived as serious domestic threats¹. The number of casualties of these deportations and massacres is still debated. Estimates range between 300 000 and 1 500 000 Armenian victims, and between 100 000 to 250 000 Syrians².

In this article I explore the popular attitudes of Ottoman Muslims (especially Turks and Kurds)³ and foreign residents (German, US, British, and so on) towards their Armenian and Syriac friends, neighbours, and countrymen during the tragic events that occurred in WWI Ottoman Empire, known in Western scholarship as the Armenian Genocide⁴. More precisely, I am interested in examining the various patterns of behaviour of Muslims and foreign residents towards Armenians and other Christians, in the ways these were perceived and recorded by foreign eyewitnesses and Christian victims during the first part of WWI (1915-1916).

Therefore, my paper reflects the perspectives of survivors and foreign observers, reflected in their diaries, letters, and interviews that had been compiled during

DADRIAN, *The History of the Armenian Genocide: Ethnic Conflict from the Balkans to Anatolia and to Caucasus*, Berghahn Books, New York, 2004.

¹ Besides Armenians (the largest and the most influential Christian minority), CUP leaders targeted other Christian groups, such as Syriac communities (Assyrians, Nestorians, Chaldeans). Following the model of David Gaunt, I use the generic term Syriac to designate a variety of Christian groups (such as Assyrians, Syriacs, Chaldeans, and Nestorians), of different denominations, who used variants of the Aramaic language. Numerous members of these communities were located in the borderlands of the Ottoman Empire during WWI. David GAUNT, *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors: Muslim-Christian Relations in Eastern Anatolia during WWI*, Gorgias Press, Piscataway, 2006, pp. 1-28; Taner AKCAM, *From Empire to Republic...cit.*; Donald BLOXHAM, *The Great Game of Genocide...cit.*; Vahakn DADRIAN, *The History of the Armenian Genocide...cit.*

² It is difficult to assess the number of the victims from each ethnic-religious group because of problematic access to unbiased and accurate reports and statistics, movements of population, and identity/belongingness controversies. The Assyro-Chaldean delegation to the Paris Peace Conference estimated that a number of 250 000 Ottoman Assyrian-Chaldeans died in battles and massacres between 1914 and 1919. See David GAUNT, *Massacres...cit.*, pp. 300-303.

³ The Ottoman Muslims involved in WWI events were especially Turks and Kurds, but also Arabs, Circassians, Chechens, so on.

⁴ See, for instance, Taner AKCAM, *A Shameful Act...cit.*; IDEM, *From Empire to Republic...cit.*; Donald BLOXHAM, *The Great Game of Genocide...cit.*; Vahakn DADRIAN, *The History of the Armenian Genocide...cit.*; Robert MELSON, *Revolution and Genocide: On the Origins of the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992. For a pro-Turkish perspective, see Guenter LEWY, *The Armenian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey: A Disputed Genocide*, University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City, 2007.

the events in *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire 1915-1916*. Edited and published in 1916 by Viscount Bryce, the book was the first important collection of primary sources concerning the annihilation of Ottoman Armenians and other Christians during WWI, and even today represents a major resource for any scholarly investigation of this topic¹. By implementing strict censorship of communications and an absolute travel embargo for Armenians, the Ottoman officials tried to prevent the dissemination of any news about atrocities perpetrated against local Christians, but with only partial success².

The patterns of behaviour of Ottoman Muslims and foreign residents varied from active persecution to indifference, opportunism and occasional help and rescue. I argue that the attitudes towards the Armenians and other Christians were influenced by different factors, such as greed, social conformism, careerism, cruelty, personal relationships, official propaganda, and anti-Armenian and anti-Syriac prejudices. Overall, the attitudes of Ottoman Muslims towards local Christians fit into the perpetrators/bystanders/rescuers paradigm³. Thus, the Ottoman officials (bureaucrats, soldiers, gendarmes, etc.) and a minority of Muslim civilians (especially Turks and Kurds) did perpetrate mass murder and other atrocities against Armenians and Syriacs. Usually not engaged in direct murder and torture, the majority of civilians were bystanders, who often became perpetrators and accomplices in order to benefit from the persecutions of their countrymen. Finally, a minority of Ottoman Muslims did oppose the persecutions, sometimes only partially, by means of expressing public protests or by helping individual Christians. The historical context was extremely complicated and often there were no ultimate distinctions between the categories taken here into account. While sometimes bystanders turned into perpetrators or accompli-

¹ The Ottoman and Turkish governments dismissed the testimonies gathered by Viscount Bryce as British war propaganda. However, many of these eye-witness accounts came not only from citizens of the Ottoman Empire's enemies, but also from citizens of its allies – German and Austro-Hungarian militaries, diplomats and other civilians – and neutral countries (such as USA, Switzerland, and Sweden). See Viscount BRYCE (ed.), *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire 1915-1916*, Sir Joseph Causton and Sons, London, 1916, pp. 13, 26-27, 91, 96-97, 305-309, 541. On the issue of denial of the Armenian Genocide, see Richard HOVANNISSIAN, "The Armenian Genocide and Patterns of Denial", in IDEM (ed.), *The Armenian Genocide in Perspective*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick and London, 1987; IDEM (ed.), *Remembrance and Denial: The Case of the Armenian Genocide*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1999.

² See Viscount BRYCE, *The Treatment of Armenians...cit.*, pp. 6, 79, 246, 343-344. Many Armenian and Syriac survivors fled abroad where they testified about their experiences. Foreign observers – missionaries, diplomats, health care staff – residing in Eastern Anatolia during WWI, sent their accounts abroad to various organizations or newspapers or returned to their countries and narrated what they saw or heard.

³ I chose to examine the categories of perpetrators, bystanders, and rescuers, because of their relevance in the case of the Armenian genocide and of interesting inter-group dynamics. I use a changed version of the model popularized by the Holocaust historian, Raul Hilberg – perpetrators/bystanders/victims. The concept of perpetrators would describe those individuals (belonging to state apparatus of just simple citizens) who decided the fate of Ottoman Christians and directly participated to their persecution. Bystanders refers to people living in the genocidal area, who were neither perpetrators nor victims, people who heard or saw something about the Armenian tragedy but were not "involved", in the sense of not being willing to hurt the victims nor wishing to be hurt by the perpetrator. By rescuers I understand people who helped persecuted Armenians in one way or another. See Raul HILBERG, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: the Jewish Catastrophe 1933-1945*, Aaron Asher Books, New York, 1992.

ces, in other contexts they became rescuers. Therefore, the separation between these three main categories is often a fluid one and they are not easily quantifiable. In general, the foreign residents' behaviour proved much more favourable toward local Christians than those of Ottoman Muslims. Foreign residents' behaviour was influenced by their worldview and prejudices towards "uncivilized" and "savage" Turks/Orientals, and by a sense of common belongingness (along with the victims) to the same religious community – Christendom. Many of the foreign residents in Ottoman Empire were protestant missionaries looking for proselytes among Armenians and Syriacs. However, not all foreign residents did help persecuted Christians: some of them (especially German officers) became active perpetrators and profiteers, or just indifferent bystanders.

This article scrutinize, first, the debate over the conceptualization of the Ottoman radical policies that targeted local Christians: was it a genocide or a tragic civil war triggered by the victims' provocation? Then it explores some theoretical aspects of human behaviour during WWI Ottoman Empire, and follows up with a discussion of the various motivations of the actions of perpetrators, bystanders, and rescuers.

The Annihilation of Armenians between Genocide and Victims' Provocation

In the historiography of the Armenian genocide, the "provocation thesis" played and still plays a vital role in justifying the Ottoman actions during WWI. According to the provocation thesis, the death of Armenian civilians during "relocations" and "random killings" was not part of a premeditated genocidal policy, but simply the result of a "civil war" turmoil, combined with catastrophic famine and epidemics, which caused the death of many Muslim civilians as well. Thus, in order to avoid the responsibility for the genocide, the Ottoman and, later, the Turkish authorities blamed the Armenian victims for provoking their own destruction. This pro-Ottoman position argues that, driven by their radical ethno-nationalisms, Armenians and Turks engaged in a deadly struggle during WWI, for the possession of the same area that both sides regarded as a vital part of their national territory, and further, that, in general, the Armenians behaved as disloyal rebels who favored Tsarist Russia. According to the Ottoman and Turkish narrative, there were significant proofs of Armenian treason: the preparation for "rebellion" (amassing arms and establishing political revolutionary organizations) against the legitimate Ottoman authorities, further, several cases of Armenian armed resistance, most notably the Van "rebellion", and the participation of Armenian volunteers in the Russian army. According to the same narrative, the Young Turks responded in the only way any legitimate government would act, namely by trying to suppress a domestic uprising and to remove dangerous elements from the conflict area (borderlands)¹.

Under closer scrutiny, it seems that the "provocation thesis" is not consistent with the reality on the ground in several points. To begin with, at that time, Armeni-

¹ For a pro-Turkish perspective, see Guenter LEWY, *The Armenian Massacres...cit.*; Stanford SHOW, Ezel Kural SHOW, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, 2nd vol., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1977; Justin MCCARTHY, *The Armenian Rebellion at Van*, University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City, 2006.

ans had neither a state of their own nor a proper army, and not even a coherent and strong resistance movement. Although there were some Armenian volunteers in the Russian army and some Armenian guerillas within the Ottoman Empire, the Turks held an overwhelming superiority of the state power over their Armenian "opponents". At the individual level, the role of Armenian volunteers within Russian army, especially after the defeat of Ottoman forces at Sarikamish, triggered the fear and hostility of many local Muslims towards the Armenian communities behind the front lines¹. It is not clear to what extent the role of Armenian volunteers was or was not exaggerated by the Ottomans. Regardless of the controversy surrounding the decision-making process², what it seems to be clear is that CUP central government decided – influenced by ethno-nationalism and security concerns (possible Great Powers interference) – to annihilate its Christian citizens, such as Armenians and Syriacs, considering them a domestic threat to the Empire³.

On the political level, although there were some Armenian nationalist parties, the Hanchackist and the Dashnaksutiun, their leaders realized that a complete separation from the Ottoman Empire was impossible due to the geographical and social repartition of the Armenians, who lived in mixed villages and towns across Anatolia together with different Muslim groups. The majority of the Armenians were peasants living in remote villages and they were politically more passive than active in a potential struggle for independence. Many of the Armenian leaders rather wanted to obtain equality of rights or some form of autonomy within the Ottoman Empire, and not to become a province under the Tsarist autocracy⁴.

As to the behavior of Armenian soldiers within the Turkish army, it seems that, in general, they proved to be loyal and brave in battles against the Russian army, in whose favor they were later accused to have betrayed⁵. Therefore, the Turkish claim that the Armenians were "traitors" favoring Tsarist Russia does not seem to reflect the more complex military reality of Eastern Anatolia. Some Armenians defected from the Ottoman army, hid within local communities or joined the guerilla groups or the Tsarist army, but they seemed to represent a minority of the Armenians living in the borderlands, and an even a smaller minority compared with the entire group of

¹ See, for instance, the case of Erzeroum, where local officials and returning Ottoman officers blamed the Armenian volunteers for the defeat against Russian Army and urged radical measures against Armenian civilians. Viscount BRYCE (ed.), *The Treatment of Armenians...cit.*, pp. 231, 233, 237.

² When did the CUP leaders decide to annihilate the Armenians and Syriacs? Before WWI, immediately after the war started, after the Russian victories on the Caucasus front, or after the Gallipoli landing? Some historians argued that the annihilation of Armenians was planned long before WWI. See Vahakn DADRIAN, *The History of the Armenian Genocide...cit.*; other historians, such as Hilmar Kaiser, argue that there was no longstanding plan or blueprint to eliminate the Armenians when the opportunity arose. Hilmar KAISER, "A Scene from the Inferno: The Armenians of Erzerum and the Genocide 1915-1916", in Hans Lukas KIESER, Dominik SCHALLER (eds.), *Das Volkermord an den Armeniern und die Shoah/The Armenian Genocide and the Shoah*, Chronos, Zürich, 2002, p. 172.

³ See Tanner AKCAM, *A Shameful Act...cit.*

⁴ Robert MELSON, *Revolution and Genocide...cit.*, p. 157.

⁵ Enver Pasha, the Ottoman Defense Minister, praised the Armenian troops for their bravery in the battle of Sarikamish. *Ibidem*, pp. 158-159.

Ottoman Armenians¹. These initiatives need to be interpreted in the wider context of regional tensions created by forced conscriptions, requisitions (often sheer looting), and other unlawful practices by Ottoman officials. Moreover, Armenian soldiers were subjected to a persecutory treatment in the Ottoman army: they were disarmed, used for menial work, humiliated, half-starved, abused, and gradually murdered by the Ottoman military².

Overall, the evidence suggests that there was no plan for a general rebellion of the Armenian population, but only few, isolated, and desperate last-stand type of defensive actions against the attacks of Ottoman soldiers and their auxiliaries. These very few cases of resistance took place only after local Armenians and Syriacs heard from refugees and survivors about the tragic fate of neighboring Christian communities, and tried to avoid the same fate. The building up of these resistance cases followed the same pattern: procurement of weapons, abusive requisitions of men, incoming information about violence against Christian communities, isolated skirmishes, provocative violence by Ottoman forces – beating, murder, rape, and looting – against local Christians³. The case of the Van “revolution” illustrates the same pattern. Even the strategic and technical aspects of these cases of resistance suggest that they were defensive battles, some last-stands of local inhabitants trying to avoid the complete destruction of their communities. The Armenians and Syriacs, barricaded in their neighborhoods, defended themselves against numerically superior and better armed Turkish and Kurdish assailants⁴.

The theory of the necessary “preventive measures” adopted by the Young Turks regime in order to remove the “dangerous” Armenians from the conflict area is contradicted by the reality of the “relocations”: they targeted not only the population from the conflict (border) areas, but almost all Ottoman Armenians, including people located far away from any military zone, such as those living in Constantinople, Bursa, Angora, Konya, Eskishekir, and Diyarbekir⁵. Moreover, these “relocations” targeted not only the remaining potential dangerous able men, many of whom had been already conscripted into the army, but also Armenian women, children, and the elderly. During the events, the Ottoman authorities tried to sway the public opinion about the goals of the “relocations”: asked about the destination of the deportation

¹ The Ottoman searches for Armenian defectors hiding among local communities triggered abuses and tensions. See Anahide Ter MINASSIAN, “Van 1915”, in Richard HOVANISSIAN (ed.), *Armenian Van*, Mazda Publishers, Costa Mesa, 2000, pp. 214-215; Viscount BRYCE (ed.), *The Treatment of Armenians...cit*, pp. 31-78.

² See David GAUNT, *Massacres...cit*, pp. 66-67; Anahide Ter MINASSIAN, “Van 1915”, cit, p. 215.

³ Such as those from Van, Sassoun, Mussa Dagh, Urfa or Azakh. For the case of Urfa, Azakh, and Ayn Wardo (the last two by Syriac Christian), see David GAUNT, *Massacres...cit*, pp. 202-205, 264-267, 273-294, 403-404; for Van and Sassoun, see Viscount BRYCE (ed.), *The Treatment of Armenians...cit*, pp. 31-78, 83-87; Donald MILLER, Lorna Touryan MILLER (eds.), *Survivors An Oral History of the Armenian Genocide*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999, pp. 72-72, 76-77.

⁴ See Viscount BRYCE (ed.), *The Treatment of Armenians...cit*, pp. 31-78; see also Anahide Ter MINASSIAN, “Van 1915”, cit, pp. 209-244.

⁵ See Viscount BRYCE (ed.), *The Treatment of Armenians...cit*, pp. 28, 38-406; Vahakn DADRIAN, *The Key Elements in the Turkish denial of the Armenian Genocide: A Case Study of Distortion and Falsification*, The Zoryan Institute, Cambridge, MA, 1999, pp. 11, 17-18; David GAUNT, *Massacres...cit*, p. 300.

convoys from Erzeroum and Baibourt, the governors replied that the purpose was "to save" the Armenians from the anger of the local mob by sending them to a safe place until the end of the war¹. Referring to another version of the official deceit, a German observer realized that the official claim that the purpose of the relocation of Armenian civilians into the Syrian desert was to employ them in "colonizing land" around Bagdad Railway, meant "nothing less than the wholesale murder of the [Armenian] families"².

Furthermore, the whole concept of "relocation" proves highly problematic: the Armenians and other Christians were not safely relocated in protected convoys to other regions of the Empire. Instead, in most of the cases, they were subjected to long and deadly marches, which meant rapid killing of males, rape and kidnapping of females and children, starvation, thirst, and exposure. In general, the lack of minimal subsistence preparative – including at the terminus point (Syrian dessert) – would suggest, at best, a complete neglect and lack of interest in the fate of the deportees, if not premeditated criminal intent. If we take into account also the behavior of the convoy guards, the gendarmes, who were often involved in the murder, rape, and looting of their deportees in complicity with roaming gangs of criminals, this better fits the pattern of organized death marches aiming to destroy the deportees. Observing the deportations foreign eyewitnesses residing in Eastern Anatolia concluded that "all these details plainly show that the massacre was deliberately planned" aiming to eliminate "the Armenian race"³.

Opportunism and Corruption During the Genocide

Opportunism and corruption are often encountered in the context of political, military, and social upheaval, but vary according to local practices, ideological worldviews of officials and ordinary citizens, and public policies. During the Armenian genocide systematic opportunism and corruption were the most prevalent features influencing the behavior of Ottoman Muslims towards their Christian countrymen. The personal interests of Turks, Kurds and other Muslim groups – for example, the probability of gaining property, jobs, sexual gratification, and slave labor – shaped their attitudes towards local Christians. I use the concept "corruption" in a wider sense, loosely defined as a dysfunction of the state system and of individual morality, which affects the preeminence of law and moral rules in the relations between state (and its officials) and citizens, as well as among citizens themselves. In my understanding the essence of corruption as a social practice is made of the mutual goals envisioned by the participants and the inequality of power between the two parties engaged in an illegal transaction. Regarding the dominant part of the corruption, I consider as dominant agents not only the bureaucrats, but also ordinary citizens, who, without acting in an official role, chose to take advantage of the differences in status and gain personal profits.

Genocidal epochs determine the empowerment of many citizens belonging to the "privileged" group(s), devolving them – as a state sanctioned initiative or just infor-

¹ Viscount BRYCE (ed.), *The Treatment of Armenians...cit.*, pp. 121, 234.

² *Ibidem*, p. 26.

³ *Ibidem*, pp. 91, 264.

mal acts – a considerable power over the members of the targeted group(s). During the Armenian genocide, however, besides the direct economic profit, the moral corruption of the perpetrators embraced other aims, such as upward social mobility, sexual gratification through rape and sexual violence, slave labor, or sadistic pleasure from exerting power and torturing the victims¹.

Ambiguity of Behavior During Genocide

As in many other cases of mass violence, no clear cut conclusions based on ethnic affiliation can be drawn about the perpetrators, bystanders and rescuers: people's behaviors during WWI were neither positive nor negative, but there were also many ambivalent and changing attitudes towards the victims. For example, the case of Ottoman Kurds is extremely relevant in this sense: various Kurds represented a major category of perpetrators and profiteers, whose violence had been channeled against Christian Ottomans. Kurdish bands had been involved in looting, raping, and murdering deportees, as well as kidnapping attractive women and children². While many Kurds participated in the atrocities, other Kurds helped or offered asylum to Christian escapees because of friendship or for certain benefits³. At the same time, there are also testimonies about individual Turks who helped Armenians during the genocide or about Turks who expressed their compassion for Christians' plight⁴.

The difficulty to quantify group attitudes during the genocide is obvious also in the case of Muslim rescuers who offered hiding places to persecuted Christians and later pressured them to convert to Islam. Other friendly Muslims offered to hide the property of fleeing Christian neighbors, but refused to return it, when the rightful owners asked it back. Even though, many foreign diplomats and missionaries helped Armenians and Syrians, others refused to help them despite repeated Armenian requests⁵.

In another case that illustrates the ambiguity of human behavior during genocidal epochs, some local Turkish bystanders who "could not stand the wailing" of 100 Armenian men imprisoned without food and drink who kept begging for bread, pressured the local government "either to give them bread or kill them"⁶. The local officials decided to kill them. To which category of behavior would the Turkish inhabitants fit: perhaps (selfish) bystanders or indirect perpetrators?

¹ Rape and sexual violence perpetrated by Ottoman men against Christian women, girls, and children were a wide-spread practice during WWI, even though, due to the nature of these crimes, survivors and foreign eye-witnesses used a variety of euphemisms – such as "outrage", "abducted", "violated", "condition worse than death", "brutal treatment by their captors", "dishonored", "treated barbarously", "awful deeds", "indescribable deeds", "to be their sport" – to describe the sexual violence. See Viscount BRYCE (ed.), *The Treatment of Armenians...cit.*, pp. 20-21, 27, 92, 110, 117, 135, 166, 248-249, 225, 242, 243, 265.

² Hilmar KAISER, *A Scene from the Inferno...cit.*, p. 163. See also Viscount BRYCE (ed.), *The Treatment of Armenians...cit.*, pp. 85, 92, 94, 114, 162, 165, 223, 237, 241, 247, 262, 265-266, 270.

³ Viscount BRYCE (ed.), *The Treatment of Armenians...cit.*, pp. 94, 119-120, 235, 247.

⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 399, 401.

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 123, 126, 269, 272, 347.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 94.

Gendered Violence

The Young Turks' policy of annihilating their Christian citizens presents clear signs of gendered violence, with specific measures targeting specific categories of victims based on gender criteria. While usually most of the men were killed immediately, women were sometimes spared outright murder, and were often subjected to sexual violence, kidnapping, and forced marriage or labor for their predators¹. That is why men tried to escape alive by disguising themselves wearing women's clothing, a strategy that did not always succeed². Ottoman perpetrators targeted in particular young women and girls. In this sense, a German, traveling from Eastern Anatolia to Constantinople, noticed that "we encountered only old women. No young women and girls were to be seen"³. Young age did not save the girls from sexual assault. According to a survivor's testimony, Kurdish guards of a large deportation column "very often...violated eight or ten-year-old girls" in public view⁴. Another measure targeting specifically Christian women and girls was their sale at public auctions at ad-hoc slave markets along the deportation routes. Thus, local Muslims were able to buy and sell Armenian women and children. For instance, in Vezir Kopru (Marsovan District) all the Armenian women and girls aged 7 to 40 years old were sold at public auctions⁵. Gendered violence refers not only to victims, but also to perpetrators: in general, men were those committing most of the atrocities against Christian civilians. Sometimes also women had their share of violence, such as in the case of Kurdish women who arrived with their butcher knives to help their men engaged in the murder of Armenian deportees from Harpout⁶.

Ideology

Ideology represented a major motivation behind the genocidal policies against Ottoman Christians. There were different types of ideological reasons that justified the persecutions of Armenians and Syrians, such as ethno-nationalism, racism, political and religious considerations. The press played an important role in disseminating anti-Armenian and anti-Christian propaganda: for example, newspapers from the capital argued that it was in the state's interest to have a homogenous population⁷.

Overall, it seems that certain Turks internalized the official propaganda and invoked racial, ethno-national, and religious reasons for participating in the persecution of Armenians and other Christians. Armenians were also depicted in terms of racial hygiene/Darwinism, as a fatal disease – cancer – for the body politic of the country⁸.

¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 23, 84-85, 104, 135, 161, 165-166, 217-218, 265.

² *Ibidem*, pp. 243, 247.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 91.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 92.

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 13, 23, 234, 238, 246, 274.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 91.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 390.

⁸ *Ibidem.*, p. 396.

The Armenians were considered such a political (“they were all Anarchists”) and economic threat to the future of the state that their physical removal was regarded as an indispensable measure to be implemented at any cost, even if ruining the economy. Eyewitness accounts reveal that Ottoman officials, aware of the economic paralysis that was to be brought about by the annihilation of Armenians – who represented the majority of commercial and industrial entrepreneurs – were ready to assume such risks¹.

Some ordinary Turkish perpetrators reflected the official ethno-nationalist rhetoric and saw the removal of Armenians as part of a larger ethnic-cleansing plan that would have gradually eliminated all foreign minorities from the national community: “First we kill the Armenians, then the Greeks, then the Kurds”².

Others seemed convinced of the moral superiority of Islam over Christianity and of an apocalyptic fate for the Armenians – perceived as doomed by deity:

“Armenians committed atrocities at Van because their religion is inferior. The Moslems should not follow their example, but should have carried the massacre with greater humanity....God has no pity on them”³.

Other Turkish religious leaders openly urged for the massacre of Armenians, as allegedly responsible for the defeat by Russians⁴. The importance of the religious motivation appears from the often encountered practice according to which Christians – especially women and children – were spared deportation or murder if they become Muslims. But not all those willing to convert were in fact accepted: Christian men usually did not have that option, and in several towns Armenians had to pay bribes in order to be able to convert to Islam⁵. In certain areas the permission to convert to Islam as an escape avenue from deportation (and death) was opened according to social status: in Broussa, for instance, only rich Armenians were allowed to convert, while the poor ones were deported. However, not always conversion to Islam meant the avoidance of deportation⁶.

Sadist Perpetrators

Eyewitness testimonies suggest that the pleasure to exercise power over Christian civilians, and the pleasure of inflicting pain – such as various tortures (eye-brows plucked out, nails torn off) and mutilations (cutting off male genitals and women’s breasts) – played a major role in the conduct of some perpetrators⁷. Thus, the motivations behind the behavior of certain Ottoman tormentors did not seem to have been pure rational (functional) – simply killing Armenians or looting their property – but also included a desire to enjoy dominance over people previously of a higher social

¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 251, 396, 403.

² *Ibidem*, p. 253, 342.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 250.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 231.

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 341, 347, 391.

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 5, 14, 18, 23, 27, 391.

⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 21, 26, 90, 94, 225, 243.

status, and a desire to humiliate them in front of their family and community. Confirming this hypothesis, some Armenian survivors near Bitlis observed that "the object of massacres was not simply to kill, but to torture"¹. Only in this way one could interpret the horrible and gratuitous acts of torture and mutilation of bodies, together with the accompanying cheerful atmosphere, laughs, and joyful mood². For instance, a German eyewitness noticed that the soldiers laughed and "took great delight in hearing" the cries of Armenians adults and children who were burnt alive in their houses³. Perhaps one of the most suggestive explanations came from a gendarme, who detailed the frightful torments of the deportees to foreign residents who asked him why the Armenians were tortured through long death marches, and not simply killed in their villages: "It is best as it is. They ought to be made to suffer"⁴. Other Ottoman perpetrators enjoyed boasting in public about their crimes against Armenian civilians, and expected praise for their achievements or perhaps, just wished to show off their manliness⁵.

Arrivists

Social upward mobility represented a powerful incentive for many Ottoman bureaucrats to commit genocide: those sufficiently zealous during the persecution of Armenians have been promoted, such as the Kaimakan of the town of Develou (Kaiseria), who personally marshaled the torture of Armenian inmates and who was promoted to a higher position in the Vilayet of Constantinople⁶. Overall, from a bottom-up perspective, it seems that the initiatives of local officials, who competed to prove their vigilance in uncovering real or alleged Armenian conspiracies, contributed to the radicalization of the central government that decided on increasingly harsher measures against threatening domestic enemies. For instance, in order to prove his zeal, the Vali of H. used deceptions, threats, and arbitrary arrests of Armenian notables to collect proofs of their alleged preparation for a rebellion and forwarding these immediately to the central government, asking for permission to suppress the impending Armenian revolution⁷.

Obedying Orders: Rational and Conformist Perpetrators

While some perpetrators enjoyed torturing and murdering Christians, others disagreed with the cruelties and justified their own criminal behavior against civilians by invoking rational reasons, such as a legitimate source of authority (superiors' orders) or the alleged treason of Armenians. For instance, faced by several foreign

¹ *Ibidem*, p.18.

² *Ibidem*, pp. 21, 90, 238.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 90.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 252.

⁵ One such hero bragged that "he ruined eleven Armenian girls, two of them under seven years of age", while others showed off that they have got rid of "all the Armenians." *Ibidem*, pp. 89, 161.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 23.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 259.

residents who were horrified by the murder of women and children, several Ottoman soldiers deflected the responsibility for the killings and argued that they could do nothing to prevent those crimes because they received official orders to do so. Other executioners who invoked obeying orders were proud or just indifferent of their criminal activity¹.

Local Corrupted Officials

Among Ottoman officials, the Valis – the governors – enjoyed the greatest power at the local level and they played a major role in the persecution of Armenians, implementing radical measures, such as dispossession, torture, deportations, and mass murder². There are testimonies about Valis (and their aids), who claimed or accepted valuables from certain Armenians in order to protect them or to attenuate the persecutions. What seemed to have been a major feature of this type of transactions was that, the Vali and other officials, did not always keep their part of the bargain and in the end, their Armenian “protégés” were also deported³.

Despite their considerable power, the provincial Ottoman officials had been aware of the influence of the central government, and, in general, feared its retaliations. It seems that this fear influenced the way local officials behaved towards the Christians and the extent to which they been involved in corruption. Several eyewitnesses mentioned cases when American missionaries attempted to bribe Ottoman officials or Kurdish leaders in order to protect Armenians and Syriac victims⁴. This strategy did not always work: in the town of X., for example, after serious disagreements with the commander of Gendarmerie and other officials on how to share the bribes, in the end, the Kaimakan was afraid to accept the money from the American religious envoys⁵.

Ottoman Officers, Soldiers, and Gendarmes

Officers comprised a special group of perpetrators that is often mentioned for its involvement in the persecution of Armenians. Overall, it seems that Ottoman officers were less involved in direct murders, but they participated in coordinating and supervising the murders, pursuing material profit, kidnapping, and sexually abusing women and girls. There were cases, however, when officers tried to preserve order and prevent robberies by local Muslims⁶. Ottoman soldiers are also mentioned as direct perpetrators of atrocities against Christian civilians. Sometimes, returning from

¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 223, 248, 251.

² Not all the Valis behaved the same, and some of them were quite reluctant to carry out the order to kill the local Armenians. *Ibidem*, p. 223.

³ *Ibidem*, pp. 352-353, 363.

⁴ See for instance the case of Dr. Packard from Urmia, who rushed to a Christian village – besieged by Kurds – and managed to persuade the attackers' leader to spare the lives of 1000 people in exchange for surrendering their goods. See *Ibidem*, pp. 116-117.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 364.

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 12-13, 88, 120, 225, 368.

the front lines after military defeats, the Ottoman soldiers seemed particularly willing to use violence against the civilian coreligionists of their Russian enemies¹.

Gendarmes represented another category of Ottoman officials perpetrating atrocities against Armenian and Syriac civilians. Charged with preserving the domestic order and policing the rural areas, the gendarmes escorted the deportation caravans. As the official guardians of these convoys, gendarmes engaged in various cruelties and looting at the expense of deportees, and, in general, they better fit the category of perpetrators and accomplices, instead of deportation convoys' protectors. According to various testimonies, sometimes the gendarmes simply fraternized with the gangs of "brigands" in victimizing the deportees they had to escort².

The Changing Category of Bystanders

One of the most common characteristics of the Armenian genocide was the tendency of many Muslims to take advantage of the difficult situation of Christian groups. They got rich by confiscating Armenian and Syriac property, obtained sexual gratification and slave labor, all actions favored by the state policy, which in some cases was not clearly formulated from the beginning³. The central government tried to control the plunder of Armenians, to "Turkify" their property for the benefit of the state. Public auctions were organized in order to finance grandiose state projects and to rapidly create a Turkish middle class, but the reality showed how difficult it was to control the ravenousness of local Muslim civilians. Competing with local greedy individuals, the CUP government sent several Special Commissions to take care of the property of the deportees and to liquidate the so-called abandoned goods and real-estate⁴. Especially the mobile valuables of the Armenians and Syriacs, such as money, precious metals, and jewelry, by their nature more difficult to identify and seize, was easy prey to the voracity of Ottoman officials and local civilians.

As any cautious law abiding citizens would do, the predators were sometimes preoccupied with respect for legal formalities during the appropriation of Armenian real estate: these robberies were often disguised as legal transactions with the complicity of Ottoman judicial authorities⁵.

The desire for personal profit transformed many ordinary Ottoman citizens from bystanders into active accomplices and perpetrators of the genocide. For instance, Turkish and Kurdish neighbors, inhabitants of Anatolian towns and villages located on the deportation routes, often attacked the caravans, robbed the deportees, and

¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 163, 165, 180.

² See *Ibidem*, pp. 9, 13, 20-21, 24-25, 85, 231, 234, 265, 342.

³ For the city of Erzurum, Hilmar Kaiser argued that the deportation of Armenians has not been prepared long in advance because local authorities did not have a swift and coherent policy of confiscating property and lacked detailed instructions from the center up to June 1915, when the deportations started. See Hilmar KAISER, *A Scene from the Inferno...cit.*, pp. 129-185.

⁴ Viscount BRYCE (ed.), *The Treatment of Armenians...cit.*, pp. 21, 24, 227.

⁵ See, for instance, the cases when Armenians were forced to sign "contracts" attesting the transfer of their property to Muslim owners, in exchange for money that were immediately confiscated by authorities and used for the next "transaction". See *Ibidem*, p. 395; see also the cases when some Turkish business owners told a curious Kurd that they have bought the stores from previous Armenian owners. *Ibidem*, p. 241.

kidnapped Armenian women and children. In certain locations of Eastern Anatolia, the kidnapped Armenian women were placed at the disposal of male public, for whom they had to provide sexual services. Thus, in the town of Mezre, all good-looking Armenian women and girls were placed in a newly opened public brothel, and "at night Turks were allowed free entrance"¹. Sometimes local Turkish neighbors and officials did not wait for the deportation to take place and robbed Armenian property in the presence of the rightful owners². Usually, many neighbors and near-by villagers rushed in for bargains, either before the deportation (buying at derisory prices or simply robbing the desperate Armenians), or immediately after the deportations (looting the abandoned property or moving into Armenian houses). In some cases, Muslim refugees from the Balkans were those who installed themselves in houses of the deportees³.

Muslim Bystanders Becoming Rescuers

Not everywhere the relations between Muslims and Christians had been antagonistic. In Bitlis, for instance, Kurdish and Armenian communities agreed on a mutual protection scheme in case of emergency, but all the plans failed when a radical Turkish leader arrived in the region and his troops started to massacre the Armenians⁴. Not every Muslim behaved as a perpetrator or greedy profiteer. Some did oppose the cruel treatment of Ottoman Christians. Thus, several Muslims (a mullah and a Muslim notable) criticized the persecutions against Armenian women and children as contrary to the Muslim religious law. These cases show that certain religious and political leaders, who criticized the cruelties perpetrated against Armenians from a religious/ethical perspective, did so only on behalf of women and children, while they (implicitly) accepted the atrocities against Armenian men⁵.

In other contexts, Turks, Kurds, and Arabs helped various Armenians and Syrians. Sometimes, entire Christian villages entered under the protection of a certain Kurdish chief. While many of these Muslim rescuers previously knew their protégés, others did not and they were described as "kind" or "merciful" individuals. Sometimes, the vital help was just a warning to run away and hide, enough to save the life of the beneficiary⁶.

Difficulty of Helping Persecuted Christians

When assessing the issue of Ottoman Muslims who opposed the official mass-murder campaign and saved their Christian countrymen, one should take into account that helping Armenians posed serious risks for the potential rescuers. The Ottoman

¹ *Ibidem*, p. 91.

² *Ibidem*, pp. 395, 402-403.

³ See Hilmar KAISER, *A Scene from the Inferno...cit.*, p. 136; also Viscount BRYCE (ed.), *The Treatment of Armenians...cit.*, pp. 17, 234, 240, 241, 246, 403, 411-412.

⁴ Viscount BRYCE (ed.), *The Treatment of Armenians...cit.*, p. 84.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 348.

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 24, 122, 157, 167, 180-181, 217, 274.

government issued strict orders according to which any Muslim who would shield his Armenian friends would be punished as severely as his protégés, and testimonies mentioned Turkish civilians hanged for such a "crime"¹. Other accounts show how the central government threatened to punish the Kurds who would not participate in the official attacks against local Christians². Thus, the actions of those Turks and Kurds, who dared to save Christians despite the high risks involved by such behavior, are quite remarkable within the WWI context. Individual Muslim (would be) rescuers faced considerable risks not only from government's retaliations, but also from other Turks who disagreed with their altruistic behavior³. Moreover, aiming to prevent foreigners from observing the atrocities against local Christians or helping the victims, the Ottoman officials imposed certain travel and meeting restrictions even on the citizens of its main ally, Germany. The government also warned an Austrian-Hungarian diplomat who demanded an explanation in the case of several Armenians murdered in Smyrna, that as an ally, he "ought not to meddle in such questions"⁴.

Foreign bystanders, especially the citizens of the Ottoman Empire's allies, Germany and Austro-Hungary, as well as of the neutral states (USA), had a "privileged" status and sometimes could intervene on behalf of persecuted Christians with higher chances of success. Christian missionaries, diplomats, medical staff, educators, and other foreigners residing in WWI Ottoman Empire made up the bulk of these bystanders turned into rescuers⁵. Overall, American protestant missionaries, doctors, and educators were among the most active foreign rescuers, providing shelter, hiding place, relief aid, and pleading before Ottoman authorities in favor of Armenians and Syrians⁶. Helping the persecuted Christians and refusing to cooperate with Ottoman perpetrators posed certain security risks even for apparently inviolable citizens of the Great Powers, and not all their rescue attempts were successful⁷. In spite of Germany's policy of non-interference in the "internal affairs" of its Ottoman ally, German individuals managed to save certain Armenian women, girls, and children⁸. Not all Germans were examples of moral behavior during the genocide: several German militaries contributed to the atrocities. For instance, they participated in the massacre of Armenian civilians, in organized deportations and lootings⁹. According to several eyewitness accounts, German officers had been particularly active in kidnapping and raping Armenian girls in Erzeroum: "German officers...took their share of the booty. Almost every one of them had kidnapped Armenian girls"¹⁰.

¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 238, 348.

² *Ibidem*, pp. 180-181.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 249.

⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 246, 391.

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 13, 248, 250.

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 96, 109-111, 224, 228-230.

⁷ Mr. Allen, an American missionary, was beaten twice by Turkish soldiers, who broke into the mission's building to look for certain men. Later they killed several refugees hosted in the building. Viscount BRYCE (ed.), *The Treatment of Armenians...cit.*, p. 117.

⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 18, 95, 235, 238, 246.

⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 86, 94-95, 235.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 235, 238-239.

Survival Strategies During the Genocide

While some Armenians, as law-abiding citizens, did comply with the official measures and did not oppose legal persecutions, others did not accept them and resisted one way or another. One of the most radical forms of opposition to genocidal policy was armed resistance. Following the martial traditions of the area (almost everybody possessed arms) and informed of the Ottoman forces' murderous practices, many Christians resisted the official attempts to be disarmed (similar measures did not apply to Muslim neighbors) and to be deported, and they murdered the Ottoman official¹. Usually, Ottoman authorities labeled these episodes of resistance as rebellion and brought in the regular army and auxiliary forces to defeat defying Armenians and Syriacs. In general, these resistance episodes were relatively easily defeated by overpowering Ottoman forces, but some survivors managed to escape to the mountains and engage in guerilla warfare². Although these did not have the same "heroic" reputation as the armed resistance, non-armed resistance strategies were no less important in saving lives.

In genocidal contexts, when members of the targeted group are not able to resist militarily against the perpetrators, societal context enables them to use other survival strategies such as corruption, hiding, fleeing, pleading for international help and foreign protection, and disseminating information about persecutions. Overall, it seems that the most widespread non-armed survival strategy were hiding, fleeing and gaining the protection of Ottoman officials and local Muslims by offering them various incentives. Often, the deportees had to bribe their guards in order to gain protection from roaming criminals, to be transported faster (by train), or on better and safer roads to the deportation sites³. Even if corruption is held in low esteem by the ethical systems of most societies, it could make the difference between life and death, and from the victims' perspective, it might have been a successful strategy of resistance against radical policies.

Having heard about the atrocities perpetrated against local Christians, many Armenians and Syriacs chose to resist persecutions by fleeing and hiding in various places, such as friends' houses, mountains, and forests, or they crossed the border into the Russian Empire⁴. Hiding was not easy and required a lot of resourcefulness from its practitioners. Noticing the official policy of gendered violence (immediate murder of men and boys), one woman disguised her fiancé in woman's clothing and hid him among other deported women, while other woman hid her son under her skirt⁵. Although highly controversial, suicide, often committed collectively, represented another resistance strategy employed by Christian women to escape sexual violence, tortures, and deportation. Sometimes, women committed suicide together with their dear ones, or after they killed their own children⁶.

¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 81-82, 85-87, 121, 167, 169, 172, 175, 178, 188.

² *Ibidem*, p. 87.

³ *Ibidem*, pp. 24, 273, 267.

⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 81, 82, 85, 87, 92, 93, 167, 173, 217, 274, 355.

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 218, 247.

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 84, 87, 180, 218, 260, 266.

Conclusion

Today, the Armenian Genocide is one of the most debated topics in current historiography of genocide and politics. Despite the difficult access to the archives, nowadays we know a lot about the annihilation of Armenians and Syriacs by CUP authorities in WWI Ottoman Empire. Among the many available sources documenting the fate of Ottoman Christians, eyewitness accounts and victim testimonies are crucially important to the researchers, allowing them an insight into the popular attitudes of ordinary Ottomans and foreign residents. Contrary to the pro-Turkish mainstream narrative that depicts Armenian and Syriac victims as unfortunate casualties in a civil war struggle, allegedly caused by the provocation of the victims, combined with extensive famine and epidemics, the available evidence suggests the existence of a coordinated policy of Young Turks to annihilate the local Armenian and Syriac communities. According to international criminal law this type of actions represents the crime of genocide. Overall, it seems that the origins of the Armenian genocide rested with the CUP's radical revolutionary ideals and xenophobic nationalism adopted after the failure of the Pan-Islam ideology, military defeats, and territorial losses suffered in the European and African parts of the Empire as a result of the interference of the Great European Powers.

At the level of ordinary people, widespread opportunism, corruption, greed, ideological worldviews – such as racism, ethno-nationalism, and religious intolerance – social conformism, careerism, cruelty, personal relations, and official propaganda shaped the attitudes of local Muslims towards their Armenian and Syriac neighbors. These patterns of behavior fit the perpetrators/bystanders/rescuers paradigm. Many Ottoman officials and some civilians acted as executioners and tormentors of Ottoman Christians. While majority of Muslim civilians behaved as bystanders, often transforming themselves into profiteers and accomplices, a minority of them opposed the persecutions of Christians. Different types of behavior towards Armenian and Syriacs could also be identified among foreign residents of the Ottoman Empire, although, due to their religious beliefs and worldviews they were much more inclined to help the victims of Ottoman persecutions, whom they regarded as their co-religionists.