INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ARMENIAN GENOCIDE STUDIES

VOLUME 10, NO. 1, 2025

International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies
Published by Armenian Genocide Museum & Institute Foundation

International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies (**ISSN 1829-4405**) is a peer-reviewed journal published bi-annually by the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute Foundation since 2014 (8/8 Tstitsernakaberd highway, 0028 Yerevan, Republic of Armenia (+374 10) 39 09 81, www.genocide-museum.am). *International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies* (IJAGS) publishes articles and reviews related to genocide studies with a special focus on the Armenian Genocide. Articles dealing with research and theory from various disciplines and fields, including anthropology, law, education, gender studies, history, arts and literature, philosophy, political science, psychology, religious studies and sociology are being accepted.

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ISSN 1829-4405
eISSN 2738-2931

Volume 10, no. 1, 2025
International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies 10:1

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BOOK REVIEW

RASULAIN AND THE ARADA STEPPE DURING THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE, JULY 1915 – APRIL 1916

Hilmar Kaiser
Historian, Phnom Penh

Abstract

In 1998, Raymond Kévorkian's article "Le Sort des déportés dans les camps de concentration de Syrie et de Mésopotamie" put the so-called "destination areas" in the focus of research on the Armenian Genocide. Officially, the Ottoman government intended settling Armenian deportees, primarily in Zor district. In reality, the deportees were starved to death, abandoned to the desert or massacred.

On the basis of official Ottoman documentation and rare first-hand evidence from the Chechen community of Rasulain, this article shows that district governor Ali Suad Bey initiated some limited relief and settlement projects. The central authorities, however, undid these efforts. At the same time, local Chechens opposed the settlement of Armenians as it interfered with their economic interests. They drew on an impressive network of contacts, denouncing alleged Armenian revolutionaries. In the end, the Chechens played a key role in the massacre of the deportees.

Keywords: Armenian Genocide; Rasulain; Chechens; Baghdad Railway; Ali Suad Bey; George Sukkar; Hagop Nersessian

This article was submitted on 24.11.2024 and accepted for publication on 13.05.2025.

How to cite: Hilmar Kaiser, "Rasulain and the Arada Steppe during the Armenian Genocide, July 1915 – April 1916," *International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies* 10, no. 1 (2025): 5-39.

Introduction

Over the past 25 years, research on the extermination of Ottoman Armenians has made significant progress. Case studies have contributed to a deeper understanding of the crime, offering more nuanced analyses of its complexities. These studies have explored major deportation routes and massacre sites along the path to the so-called "destination areas" in the Ottoman desert regions.[1] Discussions on the fate of Armenians in these desert areas have become another central theme of scholarly inquiry.[2] The Ottoman authorities maintained that, with few exceptions, Armenians would be resettled in the independent districts of Zor and Urfa, as well as in the Aleppo, Syria, and Mosul provinces, which today encompass parts of Jordan, Syria, and Iraq. This paper examines the events surrounding the short-lived settlement of Armenians in the Rasulain sub-district of Zor district, spanning from the summer of 1915 to the end of district governor Ali Suad Bey's term in April 1916. It focuses on the policies of the Ottoman government and the influence exerted by local administrators and notables in shaping the implementation of these policies.

Ottoman settlement projects were not a new concept. In the 1860s, the Ottoman government had sent Chechen refugees from the Caucasus to the edge of the desert at Rasulain. The authorities aimed to assert greater control over the region by introducing settlers who would be reliant on government support. These newcomers were expected to counterbalance the influence of predominantly nomadic Kurdish and Bedouin tribes. However, the plan failed disastrously due to insufficient resources and inadequate government support. Most of the settlers succumbed to disease, and the surviving Chechens, far from complying with the government's plans, became a source of instability by violently pursuing their own interests.[3]

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* I am indebted to Mihran Minassian for his generous support and to colleagues at the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, Yerevan, for their assistance with Armenian language materials.

1 Raymond Kévorkian, *Le génocide des arméniens* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2006); Aram Arkun, "Zeytun and the Commencement of the Armenian Genocide," in *A Question of Genocide Armenians and Turks at the End of the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Ronald Suny, Fatma Göçek, and Norman Naimark (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 221-243; Hilmar Kaiser, "'A Scene from the Inferno': The Armenians of Erzerum and the Genocide, 1915-1916," in *The Armenian Genocide and the Shoah*, ed. Hans-Lukas Kieser and Dominik Schaller (Zürich: Chronos, 2002), 129-186.

2 Raymond Kévorkian, "Le Sort des déportés dans les camps de concentration de Syrie et de Mésopotamie," *Revue d'histoire arménienne contemporaine* 2 (1998): 7–61.

3 Eugen Wirth, "Die Rolle tscherkessischer „Wehrbauern" bei der Wiederbesiedlung von Steppe und Ödland im Osmanischen Reich," *Bustan* 1 (1963): 16-19; Kemal Karpat, "The Status of the Muslim Under European Rule: The Eviction and Settlement of the Çerkes," *Journal of the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs* 1, no. 2 (1979): 7-27; Max Freiherr von Oppenheim, *Vom Mittelmeer zum Persischen Golf. Durch den Hauran, die Syrische Wüste und Mesopotamien*, vol. 2 (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1900), 78; Mark Sykes, *Dar-ul-Islam. A Record of a Journey Through Ten of the Asiatic Provinces of Turkey* (London: Bickers & Son, 1904), 283-286; *The Caliphs' Last Heritage. A Short History of the Turkish Empire* (London: Macmillan, 1915), 327-328; British Library, India Office Records and Private Papers, L/MIL/17/15/41/1, Admiralty War Staff Intelligence Division: *Handbook of Mesopotamia*, vol. 1 (1916), 78; Samuel Dolbee, *Locusts of Power: Borders, Empire, and Environment in the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 45-52, 153.

By August 1915, a population of 2,990 Muslims was recorded in Rasulain and its surroundings. The Chechens, numbering 726, were a minority but controlled the villages. Only 89 Arabs had permanent residences, while the vast majority of the Arab population remained nomadic. Thus, the scale of the alleged Armenian settlement plan far exceeded any previous projects in the region but suffered from a complete lack of preparation.[4]

The deportation of Armenians and their resettlement in what was once called the "fertile crescent" formed part of a broader scheme. After its defeat in the Balkan Wars, the Ottoman state faced a massive refuge crisis with Muslims flooding into Constantinople. Given its past record and the dire state of public finances, the government once again failed to adequately provide for these arrivals. However, in line with its ideological goals, the ruling Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) viewed the refugee crisis as an opportunity for demographic engineering. It exacerbated the situation by encouraging even more Muslims to leave the Balkans for the Ottoman Empire.

The crisis deepened in 1915, as waves of predominantly Kurdish refugees fled districts along the eastern front. The deportation and annihilation of Armenians were seen as a solution to this compounded refugee crisis. Alongside the deportations came the systematic expropriation of Armenian property. In theory, the plunder was intended to provide the government with arable land, gardens, seeds, houses, livestock, farming equipment, tools, and even household items such as kitchenware and clothing to support incoming Muslim refugees. By design, this process left Armenians with almost nothing when they were forced to leave their homes.[5]

Most of the deportees who survived massacres and the death marches from the eastern provinces ended up in what would become a vast killing field: the Zor district and adjacent sub-districts, such as Meskene in Aleppo province and Rakka in the Urfa district.[6] Relatively few Armenians reached Mosul province. Larger groups of deportees arrived in the Ottoman districts of Hama, Karak, and Hauran in Syria province, although their numbers were far smaller compared to those in the wider Zor region. Accurate numbers of arrivals remain difficult to determine due to the scarcity of reliable data, as authorities frequently redirected deportees to different locations. For instance, an Armenian deportee might initially be forced to march to Rasulain in Zor district, only to be subsequently sent on to Aleppo, Hama, or further south.[7]

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4 DH.Sicill-i Nüfüs.Müteferrik (DH.SN.M) 238-78, Rasulain, Aug. 25, 1915.

5 Fuat Dündar, *Crime of Numbers: The Role of Statistics in the Armenian Question (1878-1918)* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2010); Hilmar Kaiser, "Armenian Property, Ottoman Law and Nationality Policies during the Armenian Genocide, 1915-1916," in *The First Word War as Remembered in the Countries of the Eastern Mediterranean*, ed. Olaf Farschild, Manfred Kropp, and Stephan Dähne (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2006), 46-71.

6 DH.Şifre Kalemi (ŞFR) 53-91, Minister to Mosul Prov., Urfa, Zor Distr., May 23, 1915; 53-92, Minister to Adana, Aleppo prov., Marash distr., May 23, 1915; 53-94, Minister to 4th Army Command, May 23, 1915.

7 Hilmar Kaiser, "Ottoman Rule and Genocide in Mosul Province," in *Armenians of Iraq*, ed. Antranig Dakessian (Beirut: Haigazian University Press, 2021), 83-154; "The Armenian Deportees in Hauran and Karak Districts during the Armenian Genocide" in *Armenians of Jordan*, ed. Antranig Dakessian (Beirut: Haigazian University Press, 2019), 39-105.

On 23 May 1915, the central government issued more specific instructions regarding the settlement areas, stipulating that they must be at least 25 kilometers away from any railway line. In the destination areas this provision excluded nearly all major cities and their surroundings. Consequently, local authorities were forced to improvise responses to the influx of deportees, but their efforts were grossly inadequate given the scale of the emergency. From the outset, the governors of Aleppo and Zor raised alarms, urgently requesting additional guidance and funding. In Aleppo, the local Armenian community, with the support of Governor Djelal Bey, formed a committee to assist deportees by organizing provisions, securing permanent housing, and finding employment. The Ministry of Interior (*Dahiliye Nezareti,*hereinafter DH) dispatched Kapancizade Hamid Bey, a senior official of the Ministry of Interior's General Directorate of Board of Investigation (*Heyet-i Teftişiye Müdüriyet-i Umumiyesi*, hereafter HTMU), to Aleppo to oversee the deportations. Hamid Bey supported the settlement efforts and even contributed from his private funds to the Armenian committee's work. Despite the goodwill of some officials and the dedicated efforts of the Armenian community, the situation in and around Aleppo deteriorated rapidly. Resources were simply insufficient to feed the destitute, let alone to settle all of them.[8]

Zor District in the Early Stages of Deportations

The situation in the desert district of Zor was no better. In early May 1915, Governor Suad Bey, an Arab, learned that approximately 1,000 Armenian households were on their way to his district. The small town of Zor, along with the district's few and even smaller settlements, was unable to accommodate the incoming deportees. Consequently, the governor proposed purchasing tents from local Arab tribes to provide temporary shelter for the newcomers.[9] Despite significant challenges, by 15 May 1915, Suad Bey had managed to secure housing for 250 families. He sought instructions on how to allocate arable land to the deportees and suggested concentrating the settlers in the central area of

8 DH.ŞFR 53-91, Minister to Mosul Prov., Urfa, Zor Distr., May 23, 1915; 53-92, Minister to Adana, Aleppo prov., Marash distr., May 23, 1915; Auswärtiges Amt, Politisches Archiv (AA-PA) Türkei 183/38, A 24658, "Bericht von Schwester Laura Möhring, die auf der Heimreise von Bagdad diese Vertriebenen in der Wüste traf", copy, enclosure in Schuchardt to AA, Frankfurt, Aug. 20, 1915; Vahram L. Shemmassian, "Humanitarian Intervention by the Armenian Prelacy of Aleppo During the First Months of the Genocide," *Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies 22* (2013): 127-152; Hilmar Kaiser, "Regional Resistance to Central Government Policies: Ahmed Djemal Pasha, the Governors of Aleppo, and Armenian Deportees in the Spring and Summer of 1915," *Journal of Genocide Research* 12 (2010): 173-218; Hilmar Kaiser, with Luther and Nancy Eskijian, *At the Crossroads of Der Zor: Death, Survival, and Humanitarian Resistance in Aleppo, 1915–1917* (Princeton, NJ: Gomidas Institute, 2001).

9 DH.ŞFR 469-127, Suad to DH, Zor, May 5, 1915. See also: Hilmar Kaiser, "Zor District during the Initial Months of the Armenian Genocide," in *The First World War as a Caesura? Demographic Concepts, Population Policy, and Genocide in Late Ottoman, Russian and Habsburg Spheres*, ed. Christin Pschichholz (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2020), 109-124.

the district.[10] Suad Bey also requested funds from the DH to provide farming implements, as the deportees' tools and equipment had been confiscated and redistributed to Muslim settlers in their former places of residence. Additional funds were needed for constructing schools and churches, though the churches were to remain without bells to align with Muslim sensitivities.[11]

By 26 June 1915, 9,500 deportees had arrived in Zor. Of these, 4,000 were settled within the town and its surroundings, while another 3,000 had been relocated to other sub-districts. However, an additional 5,000 deportees were expected to arrive soon. As most of the district's land was desert, settlements were feasible only along the banks of the Euphrates and Khabur rivers, where arable land was scarce. Consequently, distributing land to all deportees was out of the question. Instead, the authorities began placing Armenians as laborers or sharecroppers with local landlords. Paid labor became the only reliable means for Armenians to obtain food, as the authorities distributed rations only sporadically, if at all. Meanwhile, conditions in the Rasulain sub-district to the north were deteriorating. The sub-district's governor warned that security forces from Diarbekir were attacking and looting deportees within the borders of Zor district. One gendarme reportedly incited the local population to massacre Christians. Additionally, tribal raids on railway construction sites had brought work to a standstill. In response, Suad Bey mobilized a gendarmerie detachment and traveled to Rasulain and nearby areas to restore public safety and protect the construction sites.[12]

The Ten Percent Rule – An Exercise in Government Fiction

On 5 July 1915, the Ministry of Interior introduced regulations for the settlement of Armenians, stipulating that their numbers should not exceed ten percent of the sedentary Muslim population in settlement areas. The authorities in Der Zor, however, could only remind the Ministry of Interior that the number of Armenian deportees already surpassed fifteen percent of the district's registered Muslim population. This figure excluded the large portion of the population that was nomadic or semi-nomadic, as the tribes often lived in temporary villages unsuitable for settling Armenians. In reality, the concentration of Armenians in permanent villages was even higher than the official numbers suggested. To comply with these directives, Kamil Bey, acting as governor in the absence of Suad Bey, began redirecting Armenians northward toward Rasulain. However, this measure

10 DH.ŞFR 471-17, [Suad] to DH, Zor, May 15, 1915.

11 DH.ŞFR 472-65, Suad to DH, Zor, May 24, 1915; 472-83, [Suad] to DH, Zor, May 29, 1915.

12 DH.ŞFR 477-23, Suad to DH, Zor, June 25, 1915; 477-50, Kamil to DH, Zor, June 26, 1915; 477-112, Suad to DH, Zor, June 29, 1915; 477-113, Suad to DH, Zor, June 29, 1915; 478-62, Suad to DH, Zor, July 3, 1915; 54-354, Minister to Zor district, July 8, 1915. AA-PA Türkei 183/38, A 24658, "Bericht von Schwester Laura Möhring, die auf der Heimreise von Bagdad diese Vertriebenen in der Wüste traf," copy, enclosure in Schuchardt to AA, Frankfurt, Aug. 20, 1915.

proved no solution. Kamil Bey soon learned that an additional 2,000 Armenians were en route to Rasulain from Mardin in the north, making compliance with the regulations on population limits impossible. He warned that the authorities in Rasulain, already struggling with inadequate resources, would be overwhelmed.[13] Some relief reached Rasulain when Djemal Pasha authorized a mission led by two Armenians–a priest and a pharmacist from Aleppo–to assist deportees in Rasulain and Zor. However, this initiative triggered an investigation by central authorities. The government sought to suppress such interventions, as it aimed to keep information about the deportations confidential, ensuring the outside world remained unaware of what was happening.[14]

By 27 July 1915, 14,770 Armenians had officially reached the district, contradicting earlier reports of 15,000 arrivals. Of these, 11,770 had come from the Marash district alone, while only 3,000 originated from the Erzerum and Bitlis provinces. This was alarming news, as Zor was intended to be the principal destination for deportees from the eastern provinces. Once again, Kamil Bey emphasized that accommodating further arrivals was impossible. Thus far, the local authorities had managed to settle 7,500 Armenians, while another 7,843 were still waiting for placement.[15] An urgent decision was required. Suad Bey departed for Aleppo by train from Rasulain, protecting the two Armenian relief workers who accompanied him. Upon reaching Aleppo, he and the new governor of Aleppo, Bekir Sami Bey, sent a joint telegram to the Ministry of Interior. They warned that 3,000 Armenian women and children were en route to Rasulain and Zor, and it was impossible to provide for them. The two governors proposed allowing these deportees to be sent to larger cities in Syria, where they might have a chance to find work.[16]

Suad Bey continued lobbying the Ministry of Interior for additional funding and took steps to address the deteriorating situation. He demanded that the governor of the Rasulain sub-district was removed and replaced with someone of his choosing.[17] To underscore the gravity of the circumstances and strengthen his demands, Suad Bey even offered his resignation, though he remained at his post for the time being.[18]

By the end of August 1915, the number of Armenian deportees in the Zor district had risen to 20,000. Of these, 6,400 were sent further south along the Euphrates to the Ashara, Abukamal, and Ana sub-districts. In the central sub-district, 5,000 Armenians had been placed in villages, while 8,600 remained in Zor city, awaiting settlement locally. Suad Bey

13 DH.ŞFR 54-308, Ali Munif to Zor distr., July 5, 1915; 54-315, Ali Munif to Adana, Erzerum, Bitlis, Aleppo, Diarbekir, Syria, Trapizon, Kharberd, Mosul prov., Zor, Marash, Djanik, Cesarea, Ismid distr., Adana and Aleppo Abandoned Property Commissions, July 5, 1915; 479-22, Kamil to DH, Zor, July 7, 1915; 479-73, Kamil to DH, Zor, July 10, 1915.

14 DH.ŞFR 480-113, Kamil to DH, July 21, 1915; 54/A-71, Minister to Aleppo prov., July 22, 1915.

15 DH.ŞFR 54/a-106, Minister to Aleppo, Syria prov., Urfa, Zor distr., July 25, 1915; 481-48, Kamil to DH, Zor, July 27, 1915.

16 DH.ŞFR 481-76, Bekir Sami, Suad to DH, Aleppo, July 28, 1915.

17 DH.ŞFR 483-60, Suad to DH, Rasulain, Aug. 10, 1915; 484-106, Suad to DH, Zor, Aug. 20, 1915.

18 DH.ŞFR 486-110, Suad to DH, Zor, Sept. 1, 1915.

emphasized the urgent need for large-scale construction projects, estimating that 4,000 houses were required to prepare for the approaching winter when housing of deportees in tents would be impossible. Although most of the arrivals were women and children, there was still insufficient employment for the men who had managed to survive and reach Zor. The DH, however, denied requests for draught animals and seeds. Drawing on the relief work in Aleppo province, Suad Bey called for the formation of a local commission to organize relief and settlement efforts.[19] Despite his persistent pleas, the number of deportees continued to rise.

Ali Munif Bey, a former assistant to Talaat Bey at the Ministry of Interior, visited Aleppo to assess the situation. He estimated that approximately 150,000 Armenian deportees would arrive in Aleppo from the western provinces of the Ottoman Empire, with 50,000 expected to continue on to Zor, in addition to those already arriving from the eastern provinces.[20] By 7 November 1915, the Zor authorities had registered 26,543 Armenians. Of these, 12,454 were placed in villages, while 14,089 remained in Zor town. The desert road between Rasulain and Zor town remained a major deportation route, and these numbers included only those who survived the march. The death toll along the roads and in the towns and villages was not officially communicated.[21] Only a few Armenians with the necessary funds and connections, or those aided by railway officials, managed to escape from Rasulain to Aleppo by rail.[22]

Official data revealed that the influx of Armenian deportees led to a rapid expansion of settlements in the Zor district. The population of Sabka village, for example, increased from a few hundred to approximately 7,000. Armenian men deported from Zeitun were engaged in building new houses; 100 had been completed, with an additional 250 still under construction. However, due to the sheer number of deportees, the majority were forced to live in tents or other temporary shelters. Living conditions were dire, marked by widespread famine and rampant diseases, which claimed many lives. The situation in Zor town was equally grim. Its population had surged to 30,000, double its previous size. Like in Sabka, most deportees were confined to tents and endured severe famine conditions. Health care was scarce, if it existed at all, and up to 200 people were reportedly dying each day in Zor alone. Despite the high mortality rate, the number of those in need did

19 DH.ŞFR 485-114, Suad to DH, Zor, Aug. 28, 1915; 488-103, Suad to DH, Zor, Sept. 1, 1915.

20 DH.ŞFR 488-80, Ali Munif to DH, Aleppo, Sept. 10, 1915.

21 On 1 September 1915, another 607 Armenians arrived from Mardin at Zor. A week later 43 deportees had come from Mardin and Viranshehir. On 12 September 222 Armenian women and children from Erzerum, Kharberd und Sebastia arrived. 22 Armenians came from Albistan and Goksun by the river route. DH.ŞFR 486-109, Suad to DH, Sept. 1, 1915; 488-26, Suad to DH, Zor, Sept. 8, 1915; 488-116, Suad to DH, Zor, Sept. 12, 1915; 496-57, Kamil to DH, Zor, Nov. 7, 1915.

22 Maritza Kedjedjian, Mamouret-Ul-Aziz: Narrative of an Armenian Lady Deported from [Husseinig] (A Place Half-an Hour Distance from Kharberd]), Describing her Journey from [Husseinig] to Ras-ul-Ain; Written After Her Escape from Turkey, and Dated Alexandria, 2 November, 1915; Published in the Armenian Journal "Gotchnag" of New York, 8 January 1916, in James Bryce and Arnold Toynbee, *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, 1915-1916. Documents Presented to Viscount Grey of Fallodon by Viscount Bryce. Uncensored Edition* (Princeton, NJ: Gomidas Institute, 2000), 299-304.

not decrease, as new arrivals continually replaced those who had died. The housing under construction could, at best, accommodate only a small fraction of the deportees.[23]

Shukru Bey's Mission

The situation in Zor was far from unique. Authorities in Urfa, Aleppo, and the Syria province faced similar challenges. Additionally, Armenian deportee caravans clogged the roads to the settlement areas, creating chaotic conditions that also disrupted the transport of military supplies. In response, the Ministry of Interior dispatched Shukru Bey, the head of the Directorate for the Settlement of Tribes and Immigrants (İskan-i Aşair ve Muhacirin Müdüriyeti, hereafter IAMM), on an inspection tour to address the problems. Shukru Bey, the chief architect of the deportation program, issued two new manuals for the deportation of Armenians from the western Ottoman provinces to Aleppo, and a third one for their onward deportation to Zor. He also established a branch of the IAMM in Aleppo to streamline the deportation process in the region and exert a degree of supervision. Following his visit to Rasulain in the latter half of October, Shukru Bey praised the new Sub-District Governor Yusuf Zia Bey for his organizational skills in managing deportations there. Additionally, Shukru Bey locally recruited fifty Chechens to assist with deportation assignments in Aleppo province. Revising Ali Munif Bey's earlier estimates, he predicted that approximately 100,000 deportees would arrive from the west, with 20,000 expected to be accommodated in Zor district. One of Shukru Bey's main priorities was the removal of Armenians from Aleppo city, regardless of the consequences for other locations. To expedite this process, increased railway deportations were implemented, clearing Aleppo but simultaneously worsening the humanitarian crisis in Rasulain.[24]

After touring most of the so-called "destination areas," Shukru Bey began coordinating deportations from Aleppo. On 10 November 1915, a conference was convened at Aleppo under the presidency of Fourth Army Commander Djemal Pasha. His army's jurisdiction covered all "destination areas" except those in Mosul province. The meeting included Mustafa Abdulhalik Bey, the new governor of Aleppo, as well as Ismail Djanbolad Bey, the head of the Ministry of Interior's Directorate for Public Security (*Emniyet-i Umumiye Müdüriyeti*, EUM), and Shukru Bey. The participants agreed to halt deportations from the western provinces for the duration of the coming winter, a policy change that could have provided significant relief to the Zor district. However, other decisions made at the conference shifted much of the deportation burden onto the district. The conference

23 AA-PA, Türkei 183/41, A 5498, Litten to Rössler, Aleppo, Feb. 6, 1916 enclosure in Rössler to Bethmann Hollweg, Aleppo, Feb. 9, 1916; Kaiser, "Zor District,"121.

24 DH.ŞFR 490-62, Shukru to DH, Aleppo, Sept. 22, 1915; DH.EUM 2 ŞB 13-9, Shukru to DH, Aleppo, Oct. 24, 1915; Hilmar Kaiser, "Shukru Bey and the Armenian Deportations in the Fall of 1915" in *Syria in World War I: Politics, Economy, and Society*, ed. Talha Cicek (London: Routledge, 2016), 205, 207.

resolved to empty both the transit camps west of Aleppo and the city itself of deportees. Deportations to the southern Syria province were also terminated, and large-scale railway deportations to the east were planned. Deportees would be transported to Tell Abiad and Rasulain railway stations, from where they would march along the Euphrates and Khabur rivers toward Rakka, Sabka, and Zor, where they were ostensibly to be settled. Additionally, the agreement stipulated that Armenians who could not be settled in these locations were to be sent to Mosul. Given Suad Bey's reports about the dire conditions in Zor, this effectively meant routing deportees through the Zor district to Mosul, if feasible. However, this point was presumably left vague, as Mosul province had not been consulted, and logistical considerations were largely ignored. In practice, the number of deportees far exceeded the railway's capacity. Authorities responded by overcrowding railway cars beyond their official limits, resulting in horrific conditions and numerous deaths. Even with these measures, the railway could not accommodate the volume of deportees, forcing authorities to resort once again to marching Armenians through the desert. In summary, the conference concentrated the problems created by deportations in the Zor district, effectively making it the focal point for managing the overflow from the Syria and Aleppo provinces, as well as the Urfa district.[25]

Nothing Changes

In Zor district, towns and villages were crowded with approximately 40,000 deportees. New arrivals had to be relocated to tents in smaller settlements, which lacked any administrative infrastructure. To address this, Suad Bey planned to deploy mounted gendarmes on inspection tours to establish minimal administrative oversight in these areas. Many deportees were sick, and those who were healthy were unable to farm due to the unavailability of draught animals and arable land. Even if farming was possible, the deportees would require at least six months' worth of supplies to sustain them until their first harvest. Men were a small minority among the deportees. Many of the male arrivals had perished without being registered. Around 80% of the population consisted of women and children, who were entirely dependent on government aid. Many women,

25 The decision regarding railway transport appears to have been implemented immediately. Djemal Pasha dispatched an Armenian observer, J. Khéroyan, to Rasulain. Khéroyan was likely drafted into the Fourth Army, as he carried military credentials that legitimized his presence and activities in Rasulain. Neither the sub-district governor nor Suad Bey, who was also in Rasulain at the time, had been informed of his mission, and he was not under their authority. This suggests that Khéroyan was acting in a military capacity. It seems unlikely that Khéroyan was functioning as a deportation official under the command of the newly established IAMM branch office in Aleppo, as he was unable to intervene in the inhumane railway deportations managed by the IAMM. However, Khéroyan also carried a document issued by the IAMM branch office, likely intended to introduce him to local officials involved in the deportations.
Kaiser, "Shukru Bey," 201; AA-PA, Türkei 183/41, A 5498, Rössler to Bethmann Hollweg, Aleppo, Feb.9, 1916; J. Khéroyan, "La situation des Arméniens déportés à Ras ul-Aïn et leur extermination," *Revue d'histoire arménienne contemporaine* 2 (1998): 110-111; Garabèd K. Mouradian, "Ras ul-Aïn," Ibid., 119-120.

overwhelmed by despair, reportedly wished for death. The limited aid distributions were further marred by corruption. The only realistic option for improving the situation was to permanently settle the deportees at their current locations. In other words, Suad Bey advocated for an end to deportations to Zor. Once again, he urged the central authorities to allocate substantial funds for relief. How unrealistic the request was, could not have escaped any informed observer.[26]

To bolster his proposal and demonstrate his willingness to cooperate and follow orders, Suad Bey emphasized that without additional funds for transport animals and food, it would be impossible to move Armenians from Rasulain to Zor. He stressed the urgency of the operation, as worsening weather conditions were accelerating the spread of diseases, posing a significant threat to the military supply route passing through Rasulain. Suad Bey's report was based on personal observations, having just returned to Zor from Rasulain. Along the road, he witnessed firsthand the desperate conditions prevailing in the desert. By the end of December 1915, approximately 21,500 Armenian deportees were camped at Rasulain. Their relocation to Zor remained the district authorities' most pressing task, even as Zor itself was severely overcrowded and bracing for the arrival of additional deportees from Aleppo via the route along the Euphrates River.[27]

In the town of Zor, the situation had deteriorated further. Acting Governor Kamil Bey was unable to provide adequately for the deportees. Despite the government's settlement program stipulating the need for education for Armenian children, nothing had been done in this regard. Due to a lack of funds, the authorities resorted to borrowing money from the local municipality and other sources to finance the pending deportation of 15,000 Armenians to Mosul. With all funds exhausted, officials remained unpaid. [28]

Moreover, grain stocks in Zor were critically low, with supplies sufficient for only one and a half months. To prevent speculation, the authorities fixed the price of wheat. However, whatever positive impact this measure might have had was negated by central authorities. Despite the grain shortage, the central government prohibited the sale of government-owned grain, reserving it exclusively for military use. Additionally, any surplus grain was to be transferred to the army. In essence, Constantinople directed the Zor authorities to exacerbate the famine by removing supplies from the market. Clearly, the plight of the starving population was of no concern to the Ottoman government. On the contrary, it sought to extract as much grain as possible from the disaster-stricken area.

Equally concerning was the lack of seeds for planting, as out of desperation people had consumed their stored seed grain. Consequently, most farmers were unable to plant, leading to both famine and a significant decrease in government revenue. The local

26 DH.ŞFR 498-31, Suad to DH, Rasulain, Nov. 20, 1915; 498-47 Suad to DH, Rasulain, Nov. 21, 1915.

27 Suad Bey planned to allocate the funds to purchasing bread and to assign one camel for every ten children, with additional camels designated for transporting the sick. DH.ŞFR 501-77, Suad to DH, Rasulain, Dec. 15, 1915; 502-73, Suad to DH, Rasulain, Dec. 25, 1915; 503-2, Defterdar Galip to DH, Aleppo, Dec. 27, 1915; 503-31, Suad to DH, Rasulain, Dec. 29, 1915.

28 DH.ŞFR 503-39, Kamil to DH, Zor, Dec. 29, 1915; 503-50, Kamil to DH, Zor, Dec. 31, 1916.

authorities applied for additional government funds of at least 10,000 Turkish Pounds (£T) and requested seed deliveries through the Ministry of Agriculture. The central government, for the time being, promised to provide the necessary funds.[29] By January 1916, a drought had set in, compounding the already dire situation. Outlying districts reported increasing difficulties, and securing deliveries from neighboring provinces became nearly impossible. In Aleppo province, the influx of Armenian deportees had led to severe shortages and high inflation, mirroring the conditions in Zor. Supplies from Mosul province were inaccessible due to attacks along the overland routes by Yezidis in the Sindjar area and other groups. The famine fueled rising insecurity in the Zor district. Armenians deported from Aleppo's Meskene district to Zor were subjected to attacks. Unable to take significant action, Suad Bey appealed for directives to be sent to Aleppo and Mosul provinces to secure the roads leading to the Zor district.[30]

Deportations to Mosul

The pleas from Zor prompted the DH to make some adjustments to its deportation program that kept in line with the decisions of the November conference. Resources were severely limited, and the simplest solution remained the same: moving Armenians from one place to another. Consequently, Talaat Bey ordered the deportation of all Armenians from Rasulain to Mosul. According to Suad Bey, Rasulain's local Armenian population comprised only five or six households of shopkeepers, but more than 30,000 Armenian deportees were present in the sub-district. Precise figures were difficult to ascertain due to the absence of detailed records from sub-district authorities. Approximately 6,000 deportees were concentrated in the village of Rasulain, while an estimated 15,000 Armenians were deemed capable of being deported to Mosul within a relatively short time. However, the remaining deportees were too weak or ill to undertake the journey.

Suad Bey was unable to improve the situation, having already exhausted all available government funds allocated for deportees and his budget for bribing local tribal leaders. For the time being, the authorities focused on preparing the deportation of primarily Armenian men to Mosul. The route along the railway track from Rasulain to Nissibin and then on to Zakho was reserved for military transport and therefore off limits for deportations. As a result, the deportees were forced to use an alternate route, requiring them to carry all necessary provisions, as there were no settlements along the way. However, such supplies were unavailable due to the lack of funds. Despite these obstacles, on 8 January 1916, Suad Bey reported that 3,000 Armenians had been dispatched to

29 DH.ŞFR 501-108, Kamil to DH, Zor, Dec. 18, 1915; 59-79, Minister to Zor district, Dec. 21, 1915; 502-11, Kamil to DH, Dec. 20, 1915; 502-53, Kamil to DH, Zor, Dec. 23, 1915.

30 By the end of February 1916, it had become official that aside from a quantity of animal fat Zor district would unable to export other agricultural produce. DH.ŞFR 511-24, Suad to DH, Zor, Feb. 27, 1916; 511-37, Suad to DH, Zor, Feb. 28, 1916.

Mosul. He noted that if even a portion of the requested funds were transferred, orderly deportations could continue.[31]

Between 19 and 25 January 1916, the authorities deported 4,000 individuals, but this failed to improve local conditions, as 6,980 new deportees arrived during the same period. In the following weeks, Zor district registered 5,440 additional arrivals. Subsequently, the arrival rate slowed, with 1,862 Armenians arriving by 19 March 1916. However, it surged again when 3,707 deportees arrived within four days, up to 25 March 1916. Meanwhile, deportations from Rasulain continued, with 7,000 Armenian deportees sent to Mosul within a month, and 600 placed in nearby locations. These figures did not account for Armenians who had died along the route or those still en route to the district capital. In sum, the deportations from Rasulain to Mosul did little to alleviate the worsening conditions in Zor district; the overall number of deportees continued to rise rather than decline. All Suad Bey could do was repeatedly urge the DH to halt further deportations to his district. He also demanded renewed orders to improve security along the deportation routes. Conditions in Mosul province remained dire.[32]

Suad Bey's Personal Approach

Desperate for funds, Suad Bey sought permission to accept a 50 £T donation from the German consulate in Aleppo for relief efforts.[33] However, this sum was negligible given the scale of the crisis, as more and more Armenian deportees continued to arrive from Aleppo. Starvation was widespread and relentless.[34] Many children had lost their parents and relatives. In Zor, the authorities gathered 340 orphans and placed them in an inn. However, it was evident that this represented only a fraction of the actual number of orphaned children. Despite the dire situation, Suad Bey optimistically claimed he could care for all the orphans he might find, subtly emphasizing the need for additional funding. The number of orphans quickly increased to over 500. Some financial assistance came from the local population and Armenian deportees, leading to the establishment of a makeshift orphanage. This facility also served as a distribution center for relief efforts.

31 DH.ŞFR 59-189, Talaat to Suad (at Rasulain), Jan. 3, 1916; 504-32, Suad to DH, Zor, Jan. 5, 1916; 667-31, Suad to DH, Rasulain, Jan. 8, 1916; 505-104, Suad to DH, Zor, Jan. 18/19, 1916; 508-72, Suad to DH, Zor, Feb. 8, 1916.

32 DH.EUM 2 Şb 69-5, Suad to DH, Zor, Jan. 31, 1916; DH.ŞFR 506-56, Suad to DH, Zor, Jan. 22, 1916; 506-102, Suad to DH, Zor, Jan. 25, 1916; 508-55, Suad to DH, Zor, Feb. 7, 1916; 508-36, Suad to DH, Zor, Feb. 8, 1915; 508-55, Suad to DH, Zor, Feb. 7, 1916; 509-3, Suad to DH, Zo, Feb. 11, 1916; 509-19, Suad to DH, Feb. 12, 1915; 510-117, Suad to DH, Zor, Feb. 25, 1916; 511-24, Suad to DH, Zor, Feb. 27, 1916; 511-38, Suad to DH, Zor, Feb. 28, 1916; 512-69, Suad to DH, Zor, Mar. 9, 1916; 513-96, Suad to DH, Zor, Mar. 19, 1916; 514-66, Suad to DH, Zor, Mar. 25, 1916.

33 DH.ŞFR 508-72, Suad to DH, Zor, Feb. 8, 1916.

34 DH.ŞFR 506-33, Suad to DH, Zor, Jan. 21, 1916.

As usual, funding was insufficient, and government aid was desperately needed.[35] Some government officials had taken Armenian orphan girls with the intention of taking them to Constantinople and other places. Suad Bey justified these actions by claiming they were intended to provide the girls with education, attempting to preempt any suspicions that the officials' motives might have been less than charitable. The DH allowed the relocation of the girls, provided they were not taken to Constantinople, where a sizable Armenian community still existed.[36]

Setting aside the challenges of securing funding, he proposed establishing a women's teacher college and employing women in carpetmaking as a means of providing livelihood opportunities. Additionally, six Armenian women and children, who had no remaining relatives, sought shelter with him and applied for conversion to Islam. In response, he suggested creating a specialized institution for such cases, where they could receive food allowances and other essential support.[37] Such projects were clearly unfeasible, as the district was completely out of funds. By the end of March 1916, the central government had not transferred any new funding for deportees or for the district's general administration for the new fiscal year, which had begun at the start of the month. Local tax revenues were insufficient to sustain even basic administrative functions. Meanwhile, Armenian deportees continued to arrive in large numbers. In response to the reports, Talaat Bey allocated a small amount of money and pressed for the immediate onward deportation of Armenians to Mosul. The DH reiterated to the governor that it considered the presence of a large number of deportees in Zor district to be extraordinarily harmful.[38]

Despite the central government's overt hostility towards Armenians, Suad Bey's official reports displayed a noticeable degree of compassion for the deportees. However, these reports did not fully capture the governor's true attitudes. In reality, he was even more proactive in attempting to improve local conditions. For instance, in Rasulain, the authorities permitted more affluent Armenians to establish a new residential quarter in the village. This construction initiative provided employment for Armenians, similar to the building of a hospital and some barracks. The Armenians named the new quarter "Suadiye" in honor of the governor. It was situated at a distance from the sprawling tent camp where the majority of deportees endured famine and rampant contagious diseases. In and around Rasulain, hundreds of deportees died each day from "natural" causes, while frequent rapes and murders claimed additional lives.[39]

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35 DH.ŞFR 508-73, Suad to DH, Zor, Feb. 8, 1916; 510-97, Suad to DH, Zor, Feb. 24, 1916. For Ottoman government policies concerning orphans, see: Hilmar Kaiser, "Assimilating Armenians, 1915-1917," in *Aufarbeitung historischer Verbrechen gegen die Menschlichkeit: Eine interdisziplinäre Auseinandersetzung mit dem Armenier-Genozid*, ed. Melanie Altanian (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2018), 23-55.

36 DH.ŞFR 509-48, Suad to DH, Feb. 13, 1916; Talaat to Zor distr., Feb. 16, 1916.

37 DH.ŞFR 513-95, Suad to DH, Zor, Mar. 19, 1916.

38 DH.ŞFR 513-97, Suad to DH, Zor, Mar. 19, 1916; 514-71, Suad to DH, Zor, Mar. 16, 1916; 515-8, Suad to DH, Zor, Mar. 28, 1916; 515-82, Suad to DH, Zor, Apr. 2, 1916; 62-192, Talaat to Zor distr., Apr. 1, 1916; 62-199, Minister to Zor distr., Apr. 1, 1916; 62-273, Talaat to Zor distr., Apr. 9, 1916.

39 Shukru Aghazarian, "Odyssey of an Armenian Youth Who Learned He Could Tackle the Turk with Bribery,"

At times, Suad Bey took decisive and severe measures to protect Armenians, going far beyond official protocol. For some time, Bedouins had been raiding Armenian caravans and tents, plundering and killing deportees during the attacks. When Armenians appealed to the governor for help, he dispatched gendarmes to capture the perpetrators. After their apprehension, Suad Bey convened a public interrogation, after which he sentenced the men to death. He even invited Armenian victims to carry out the executions. When they declined, the gendarmes beheaded the offenders, placed their heads on spears, and paraded them through Rasulain as a warning to others. Suad Bey's drastic actions also left a strong impression on the gendarmes and irregulars tasked with overseeing the deportees on their marches from Rasulain to Zor. The guards were terrified of returning to Zor if Armenians had escaped from their caravans, fearing that Suad Bey might accuse them of murdering the fugitives and execute them. These very public displays of authority and his protective stance toward Armenians earned Suad Bey the nickname "Armenian Patriarch."[40]

At Zor, Armenians experienced considerable freedom of movement and assembly while Suad Bey was in charge. Wealthy Armenian merchants, priests, and a doctor regularly gathered at a public reading room.[41] The governor himself frequently entertained and visited local Christian notables. Having lived in Egypt, Suad Bey was familiar with foreign languages and maintained friendly relations with Europeans and Americans in Aleppo.[42] His social circle also included newly arrived prominent Armenians, some of whom he had encountered on the road between Rasulain and Zor or at Sabka. One of them, the physician Dr. Hovhannes Markarian from Albistan, Suad Bey appointed as a medical inspector for the Armenian deportees in and around the town. The governor also tasked Markarian with distributing relief. The two men became rather friendly. Markarian learned that Suad Bey had been a supporter or member of the oppositional "Hürriyet ve İtilaf Firkası" (Freedom and Accord Party) which had been forced to go underground.[43] Another confidant was Hagop Nersessian, a former dragoman of the British consulate in Baghdad. In 1912, Nersessian had become the chairperson of the newly founded chapter of the "Armenian General Benevolent Union," an organization closely associated with the conservative Armenian Ramgavar Party. Beyond his official and public roles, Nersessian

in *The Cilician Armenian Ordeal*, ed. Paren Kazanjian (Boston, MA: Hye Intentions Inc., 1989), 5-6; Khéroyan, "La situation," 112; Mouradian, "Ras ul-Aïn," 119-120.

40 Aghazarian, "Odyssey," 6; Khéroyan, "La situation," 111-112.

41 AA-PA, Türkei 183/41, A 5498, Litten to Rössler, Aleppo, Feb. 6, 1916 enclosure in Rössler to Bethmann Hollweg, Aleppo, Feb. 9, 1916.

42 United States, National Archives, Record Group (US-NA, RG) 59, 867.4016/373, Jackson to Secretary of State, Washington, March 4, 1918. Hilmar Kaiser, "Resisting Genocide: The Aleppo Relief Network 1915-1918," in *The Rescue of Armenians in the Middle East in 1915-1923*, ed. Harutyun Marutyan, Narine Margaryan (Yerevan: Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, 2020), 270, 277-278.

43 Mihran Aghazarian, "Mémoires d'un déporté [à Deir-Zor]," *Revue d'histoire arménienne contemporaine* 2 (1998): 222. At least one other official also extended his trust to Makarian and revealed to him his opposition to massacre as well as providing highly compromising information. Ibid., 181. Robert Tatoyan, "The Armed Resistance Attempt of Deported Zeitun-Armenians in the Deir al-Zor Desert," (forthcoming). I am indebted to Dr. Tatoyan for his kind permission to refer to his upcoming article.

was a highly educated linguist. At Zor, he became a confidant of Suad Bey and exerted some influence on the governor, ultimately aiding the Armenian deportees.[44]

Another prominent member of this circle was George Sukkar, a Melkite Christian merchant and landowner. Likely the wealthiest man in the district, Sukkar used his considerable resources to aid Armenian deportees, providing desperately needed food and clothing. His extended family owned several large compounds in the town, including one near the government house. After work, Suad Bey frequently visited Sukkar at his residence, often joined by Nersessian and other members of the community. Sukkar's house, built in a European style and equipped with indoor plumbing–an almost unheard-of luxury in Zor at the time–became a central gathering place. Over time, the Sukkar family's compounds were turned into shelters for deportees. Sukkar's wife alone housed 34 deportees in one of their homes. This humanitarian effort came at great personal risk, as hosting large numbers of displaced individuals increased the likelihood of exposure to contagious diseases. In early 1916, Sukkar contracted typhus during his relief work among the deportees and passed away. Many of the deportees sheltered in the family's compounds succumbed to the same disease.[45]

The Sukkar family operated a branch office in Rasulain, managed by George Sukkar's brother, Bashar Bey, who maintained excellent relations with local officials. Leveraging these connections, Bashar Bey was able to protect several wealthy Armenians from Erzerum province, including the Levonian family, by providing them with papers for safe travel to Zor. While most deportees were forced to remain outside the city, the Levonians were granted permission to enter Zor and stay at Bashar Bey's house, located next to George Sukkar's residence. The Sukkar family's extensive network of connections and business interests spanned the entire district, proving invaluable when a promising business opportunity arose near Rasulain.[46]

Government Projects at Rasulain

Between July and December 1915, Suad Bey spent a significant portion of his time in Rasulain. The ongoing conflict with raiding security forces from Diarbekir province and the crisis caused by the deportations provided sufficient justification for his stay. Additionally, the location allowed for short visits to Aleppo, as the railway line provided faster and more comfortable travel compared to the road along the Euphrates River.

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44 Aghazarian, "Mémoires," 221. US-NA, RG 84, Baghdad, 711.5.N., Heizer to Percy Cox, Bagdad, Mar. 15; Raymond H. Kévorkian, Vahé Tachjian, *The Armenian General Benevolent Union. One Hundred Years of History*, vol. 2, 1941-2006 (Cairo: Armenian General Benevolent Union, 2006), 71.

45 Esther Der-Hagopian, "Georges Soukkiar, bienfaiteur des déportés de Deir-Zor," *Revue d'histoire arménienne contemporaine* 2 (1998): 174; Aghazarian, "Mémoires," 220; Shoah Foundation, Visual History Archive, Hovannisian Oral History Collection (VHA), Takouhi Levonian; Armenian Film Foundation, Naim Sukkar.

46 VHA, Takouhi Levonian.

During his time in Rasulain, Suad Bey focused on overseeing various building projects. In December 1915, he declared that employing Armenian labor for construction projects was making sensible use of funds. Under his direction, a military hospital and facilities for army supply units were constructed in Rasulain. He also established a gendarmerie post to protect the road to Mardin. One project he prioritized was the construction of a bridge near Rasulain, although its funding was still pending. Suad Bey proposed reallocating funds from two planned bridges in the nearby Arada area to secure resources for the new project. The Arada project, initiated three months earlier, had been abandoned due to a lack of funds, with little hope of resuming in the near future. Interestingly, while the governor claimed a shortage of workers for the Arada bridges, he noted that sufficient labor had been recruited for the Rasulain bridge. He emphasized that the new bridge would facilitate the deportation of Armenians from Rasulain to Zor.[47]

The Baghdad Railway and the Land Regime in the Arada Steppe

Despite the chaos reigning in the region, Suad Bey found an opportunity to combine his official duties with personal business interests. His tour of the area coincided with a mission undertaken by one of his associates in Zor, Mahmud Bey, a member of the district's administrative council. This coincidence was likely not accidental, as Mahmud Bey's assignment was controversial among locals. Given the Chechens' reputation for taking matters into their own hands, the presence of a sizable gendarmerie force accompanying the mission likely seemed prudent. The construction of the Baghdad Railway Line in Der Zor's northern sub-district brought significant changes to the region.[48] The sub-district's seat of government had been relocated to the once-small village of Rasulain, where a new railway station was established. The railway opened the area to commerce, creating new opportunities. To the west, Aleppo and its expansive market became easily accessible. Locals also anticipated that the railway would soon provide a similarly convenient connection to Baghdad, driving expectations of rising land prices. However, disputes over land titles complicated matters. Many local land titles were contested, and the land registry refused to issue new ones, as the government intended to expropriate landowners along the railway line. Mahmud Bey was tasked with leading a commission to manage this particularly contentious issue.[49]

47 DH.ŞFR 501-29, Suad to DH, Rasulain, Dec. 12, 1915; 502-29, Suad to DH, Rasulain, Dec. 22, 1915; 505-41, Suad to DH, Zor, Rasulain, Jan. 12, 1916. Mikayel Keshishian, "Testimony," in *The Armenian Genocide: Testimonies of the Eyewitness Survivors*, ed. Verjiné Svazlian (Yerevan: Gitoutyoun, 2011), 422.

48 On the Baghdad Railway during the Armenian Genocide, see Hilmar Kaiser, "The Baghdad Railway and the Armenian Genocide, 1915-1916. A Case Study in German Resistance and Complicity," in *Remembrance and Denial. The Case of the Armenian Genocide*, ed. Richard Hovannisian (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 67-112.

49 Cumhuriyet Arşivi (CA), Toprak ve İskan Genel Müdürlüğü (TIGM), Muhacirin, 36-11-9, Suleiman Agha to Ministry of War, Jan. 7, 1916.

The land regime in the area was highly complex. During the agricultural crisis of the 1880s and 1890s, many of the original landowners abandoned farming. Compounding the issue, the region became a conflict zone where Chechen settlers and nomadic tribes–both Bedouin and Kurdish–competed for control.[50] While surveying land east of Rasulain, Mahmud Bey learned from members of the Sharabi tribe that an area called Arada had no legally recognized owner. Locals distinguished the area into two zones: Greater and Lesser Arada. In late December 1873 or early January 1874, members of the Sharabi tribe had secured land titles for the entire Arada. However, in the 1880s, they abandoned the land but still retained their legal documents. By around 1900, Chechens began claiming land in Lesser Arada and established a village there–a development that appeared to be of little concern to Mahmud Bey.[51]

A Business Venture

Mahmud Bey located Sharabi tribesmen who identified themselves as the legal owners of the land and were willing to sell it. In May or early June 1915, he successfully acquired 1,500 hectares along the Baghdad Railway line, between kilometers 1009 and 1019. The land was valued at approximately 60,000 £T, or 40 £T per hectare. However, no reliable record of the amount paid existed in the local land registry office, and people thought that the amount paid was only a fraction of the land's actual value. Registering the purchase and obtaining proper title deeds proved to be a more complicated process. Mahmud Bey employed persuasive measures–described by some as threats–to convince the local land registry official to bypass the ban on issuing new title deeds. Initially, only 104 hectares were officially recorded, allegedly purchased for 123 £T, or about 1.2 £T per hectare.[52] This valuation represented an extraordinary bargain, which also served to minimize taxes and fees. In August or early September 1915, Mahmud Bey transferred portions of the land to his associates in Zor. Once again, the land registry official disregarded regulations, certifying the transfers and issuing new title deeds. The new owners included Hamdi Bey, the former chief accountant of Zor district; George Sukkar, the prominent local merchant; and Hadjer Hanim, the wife of Governor Suad Bey, who acted as a proxy for her husband.

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50 On Kurdish tribes in the area, see Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Sheikh and State. The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan* (London: Zed Books, 1992), 187-189; Hütteroth documented the migrant of Kurdish nomads in the area, albeit in their curtailed form following World War I. See Wolf-Dieter Hütteroth, *Bergnomaden und Yaylabauern im mittleren kurdischen Taurus* (Marburg: Selbstverlag des Geographischen Institutes der Universität Marburg, 1959), map 1.

51 DH. İdâre-i Umûmiye-i Dahiliye Müdiriyyeti (IUM).EK 80-4, Zor Chief Account to Ministry of Finance (ML), Zor, Mar. 26, 1916 (copy) enclosure in ML to DH, May 2, 1916, Public Land Directorate, 2nd Dep., Gen. 632, Spec. 44; DH.Memurin (MEM) 486-5, HTMU to Talaat, Apr. 5, 1917.

52 DH.IUM.EK 80-4, Zor Chief Account to ML, Zor, Mar. 26, 1916 (copy) enclosure in ML to DH, May 2, 1916, Public Land Directorate, 2nd Dep., Gen. 632, Spec. 44; DH.ŞFR 525-102, Zeki to Ministry of Interior, Zor, July 18, 1916, No. 98.

Suad Bey later confirmed that the land had become part of his estate.[53]

The new owners had ambitious plans for Arada. With assistance from a member of Zor's administrative council, they secured draught animals, demonstrating that neither Mahmud Bey nor Suad Bey saw any conflict of interest in using their official positions to obtain scarce resources for their private business venture. Their plans included cultivating potatoes and corn as cash crops. George Sukkar served as an intermediary in recruiting Armenian deportees as farmhands. At the time, it was common practice among prominent landowners in the Rasulain area to exploit Armenian deportees as a source of cheap labor. Typically, deportees were compensated with minimal food rations which were barely sufficient for survival. Despite the harsh conditions, this work offered a degree of temporary protection for the laborers. With draught animals secured, Suad Bey and his associates were left with only one critical need: an adequate supply of seeds. The governor considered using funds from the district's special budget to purchase seeds and expressed hope that the Ministry of Agriculture might provide additional supplies.[54]

The Chechen's Response: Suleiman Bey's Petition

The land deal did not go unchallenged. Suleiman Agha, the leader of the Chechens in Lesser Arada, fiercely opposed the arrangement. He claimed that in the past he had made repeated attempts to obtain land titles for Lesser Arada, only to be denied, with officials citing the ban on issuing new titles in the railway zone. His renewed appeals to authorities in Zor were similarly ignored–unsurprising, given Suad Bey's personal investment in the very land Suleiman Agha claimed. During the governor's visits to Rasulain, Suleiman Agha directly confronted Suad Bey, demanding recognition as the rightful owner of the Lesser Arada area. The confrontation was anything but cordial. Suleiman Agha later alleged that the governor had threatened him, advising him to remain silent or risk being killed. Tensions escalated further when gendarmes visited Suleiman Agha's village and confiscated 640 kilos of tobacco, claiming it was contraband. As if this were not enough, Suad Bey established a gendarmerie post in the village, officially for the protection of the road to Mardin. The move was perceived as a direct assertion of control over the Chechens.[55]

Suleiman Agha refused to concede defeat. Realizing that his efforts in Zor district were futile, he traveled in January 1916 to neighboring Mardin and Diarbekir. The

53 DH.IUM.EK 80-4, Zor Chief Account to ML, Zor, Mar. 26, 1916 (copy) enclosure in ML to DH, May 2, 1916, Public Land Directorate, 2nd Dep., Gen. 632, Spec. 44; DH.ŞFR 506-111, Suad to DH, Zor, Jan. 25, 1916; DH.MEM 486-5, HTMU to Talaat, Apr. 5, 1917.

54 DH.ŞFR 506-111, Suad to DH, Zor, Jan. 25, 1916; Mouradian, "Ras ul-Aïn," 119-120.

55 Tobacco was a government monopoly and administered by the "Régie co-intéressée des tabacs de l'Empire ottoman." See Donald Quataert, *Social Disintegration and Popular Resistance in the Ottoman Empire, 1881-1908: Reactions to European Economic Penetratio*n (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1983), 13-40.

acting governor of Diarbekir was none other than Bedri Bey, formerly the governor of Mardin. Suleiman Agha could count on Bedri Bey's support, as Suad Bey had previously denounced Bedri Bey and called for his punishment for murder. On January 7, 1916, Suleiman Agha filed a petition with the Ministry of War and the Ministry of Finance, which was in charge of land matters.[56] In it, he presented himself as a survivor of massacres in the Caucasus who had fled to the Ottoman Empire in the 1890s. He emphasized that the government itself had ordered him to settle in Rasulain. Additionally, he highlighted his service as a lieutenant in the gendarmerie and explained that upon retiring, he had settled east of Rasulain in Zerkan Nahiye, within the boundaries of Lesser Arada. Contrary to the evidence of the land registry who showed that the land had been registered to the Sharabi tribe by 1874, Suleiman Agha claimed that the land in question had been abandoned for 50 years. He maintained that he and his companions had sought out the former owners and concluded a valid agreement to purchase the land. He argued that this transaction gave him the rightful claim to the land titles.

Suleiman Agha further stated that thirty Chechen households, comprising 150 people, had settled on the land around 1899 and established a new village with residential houses and farm buildings for each family. The settlers had restored irrigation channels from a river located about 1.5 hours away and had ploughed the land using fifty oxen. Additionally, they had planted 15,000 trees, including 7,000 poplar trees, 5,000 willow trees, and 3,000 fruit trees. Over the course of sixteen years, they claimed to have spent 1,500 £T on building materials, irrigation, and agricultural improvements.

Suleiman Agha emphasized that he had complied with the authorities' refusal to issue him official land titles, yet he had continued to pay land taxes despite being denied title deeds. Over the years, he claimed to have paid more than 40 £T in tithes, in addition to the more recent war taxes. His compliance, however, was not rewarded. Instead, he alleged that Mahmud Bey and his associates had unlawfully seized the land. In his denunciation of Mahmud Bey's actions, Suleiman Agha accused George Sukkar of being not just an Armenian, but a "most harmful Armenian leader." According to him, Sukkar was an Armenian revolutionary and a dangerous enemy of the state. Furthermore, he claimed that Governor Suad Bey was an ally of Sukkar, actively working against the Chechens. Suleiman Agha asserted that the governor had violently displaced the Chechens and replaced them with Armenians who were followers of Sukkar. Local officials, he argued, dared not interfere due to fear of Suad Bey and his alleged Armenian accomplices. Suleiman Agha also accused Suad Bey of robbing the Chechens by seizing their tobacco crop, which should have fallen under the jurisdiction of the Tobacco Régie officials in Mardin. Frustrated that his appeals for justice had been ignored in Zor district, Suleiman Agha turned to Diarbekir province for help. He called for the formation of a commission

56 CA,TIGM, Muhacirin, 36-11-9, Suleiman Agha to Ministry of War, Jan. 7, 1916. He mailed the petition first on 10 January 1916 from Mardin and a second time on 21 January 1916 from Diarbekir. Suleiman Agha to DH, Mardin, Feb. 8, 1916

composed of officials or provincial council members from Diarbekir or Mardin to investigate and resolve the situation.[57]

At Diarbekir, Suleiman Agha managed to meet with Mazhar Bey, the head of a special inquiry commission touring parts of the eastern provinces. However, since Zor district was not within Mazhar Bey's zone of investigation, the meeting yielded no practical results. Bedri Bey proved to be more supportive. He filed his own report on the issue, reiterating Suleiman Agha's claims and requesting instructions aligned with the latter's demands. The land dispute, it seemed, presented Bedri Bey with an opportunity to intervene in the affairs of Zor district, which appeared to be desirable. After all, Suad Bey was his enemy. Suleiman Agha escalated his campaign by sending additional telegraphic appeals to the Ministry of War, the Grand Vizierate, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Interior, ensuring that his grievances were not forgotten and heard at the highest levels of government.[58]

Suad Bey's Response

The Ministry of War took up Suleiman Agha's case and referred the matter to the Ministry of Interior. The Ministry of Finance, for its part, contacted the authorities at Zor on 6 February 1916 forwarding a copy of Sulaiman Agha's petition and ordering an investigation.[59] The next day, the Ministry of Interior invited Suad Bey to submit a statement regarding the case. Four days later, Suad Bey cabled a detailed report. In his reply, Suad Bey confirmed that Suleiman Agha had been petitioning him for the past six months. He pointedly remarked on Suleiman Agha's rise to wealth despite serving as a lowly paid second lieutenant in the gendarmerie, implying that his fortune was likely ill-gotten. According to Suad Bey, Suleiman Agha had given the tribesmen–the true landowners–a small sum of money before establishing a hideout for Chechen bandits on the disputed land. He highlighted the recent seizure of approximately 640 kilos of contraband tobacco, further discrediting Suleiman Agha's claims. Despite lacking a title deed, Suleiman Agha continued attempting to occupy the land. Suad Bey argued that the newly established gendarmerie post disrupted the operations of the Chechen bandits, who reportedly numbered around 200 households in the Rasulain area. He described Suleiman Agha as an "old thief" seeking to restore the previous,

57 Ibid.

58 CA,TIGM, Muhacirin, 36-11-9, Bedreddin to DH, Diarbekir, Jan. 26, 1916; Suleiman Agha to Ministry of War, Diarbekir, Feb. 8, 1916; Suleiman Agha to Grand Vizirate, Diarbekir, Feb. 8, 1916; Suleiman Agha to ML, Diarbekir, Feb. 8, 1916; Suleiman Agha to DH, Diarbekir, Feb. 8, 1916. The former telegrams were passed on to the DH.

59 ML.Emlak-ı Emiriye Müdüriyeti (EEM) 1191-43, ML to Zor District Accounting Office, Feb. 6, 1916; Zor Chief Account to ML, Zor, Mar. 26, 1916; DH.IUM.EK 80-4, ML to DH, May 2, 1916, Public Land Directorate, 2nd Dep., Gen. 632, Spec. 44; CA,TIGM, Muhacirin, 36-11-9, Ministry of War to Ministry of Interior, Jan. 27, 1916.

lawless state of affairs through his petitions.

Addressing the Armenian dimension of the case, Suad Bey pointed out that it was permissible to settle Armenians outside the 25-kilometer exclusion zone from the nearest railway line. He emphasized that many Armenians could be resettled at a distance of 35 kilometers from Rasulain, where they could grow crops such as corn and grain and provide valuable labor.[60] Considering the dire conditions of Armenian deportees in Rasulain, Suad Bey likely believed that this settlement scheme would garner interest from the Ministry of Interior.

Suad Bey further noted that Suleiman Agha's applications to district and sub-district authorities had been rejected as meritless by both the land registry and local officials. He added that further details were being examined as part of an ongoing investigation. Finally, Suad Bey requested prompt instructions to forward Suleiman Agha's petitions and telegrams to a court martial, aiming to put an end to the Chechen leader's intrigues and improve conditions in the sub-district.[61]

Suad Bey's response did not settle the matter. On February 14, 1916, Talaat Bey informed Minister of War Enver Bey that he had received a reply from Suad Bey. Due to the significance of the issue, the Interior Ministry's HTMU would conduct an investigation. On the same day, IAMM Director Shukru Bey wrote to Hamid Bey, the director of the HTMU, providing an update on the current state of the affair and formally requesting an investigation. On February 24, 1916, Shukru Bey followed up with Hamid Bey, informing the latter of Bedri Bey's intervention and reiterating the urgency of an official investigation.[62]

Bureaucracy at Work

Meanwhile, the authorities at Zor worked on their official response to the Ministry of Finance's inquiry. On 26 March 1916, the district's chief account submitted a short statement. It eStablished the Sharabi tribe's initial ownership of the land, the date of the land transfer to Mahmud Bey and that of Mahmud Bey's sale to his associates. The document also specified that Suleiman Agha had no claim whatsoever to the land. For its part, the Ministry of Finance forwarded the reply and its copy of Suleiman Agha's petition to the DH for further consideration on 2 May 1916.[63] In response, DH forwarded the petition to Zor district an ordered a thorough review of the facts.[64] At Zor, the instructions set off flurries of activity. The matter reached the Land Registry at Zor on 20 May 1916

60 CA,TIGM, Muhacirin, 36-11-9, Suad to DH, Zor, Feb. 11, 1916.

61 Ibid.

62 CA,TIGM, Muhacirin, 36-11-9, Talaat to Enver, Feb. 14, 1916; Shukru to Hamid, Feb. 24, 1916.

63 DH.IUM.EK 80-4, Zor Chief Account to ML, Zor, Mar. 26, 1916 (copy) enclosure in ML to DH, May 2, 1916, Public Land Directorate, 2nd Dep., Gen. 632, Spec. 44.

64 DH.IUM.EK 80-4, DH to Zor District, May 6, 1916, IUM Gen. 6422, Spec. 29.

and it took the officials only three days to file their reply. Two days later, the acting governor sent off the documents to Constantinople.[65]

The Zor Land Registry reiterated the legal status of the land, namely that Mahmud Bey and his associates had legally purchased the land. As for Suleiman Agha's claims the officials confirmed that the latter had filed on 8 October 1915 a petition, stating that he had bought the land and been the owner for the past 15 years. However, already on 24 April 1909 the district's Administrative Council had rejected his claims following an investigation. Given the circumstances, the land registry refused to annul the newly issue land titles. It was up to Suleiman Agha to contest in court those land titles and establish his claim to land. Moreover, on 5 September 1915, the land registry had issued a decision to the same effect in the case of another claimant to the land. Interestingly, the land registry did not address the question of the land expropriations in the railway zone and the ban on the issue of new land titles. These findings did, however, not bring about a termination of the investigation.[66]

The pending investigation marked a significant victory for Suleiman Agha. He had successfully mobilized not only the upper echelons of the Diarbekir provincial administration but also the highest levels of the central government. At the same time, it was obvious that no immediate resolution was forthcoming. The investigation would require time, as Zor was part of an HTMU district encompassing both Mosul province and Zor district. It would be a while before an inspector could reach Rasulain and Zor to investigate the matter. Simultaneously, the land dispute had escalated beyond the realm of local negotiations and informal arrangements, which had previously been the norm.

At Constantinople, Talaat Bey most likely found the situation uncomfortable. The governor of an independent district was under investigation, and there was little he could do to further clarify the situation. The incoming correspondence from district had not rendered any decisive new information. It took another two months before an opportunity arose to gain more insight into the matter. By July 1916, a new governor had taken office in Zor and was establishing firm control over the district's administration. Zeki Bey, the new appointee, was already infamous for torturing Armenians prior to his transfer. Unlike his predecessor, Suad Bey, Zeki Bey was unlikely to form alliances with local Christians. His appointment was deliberate–he was selected because he was expected to execute orders without question, regardless of their nature. When Talaat Bey inquired about the land dispute, Zeki Bey initially reported only what was already known: Suad Bey had privately purchased the land in his wife's name. Talaat Bey was dissatisfied with this vague response and demanded more detailed information, such as the exact size of the land, its actual value, and the amount paid for it. It was only through Zeki Bey's new

65 DH.IUM.EK 80-4, Zor Land Registry to Zor District, May 23, 1916 enclosure in Zor District to DH, May 25, 1916, No. 55.

66 DH.IUM.EK 80-4, Zor Land Registry to Zor District, May 23, 1916 enclosure in Zor District to DH, May 25, 1916, No. 55.

response that the Ministry of Interior discovered the area in question was far larger than the portion mentioned in Suleiman Agha's petition.[67]

Zeki Bey was far from finished. Two days after submitting his report on the land dispute, the new governor forwarded fresh accusations against Suad Bey. He alleged that the former governor had accepted substantial bribes from Armenians during the deportations and the local population census, thereby undermining government policy. Suad Bey was also accused of embezzling government funds allocated for expenses related to the deportations. According to Zeki Bey, about 2,000 of the roughly 20,000 Armenians in Zor city had escaped registration, while an additional 1,000 remained unrecorded in surrounding settlements. Census officials had reportedly demanded bribes of 5 £T per person to process registrations. Some Armenians were registered solely based on their own statements, allowing them to conceal their true identities. Others had even obtained Ottoman identity papers without proper verification. Zeki Bey implicated several of Suad Bey's associates in these alleged crimes, including high-ranking officials such as Fuad Bey, the head of the correspondence department, and Abdulkerim Bey, a former official responsible for deportation affairs. As a result of Zeki Bey's investigation, Fuad Bey resigned, and others, including Mahmud Bey–Suad Bey's business partner and a member of the administrative council–were removed from their posts. Zeki Bey planned to ban these men from the district to set an example. However, Talaat Bey intervened, advising Zeki Bey that exiling the men was illegal. Instead, Talaat Bey instructed that proper legal proceedings should be followed to address the accusations.[68]

The Investigation Report

It took nine months until, in April 1917, Emin Bey, the Ministry of Interior's investigator, submitted his report on the Arada land dispute. The investigator carefully distinguished between the issues related to land purchases in Lesser Arada and Greater Arada. Suleiman Agha's case specifically concerned the Lesser Arada. Emin Bey determined that the land in Lesser Arada had been left vacant by the Sharabi tribe for about twenty years before Suleiman Agha took over. This contradicted the latter's claims that the land had been abandoned for fifty years. While Suleiman Agha's assertion was false, the investigator confirmed allegations regarding the land acquisition by Mahmud Bey and his associates. Emin Bey found that Mahmud Bey had indeed coerced local officials and the local Council of Elders into certifying the land transaction, an act that necessitated legal prosecution of Mahmud Bey and the implicated local officials. Through local interrogations, Emin Bey

67 The DH had announced Zeki Bey's appointment as district governor of Zor on 30 April 1916. DH.MEM 486-5, DH to Zor distr., Apr. 30, 1916; DH.ŞFR 65-128, Talaat to Zor distr., July 1, 1916; 524-92, Zeki to Talaat, Zor, July 3, 1916; 65-175, Talaat to Zor distr., July 10, 1916; 525-102, Zeki to DH, Zor, July 18, 1916.

68 CA,TIGM, Memurin, 28-4-6, Zeki to DH, Zor, July 20, 1916; Talaat to Zeki, July 25, 1916; DH.SN.Tahrirat Kalemi 69-46, Zeki to DH, Zor, July 20, 1916.

also uncovered that the transfer certificates, along with all private contracts, waivers, and declarations, were fraudulent. His informants had consistently lied, and the local land registry proved useless for clarifying ownership, as it contained no evidence of legal transfers. Ultimately, Emin Bey was unable to establish the rightful owner of the land. He recommended an independent investigation by the Office of the Land Registry in Constantinople to scrutinize the operations of its Rasulain branch and review local land titles and waivers. In conclusion, Emin Bey not only questioned the legality of Mahmud Bey's land acquisition and that of his associates but also cast doubt on Suleiman Agha's claim to the land.[69]

The situation regarding the Greater Arada was no clearer than that of the Lesser Arada. This land had also originally been owned by the Sharabi tribe. Over time, land transfers had taken place, but these were processed by the land registry official not in his office but in the tents of the tribesmen. This irregular practice had created opportunities for corruption and abuse.

The exact circumstances surrounding these transfers remained disputed. Allegations of extortion were raised, with some supposed sellers claiming they had not consented to the transactions. Faced with these competing claims, Emin Bey declared that he could not determine the veracity of the statements or the rightful ownership of the land. Instead, he recommended that claimants present their cases in court, which would need to settle the matter. As in the case of the Lesser Arada, the local land registry's files were in disarray. It was not clear whether the land had been vacant at all. One fact was certain, however: given the state of the files, the local land registry official should have refrained from issuing land titles to Mahmud Bey. Once again, Emin Bey called for a central investigation into the operations of the Rasulain branch of the land office to clarify the situation. Only after such an investigation could legal action be pursued by interested parties.

Politically significant was the fact that Emin Bey issued a clean bill of health for Suad Bey, absolving the governor of any wrongdoing. According to Emin Bey, Suad Bey was free of guilt, as he had not been involved in the original land deal. The governor had merely purchased land for his wife from Mahmud Bey after the latter had obtained the title deeds. Furthermore, contrary to Suleiman Agha's claims, the governor did not even own land in Arada. Applying the same reasoning, Hamdi Bey and the late George Sukkar were also declared innocent of any misconduct. Emin Bey appeared uninterested in investigating the precise circumstances of the land transfers. Regarding Suleiman Agha's complaint, Emin Bey absolved himself of further inquiries by concluding that the petitioner lacked any legal title to the land. Thus, the case was officially closed. Emin Bey concluded his investigation without implicating any Ministry of Interior personnel. Legal trouble was anticipated only for a minor official associated with the Ministry of Finance and a member of Zor district's administrative council, neither of whom were on the Ministry of Interior's payroll. For his part, Talaat Bey contacted the Ministry of Finance to involve the Land Registry Administration in addressing the matter. While Suleiman

69 DH.MEM 486-5, HTMU to Talaat, Apr. 5, 1917

Agha had succeeded in obstructing the land acquisition by Suad Bey and his associates, he had simultaneously failed to solidify his own claim. Worse still, his claims were now fully invalidated. Nevertheless, the overall outcome was not entirely unfavorable for Suleiman Agha. Acting preemptively before the investigation's findings were finalized, he and his Chechen allies created new realities on the ground. Within weeks of the Ministry of Interior's call for an investigation, the Chechens had resolved one of their most pressing concerns and gained additional profit in the process–they killed the Armenian settlers on the disputed land.[70]

The Massacre

In his report, Emin Bey made no mention of the settlement of Armenian deportees in Arada, as though it had never occurred. This omission was striking, given that Suleiman Agha had explicitly warned the authorities about a so-called "harmful Armenian leader" and his followers taking over the land. Ignoring such a claim should have raised concerns, especially in light of the Ministry of Interior's typical zeal in pursuing Armenian political leaders. Talaat Bey, in his correspondence with Zeki Bey regarding Arada, also showed no interest in the Armenians involved, despite the Ministry of Interior's broader efforts to suppress Armenians. Once again, it seemed the issue had simply faded into obscurity. By this time, the Armenian deportees and farmhands in the Rasulain area were no longer a significant concern. This shift in focus coincided with critical changes in the administration of Rasulain. In March 1916, Suad Bey's ally, the Rasulain governor Yusuf Ziya Bey, was transferred to a new post in Rumkale, Aleppo province. Armenian deportees had praised Yusuf Ziya Bey as a fair and compassionate governor who had assisted them. He was replaced by Kerim Refi Bey, a fanatical member of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) and a vehement opponent of Armenians.[71]

Even more significant was the transfer of Zor district from the control of the Ottoman Fourth Army to that of the Ottoman Sixth Army.[72] This change in jurisdiction had critical implications. Under martial law, military decisions overrode those of civilian authorities based on claims of military necessity. From the outset of the deportations, Fourth Army Commander Ahmed Djemal Pasha had pursued his own policy regarding Armenian deportees, using his authority to exempt them from wholesale massacre. The transfer of Zor district to the Sixth Army Region marked a turning point, leaving the deportees vulnerable to new policies and actions under the Sixth Army's command.[73]

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70 DH.MEM 486-5, Talaat to ML, Apr. 9, 1917

71 Yusuf Ziya Bey's transfer was not a form punishment. He was the preferred candidate for the post of Aleppo governor Mustafa Abdulhalik Bey. DH.ŞFR 508-28, Mustafa Abdulhalik to DH, Aleppo, Feb. 6, 1916; Khéroyan, "La situation," 112.

72 Edward Erickson, *Ordered to Die: A History of the Ottoman Army in the First World War* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 128.

73 Hilmar Kaiser, "Regional Resistance," 365-383.

Initially, Kerim Refi Bey conducted a survey of the Armenian camp, openly displaying his resentment and swearing at the deportees. On 30 March 1916, he personally selected Armenians for deportation to Mosul and dispatched the first convoy from Rasulain. In principle, his actions appeared to align with the decisions made at the Aleppo conference in November 1915. The deportees, unsuspecting of what awaited them, offered no resistance. Shortly thereafter, the guards accompanying the convoy returned, carrying the deportees' clothing. The following day, Armenian women gathering grass at a distance from the camp witnessed security forces butchering Armenians in a nearby valley. In this manner, the large camp at Rasulain was emptied consecutively. Each day, 300 to 500 Armenians were marched off, only to be murdered by killing squads about ten kilometers away on the banks of the Djirdjib River, which marked the western boundary of Lesser Arada.[74]

A police officer in a nearby village temporarily protected an extended Armenian family by employing them in house construction. Similarly, some Armenians survived for a time by working as builders, but once construction ended, the authorities took them away. Ultimately, only a few children survived, hidden with Chechen families and disguised as Muslims. Some officials at Rasulain warned the Armenians that deportation meant certain death and advised them to remain in the camp as long as possible. Others suggested converting to Islam as a temporary reprieve. Many Armenians heeded this advice, changed their names, and were allowed to stay for the time being. However, this reprieve was short-lived. About a month later, even the Armenian converts were ordered to march to Zor town, fully aware that this would lead to their massacre.[75]

In sum, the authorities systematically emptied Rasulain village, its local camp, and surrounding villages and farms of Armenians, murdering approximately 12,000 of the at least 14,000 Armenian deportees in the vicinity during late March and April 1916. The remaining 2,000 Armenians were mostly sick or otherwise incapacitated individuals who had been left behind, as well as a few comparatively wealthy Armenians living in the Suadiye neighborhood. These remnants, along with newly arrived deportees, were killed by the Chechens in late May. At the same time, Armenian farmhands and construction workers, whose services were no longer needed, were also massacred. The killings were carried out by members of the local Chechen community, with nearly all males between the ages of ten and sixty participating in the slaughter. Muslim observers commented on the extraordinary savagery of the Chechen perpetrators. When confronted by an Ottoman officer about these crimes, Kerim Refi Bey declared that he was acting under orders. Meanwhile, the military had sent a pioneer battalion from the Fourth Army to the area to repair two damaged bridges that Suad Bey had been unable to fix earlier. Some of the Armenians temporarily spared from the massacres had been conscripted to work on the bridges for two weeks. After completing their work, they too were massacred. The soldiers

74 Kévorkian, *Le génocide*, 804-805.

75 Aghazarian, "Odyssey," 7-8; Hovsep Bshtikian, "Testimony," in Svazlian, *Armenian Genocide*, 433-439; Khéroyan, "La situation," 112-114.

sent to the area witnessed the mutilated corpses of the Armenians and confirmed that the massacres had been systematically organized.[76]

Suad Bey's Departure – Baghdad

Suad Bey's tenure in Zor was nearing its end. At the time, the central government was finalizing his transfer to a new post and deliberating on his replacement. On 30 April 1916, the Ministry of Interior informed Baghdad province that Suad Bey had been appointed deputy governor of the province. Suad Bey departed Zor on 1 May 1916, and assumed his new position on 27 May 1916. The transfer was not a reprimand; in fact, it was a promotion. Khalil Bey, commander of the Ottoman Sixth Army and in charge of the Mesopotamian front, officially held the title of governor of Baghdad. This dual role gave him both civilian and military authority, although his military responsibilities left him with limited time to manage civilian affairs. Instead, Khalil Bey played a supervisory role, retaining the final authority on decisions while delegating the daily administration to the acting governor–now Suad Bey.[77]

Suad Bey understood that his Armenian acquaintances in Zor were in grave danger. Using his influence, he arranged for the transfer of Nersessian and other associates to Baghdad. He also secured permits for several Armenian girls, including Takhouhi Levonian, to travel to Baghdad. Nersessian employed Levonian's sister in his household, while Takhouhi preferred to stay with Apostolic Armenians rather than with Nersessian, who was Catholic. Suad Bey offered Nersessian an administrative position, and the German consul also sought to hire him due to his fluency in German and excellent local connections. However, Nersessian declined both offers and instead chose to work with the American consulate, where he distributed relief funds. Thanks to Suad Bey's protection, Nersessian was able to re-establish himself in Baghdad and assume a

76 Khéroyan estimated that approximately 40,000 deportees had been present at Rasulain, while Aram Andonian provided a somewhat lower estimate of over 30,000 Armenians. By early February 1916, relief workers in Aleppo informed the local U.S. consulate that the number of deportees at Rasulain was about 20,000. The grim characterization of the Chechen community in Rasulain is supported by Ottoman data. In August 1915, there were 401 Chechen males, including boys, living in Rasulain. Of these, Shukru Bey had recruited 50 for service in Aleppo province, leaving fewer than 300 teenage boys and able-bodied Chechen men in the area. Escorting victims to massacre sites, carrying out the killings, returning to Rasulain, and disposing of plunder was time-consuming but also highly profitable. Given these circumstances, it seems likely that participation in the killings was widespread among the Chechen community. Nevertheless, there were notable exceptions. A small number of Chechens defied the norm, choosing to protect Armenians and helping some to escape. DH.SN.M 238-78, Rasulain, Aug. 25, 1915; AA-PA, Türkei 183/42, A 12911, Rössler to Bethmann Hollweg, Aleppo, Apr. 27, 1916; 183/43, A 17939, Rössler to Bethmann Hollweg, Aleppo, June 17, 1916; US-NA, RG 59, 867.4016/271, Jackson to Morgenthau, Aleppo, Feb. 8, 1916. Khéroyan, "La situation," 112-114; Aram Andonian, "Les massacres de Ras ul-Aïn," *Revue d'histoire arménienne contemporaine* 2 (1998): 107-110; Onnig K. Bédrossian, "De Tokat à Ras ul-Aïn," Ibid.: 115-117; Zaréh E. Ghougassian, "Scènes de la vie des déportés de Ras ul-Aïn," Ibid.: 117-118; Garabèd K. Mouradian, "Ras ul-Aïn," Ibid.: 119-120.

77 DH.MEM 486-5, DH to Baghdad prov., Apr. 30, 1916; Personnel Dept. to Accounting Dept., June 7, 1916; Aug. 6, 1916

prominent role in the city. Nonetheless, his position remained more precarious than he might have hoped. [78]

On 8 January 1917, Suad Bey informed the Ministry of Interior, in response to an inquiry, that only one Armenian had worked for a consulate of an allied or neutral power in Baghdad. According to his report, the individual had resigned following the death of the German consul. It had taken approximately six weeks for the Ministry of Interior's memorandum to reach Baghdad, and probably the same time for Suad Bey's reply to reach Constantinople. On 10 February 1917, Talaat Bey sent a telegram demanding a response to the Ministry of Interior's inquiry. Provincial authorities replied promptly by telegram, capitalizing on the fact that Suad Bey had already left Baghdad for a new post on 2 February 1917. Their report contradicted the former deputy governor's earlier statements. Contrary to Suad Bey's claim, Hasro Kapudjujian, the interpreter for the German consulate, had not resigned. Worse, the authorities deemed him a "treacherous Armenian." Additionally, they emphasized that Nersessian, whom they described as "a particularly disrespectful and treacherous individual," had been brought from Zor to Baghdad. The authorities sought instructions on how to deal with the two men.[79]

In response, Talaat Bey demanded details on when, for what purpose, and under whose authority Nersessian had been brought to Baghdad. On 25 February 1917, the acting governor, Memduh Bey–the notorious former governor of Erznka district–replied that Nersessian had returned to Baghdad on 3 June 1916, under the orders of Suad Bey. Memduh claimed the case was resolved, as Nersessian had been deported a week earlier. This was false.[80]

The day after Suad Bey's departure from Baghdad, the police had attempted to arrest Nersessian but failed, as he had gone into hiding. When local Armenian clergy were arrested, Nersessian surrendered to the authorities. U.S. Consul Oscar Heizer learned of Nersessian's arrest and subsequent disappearance while in police custody. On 5 March 1917, Heizer confronted Memduh Bey about the case and demanded Nersessian's release. Memduh responded with a blatant lie, claiming that Nersessian had been sent to Kut El Amara to serve as an interpreter for Sixth Army Commander Khalil Pasha. According to Memduh, the British had intercepted the steamer carrying Nersessian, meaning he was likely in British custody. This response demonstrated Memduh Bey's disdain for Heizer.[81]

In Baghdad, it was common knowledge that being "sent south to see Khalil Pasha at Kut" was a euphemism for being murdered and having one's body thrown into the river. In reality, Nersessian had been tortured and beaten to death at Baghdad's main police station

78 VHA, Takouhi Levonian; Aghazarian, "Mémoires," 224; National Archives of India, Government of India, 1920, Foreign and Political Department, Establishment A: Proceedings, Oct. 1920, Nos. 10-14, Brevet to Secretary to the Government of India in the Foreign and Political Department, Baghdad, Dec. 11, 1919 (copy).

79 DH.EUM 5 ŞB 34-3, Suad Bey to DH, Baghdad, Jan. 8, 1917; Ahmed to DH, Baghdad, Feb. 14, 1917; DH.Ş-FR 72-203, Talaat to Baghdad prov., Feb. 10, 1917;

80 DH.EUM 5 ŞB 34-3, Talaat to Memduh, Feb. 20, 1917; Memduh to DH, Baghdad, Feb. 25, 1917.

81 US-NA, RG 84, Baghdad, 711.5.N., Heizer to Percy Cox, Bagdad, Mar. 15; Zaven Der Yeghiayan, *My Patriarchal Memoirs* (Barrington, RI: Mayreni Publishing, 2002), 141-142;

on 23 February 1917, upon receipt of Talaat Bey's telegram. This brutal act eliminated an unwanted witness just days before the British captured the city.[82]

Conclusion

At the outset of the Armenian deportations, the Ottoman government designated the Zor district as the primary destination for deportees from the empire's eastern provinces. By November 1915, Zor had also become the main destination for Armenian deportees from the western provinces. However, the desert district lacked infrastructure and had few habitable locations. The Ministry of Interior's repeated orders for the deportation of more than a 100,000 Armenians to Zor at a time the Armenians at Zor already outnumbered the official limit for deportees in the district made it evident that the Ottoman government disregarded its own directive that Armenians should not exceed ten percent of the settled Muslim population in the settlement region. Instead the government invoked the rule selectively, depending on convenience. Similarly, assimilation programs targeting Armenian children were largely absent in the Zor district. The region lacked foreign-owned institutions that could be confiscated and converted into government orphanages. Like their parents, the children were considered expendable, valued only for their statistical significance. The central government's response to any undesirable concentrations of Armenians was to enforce constant movement from one location to another. This approach not only denied local authorities the resources necessary to manage the humanitarian crisis but also ensured that Armenians died en route due to starvation, disease, exhaustion, and exposure.

By refusing to address the emergency, the government systematically transferred the burden from one place to another, creating large concentrations of Armenians without providing means for their survival. This policy led to catastrophic mortality rates among the deportees. In effect, the central authorities replaced direct massacres–used predominantly in the Ottoman Third Army's region–with famine and epidemics in greater Syria.

In Zor, the promise of transferring Armenians to the Mosul province proved to be mere rhetoric. Once the eastern provinces were emptied of Armenians, the Ottoman government prepared the administrative groundwork for mass murder. By removing the control of the Ottoman Fourth Army and appointing a compliant sub-district governor, the government facilitated the initiation of large-scale massacres in the Zor district.

The killings marked a stark departure from Suad Bey's policies. As governor, Suad Bey adhered to the official government policy, which allegedly aimed at resettling

82 National Archives of India, Government of India, 1920, Foreign and Political Department, Establishment A: Proceedings, Oct. 1920, Nos. 10-14, Arousiak Nersessian to Wilson, Baghdad, Nov. 25, 1919 (copy); Brevet to Secretary to the Government of India in the Foreign and Political Department, Baghdad, Dec. 11, 1919 (copy); Edmund Candler, *The Long Road to Baghdad*, vol. 2 (Boston-New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1919), 121.

Armenian deportees in new locations. He actively protected the deportees from killing squads sent from the Diarbekir province, which had collaborators stationed in Rasulain. Among these collaborators were some gendarmes, local Arabs, and a majority of the Chechen community, who were eager to exploit the deportations and attack the deportees for personal gain. While some of Suad Bey's initiatives, such as his settlement program, were partially funded by the government, the financial support was grossly insufficient. As a result, most infrastructure projects–whether directly or indirectly connected to resettling Armenians–were financed through unpaid or nominally paid labor by deportees themselves. Since few men from the eastern regions survived the journey, the labor pool primarily consisted of deportees from the western provinces who had not passed through the killing fields of the Third Army Region.

Suad Bey combined relief efforts with personal interests. Alongside his associates, he acquired a large area of land. Lacking sufficient personal funds, it is plausible that he resorted to a combination of embezzlement and extortion. Allegations suggest that he siphoned off government funds allocated for deportees and even defrauded some deportees, according to the testimony of at least one survivor.[83] Additional funding came from his local associates, most notably George Sukkar. Regardless of whether these actions skirted the boundaries of legality or constituted outright crimes, they had a positive impact on a significant number of Armenian deportees. Through this scheme, many deportees were able to leave the Rasulain camp, where they had suffered from crimes, starvation, and disease. Resettling on farmland provided access to food and, critically, potable water–a decisive improvement in their living conditions. This not only benefitted the individuals directly involved but also alleviated the dire conditions at the overcrowded Rasulain camp. Furthermore, the initiative had the potential to boost local food production at a time of critical need.

The investors opened up an area for the settlement of deportees that would otherwise have been inaccessible due to Chechen opposition. Chechen leader Suleiman Agha had long been a local strongman in the Rasulain area. Rising from a low-ranking gendarmerie officer to a wealthy landowner, his claims to the land were dubious at best. However, his ability to enforce his will made the legality of his ownership irrelevant–until the railway construction boom triggered a sharp increase in land prices. Suad Bey and his associates were able to overcome the Chechens' resistance. The investors from Zor had sufficient firepower and, at least temporarily, the law on their side. Suleiman Agha found himself in a precarious position. He could not resort to heavy-handed tactics against local administrators because he needed the land registry official alive to secure a title deed. Moreover, he failed to intimidate Suad Bey, who openly expressed his readiness to use deadly force against the Chechens. The severed heads of Arab perpetrators only enhanced the governor's fearsome reputation.

To further assert his authority, Suad Bey inflicted serious financial damage on the Chechens by seizing their tobacco stock. He also established a gendarmerie post–the

83 Agilian, "Who was the former governor of Der Zor Ali Suat?" *Joghovourti Dzayn*, 10 May 1919.

only one during his tenure–in the Chechen village itself, placing them under constant surveillance. Available sources do not corroborate Suleiman Agha's claim that the Chechens were displaced. The presence of the gendarmerie post in their village suggests they remained in the area. The Chechens despised Armenians, and the plundering, raping, and killing of deportees had become a way of life in and around Rasulain. The settlement of Armenians on what the Chechens considered their land was seen as a provocation. Furthermore, if the settlement proved successful, it threatened to permanently undermine Chechen dominance in the region.

Suleiman Agha did not give up. He leveraged his allies within the administration of Diarbekir province, where officials shared his anti-Armenian views. His petition is a rare document in which a Chechen perpetrator shared his own views and agenda. By demanding that a commission composed of Diarbekir officials be sent to Rasulain, he played a calculated move, knowing they would support his agenda. His petitions to various central government departments also proved effective. In these, he framed Suad Bey's policies as a threat to the government by referencing so-called "harmful Armenians." To Suleiman Agha, the fact that George Sukkar was not Armenian was irrelevant. His collaboration with Armenian deportees rendered him an "Armenian" in the Chechens' eyes. Both Melkites and Armenians were viewed as *giaours*–unbelievers. The case's referral to the HTMU delayed any swift resolution, but Suleiman Agha and his men found a quicker way to address their problem.

The appointment of Kerim Refi Bey created an opportunity for Suleiman Agha to act decisively. The new administrator orchestrated the massacre of Armenians in the Arada area. The slaughter went undettered, as the Chechens' local interests aligned with those of the central government. The authorities had neither registered nor counted the Armenian settlers in Arada, effectively erasing their existence. By April 1916, the only evidence of the Armenians' presence in the area was their decaying corpses.

In Zor, a provincial bourgeoisie had emerged, comprising individuals from diverse ethnic, religious, and social backgrounds. This elite included high-ranking officials, local Arabs, and Christians from Melkite, Catholic, and Armenian Apostolic communities. Despite their different backgrounds, they shared a common language, Arabic, which facilitated communication and cooperation. Members of this group welcomed and integrated Armenian deportees who shared a similar educational, economic, or cultural background into their social circles, offering them protection and support. Ideologically, this group transcended the propaganda and policies of the Ottoman government. Unlike the state's portrayal of Armenians as enemies or the Chechen perception of them as disposable victims ripe for exploitation of any sort, the provincial elite viewed Armenian deportees through a more complex lens. Their perspective temporarily frustrated the Ottoman government's resolve to annihilate as many Armenians as possible.

Using their limited resources, the local elite sought to alleviate the overwhelming misery faced by the deportees, effectively opposing the central government's genocidal policies. While this was undeniably a humanitarian effort, it may also have reflected an

investment in the future of their networks and business relations. In cases like Arada, the boundary between exploitation and genuine aid might have been blurred, reflecting the complex dynamics of survival and self-interest under such dire circumstances.

Rendering assistance to survivors from bourgeois Armenian families highlights a neglected theme in the study of the Armenian Genocide: the role of class in determining survival. In some instances, authorities specifically targeted wealthy Armenians for "special processing," which often involved plundering and murder based on pre-determined hit lists, rather than the wholesale slaughter inflicted on large caravans. However, outside these targeted cases, wealthy Armenians had significantly better chances of survival. Their advantages were manifold. Wealthier Armenians spoke Turkish and had experience in dealing with Ottoman officials, which could help them navigate life-threatening situations. They also possessed greater resources, such as access to means of transport, food, and medicine, which increased their chances of survival during deportations. Upon reaching urban centers in or near the so-called destination areas, such as Aleppo and Zor, they could reconnect with their networks and secure assistance. A thorough study of class dynamics during the Armenian Genocide remains a pressing need for future research.

It is evident that class played a pivotal role–not only in survival but also in resisting CUP nationalism. The remarkable solidarity and resilience exhibited by the Zor elite suggests that class relations were at least in part shaping postwar and post-genocide society in the Arab provinces. This society, united in its rejection of CUP nationalism and its genocidal legacy, may have drawn strength from these networks of mutual aid and shared experiences.

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About the Author

Dr. Hilmar Kaiser holds a Ph.D. from the European University Institute, Florenze, Italy. He specializes in late Ottoman social and economic history as well as the Armenian Genocide.

E-mail: hilmar.kaiser@freenet.de

ARMENIAN-AMERICAN SOLDIERS AS LIBERATORS AGAINST NAZISM

Gregory Aftandilian
School of International Service, American University, Washington, D.C., United States

Abstract

Armenian-American soldiers during World War II joined the military largely for the same reasons, as other ethnic Americans at the time, to prove they were just as patriotic as any other American and to erase the derogatory "foreigner" label that had been applied to them by the larger society even though most were born in the United States. However, they were different than most other ethnic American soldiers in that they were the offspring of genocide survivors. Although they did not initially make the connection between the extreme nationalism of the Committee of Union and Progress of the Ottoman Empire that perpetrated the Armenian Genocide and the ideology of Nazism, their wartime experiences, both at home and in Europe, made this connection for them. The highly stressful and emotionally-charged experience of leaving home, with their survivor parents in a very distraught state, made them much more conscious of the genocidal experience. And once these soldiers reached Europe and engaged in the fighting, they saw first-hand what such an evil ideology did to the peoples of that continent. Seeing the effects of the Nazi ideology not only against Jews who were murdered in great numbers in the concentration camps but against fellow Armenians who were brought to Germany as slave laborers and prisoners made them understand that the fight against Nazism was indeed a noble cause and worth all of their sacrifices. From these experiences, some of them indeed saw similarities between what the Armenians had been subjected to in World War I and what the peoples of occupied Europe had just experienced in World War II. The wartime experiences also enhanced their sense of responsibility toward fellow Armenians in need, something they knew their parents would be proud of.

Keywords: Armenian Genocide; World War II; survivors; identity; ideology; prisoners; concentration camps

This article was submitted on 19.01.2025 and accepted for publication on 14.05.2025.

How to cite: Gregory Aftandilian, "Armenian-American Soldiers as Liberators against Nazism," *International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies* 10, no. 1(2025): 40-53.

Introduction

World War II brought Americans of all races and ethnic groups into the struggle against the Axis powers made up of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and Imperial Japan. About 16 million Americans served in the armed forces, while millions of others worked in the defense industries. Of this large cohort were Armenian-Americans. Although the figures concerning the number of this ethnic group are not precise, it is estimated that out of an Armenian-American population of approximately 200,000 in the early to mid-1940s, about 18,500 of them served in US military.[1] Most of these servicemen (and some servicewomen) were born in the early 1920s as offspring of Armenian Genocide survivors. However, research on these veterans has also revealed that many of them were child survivors of the Genocide[2] who arrived in the United States in the years 1919 to 1924. These soldiers' experiences as liberators against Nazism is the subject of this paper based on personal interviews, research in Armenian-American newspapers of the 1940s, and stories in book anthologies of Armenian-American veterans of World War II.

Motivations and the Experience of Leaving Home

Like most Americans, most of these Armenian-American service members volunteered or were willingly drafted for the same reason as millions of other young American citizens. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941 and the German declaration of war against the United States shortly thereafter, a great patriotic wave swept through the United States, and young men and women were eager to defend their country. There were other motivations as well–young Armenian-Americans, like those of other ethnic groups such as Italian-Americans, also wanted to erase of the stigma of being a "foreigner" in the eyes of many Anglo-Saxon Americans even though they were born in the United States.[3] They saw the war as a way to prove they were just as "American" as anyone else. Some Armenian-American veterans whom I interviewed said they were "gung-ho," an expression from the time that described someone who was "all in" to fight against America's enemies.[4] As one Armenian-American from this generation from

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* This paper was presented at the conference, "From CUP Nationalism to Nazism: The Survivors of the Armenian Genocide at the Forefront of the Resistance Movement," held at the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute Foundation, Yerevan, Armenia, March 15-16, 2025.

1 James H. Tashjian, *The Armenian American in World War II* (Boston: Hairenik Association, 1952), viii.

2 Ibid. See also *Armenian-American Veterans of World War* II [also known by the cover title, Our Boys] (New York: Armenian General Benevolent Union, 1951).

3 The famous Armenian-American writer William Saroyan even wrote about this stigma in one of his short stories. See William Saroyan, "The Foreigner*," Armenian Review* I, no. 2 (1948): 17-22. Several documentaries about the Italian-American experience in the 20th Century also noted this "foreigner" label that was applied to the American-born generation of that ethnic group as well. See: https://www.pbs.org/show/italian-americans/.

4 This "gung-ho" comment was expressed to me by several Armenian-American World War II veterans at a conference at the University of California, Los Angeles, March 17, 2007," where I gave a paper on Ar-

Providence, Rhode Island observed: "A swelling of new nationalistic American pride encompassed the Armenian Community [as they honored their returning veterans]. This first American-born generation became secure as they entered civilian life as American veterans. They…[were] no longer concerned about being foreign."[5]

But the war was a very traumatic event for the Armenian-American community, particularly for the genocide survivors. As this same observer from Rhode Island noted, the Armenian-American soldiers were "the first off-spring from the families of immigrant genocide survivors. It should be remembered that it was only twenty years or so from the time their fathers and mothers arrived as survivors of the genocide that they sent off their first born to fight a war for their new country. It was traumatic for many to fathom this new crisis after having lived through their own war experiences that had devastated their lives."[6]

Armenian parents of the survivor generation understandably were not as "gung-ho" as their sons (and there were some cryptic comments in the Armenian-American newspapers at the time from younger members of the community about their parents "not having the proper attitude").[7] After witnessing so many deaths of family members during the genocide, the survivor generation understandably had a difficult time sending their sons off to war where they possibly could be killed. A story that was passed down to this author from an older relative was that there was an Armenian man on the draft board of Watertown, Massachusetts (home to a substantial number of Armenians) and this man "caught holy hell" from Armenian mothers whose sons had just received a draft notice.[8]

But many Armenian survivor parents put on a brave face and realized that their sons had to serve their adopted country, as did millions of other families in the United States. One Armenian American soldier from Fresno, California said: "My parents were heartbroken about my receiving my induction (draft) notice, but they were patriotic and knew I had to go and so they held up well."[9]

One story that was passed down to me was an episode at my grandparents' home in Medford, Massachusetts. My grandmother (a genocide survivor) was having several Armenian women, including her sister-in-law, over to lunch one day during the war, and her sister-in-law was in a fraught state because her son had just received his

menian-American soldiers stationed in India during World War II. In addition, Varoujan Karentz from the Providence, Rhode Island, Armenian community wrote: "As the war escalated, more young men entered the armed forces, and there was an unbelievable period when they were joining up one after another." See Varoujan Karentz, *Mitchnapert (The Citadel): A history of the Armenians of Rhode Island* (New York and Lincoln, NE: iUniverse Press, 2004), 185.

5 Karentz, *Mitchnapert*, 298.

6 Ibid., 296.

7 Such comments were aired in some issues of the *Hairenik Weekly* in 1941 and 1942.

8 Phone Interview with Aram (Sonny) Gavoor, 10 August 2012. Gavoor had grown up in Watertown, Massachusetts.

9 As quoted in Richard Demirjian, *Triumph and Glory: Armenian World War II Heroes* (Moraga: CA: Ararat Heritage Publishing Co, 1996), 260.

draft notice. She kept repeating the phrase, "chojokh-e, chojokh-e," a mixed Turkish-Armenian phrase meaning "he is just a child." Later, after the guests returned home, my grandmother called her on the phone to admonish her for acting this way, emphasizing that many of the women who were at the lunch had two or three sons already serving in the military and they were stoically keeping their emotions to themselves, but her sister-in-law's outbursts had upset them all (my grandmother's son, my uncle – the sister-in-law's nephew – was already serving in the US Army Air Corps in the Pacific theatre at this time).[10]

Nonetheless, this research demonstrated that the act of leaving home for the military was a highly traumatic event for Armenian-American families, as emotions ran high as the horrible experience of the genocide inflicted on the Armenians resurfaced, making these young soldiers much more conscious of what their parents had gone through a generation earlier.[11] Many Armenian survivor parents had attempted to shield their children from the horrors of the genocide as much as they could, but when the United States entered the war, and young men were being called up to serve, many of these parents' horrific memories came to the surface.

My mother recalled that the day her brother (my uncle) was scheduled to report for military service was a highly painful and an emotionally-draining day for the entire family as he getting ready to leave home. When my uncle surprised everyone later that evening by returning home because there was a mistake in his papers and he was told to report to the military the next week, the family was of course happy to see him but then dreaded the prospect of going through another emotionally-draining day again.[12] Such traumatic scenes were typical in many Armenian-American households. My aunt, in a letter written to her uncle (he was a child survivor of the genocide who would soon be joining the US Army) in April 1943, recalled that her social life as a teenager consisted of going to the movies and attending "farewell parties" for Armenian-American boys going into the military service. She wrote: "I don't think I could stand another one [of these farewell parties]. They are *so sad* [emphasis added], when really everyone [in our age group] should be enjoying himself."[13]

Revealingly, two Armenian-American veterans (one of whom was a navigator on bombers and flew many dangerous missions over Germany) broke down in tears to me, not of their wartime experiences of seeing their comrades die, but of leaving home and witnessing their mothers chasing after their troop train or troop bus as it was leaving the station.[14] Of course, sad farewells were common in most American families at the time,

10 Interview with Helen Baronian, Falmouth, Massachusetts, 17 February 2009.

11 Interview with Ralph Talanian, Milton, Massachusetts, 31 March 2005.

12 Interview with Stella Baronian Aftandilian, Vienna, Virginia, 4 December 2004.

13 Letter from Helen Baronian to Her Uncle, Rouben Gavoor, 24 April 1943, from the author's private collection.

14 Interview with Haig Tashjian, Laguna Niguel, CA, 18 April 2006; Interview with Vahan Aghajanian, Tewksbury, Massachusetts, February 7, 2007.

but given the Armenian experience of genocide, it was undoubtedly even more stressful for Armenian parents and the siblings of the service members.

Although most Armenian-American service members joined the war effort for the same reasons as those in the broader American population, some, who were more politically conscious, did so out of the belief that Nazism was an evil ideology that had to be defeated,[15] similar to the attitude of most Jewish-American soldiers.[16] Whether these Armenian-American soldiers tied this strong anti-Nazi attitude to what their own parents had experienced in Ottoman Turkey may not have been front and center in their minds when they joined the military, but once they landed in Europe it became clearer to them what they were fighting against, and some of them indeed made this comparison as the testimonies of some of these veterans will show.

Profound Experiences in Europe

For many Armenian-American soldiers serving in the European theatre of war, their first baptism under fire was in France during and soon after the Normandy invasion. The sheer destruction, deaths and severe hardships they witnessed first-hand brought home to them the experiences that their own parents must have gone through. Max Boudakian, who fought in France and Germany, stated many years after the war: "As an 18-19 year-old, I was fortunate to count on the tremendous resources of the US military. In my mother's case [she was a genocide survivor], there was no support system to protect her."[17]

Ashod Jelalian of Cambridge, Massachusetts, who was a US Army photographer, saw French citizens in Normandy, France rummaging through the garbage of the American soldiers in search of food. Recalling this scene many decades later, he got very emotional and said: "Those people [meaning the French citizens] really had it rough," referring to their lives under Nazi occupation. He also recalled giving one very hungry Frenchman his own GI food rations.[18] While in Normandy, Jelalian also photographed a Jewish religious service attended by Jewish-American soldiers shortly after the area's liberation.[19] In the backdrop of this photo are two large German swastika flags. One is initially disoriented by viewing this photo but keeping the Nazi flags in place was likely these soldiers' way of saying to the Nazis that "you haven't killed us all and that your demise will arrive soon." Jelalian, perhaps because of his Armenian background, wanted to capture this

15 During my interviews with three Armenian-American veterans in Fresno, California, 13 April 2006, one of them expressed strong political and ideological reasons for fighting in the war.

16 For the motivations and experiences of Jewish-American veterans who fought in World War II, see Deborah Dash Moore, *GI Jews. How World War II Changed a Generation* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2004).

17 Max Boudakian's story and direct quotes are in Richard Demirjian, *The Faces of Courage. Armenian World War II, Korea, and Vietnam Heroes* (Moraga, CA: Ararat Heritage Publishing Co., 2003), 226-246.

18 Interview with Ashod Jelalian, Vienna, Virginia, 22 May 2002.

19 This photo can be accessed by going to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum website, https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1175481.

moment. He later went on to photograph the dead and the barely living emaciated bodies of the concentration camps victims in Germany, which also had a profound effect on him. Many of these photographs are now part of the collection of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

Interestingly, because there was a large Armenian community in France, many of these Armenian-American soldiers encountered fellow ethnic Armenians in that country. Usually, they would find them by seeing an Armenian name on a store as the US Army was going through towns and villages. After greeting each other in Armenian, the French-Armenian would invite such soldiers into their homes for a meal even though they barely had enough food to eat for themselves. Usually in these cases, the Armenian-American soldier would offer his GI food rations to his French-Armenian new acquaintance.[20]

After the liberation of Paris, two of such soldiers went to the Armenian Church in that city and, by chance, stumbled upon a baby's baptism ceremony. When the two entered the church, the ceremony stopped and the parishioners wondered why these two American soldiers had come by. When they realized these soldiers were of Armenian heritage, the parents of the child insisted they should be the baby's godfathers. Respectfully declining this kind offer (they said there was plenty of fighting ahead and they could possibly be killed in the coming months) they then agreed to be "honorary" godfathers to the baby and stayed on for the ceremonial meal which reminded them of the Armenian food that they missed from home.[21] Other Armenian-American soldiers also had the opportunity in France to look up relatives in such cities as Marseille or Paris either after the liberation of France or soon after the war in Europe ended.[22]

But some Armenian-American soldiers, outside of these more pleasant encounters, also interacted militarily with French Armenians who were involved in the resistance movement. Homer Lafian of Michigan, who parachuted into Normandy with the famous 82nd Airborne Division the evening right before D-Day, fought all the way through France and Germany from June 1944 to the end of the war, losing many of his comrades. In late 1944, he later recalled, his division's intelligence section had made contact with a French-Armenian "by the name of Mooradian or Manoushian" who told him in Armenian that he was a member of the French Communist party and was active in the French Underground for some time. Lafian, for unspecified reasons, was unsure at first of this man's resistance background, but agreed to help him nevertheless. In Lafian's words:

> He wanted 12 men to go into the Ardennes Mountain area with him. He said the Germans had a large supply of fuel hidden in the mountains and he wanted to blow it up with demolitions. So twelve of our paratroopers volunteered to go up into the mountains on patrol to

20 See the story of Charles Shenloogian in Demirjian, *Triumph and Glory*, 427.

21 Phone interview with George Ovigian, 7 February 2010.

22 See, for example, the letter from Private Nazar Manoogian, "Soldier Meets Relatives in Marseilles," *Armenian Mirror-Spectator*, 20 January 1945.

> find the fuel depot and to try to blow it up. Since he was demolitions expert, he needed help to do so. We were told this was a highly secret mission and that we were not going to be dressed as GIs because of the nature of the mission…Finally we went up the mountain with him. He had all kinds of demolitions stashed away. Where he got it, I don't know, but I speculate that some of it was smuggled from the Soviet Union through the French Communist Underground. He knew what his goals were and, and he said he wished to contribute to the cause of the Allies by blowing up this vast fuel depot. We helped him carry all of the explosives into position and helped wire them up. We were up in that mountain a good day and a half setting up the explosives without detection. This French-Armenian set it up in such a fashion that he blew the whole side of the mountain up where the fuel was stored. He had speculated that the Germans had secretly stored this fuel as a backup supply in their retreat for a possible future counteroffensive. After the successful conclusion of this operation, all 12 of us returned to our unit.[23]

Soon after this secret operation, Hitler launched the surprise German offensive in the Ardennes known as the Battle of the Bulge, and Lafian found himself in the midst of it, fighting in the besieged Belgian town of Bastogne surrounded by German troops. That the lack of fuel was one of the reasons this large offensive did not succeed in reaching all the way to Antwerp, as was envisioned,[24] may have been partially the result of the secret operation that this French-Armenian Communist resistance fighter and his Armenian-American soldier partner undertook.

While in Belgium, Lafian and his fellow members of the 82nd Airborne came across the massacre of American prisoners of war (POWs) in Malmedy, perpetrated by a Nazi SS unit. Lafian and many other American soldiers became so incensed at this scene that he and others vowed not to take any German prisoners alive and had to be calmed down by his superior officers.[25]

Another Armenian-American, Lieutenant Dickran Hovsepian, a US Army intelligence officer, wrote that he met many Armenians throughout the European continent, including Soviet Armenian soldiers at the end of the war with whom he shared a special bond. Reflecting on his time in France, he also noted that "many of our [Armenian] people in France worked actively in the Underground–their lives not worth [a 5-centime piece] if they were ever caught."[26]

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23 Homer Lafian's story and direct quotes are in Demirjian, *Triumph and Glory*, 381-389.

24 US Army, "Battle of the Bulge Ends: January 25, 1945." https://www.army.mil/article/15949/battle_of_the_bulge_ends_25_january_1945.

25 See Lafian's story.

26 Letter from Dickran Hovsepian, dated 9 October 1945, and printed in the *Armenian Mirror-Spectator*, 3 November 1945.

Liberating the Concentration Camps

One of the most noteworthy and gut-wrenching experiences for Armenian-American soldiers as they entered Germany and Austria was taking part in the liberation of the concentration camps. Lafian and his comrades did so at Bergen-Belsen, where he said the stench of the dead was overwhelming. In his words: "It was so bad, we all started throwing up. It was very hard to take, seeing all of those bodies lying there, melting, bloated up and many in a skeletal mess… I could see many of the bodies on the ground that their skin was removed."[27]

Another Armenian-American soldier, unbeknownst to Lafian, who liberated Bergen-Belsen, was Fred Randolph (his Armenian last name was Anglicized). Randolph mentioned to me many years ago that when his unit entered Bergen-Belsen and came across these scenes and other victims of grotesque medical experiments, they were so incensed that they rounded up the Nazi doctors at the camp, put them up against a wall, and shot all of them. That Randolph's military superiors were also so repulsed by what they saw that no punitive action was taken against these American soldiers, including Randolph, who participated in these executions.[28]

Later, at the end of war, Lafian served as one of General Dwight Eisenhower's bodyguards and even attended the Nuremburg Trials of Nazi war criminals before being discharged in 1946. Looking back at his experiences, he expressed pride serving in the war as an Armenian-American soldier. He added: "Our numbers were small in America. We were maybe 200,000 in the US population. I would say per capita that there were more Armenian-Americans in the military service than any other nationality. We distinguished ourselves for our country."[29] This comment was similar to an article penned during the war by Private Berj Hoogasian who wrote from an Allied military camp in Italy about an impromptu gathering of 10 Armenians (9 from the US Army and one from the Canadian Army): "We are resolved that although our numbers may be few, our courage and patriotism will be high and that our families and our country will be proud of our achievements."[30]

Other Armenian-American soldiers who liberated the concentration camps felt a direct connection between what they witnessed and the genocidal ordeals experienced by their Armenian parents. Walter Basmajian of Massena, New York, wrote to his parents the following letter toward the end of the war:

> I wouldn't believe this [stories of utmost cruelty] had I not seen all this and more. I wouldn't believe that such people could live upon the earth

27 See Lafian's story. See also "Soldier Describes Horror Scenes of Concentration Camp," *Armenian Mirror-Spectator*, 28 July 1945.

28 Randolph mentioned this episode to me when he was visiting my relatives in Medford, Massachusetts when I was a high school student in May 1975.

29 See Lafian's story.

30 Letter from Private Berj Hoogasian, published in *Hairenik Weekly*, 22 March 1944.

> if I hadn't seen the bodies alongside the roadsides and the ones found at concentration camps. I couldn't tell you about this before but now it will be revealed to the world and will shock everyone. These [Nazi SS men] aren't people. They are monsters and I guess I can't write about this and tell it decently, because it isn't a decent thing to tell. *You have never seen such hellholes of torture, bodies tortured and destroyed beyond recognition. I keep remembering that this is what the Turks did to the Armenians, only the Armenians never had a chance to let the world know; actually nobody cared or probably wouldn't believe them. Now I know, because I have seen this* [emphasis added].[31]

Ralph Talanian of Boston, Massachusetts, who was part of General George Patton's 3rd Army sweeping through southern Germany and Austria, at one point had the gruesome task of burying murdered Jews from several smaller concentration camps that had been dumped on the side of a road. In one instance, he noticed a captured German SS officer standing nearby. When he ordered this officer to do the same job, the German responded smugly in perfect English that, "under the Geneva Convention, officers who are prisoners of war are not required to do manual labor." Talanian became so incensed that he took out his pistol, put it under the German officer's chin, and said in a very stern voice. "I am Armenian, I am Armenian, do you understand? You start digging now!" The officer, understanding what this phrase meant (many German officers were assigned to the Ottoman Turkish army during World War I), became visibly scared at Talanian's threat and immediately started to do this "manual" work.[32]

After he came home from the war, Talanian told his parents (both genocide survivors from Kharbert) about the atrocities he witnessed against the Jews. His parents became so visibly distraught and upset at these stories of what he saw and experienced first-hand that he stopped talking about them.[33]

As part of the liberation of Dachau concentration camp, Burt Martinson (his Armenian last name was Anglicized) described the "incredible macabre sight across the road where a train of open box cars was strewn, literally dripping with hundreds of skin-stretched skeletons that arrived at Dachau the night before the Americans from Buchenwald [arrived]." He added that he "talked to many men in three languages, and almost had to fight off their affections and perhaps, infection–and it was hard to keep from bawling (crying), particularly at a little Polish Jewish boy of 15 who answered all of our questions with great poise, in good English."[34]

Sergeant Harry Garabedian from Detroit, in a letter to his friend, another Armenian-American by the name of Karl Couyoumjian, was so shocked by what he witnessed at the

31 Letter from Walter Basmajian published in Hairenik Weekly, 28 June 1945.

32 Interview with Ralph Talanian, 31 March 2025.

33 Ibid.

34 Letter from Burt Martinson, published by the *Armenian Mirror-Spectator*, 11 August 1945.

concentration camps that he wrote the following: "I'm telling you Karl, the Germans in this war have far surpassed what the Turks did during the last war…some of their doings are unbelievable and far more ghastly than the human mind can imagine. I don't know of any punishment that can be meted out to them to make restitution for their crimes."[35]

Armenian-American soldiers also played a role in liberating slave labor and prisoner of war camps of citizens of the Soviet Union from different nationalities, including many Armenians. One soldier, Henry Bashjian, who was with the 8th Infantry Division of the US Army was part of the liberation of one of these slave labor camps. He recalled: "As we were liberating this one camp, we busted the locks and as people came running out of the gate I was yelling, 'Hos Hye ga?' (are there Armenians here?) when all of a sudden one of these fellows in a striped uniform stopped and responded, 'Yes Hye em' (I am Armenian). I was surprised, he was surprised. There was a lot of screaming and happiness."[36]

Walter Basmajian also took part in the liberation of one of these camps. He wrote to his parents in the last weeks of the war:

> Ever since I have been overseas I've been looking for Armenians constantly. I never thought I'd have any luck, but I kept asking just the same. Anyway, we liberated quite a large group of Russian prisoners at this one camp and [asking whether there were any Armenians there], one of the Russians came running out of the building with three men who were Armenians…They were between the ages of 48-50 and about the happiest three people I had seen. They were so happy to meet me, I guess they never expected to see an American soldier of Armenian heritage and I guess they couldn't get over it. Neither could I. They shook hands with me and hugged me and there were tears in their eyes and they were so moved they could hardly talk. I felt pretty emotional myself…They said that despite everything, they were the lucky ones. That thousands had died of starvation, or had been tortured to death. They said that for three years they had lived only by a sheer will to survive. They had been without food and clothing for days. They were pitifully thin and haggard looking…They called their Russian friends and proudly told them I was Armenian.[37]

Ralph Talanian, at the end of the war, was assigned to a joint American-Soviet unit at a camp in Steyr, Austria, to help process through liberated slave laborers. When a Russian colonel noticed that he was of Armenian heritage, he asked Talanian for help

35 Letter from Sergeant Harry Garabedian to Karl Couyoumjian, as printed in the Armenian Mirror-Spectator, 4 August 1945.

36 As quoted in Demirjian, *Triumph and Glory*, 255.

37 Letter from Walter Basmajian, dated 19 April 1945, from "somewhere in Germany," published *in Hairenik Weekly*, 28 June 1945.

with several hundred Armenians "whom he couldn't talk to." Walking down a field where these Armenians were gathered, Talanian, only 20 years old at the time, appeared as a kind of God to them. When he spoke to them in Armenian and asked what they needed, they told him they did not have enough food. Talanian, in response, befriended a sympathetic Russian army sergeant who told him that the Soviets were hoarding Red Cross supplies in a nearby warehouse. The two got a hold of a truck, filled it with supplies from the warehouse, and then Talanian distributed the food to these destitute Armenians. Talanian also was put in charge of getting these people de-loused, as lice on bodies was a common affliction of nearly all prisoners. The Armenians in this group were ashamed to take their clothes off for this purpose but Talanian put them at ease by first asking them to write letters in Armenian so he could send them to his father in Boston. This strategy seemed to have worked because, after writing such letters, they felt more comfortable in going through the de-lousing process.[38]

What These Experiences Meant to Armenian-Armenian Soldiers

Although most Armenian-American soldiers did not initially join the military out of the conviction that they wanted to fight against an evil ideology (Nazism) that was similar to the ideology of the Committee on Union and Progress (CUP), the party in charge of the Ottoman Empire in 1915 that had perpetrated the Armenian Genocide, their wartime experiences, both at home and in Europe, made this connection for them. The highly stressful and emotionally-charged experience of leaving home, with their survivor parents in a very distraught state, made them much more conscious of the genocidal experience. And once these soldiers got to Europe and engaged in the fighting, they saw first-hand what such an evil ideology did to the peoples of that continent. Seeing the effects of the Nazi ideology not only against Jews who were murdered in great numbers but against fellow Armenians who were brought to Germany as slave laborers and prisoners made them understand that the fight against Nazism was indeed a noble cause and worth all of their sacrifices. From these experiences, some of them indeed saw similarities between what the Armenians had been subjected to in World War I and what the peoples of occupied Europe had just experienced in World War II. The wartime experiences also enhanced their sense of responsibility toward fellow Armenians in need, something they knew their parents would be proud of.

Interestingly, the sisters of these soldiers were also impacted by the war in ways that are not readily apparent. Besides those who joined the military services, Armenian-American young women had to be caretakers at home for their anxious parents, reassuring them that their brothers would be safe, and comforting them if they received a "missing-in-action" or even a death notice telegram from the War Department. These young women

38 Interview with Ralph Talanian.

would also be interpreters of letters from their brothers to their parents because while most young Armenian-American soldiers could speak Armenian (the language spoken at home), only a fraction of them could write in Armenian, and their parents were often not educated enough to read and write a letter in the English language. These young women would often verbally translate the letters into Armenian for their parents to understand and would then write letters in English to their brother or brothers from the gist of what their parents would verbally dictate to them in Armenian.[39]

That the wartime experiences affected these young women was evident by the fact that many of them, after the war, could not bear to watch documentaries on the Holocaust of the Jews in Europe because seeing the pictures of the dead and emaciated bodies reminded them of what their own parents must have gone through a generation earlier.[40]

Conclusion

While most Armenian-American soldiers joined the military services largely for the same reasons as other Americans–to show they were as patriotic as anyone in else in America and to erase the "foreigner" stigma that was often placed on them before the war, many of them came to understand that the fight against Nazism had a greater meaning, not just because Nazi Germany was an enemy of the United States, but because Nazism represented an ideology and a cruelty that was similar to what the CUP had perpetrated against the Armenian people. These wartime experiences made these soldiers more American and more Armenian at the same time, and it is noteworthy that it was this generation that came to lead the Armenian-American community in the 1970s to advocate for Armenian Genocide recognition in the United States.[41]

Acknowledgement

The author appreciates a travel grant he received from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation to participate in the international conference, "From CUP Nationalism to Nazism: The Survivors of the Armenian Genocide at the Forefront of Resistance Movement," where he presented his paper.

39 Interview with Helen Baronian. See also Karentz, *Mitchnapert*, 298

40 Interview with Norma Kennian Mugerdichian, Needham, Massachusetts, 23 February 2013.

41 For an understanding of Armenian-American activism in the 1970s, see Julien Zarifian, *The United States and the Armenian Genocide. History, Memory, Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2024), 83-89.

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About the Author

Gregory Aftandilian is a Senior Professorial Lecturer at American University in Washington, D.C. and is also an adjunct faculty member at Boston University as well as a Non-Resident Fellow at the Arab Center in Washington, D.C. Prior to these positions, he spent over twenty years in U.S. Government service, most recently in Congress where he was a foreign policy advisor to Representative Chris Van Hollen (2007-08), professional staff member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and foreign policy adviser to Senator Paul Sarbanes (2000-04), and foreign policy fellow to Senator Edward Kennedy (1999). Mr. Aftandilian worked for 13 years as a Middle East analyst at the U.S. Department of State. His other government experiences include analytical work for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Library of Congress. He was also a research fellow at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University (2006-07) and an international affairs fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York (1991-92), Mr. Aftandilian is also a specialist in Armenian-American history and is author of the book, *Armenia: Vision of a Republic. The Independence Lobby in America, 1918-1927*, the articles, "World War II as an Enhancer of Armenian-American Second Generation Identity," "The Cold War Writings of Reuben Darbinian in the Armenian Review," and other scholarly monographs dealing with the Armenian-American experience. Mr. Aftandilian holds a B.A. in History from Dartmouth College, an M.A. in Middle Eastern Studies from the University of Chicago, and an M.Sc. in International Relations from the London School of Economics.

Email: aftandil@american.edu

DENYING THE HAMIDIAN MASSACRES: OTTOMAN NARRATIVES, ARMENIAN ACTIVISM, AND THE STRUGGLE OVER THE MEMORY IN THE UNITED STATES, 1890s

Gevorg Vardanyan
Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, Armenia

Narine Hakobyan
Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, Armenia

Abstract

This article examines the Ottoman Empire's denial of the Hamidian massacres (1894–1896) in the United States, focusing on the efforts of Ottoman Minister Alexander Mavroyeni Bey and his collaborators. Drawing on primary sources and secondary literature, it analyzes how the Ottoman diplomatic mission in Washington sought to reframe reports of anti-Armenian violence as justified responses to what they called "sedition." The article suggests that Ottoman denial in the US was not merely a replication of internal propaganda but a distinct transnational strategy tailored to American audiences. Through analogies with Native Americans, appeals to US sovereignty, and collaboration with American Muslim convert Alexander Russell Webb, Mavroyeni Bey worked to delegitimize American Armenian activism, discredit missionaries, and portray the empire as a victim of Western prejudice. The study contributes to the existing scholarship on the denial of the late Ottoman state and collective violence, concentrating on the Hamidian era. It further highlights the role of American Armenians as key targets of this campaign due to their grassroots activism and influence on public opinion and humanitarian mobilization. By situating denial within broader patterns of imperial propaganda, the article offers a new angle for examining the transnational dimensions of memory and denial of late Ottoman violence.

Keywords: denial; Hamidian Massacres; American Armenian community; memory

Funding: One of the authors, Narine Hakobyan, received a research grant from the Higher Education and Science Committee of Armenia [grant number 25RG-6A214].

This article was submitted on 20.10.2024 and accepted for publication on 13.04.2025.

How to cite: Gevorg Vardanyan and Narine Hakobyan, "Denying the Hamidian Massacres: Ottoman Narratives, Armenian Activism, and the Struggle over the Memory in the United States, 1890s," *International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies* 10, no. 1(2025): 54-80.

Introduction

An article in the 4 December 1894 New York Times discussing the reports of Armenian massacres quoted the statement provided by the Ottoman Legation in Washington, DC, in which Minister[1] Mavroyeni Bey argued that "Far from committing any cruelties, the regular troops succeeded in restoring peace and order." With this declaration, Ottoman officials sought to dismiss growing international concern over reports of mass violence against Armenians in the empire's eastern provinces. They blamed the violence on Armenian "agitators" allegedly funded by the London Armenian Committee and portrayed the Ottoman response as a justified restoration of order, dismissing reports of widespread massacres as propaganda.[2]

This was one of many episodes that revealed the Ottoman Empire's disinformation efforts in the United States during the Hamidian massacres of the 1890s. As European and American newspapers increasingly reported on the violence, American Armenians began to raise their voices in protest. In response, the Ottoman diplomatic mission, led by Minister Mavroyeni Bey, launched a well-organized campaign to deny the atrocities and shape public perception in favor of the empire. Examining the various forms of denial surrounding the Hamidian massacres is essential not only for tracing the link between the violence of the 1890s and the Genocide during World War I, but also for understanding the perspectives of the American Armenian community, whose identity and collective memory were profoundly shaped by these events. Denial, as historian Bedross Der Matossian aptly put it, is not merely the refusal to acknowledge past injustices, but an act of "killing the dead and their memory over and over, inflicting pain on the survivors and their descendants."[3] Situating these early acts of denial within the broader historical continuum of Ottoman violence against Armenians reveals how the state not only concealed past atrocities but also created the conditions for their recurrence.

The study of denial of late Ottoman violence has largely focused on the negation of the 1915 genocide, paying little attention to the earlier wave of massacres during the reign of Sultan Abdul Hamid II.[4] Only a handful of scholars have addressed the denial

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1 The Ottoman Empire did not establish a permanent diplomatic mission in the United States until 1867. Between that year and the suspension of relations in 1917 during World War I, twelve different missions successively represented the Empire in Washington. Alexander Mavroyeni Bey led one of them. It is important to note that the Ottoman mission retained the status of a legation until its elevation to an embassy in 1908. Accordingly, Mavroyeni Bey, who served in Washington from 1887 to 1896, is properly referred to as *minister* rather than *ambassador*. See Sinan Kuneralp, "Ottoman Diplomatic and Consular Personnel in the United States of America, 1867-1917," in *American Turkish Encounters: Politics and Culture, 1830-1989*, ed. Nur Bilge Criss, Selcuk Esenbel, Tony Greenwood, and Louis Mazzari (Newcastle-upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 100-102.

2 "Turkish Light on Massacre: Legation at Washington Declares Armenian Reports Are False," *New York Times*, 4 December 1894.

3 Bedross Der Matossian, "Introduction: Genocide Denial in the Twenty-First Century," in *Denial of Genocides in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Bedross Der Matossian (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2023), 3.

4 There is a rich scholarship on the denial of the Armenian Genocide. See, for example, Gevorg Vardanyan, «Հայոց ցեղասպանության ժխտման պատմությունից. թուրքական մի վաղ հրատարակության

of the Hamidian massacres. Among them is Robert Melson, who applied the concept of the "provocation thesis" to describe the official Ottoman stance.[5] This thesis posits that the massacres of the late 19th century were a response to the activities of Armenian revolutionary parties. Its advocates – including Stanford J. Shaw, Ezel Kural Shaw, William L. Langer, and Bernard Lewis – argue that, amid internal dissent and external pressures, the Ottoman state perceived Armenian political mobilization as an existential threat, thus justifying repressive violence as an act of self-defense. Critics of the thesis, however, point out that it inadequately addresses questions of agency, causality, accountability, and victimhood.[6] Even so, the provocation thesis functioned not only as a tool for domestic justification but also as a tool deployed by Ottoman officials in diplomatic arenas to counter American and European criticism.[7]

This article builds on existing scholarship and explores how the Ottoman Empire deployed its state narrative about the Armenian massacres in the United States in 1894–1896.[8] Specifically, it focuses on the activities of the Ottoman Minister Mavroyeni Bey: how he articulated the Ottoman state's position on American soil and responded to the mounting criticism directed at the empire. The article suggests that, beyond reiterating the core tenets of the Ottoman narrative, Mavroyeni Bey and his allies often incorporated additional elements into their denialist rhetoric in the United States to more effectively discredit reports of atrocities and justify Ottoman actions. Specifically, they deployed a strategy of analogy – comparing the Ottoman Empire to the United States and Armenians to Native Americans. This rhetorical tactic aimed to frame Ottoman actions in terms

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քննական դիտարկում» [From the History of the Armenian Genocide Denial: Critical Review of an Early Turkish Publication], *Ts'eghaspanagitakan handes* 2, no. 1(2014): 67-77; Fatma Muge Gocek, *Denial of Violence: Ottoman Past, Turkish Present, and Collective Violence against the Armenians, 1789–2009* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Bedross Der Matossian, ed., *Denial of Genocides in the Twenty-First Century* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2023); Hakan Seckinelgin, *The Armenian Genocide and Turkey: Public Memory and Institutionalized Denial* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2024). See also "Select Bibliography on Denial of the Armenian Genocide," Zoryan Institute, 8 August 2014, https://zoryaninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Select-Bibliography-on-Denial-of-the-Armenian-Genocide-2016_08_25-18_41_10-UTC.pdf. For the historiography of the Hamidian massacres, see Narine Hakobyan, «1894-96 թթ. արևմտահայերի կոտորածներն արևմտյան անգլալեզու պատմագիտական գործերում (1970-ական - 2010-ական թթ.)» [Western English-language Historiography of the Hamidian Massacres (1970s–2010s)], *Ts'eghaspanagitakan handes* 8, no. 2(2020): 96–120. For the historiography of the Armenian Genocide, see Bedross Der Matossian, "Explaining the Unexplainable: Recent Trends in the Armenian Genocide Historiography," *Journal of Levantine Studies* 5, no. 2(2015): 143–166.

5 Robert Melson, "A Theoretical Inquiry into the Armenian Massacres of 1894-1896," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 24, no. 3 (1982): 485–486.

6 Edip Golbasi, "*The Official Conceptualization of the Anti-Armenian Riots of 1895-1897: Official Ottoman Narrative, and Discourses of Revolutionary Provocation*," Études *Arméniennes contemporaines* 10 (2018): 36.

7 Ibid., 36.

8 It should be noted though that the denial or justification of violence by the Ottoman state has deep roots. For instance, during the Russo-Turkish war of 1877–1878, the Ottoman side blamed Russians for the atrocities against the Armenians of Bayazet and Alashkert. See Gevorg Vardanyan, «Հայությունը երկու կայսրությունների միջև. 1877–1878 թթ. ռուս-թուրքական պատերազմի Կովկասյան ճակատը օսմանյան պատերազմական քարոզչության մեջ» [Armenians between Two Empires: The Caucasian Front of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 in Ottoman War Propaganda], *Ts'eghaspanagitakan handes* 4, no. 1 (2015): 11–24.

more familiar and resonant to American audiences, deflect criticism, and persuade Americans that their own historical and colonial legacies rendered them unfit to pass moral judgment on the empire. Moreover, it was not their stake to protect the Armenians, as their primary concern lay in preserving diplomatic relations and advancing bilateral interests. By presenting the Armenian Question as an issue of internal sovereignty and drawing comparisons with America's own treatment of Native peoples, the Ottoman representatives sought not only to deflect external criticism but also to cast the empire's actions as aligned with prevailing global norms – thereby reinforcing its political legitimacy in the eyes of American observers. Finally, American Armenians – who mobilized protests, raised humanitarian concerns, and petitioned US officials – emerged as central targets of this propaganda effort, because their advocacy threatened to expose the very violence the Ottoman state sought to deny.

The Armenian Question and the Hamidian Massacres

The Armenian Question, a complex set of issues regarding the safety and rights of Armenian Christians within the declining Ottoman Empire, emerged as a subject of European diplomatic concern after the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878.[9] The following Treaty of Berlin obligated the Ottoman government to "carry out, without delay, the improvements and reforms" and "to guarantee their security."[10] However, rather than securing meaningful international backing, European involvement in the Armenian Question deepened mistrust between the Ottoman authorities and their Armenian subjects. Instead of introducing reforms, the government's response was marked by escalating hostility toward Armenians.[11] These developments, combined with ongoing attacks by Kurdish tribes, the corruption of the Ottoman administrative system, the failure of constitutional reforms, the limitations of the millet system in addressing Armenian grievances, the influence of Russian revolutionary groups, and the precedent set by successful national uprisings in the Balkans, led to the formation of Armenian revolutionary groups, and, eventually, political parties between 1885 and 1890.[12] These groups sought to bring European attention to the plight of Armenians through political

9 Vahakn N Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide: Ethnic Conflict from the Balkans to Anatolia to the Caucasus* (Providence and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2003), 43–60.

10 "Treaty between Great Britain, Germany, Austria, France, Italy, Russia, and Turkey for the Settlement of Affairs in the East: Signed at Berlin, July 13, 1878," *American Journal of International Law* 2, no. S4 (1908): 422.

11 Karo Sasuni, *Քիւրտ ազգային շարժումներ եւ հայ-քրտական յարաբերութիւններ (ԺԵ. դարէն մինչեւ մեր օրերը)* [Kurdish National Movements and Armenian-Kurdish Relations, 15th century - Present] (Beirut: Hamazkayin Press, 1969), 128–131, 153–169.

12 Louise Nalbandian, *The Armenian Revolutionary Movement: The Development of Armenian Political Parties through the Nineteenth Centur*y (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963), 83–89. See also Gerard J. Libaridian, *Modern Armenia: People, Nation*, *State* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2004).

demonstrations advocating for the enforcement of the Berlin Treaty, as well as through armed resistance against state repression and violence.

One such act of resistance, initiated by the Hnchakians, one of these new-formed Armenian political parties in the mountainous region of Sassoun (Sasun), ended in massacres, with estimates of Armenian casualties ranging from 1,700 to 10,000.[13] In response, Great Britain, France, and Russia presented a reform proposal to the Ottoman government on May 11, 1895. Sultan Abdul Hamid II, unwilling to implement the proposed changes, faced renewed pressure following a peaceful demonstration organized by the Hnchakians in Constantinople on 18 September 1895.[14] The violent suppression of this protest led to further international outcry, ultimately compelling the Sultan to sign the reform package on 18 October 1895.[15] However, rather than enforcing these measures, the Ottoman government responded with another wave of massacres in various provinces, including Trapizon, Erzerum, Baghes (Bitlis), Van, and Diarbekir. Armenian resistance efforts proved insufficient in preventing large-scale violence. While the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) once again captured European attention with its 1896 seizure of the Ottoman Bank, the Great Powers refrained from taking decisive action, limiting their response to diplomatic condemnations.[16] The violence, known as the Hamidian massacres, resulted in the deaths of an estimated 100,000 to 300,000 Armenians.[17]

American Response

The massacres in Sassoun brought widespread attention to the atrocities committed against Armenians, with reports appearing in numerous American newspapers.[18] Religious periodicals affiliated with American missionary organizations – such as The Christian Herald, The Outlook, and Lend a Hand – were at the forefront of disseminating this information. Since the United States had minimal political and economic involvement in the Ottoman Empire at the time, it was primarily the efforts of American missionaries working in the region that brought these events to public awareness.[19] Missionary

13 Karo Sasuni, *Պատմութիւն Տարօնի աշխարհի* [The History of Taron] (Beirut: The Compatriotic Union of Taron-Turuberan Publ., 1956), 580; Leo [Arakel Babakhanian], *Անցյալից* [From the Past] (Tiflis: Soviet Caucasus, 1925), 104.

14 Arsēn Kitur, *Պատմութիւն Ս.Դ. Հնչակեան կուսակցութեան, 1887–1962* [History of Social Democrat Hnchakian Party] (Beirut: Social Democrat Hnchakian Party Press, 1962), 153–160. For more information on the Social Democrat Hnchakian Party, see Bedross Der Matossian, ed., *The Armenian Social Democrat Hnchakian Party: Politics, Ideology and Transnational History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2023).

15 «Մեծ յաղթանակ» [Major Victory], *Hnchak*, 20 October, 1895, 145–146.

16 For more information, see Armen Garo, *Bank Ottoman: Memoirs of Armen Garo* (Detroit, MI: A. Topouzian, 1990).

17 R. J. Rummel, *Death by Government* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transactions Publishers, 2009[1994]), 210.

18 For more information, see Arman J. Kirakossian, *The Armenian Massacres, 1894–1896: U.S. Media Testimony* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004).

19 *The Encyclopedia of Missions, Descriptive, Historical, Biographical, Statistical*, eds. Henry Dwight, Allen

activities in the empire had long been closely tied to the Armenian population, given the missionaries' failure to convert the Muslim majority to Protestantism. As a result, concerns over the safety of missionary personnel and institutions in Ottoman territories became intertwined with broader humanitarian motivations and Christian solidarity with the Armenians. Missionary accounts, as well as reports from women's organizations, framed the massacres through religious and humanitarian perspectives, drawing parallels between Armenian and Protestant devotion to Christianity and highlighting the victimization of Armenian women.[20] These narratives were amplified in books authored by former missionaries, including Frederick D. Greene's *The Armenian Crisis in Turkey* (1895) and Edwin M. Bliss's *Turkey and the Armenian Atrocities* (1896), further heightening public outrage in the United States. Christian sympathy for the Armenian plight, coupled with indignation over Ottoman violence, led various church groups to establish local relief efforts, which eventually consolidated into the National Armenian Relief Committee (NARC), a nationwide organization that coordinated fundraising initiatives across multiple American cities.[21]

By the end of 1895 and the beginning of 1896, the US Congress had received thousands of signatures, not only from various Protestant congregations, women's organizations, and youth groups, but also from American Armenians, urging the government to give serious consideration to the Armenian Question.[22] However, not all petitions or requests were solely focused on the Armenians, as many were concerned with the fate of missionaries and their properties in the Ottoman Empire. In December 1895, Democratic Senator Wilkinson Call of Florida introduced a resolution calling on the US to join other nations to put an end to the suffering of the Armenians.[23] The Congress, however, passed another, more moderate resolution in January 1896, introduced by Republican Shelby Moore Cullom of Illinois. The resolution highlighted the "imperative duty, in the interest of humanity," for the European powers who had signed the Berlin Treaty to ensure its principles were implemented. Specifically, it called on President Grover Cleveland to engage with European governments to secure the "rights belonging to Ottoman Armenians both as men and Christians." One of the most notable outcomes of the resolution was the relief mission led by Clara Barton (1821–1912), the founder of the American Red Cross, to the Ottoman Empire. Barton's mission, which took place from the spring to the fall of 1896, included four expeditions to various regions of the Ottoman Empire. Over several months, the mission spent more than $116,000 to assist survivors and aid in the recovery

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Tupper, and Edwin Bliss (New York and London: Funk and Wagnalls, 1904), 31; See also Leland J. Gordon, "Turkish-American Treaty Relations," *The American Political Science Review* 22, no. 3 (1928): 711–721.

20 Ann Marie Wilson, "In the Name of God, Civilization, and Humanity: The United States and the Armenian Massacres of the 1890s," *Le mouvement social* 227 (2009): 33–35.

21 Merle Curti, *American Philanthropy Abroad: A History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1963), 122–124.

22 Wilson, "In the Name of God, Civilization, and Humanity," 38–39.

23 *Congressional Record, 54th Congress, 1st Session, Volume 28, Part 1.* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1895–1896), 854.

of Armenian communities in the aftermath of the massacres. As Barton later remarked, without this aid, at least 50,000 people would have likely died from "starvation or perished through accumulated hardship, before the first of May 1897."[24] Despite this significant humanitarian aid, American authorities took no further action beyond the resolution and these relief efforts.

The emergence of awareness in the United States regarding the massacres of Armenians was not driven solely by missionaries, Christian groups, or women's organizations. American Armenians also played a crucial role, both through their own community initiatives and by actively supporting the efforts of these advocacy networks. The violence of the Hamidian massacres traumatized Armenians. Many survivors arrived in the US during or after these events, and even those who had not personally experienced the violence had connections to the victims. Consequently, these events became deeply embedded in the American Armenian collective memory. Mobilizing their developing institutions and social networks, American Armenians organized public gatherings, submitted petitions to Congress, and raised funds to support relief efforts. These actions were not only humanitarian but also aimed at influencing American public discourse and foreign policy, with the hope of securing international protection for Armenians in the Ottoman Empire.[25]

Alexander Mavroyeni Bey: A Greek Orthodox Ottoman Bureaucrat and the Armenian Massacres

Born in Arnavutkoy district of Constantinople in 1845, Alexander Mavroyeni Bey received his early education in Constantinople and later obtained a diploma in law in Paris. He spent five years in London working with the Ralli Brothers, but, finding himself unsuited to commerce, he returned to the Ottoman capital and was appointed attaché in the Secretariat of Sultan Abdul Hamid II. Two years later, he entered the diplomatic service, serving for eight years as secretary and then as councilor in the legations at Belgrade and Madrid. From Madrid, he was promoted to Minister in Washington, a position he held from 1887 to 1896. Upon his recall to Constantinople, he was appointed Member of the Civil Section of the Council of State, where he served for four years. In 1902, he was named Prince of Samos and governed the island until his resignation in 1904, after which he resumed his role in the Civil Section of the Council of State. In 1908, he was elevated to the rank of permanent Senator, and in 1911, he was dispatched to Vienna as ambassador, a

24 American National Red Cross, *Report: America's Relief Expedition to Asia Minor under the Red Cross* (Meriden, CT: Journal Publishing Company, 1896), 44, 50.

25 For more information on the nature of Armenian immigrants' activism, see Gevorg Vardanyan and Narine Hakobyan "'Thanksgiving for Americans, We Mourn Massacred Armenians': Commemoration, Identity, and the Search for Prevention in the American Armenian Response to the Hamidian Massacres of the 1890s," *Nationalities Papers* (2025), https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2025.30.

post he held for one year before returning to his senatorial duties. Unmarried and without children, Mavroyeni Bey remained in Constantinople after the 1923 population exchange and died there in 1929.[26]

Alexander Mavroyeni's prominence as an Ottoman statesman and leading figure within the Rum millet was firmly rooted in the position held by his father, Spyridon Mavroyeni, who was Abdul Hamid's personal physician. Alexander Mavroyeni Bey represented the continuation of a longstanding Phanariotic lineage during a particularly complex and unsettled period at the close of the 19th and dawn of the 20th century within the Ottoman Empire. His personal history was closely intertwined with two traditional centers of powers for orthodox Greek subjects of the empire – the Ottoman imperial court and the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate. The status Mavroyeni Bey held as a Greek Orthodox bureaucrat and prominent community leader was firmly established within the legal and administrative framework created by the reforms of the 19th century. While his Phanariot forebears had long played influential roles within both the Ottoman state apparatus and their religious community, Alexander Mavroyeni Bey, as a representative of the Neophanariot generation, operated within a clearly defined legal context that legitimized his dual role as an official of both the Rum millet and the Ottoman government.[27]

By the late Ottoman period, Greek orthodox subjects of the Ottoman empire transformed from religious flock into a distinct ethno-religious and political body within the imperial system. Prominent members of this body occupied a dual role: they were simultaneously engaged in the internal governance of their community and held positions within the broader Ottoman administrative structure. Their authority within the millet legitimized their entry into state service, while their bureaucratic status in turn reinforced their influence within the communal hierarchy. Alexander Mavroyeni Bey exemplifies this category of Greek Orthodox elites who ascended through the ranks of the Ottoman bureaucracy and, through that institutional role, also intervened in the affairs of the millet. His participation in community matters – such as involvement in patriarchal elections – always occurred under the aegis of his official state positions, whether as a member of the Council of State, as Prince of Samos, or in other capacities within the Ottoman administration.[28]

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26 Konstantina Andrianopoulou, "Alexander Mavroyeni Bey: From the 19th Century Reform Era to the Young Turk Revolution through the Life and Ideology of a Neophanariot Ottoman Bureaucrat," (Master's thesis, Bogazici University, 2004), 40-41.

27 Ibid., 49-50.

28 His case was not unique. For instance, Alexander Karatheodori, who had been ambassador to Rome, earned international recognition and secured a prominent role within the Ottoman government when he acted as the empire's first plenipotentiary at the 1878 Congress of Berlin. Shortly after the congress, he was appointed head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. See Gevorg Vardanyan, *Հույն բնակչությունն Օսմանյան կայսրությունում և Փոքրասիական աղետը (1914–1923)* [The Greek Population in the Ottoman Empire and the Asia Minor Disaster] (Yerevan: AGMI Press, 2012), 56. For the comparison with Ottoman Armenians, see Gevorg Vardanyan, "The Greek Genocide in the Ottoman Empire: Parallels with the Armenian Genocide," in *Genocide in the Ottoman Empire: Armenians, Assyrians, and Greeks, 1913-1923*, ed. George Shirinian (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), 274–299.

This context explains why a Greek Orthodox subject such as Alexander Mavroyeni Bey emerged as a committed defender of the Ottoman government's denial of the Armenian massacres in the United States. His activities must be situated within the broader framework of his efforts to demonstrate unwavering loyalty to Sultan Abdul Hamid II, under whose rule personal allegiance often outweighed merit in determining career advancement. Mavroyeni Bey's vigorous campaign against American Armenian activism and his public denial of the massacres served not only as a display of fidelity to the Sultan but also as a strategic means of reinforcing his political legitimacy and securing his position within the Ottoman bureaucracy, especially given his status as a non-Muslim official operating within Ottoman imperial structure.

Before the Massacres: Mavroeyni Bey's Early Attempts to Shape American Perceptions of Armenians

The deteriorating conditions of the Ottoman Armenians heightened tensions with imperial authorities. On the eve of the Hamidian massacres, several violent incidents targeted Armenians, whom the Ottoman government blamed. In early 1893, wary of American missionaries and Armenian revolutionary activity, Ottoman authorities set fire to a building at Anatolia College in Marsovan. Since most students and faculty were Armenian, they accused the college of burning the building to incite revolt or conceal arms.[29] Two Armenian professors, Garabed H. Thoumaian and Hovhannes T. Kayayan, were imprisoned, along with 200 to 300 Armenians, despite a lack of charges.[30] That summer, officials tried to extract false confessions but found no evidence. According to missionary Edwin M. Bliss, many documents used against the accused were later exposed as forgeries – one American missionary even found his own name forged.[31] The professors were tried but acquitted for lack of evidence. After British protests, they were freed on the condition that they leave the empire. Meanwhile, US pressure secured $2,200 in compensation from Sultan Abdul Hamid II for the damage to Anatolia College.[32]

At that time, some Armenians who had acquired American citizenship returned to the Ottoman Empire to visit their families or for personal matters. When they encountered issues with Ottoman authorities, they claimed the same protections as native-born US citizens. Concerned about the influence of Armenian political parties, the Ottoman authorities viewed these cases as a challenge. This period saw discussions between American and Ottoman authorities regarding US citizens of Armenian origin who visited their homeland

29 Edwin Munsell Bliss, *Turkey and the Armenian Atrocities: A Reign of Terror from Tartar Huts to Constantinople Palaces* (*Philadelphia: Hubbard Publishing Co.*, 1896), 339.

30 Ibid., 340.

31 Ibid.

32 Joseph L. Grabill, *Protestant Diplomacy in the Near East: Missionary Influence on American Policy, 1810-1927* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), 41.

while asserting their rights as American nationals. During this time, Ottoman Minister to the United States Alexander Mavroyeni began actively monitoring the activities of the Armenian community in the United States. As one scholar noted, he was "diligent" in this work.[33] Not only did he attempt to confront the Armenians' efforts to champion the Armenian Question, but from the very beginning, he also began to deny any instances of violence committed against Armenians. On 23 August 1893, in a letter to State Secretary Walter Quintin Gresham, Mavroyeni Bey wrote that "the greater part of the Armenians who take refuge in the United States" after obtaining American nationality returned to Turkey for the purpose of "engaging in seditious acts against the public order and tranquility of the Empire."[34] In his interpretation, this situation was "incompatible with that [Monroe] doctrine from the moment that these agitators are authorized to become American citizens and to sojourn in the territory of the United States." Therefore, he argued that the Ottoman government would find it necessary to forbid the return migration of these individuals.[35]

The Ottoman minister not only exaggerated but also distorted facts to strengthen his argument. The majority of Armenian immigrants were not affiliated with revolutionary parties, and the claim that "the greater part of the Armenians who take refuge in the United States" sought to return to Turkey for "seditious acts" was a baseless accusation. As American missionary Edwin Munsell Bliss argued, the revolutionary movement among Armenians was never a national movement but rather represented individual ideas. While some people sympathized with the cause, the majority of Armenians across the empire either opposed or had no involvement in the plans, with very few supporting the extreme actions promoted by the committees.[36] On his letter, Gresham rejected the claim that Armenian immigrants naturalized in the US pose a threat to the Ottoman Empire and asserts that the Monroe Doctrine is irrelevant to this issue, affirming the right of all American citizens of Armenian descent to peacefully travel to and reside in Turkey under treaties protections, regardless of the "alleged wrongdoing of individuals of their race."[37] After Gresham's letter, Mavroyeni Bey moderated his tone. In his letter dated August 28, he softened his accusations, asserting that the Turkish government "ha[d] no animosity against any of the races which make up the vast Ottoman Empire" and clarified that the issue at hand concerned individual Armenians, not the Armenian community as a whole.[38]

What is striking however, was his parallels between American Armenians and Native Americans. According to Mavroyeni Bey, while the Ottoman Empire had

33 Sinan Kuneralp, "Ottoman Diplomatic and Consular Personnel," 102.

34 US Department of State, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, *Transmitted to Congress, December 4, 1893* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1894), 709, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1893/pg_709

35 Ibid.

36 Bliss, *Turkey and the Armenian Atrocities*, 342.

37 "Mr. Gresham to Mavroyeni Bey, 24 August 1893," https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1893/d671, accessed 10.10.2024.

38 "Mavroyeni Bey to Mr. Gresham, 28 August 1893," https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1893/d672, accessed 10.10.2024.

always respected the United States, he argued that an amicable policy should align with Turkey's interests, particularly the need for peace. He also stated that if the US Secretary of State were to familiarize himself with translations of Armenian periodicals published by immigrant communities, he would clearly understand "the plans and desires" of the Armenian immigrants in the US.[39] He concluded his letter with a question, asking what the US government would do if, in a purely hypothetical scenario, a large group of Native Americans sought to establish an independent nation and, with legal support from another country, returned to the US to cause disruption. He then answered on behalf of the US, asserting that, of course, it would have the right to defend itself and take appropriate action.[40]

Mavroyeni's response not only reflected a colonial mindset but also effectively conveyed this perspective to his American colleagues. His rhetorical question assumed the legitimacy of the US government's authority over indigenous lands and implied that any attempt by Native Americans to reclaim sovereignty or self-governance would threaten the government, thereby necessitating what he called "legitimate self-defense."[41] This viewpoint completely overlooked the historical context of colonization, in which Native Americans faced displacement, violence, and the denial of self-determination. Additionally, Mavroyeni's answer echoed justifications traditionally used by colonial powers to suppress indigenous resistance. By framing opposition to state violence as a security threat rather than a legitimate struggle for safety and basic rights – such as the right to life – Mavroyeni reinforced the notion that colonial rule is natural. Similarly, Ottoman authorities practiced internal colonization in the conquered territories, including the Armenian Highlands, where communities were subjected to violence and forced conversion to Islam. In the second half of the 19th century, worsening socioeconomic conditions further increased their vulnerability, leading to the internationalization of the Armenian Question. Ottoman Armenians were struggling for the security of their lives and property. Mavroyeni's response reflected the stance of Ottoman authorities, dismissing Armenian rights instead of addressing the grievances they raised.

To support what Mavroyeni referred to as the "plans and desires" of Armenian immigrants, he included short excerpts from two articles from *Haik*, an Armenian-language periodical published in New York from 1891 to 1898. Selectively quoting these articles, he claimed they were "inciting the Armenians who live in Turkey to insurrection."[42] His arguments appeared to have an impact, as evidenced by President Grover Cleveland's speech to Congress on 3 December 1893, in which he echoed the complaints of the Ottoman minister.[43] This understandably triggered a response from

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 "Mavroyeni Bey to Mr. Gresham, 26 October 1893," https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1893/d674, accessed 10.10.2024.

43 "Message of the President," https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1893/message-of-the-president, accessed 10.10.2024.

Mkrtich Gabrielian, the editor of *Haik*, who wrote a letter to the President asserting that his newspaper was "far from being hostile to the authority of the Sultan" and "has been misrepresented."[44] He argued that "the Armenians [did] not desire to subvert the Sultan's authority in the Armenian provinces of Turkey."[45] Voicing concerns about "ruined villages, burned harvests, captured women, and sacrileged churches" in Ottoman Armenia, Gabrielian raised a rhetorical question: "Can the Turks deny these?"[46] He reminded the President that, according to Article 61 of the Berlin Treaty of 1878, the Ottoman government had promised to implement reforms and protect Armenians from violence. However, instead of fulfilling these commitments, the Ottoman authorities treated reform demands as "proofs of a seditious spirit," accusing Armenians of sedition.[47] At the end of his letter, Gabrielian urged the President to encourage the Ottoman government "to adopt a better and more liberal policy towards its Christian subjects."[48]

Denying the Facts: Ottoman Propaganda in the United States during the Hamidian Massacres

One of the earliest accounts of the Sassoun massacres in the European press appeared in the *Daily News* of London on November 12, 1894. The article noted that Turkish officials denied anything beyond the suppression of a small Armenian uprising over the tax issue. It reported that "three thousand [were] killed, including women and children, and twenty-five villages [were] destroyed."[49] This was also one of the earliest news reports that reached the US government. As a result, Secretary of State Walter Q. Gresham, in his letter of 25 November 1894, to Alexander W. Terrell, US envoy to the Ottoman Empire, asked for further details about the incident, noting that the State Department had no information beyond what was contained in a telegram from Grand Vizier Said Pasha to Mavroyeni Bey, the Turkish minister in Washington.[50] Said Pasha's telegram to Mavroyeni Bey, in turn, deliberately reversed the roles of victim and perpetrator. Armenians were labeled "brigands" who, "furnished with arms from foreign sources," allegedly joined forces with Kurdish insurgents to commit atrocities, including the horrific claim that they "burned a Mussulman alive." The statement presented Ottoman troops not as aggressors but as

44 "Letter from Mgrdich Gabriel to the President, December 12, 1893," in *Grover Cleveland Papers: Series II: General Correspondence, 1846-1910; 1893; December 5–15*, 2. https://www.loc.gov/resource/mss16188.mss16188-081_0555_0835/?sp=182&st=image&r=-0.682,-0.227,2.363,1.411,0, accessed 12.10.2024.

45 "Letter from M. S. Gabriel to the President, 12 December, 1893," 1.

46 Ibid., 3.

47 Ibid., 5.

48 Ibid., 6.

49 *Daily News*, 12 November 1894.

50 "Mr. Gresham to Mr. Terrell, 25 November 1894," https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1894/d719, accessed 14.10.2024.

disciplined forces working to restore "public order" and protect "peaceable inhabitants," especially women and children.[51]

This was the official version of the events in Sassoun, originating in what is known as Zeki Pasha's report. Zeki Pasha was the commander of the Ottoman forces in the area. After the bloodshed in Sassoun in August, Zeki Pasha, the commander of the Ottoman Fourth Army arrived in the area and stopped the violence, when one to two thousand had already been killed.[52] In this report, specifically, Zeki Pasha described the mountainous, Armenian-populated region as a center of rebellion, led by one "Hamparsun" (also known as Murad), a former medical student who allegedly incited unrest and spread false hopes of European intervention. Zeki accused him of deceiving local villagers with promises of support from England and the other Great Powers, turning several villages toward insurrection. Zeki Pasha reported that in mid-August, Armenian villagers abandoned their homes and joined forces with regional bandits, forming a group of over three thousand with plans to attack Mush and expand the rebellion. He accused them of brutal violence against Muslim tribes, including murder, torture, and rape, claiming they committed atrocities while proclaiming loyalty to their leader "Hamparsun." Zeki Pasha claimed that the swift and well-organized military response successfully crushed the rebellion, capturing "Hamparsun – Murad" and his band, and ensuring such unrest would not recur. He admitted that soldiers fired freely into the villages, as women and children had already fled, and reported minimal Ottoman casualties. Declaring the operation a complete success, he emphasized the restoration of order and provision of aid to civilians, while also noting the campaign ended a long period of tax evasion in the region.[53]

The Ottoman Sultan received the report on 18 September 1894, and it quickly became the central narrative for the Ottoman government. In the following year, the report was circulated extensively through both internal and external channels. Many widely distributed Ottoman documents from this time can be directly traced back to this one report.[54] In response to a growing number of publications about the massacres of Armenians, the Ottoman Foreign Ministry sent versions of Zeki Pasha's report to its official representatives in Great Britain and the United States. As mentioned, Mavroyeni Bey received the version of Zeki Pasha's report on 16 November 1894, and sent it to the New York Times.[55]

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51 "Said Pasha to Mavroyeni Bey," https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1894/d720, accessed 14.10.2024.

52 Owen Miller, "Rethinking the Violence in the Sasun Mountains (1893-1894)," Études *arméniennes contemporaines* 10 (2018), http://journals.openedition.org/eac/1556.

53 Owen Miller, "Sasun 1894: Mountains, Missionaries and Massacres at the End of the Ottoman Empire" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2015), 159–162.

54 Miller, "Sasun 1894," 162.

55 Zeki Pasha's report was published in the *New York Times*, under the title "The Turkish View of the Massacres." This is a longer version of the report that Mavroyeni sent to Gresham. See "The Turkish View of the Massacres," *New York Times*, 12 December 1894.

Zeki Pasha's 1894 report placed full blame for the Sassoun violence on Armenians and their supposed foreign supporters, framing the events as externally incited and targeting Muslims. This version of events became the dominant narrative within the Ottoman state and was later echoed uncritically in some scholarly accounts. Zeki, born in Aleppo in 1862 to a Circassian family, rose quickly through the ranks due to his military education and close ties to the Palace, with his sister rumored to be a favored consort of Sultan Abdul Hamid II. He was also instrumental in creating the Hamidiye cavalry, a force often accused of violence against Armenians. Crucially, his report relied heavily on Ibrahim Kamil Pasha, a notoriously corrupt official previously dismissed from Bayazet following his failure to investigate a major massacre there in 1877 and his role in various abuses.[56] Despite this questionable source, the report claimed no civilians were harmed by Ottoman forces and became the official account promoted by the state. Zeki Pasha's account lacked specific details, offering almost no names of Muslim victims aside from a single mention of one Omer's nephew, Haji, whose death likely stemmed from a local tribal conflict. Outside of Zeki's report, there is no evidence that any Muslim village was attacked during the summer of 1894.[57]

After the news of the Sassoun massacres reached the US, American Armenians organized demonstrations, public meetings, and commemorative events in numerous cities. Their response encompassed both independent initiatives and active participation in broader pro-Armenian campaigns led by Christian groups, women's organizations, and liberal intellectuals. Consequently, their actions took various forms – mobilizing resistance through awareness campaigns, organizing mass meetings, addressing petitions to the US Congress, and engaging in fundraising activities.[58] They sought to influence American public opinion and authorities, hoping the US would collaborate with European powers to ensure the safety of Ottoman Armenians. This surge in American Armenians activism intensified Mavroyeni Bey's anti-Armenian propaganda in the US, which had begun even before the massacres but escalated in response to the activism.

On 8 December 1894, Mavroyeni Bey wrote a new letter to Gresham containing a short and edited version of Zeki Pasha's report:

> Toward the end of July last, and at the instigation of an Armenian, Hampartzoun by name, the men of ten villages near Moush, organized into bands and, armed with guns, pistols, axes, and other implements, attacked the tribe of Delikan, killed several of this tribe,

56 For more details on violence in Bayazet and Alashkert, see Gevorg Vardanyan, «Հայությունը երկու կայսրությունների միջև. 1877–1878 թթ. ռուս-թուրքական պատերազմի Կովկասյան ճակատը օսմանյան պատերազմական քարոզչության մեջ» [Armenians between Two Empires: The Caucasian Front of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 in Ottoman War Propaganda], *Tsʻeghaspanagitakan handes* 4, no. 1 (2015): 11–24.

57 Miller, "Sasun 1894," 162–168.

58 Gevorg Vardanyan, "Remembering Medz Yeghern: Armenian Genocide and Armenian Americans, 1890s–1965" (PhD diss., North Carolina State University, Raleigh, 2023), 103–107.

> and then made an onslaught on the tribes of Bekiran and Badikan. These bands burned the nephew of Emmer Agha, one of the chiefs of the Bekiran tribe Hadji, alive, and not only outraged the Moslem women of the Kulli-guzat village, but also put them to an atrocious death. Men were also tortured in an even more ferocious way. Not content with these criminal and illegal acts, the same bands also burned several villages inhabitated by Mussulmans. Thanks, however, to measures taken by the constituted authorities, the bands in question were scattered and their leader, Hampartzoun, as also the priest Mighirditch, of Kizil Killisse, and other guilty persons, were arrested and brought to justice.
>
> The assertion often published by the European press that the regular troops shot harmless women and children is absolutely false. No person without arms was killed. Twenty insurgents who had surrendered to the authorities received considerate treatment, and were released after their depositions before the courts of Moush were taken. The place where Hampartzoun and his confederates were found was made known by these 20 insurgents. These facts prove that only 20 among the insurgents surrendered to the authorities, and that, with the exception of the brigands who had revolted, no other person was maltreated.[59]

A close reading of this document reveals several important points regarding how the Ottoman State denied violence against Armenians. First, the document frames Armenians as aggressors, claiming they were organized into armed bands that carried out brutal attacks, including arson and sexual violence. Second, it employs sensationalist and inflammatory rhetoric, alleging that Armenians burned a tribal leader's nephew alive and committed sexual violence and murder against Muslim women. Third, and perhaps most importantly, it denied state involvement in the violence by flatly rejecting European media's allegations that the Ottoman army killed unarmed Armenian civilians, insisting that "no person without arms was killed." Fourth, the document portrays the state's response as lawful and restrained, contrasting it with the alleged criminality of Armenians and praising the Ottoman authorities for their "measures" to restore order. Finally, it minimizes and delegitimizes Armenian victims, failing to mention any massacres against them and portraying them as rebels while neglecting their suffering and claims to victimhood.[60] Overall, this was a deliberate strategy to shift blame onto Armenians, justify military repression, and undermine

59 "Mavroyeni Bey to Mr. Gresham, December 8, 1894," https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1894/d726, accessed 20.10.2024.

60 Ibid.

international criticism.

The denialist narrative in this document was not limited to the Ottoman Armenians. Mavroyeni included a brief introduction about American Armenians, advancing a defense that combined denial, victim-blaming, and an appeal to international legitimacy. The document portrayed American Armenians not as advocates for their compatriots' safety but as subversive agitators, accusing them of spreading "boldfaced slanders" and engaging in political "intrigues" aimed at discrediting the Ottoman government. This narrative sought to delegitimize the growing American Armenian campaign for awareness. The text expressed open resentment toward American sympathy for Armenians, dismissing such support as a product of religious prejudice rather than genuine persecution, which it derided as "imaginary." In a further attempt to undermine the credibility of American Armenians, the author alleged that they cynically acquired US citizenship only to return and propagate "revolutionary theories," even citing US Minister Alexander Terrell to support this claim. Positioning the Ottoman Empire as a sovereign power fending off external and internal threats, Mavroyeni justified its repression as "legitimate self-defense" against allegedly foreign-instigated rebellion. Ultimately, the letter appealed to the US government to withdraw its support for Armenians, presenting the Ottoman case as grounded in justice and equity while portraying American religious and moral concern as naïve, biased, and politically destabilizing.[61]

Mavroyeni arranged for an expanded version of Zeki Pasha's report to be circulated in the American press, and it was soon published in the *New York Times* on December 12 under the title "The Turkish View of the Massacres," as well as in the *New York Herald*.[62] To bolster his position, he referred to a statement made by Dr. Cyrus Hamlin, a respected American missionary, before the Sassoun massacres, in which Hamlin claimed that the Hnchaks were plotting violence as part of their goal to establish an Armenian state within the Ottoman Empire. Mavroyeni emphasized that if even Hamlin – widely seen as sympathetic to Armenians – portrayed the Hnchaks as dangerous radicals, it must reflect the reality. However, the very next day, Hamlin publicly denounced Mavroyeni's interpretation, accusing him of distorting his remarks. Hamlin insisted that the revolutionaries posed little real threat and were merely a handful of impulsive young activists. He expressed deep frustration that the Ottoman representative would use his earlier comments in an attempt to justify atrocities that had provoked global outrage among Christian communities.[63]

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61 Ibid.

62 *New York Times*, 12 December 1894. For the New *York Herald* version, see An American Observer [Alexander Russell Webb], *A Few Facts about Turkey under the Reign of Abdul Hamid II* (New York: J.J. Little & co., 1895), 57–58.

63 *New York Herald*, November 19, 20, 1894. Cited in Robert Mirak, *Torn Between Two Lands: Armenians in America, 1890 to World War I* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 215.

Expanding Anti-Armenian Propaganda: Mavroyeni Bey, Alexander Russell Webb, Islamic Solidarity, and the Price of Ottoman Patronage

Alexander Russell Webb (1846–1916) was an American writer, editor, and diplomat, recognized as one of the earliest American converts to Islam and a prominent advocate for the religion in the United States during the late nineteenth century. Born in Hudson, New York, Webb pursued a career in journalism before serving as the US consul in the Philippines from 1887 to 1892. During his time there, he developed a deep interest in Eastern philosophies and ultimately embraced Islam in the early 1890s. His conversion was influenced by extensive reading, particularly of Islamic literature, and correspondence with Muslims in India. After converting, he adopted the name Mohammad Alexander Russell Webb and envisioned himself as a cultural intermediary between Islam and the Anglo-American world.[64] After resigning from his diplomatic position in 1892, Webb toured India and returned to the United States in 1893, where he began working intensively to advance Islam in America. He established what he called the "American Islamic Propaganda" movement (also known as the "American Mission").[65] His mission lasted until 1896, during which he built a long-lasting relationship with the Ottoman state. In 1901, Sultan Abdul Hamid II appointed him as Honorary Consul General to New York. Webb even traveled to Turkey, where he received the honorific title of "Bey" [Sir] and two Ottoman orders of merit. One of his key initiatives was the establishment of *Moslem World*, America's first Islamic publication, as well as *The Voice of Islam* and the consolidated *Moslem World* and *Voice of Islam*. Through these platforms, Webb promoted Islamic teachings, corrected Western misrepresentations of Islam, and sought to construct a distinctly American Islamic identity.[66] His activities culminated in his participation in the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, where he was the representative of Islam and presented a lecture aimed at elevating Islam's moral and spiritual superiority.[67]

After attending the Parliament of the World's Religions, Alexander Russell Webb returned to New York and inaugurated the new headquarters of his Islamic mission on Twentieth Street in Manhattan on October 6, 1893. However, it soon became evident that the financial support pledged by his Indian benefactors was neither sufficient nor sustainable. As a result, Webb was forced to shut down the Manhattan office in 1894. Confronted by growing financial difficulties, he sought aid from the Ottoman diplomatic mission in Washington. He approached Ottoman Minister Mavroyeni Bey, seeking assistance. Webb explained that his Indian funding had collapsed and emphasized the

64 For more details, see Umar Faruq Abd-Allah, *A Muslim in Victorian America: The Life of Alexander Russell Webb* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 47–79. For more info, see Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb, *Islam in America* (New York: Oriental Publishing Company, 1893).

65 Abd-Allah, *A Muslim in Victorian America*, 159–160.

66 Brent D. Singleton, "The Moslem World: A History of America's Earliest Islamic Newspaper and Its Successors," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affair*s 27, no. 2 (2007): 297–307.

67 Walter R. Houghton, *Neely's History of the Parliament of Religions and Religious Congresses at the World's Columbian Exposition* (Chicago: F. Tennyson Neely, 1894), 459–464.

financial needs of his publishing endeavors: The Moslem World required a monthly budget of $837, while *The Voice of Islam* needed only $35. In response, Mavroyeni submitted a formal appeal on Webb's behalf to the Ottoman Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 21 December 1893. In his petition, Mavroyeni argued that supporting Webb's initiatives aligned with Ottoman interests, especially since Webb had consistently portrayed the Turks in a positive light. He also recommended that the financial support remain confidential to avoid diplomatic complications. Mavroyeni proposed that Webb receive a monthly subsidy of 25,000 Ottoman kurush, approximately equivalent to $1,100 at the time. The proposal reached Sultan Abdul Hamid II on 15 January 1894. It remains uncertain how much Webb ultimately received, but by the end of March 1894, he appeared to have been granted a sum of $500, possibly funneled discreetly through a figure named Mukhtar Pasha.[68]

Mavroyeni's collaboration with Webb soon extended beyond religious advocacy, as Webb became involved in Ottoman political propaganda and image building in the US. Together, they launched a well-funded campaign to represent the Ottomans as the true bearers of Islamic civilization and to counter Western Orientalist narratives. The Armenian Question became a major axis around which the Ottoman-Webb alliance functioned in the American context. Following the Sassoun massacres, Webb took an overtly anti-Armenian stance, aligning himself fully with the Ottoman official narrative that framed Armenians as violent insurrectionists rather than victims. In public writings and pamphlets, Webb accused American missionaries and newspapers of spreading falsehoods about Ottoman atrocities and argued that Armenians had manipulated Western sentiment to provoke anti-Muslim and anti-Turkish hostility. This line of argumentation was deeply embedded in his desire to shield Islam and the Ottoman Empire from Western critique and to maintain the integrity of his sponsors' legitimacy.

Webb's anti-Armenian stance found its most explicit expression in two pamphlets he authored. The first, titled *A Few Facts about Turkey under the Sultan Abdul Hamid II*, was published in 1895 under the pseudonym "American Observer." This anonymity was a deliberate strategy to obscure Webb's authorship and lend the work greater credibility. It also concealed his support from the Ottoman Empire – a connection the Ottoman embassy sought to keep confidential – especially since the publication advanced Ottoman political interests. Among all of Webb's activities conducted under the banner of American Islamic Propaganda, none presented more ethically and politically complex challenges than his involvement with the anti-Armenian pamphlets. In this work, Webb adopted a markedly partisan stance in support of the official Ottoman position while simultaneously exhibiting pronounced hostility toward Armenians, including the circulation of racially charged and derogatory rhetoric. The content and tone of the pro-Ottoman pamphlet reveal the extent to which Webb had come under Turkish sway and illustrate how his Ottoman sponsors were prepared to instrumentalize both him and his broader mission for their own political objectives. In doing so, they effectively subordinated the religious ambitions of the

68 Abd-Allah, *A Muslim in Victorian America*, 245–246.

movement. The Armenian-focused publications marked a significant shift in the character of Webb's efforts, transforming what had initially been conceived as a religious outreach initiative into a vehicle for political propaganda.

This pamphlet presents the Ottoman Empire's modernizing achievements – such as advancements in railroads, maritime infrastructure, agriculture, commerce, education, and finance – with the aim of projecting an image of economic vitality and national strength. Equally important was the glorification of the Ottoman military and navy, depicted as powerful instruments capable of defending the empire against external threats.[69] This celebratory portrayal served two intertwined purposes: first, to present the Ottoman Empire as a progressive and industrious state to Victorian American readers; and second, to discourage foreign intervention by emphasizing the empire's stability and self-sufficiency. A close reading of the pamphlet reveals that the emphasis on economic and military strength is closely linked to the Ottoman response to the American Armenian engagements with the Armenian Question. In this context, the work directly opposed the efforts of Armenian immigrants in the aftermath of the Sassoun massacres, whose appeals to Western governments aimed to expose Ottoman violence and to advocate for intervention to prevent further atrocities.[70] It is therefore telling that the most extensive section of the pamphlet devoted to the empire's accomplishments was purely anti-Armenian propaganda.

In the final and largest chapter dedicated to Armenians, the pamphlet assembled a collection of materials designed to promote denial and propaganda, aiming to delegitimize both the sufferings of Ottoman Armenians and the involvement of American actors. It reproduced the Zeki Pasha report and denied the Sassoun Massacres, reducing the Ottoman Armenian population to just 900,000 – a significant and intentional undercount – while portraying the Ottoman Empire as a model of religious tolerance.[71] One particularly revealing passage claimed that Armenians sought American citizenship not out of genuine loyalty, but to exploit US diplomatic protection against the Ottoman state.[72] One of the most striking aspects of the pamphlet is its parallel between Native Americans and Ottoman Armenians. Far from being incidental, this comparison is used to justify Ottoman suspicion of American missionaries, who were depicted as hypocrites for condemning abuses abroad while ignoring the plight of Native Americans and African Americans at home. By invoking the United States' treatment of Indigenous peoples, the pamphlet reframed Armenian suffering as a question of state security rather than humanitarian concern, thereby deflecting criticism by exposing perceived double standards.[73] In doing so, it used the abuses of other empires to justify or normalize its own, implying that

69 An American Observer, *A Few Facts about Turkey*, 35–41.

70 For more information on the nature of Armenian immigrant's activism, see Vardanyan and Hakobyan "'Thanksgiving for Americans."

71 An American Observer, *A Few Facts about Turkey*, 56–61.

72 Ibid., 65.

73 Ibid., 66–67.

all empires were equally violent and that, therefore, external criticism was invalid or hypocritical.

The second pamphlet, *The Armenian Troubles and Where the Responsibility Lies*, appeared between late 1895 and early 1896 and further promoted the denial of the Hamidian massacres. Like the first pamphlet, it was published anonymously but under a different pseudonym, "Correspondent." Rather than presenting original analysis, it compiled materials that Webb collected from various sources, possibly and likely with assistance from Mavroyeni Bay. Whereas 18 of the 67 pages of A Few Facts about Turkey addressed the Armenian Question, all 35 pages of *The Armenian Troubles* were devoted to it, further advancing a distorted portrayal of the massacres. This second pamphlet was released after a significant wave of atrocities in the fall of 1895, during which a large number of Armenians were massacred in various Ottoman Armenian settlements. Consequently, there was a stronger international response and greater awareness at this time. This likely explains why, while the first pamphlet completely denied the existence of the Sassoun massacres, the second pamphlet began by stating that the Turkish government "ha[d] never denied that serious disturbances have taken place at the district of Sassoun." It then asserted that "what it has denied is the accusation that there was a premeditated massacre; and yet this is the absurd basis upon which is built the whole Armenian agitation, both in America and Europe."[74] Reading between the lines, the opening sentence suggests an evolution in denialistic discourse. First, instead of entirely denying the Sassoun massacres, the second pamphlet denied that there was a "premeditated massacre." Second, by the time the second pamphlet was published, the new wave of violence in various Ottoman settlements, due to its scale and intensity, overshadowed the Sassoun massacres. By mentioning or focusing solely on Sassoun, the pamphlet aimed to divert attention from the ongoing large-scale violence to a local incident that occurred more than a year ago.

A notable aspect of *The Armenian Troubles* is its use of derogatory and racist language in describing Armenians, often resorting to ethnic slurs. For instance, while praising the Ottoman Empire for its tolerance, Webb remarked, "Armenians, who, as a race, are certainly much inferior to the Turks, occupy very high positions in Turkey."[75] In another instance, while discussing British public opinion, he claimed:

> No real esteem for the Armenians themselves exists in England. Besides, everybody admits in Europe that Armenians are, as a race, much inferior to the Turks. Armenians, even in olden times, showed no greatness. Their influence in the world has been absolutely nil. In science, in art, in literature, in warlike achievements, they have left no trace.[76]

74 A Correspondent [Alexander Russell Webb], *The Armenian Troubles and Where the Responsibility Lies* (New York: J. J. Little, 1895), 5.

75 Webb, *The Armenian Troubles, 5.*

76 Ibid., 9.

Promoting the denial of violence and placing all blame on the "criminal efforts of Armenian revolutionary committees" (p. 6), *The Armenian Troubles* aimed to shape American public opinion and targeted three main groups: American Armenians, American missionaries, and British politics. Webb claims that the pamphlet "has only one wish in view, and that is to impart to his readers a true and thorough knowledge of the present Armenian troubles." He argued that "the whole atmosphere on this subject has been polluted with falsehoods and exaggeration."[77] Consequently, he focused on those responsible for spreading information about the Armenian massacres. A substantial portion of the text scrutinized missionary accounts. For example, he criticized Rev. Frederick Davis Greene's *The Armenian Crisis in Turkey* (1895), accusing Greene of extensively using refugee testimonies, which he described as "a second-hand testimony, or, rather, solely an Armenian testimony."[78] To support his claims, he cited Cyrus Hamlin's statement published in the *Congregationalist* on 23 December 1893. As mentioned earlier in this article, Hamlin expressed concern in this article about the activities of the Hnchakian party, which he accused of undermining Protestant missionary work and endangering Christian Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. He warned missionaries and Protestant Armenians not to associate with or support them.[79] Remarkably, Cyrus Hamlin's letter was also extensively exploited by Ottoman minister Mavroyeni. In December 1895, Mavroyeni sent a letter to Secretary of State Olney, enclosing Hamlin's letter to reinforce his misrepresentation of Armenian political parties. By citing Hamlin, Mavroyeni attempted to validate the Ottoman position with an American voice and discredit the Armenian cause as extremist, thereby challenging US moral condemnation and shaping international perceptions of the crisis.[80] Ironically, in a public letter published in the *New York Herald* on December 20, 1894, American missionary and educator Cyrus Hamlin rejected Mavroyeni's appropriation of his earlier remarks to downplay the Armenian massacres. Clarifying his original intentions, Hamlin emphasized that he sought to highlight the weakness and futility of Armenian revolutionary efforts, not to justify violence against Armenians. He described the Armenians as a noble but scattered and unarmed population, incapable of mounting any meaningful rebellion. Hamlin condemned the massacres as atrocities that had shocked the Christian world and argued that they could not be excused by citing isolated revolutionary activity, which had only served to inflame Muslim fanaticism. He warned that Turkey, by overreacting to minor threats, had once again fallen into a geopolitical trap laid by Russia, which he believed aimed to exploit the situation to extend its influence under the guise of protecting Christian minorities.[81]

77 Ibid., 3.

78 Ibid., 17–18.

79 Ibid., 6.

80 "Mavroyeni Bey to Mr. Gresham, 8 December 1894," https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1894/d726, accessed 20.10.2024.

81 *New York Herald*, 20 December 1894.

In his anti-Armenian brochure, Webb attributed British public support for Armenians not to genuine sympathy or respect, but to a combination of religious bias and political opportunism. He argued that English public opinion favored Armenians primarily because they were Christians, and secondarily as a means of punishing the Ottoman Empire for resisting British interference in Egypt, which Webb claimed rightfully belonged to the Sultan. Drawing an inflammatory analogy, he compares Britain's occupation of Egypt and its condemnation of Ottoman treatment of Armenians to a hypothetical scenario in which England seizes a US state while simultaneously denouncing American treatment of Native Americans. On this basis, Webb warned that American support for Armenians risked aligning the United States with British imperial interests and European power politics, urging instead that American public opinion remain detached and skeptical toward both Armenian claims and character.[82]

In his anti-Armenian tract, Webb interpreted the post-Sassoun events as confirmation of what he characterized as revolutionary and subversive intent. He argued that Western support for Armenians, particularly in England and the United States, stemmed not from an objective evaluation of the situation or any genuine merits of the Armenian people – whom he disparaged as entirely lacking in virtue – but from religious solidarity and political bias. While he concedes that Armenian activism in the United States was not politically motivated, he criticized American support as naively rooted in shared Christianity. Webb attributed much of this misplaced sympathy to Protestant missionary organizations, accusing them of manipulating humanitarian efforts to advance religious conversions. He highlighted the exclusive distribution of aid to Armenians during periods of famine as evidence of sectarian favoritism, suggesting that such actions destabilized American impartiality and contributed to the threat of armed rebellion within the Ottoman Empire.[83]

Conclusion

This article examined the Ottoman Empire's campaign of denial and propaganda in the United States during the Hamidian massacres of 1894–1896, focusing on the actions of Minister Mavroyeni Bey and his collaborators. It demonstrated how Ottoman officials sought to reframe the massacres as legitimate acts of self-defense against Armenian "provocation," disseminating a narrative that portrayed Armenians as aggressors and the empire as a victim of foreign interference.

This study advances our understanding of the denial of late Ottoman collective and state violence against Armenians. Focusing on the activities of the Ottoman diplomatic representative in the United States, it demonstrates that denialist strategies went beyond

82 Webb, *The Armenian Troubles,* 9-10.

83 Ibid., 21.

the mere reproduction of Zeki Pasha's report, which underpinned the official state narrative. On American soil, these efforts took on new forms, including attempts to discredit and undermine American Armenians. As our previous research has shown, American Armenians responded to the massacres by organizing protests, submitting petitions to Congress, and collaborating with missionary and humanitarian networks. Their activism played a crucial role in raising awareness, mobilizing relief, and prompting American institutions – including the press, religious organizations, and the federal government – to engage with the Armenian Question in hopes of preventing further atrocities. Consequently, they emerged as central figures in the publicization of Ottoman violence and thus became key targets of denialist campaigns.

The article has also shown how figures like Alexander Russell Webb became instrumental in amplifying these narratives. Webb's conversion to Islam and alignment with Ottoman interests enabled him to disseminate anti-Armenian rhetoric under the guise of religious outreach and cultural mediation. His pamphlets not only denied Ottoman responsibility for the massacres but also attacked the credibility of missionaries, journalists, and American Armenians who sought to expose the violence. In both diplomatic and public arenas, the Ottoman campaign systematically downplayed atrocities, manipulated facts, and co-opted Western voices to legitimize its actions.

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About the Authors

Gevorg Vardanyan is a postdoctoral researcher at the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute. He holds a doctoral degree in public history from North Carolina State University. His research interests include public history, genocide and memory studies, and American Armenian history.

Email: vardanyangh@gmail.com

Narine Hakobyan is a PhD candidate and researcher at the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute. She has received her MA in International Relations from Yerevan State University. Her research interests include Hamidian massacres and memory studies.

Email: hakobyan.narine@genocide-museum.am

RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY IN THE MEMOIRS OF CHILD SURVIVORS OF THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

Serafim Seppälä
Professor of Systematic Theology and Patristics,
University of Eastern Finland

Abstract

Survivor memoirs of the Armenian Genocide remain an understudied genre, despite their unique value in offering a grassroots perspective on the events and illuminating the processes of remembering the past and coping with the individual and collective trauma. This paper brings together two overlooked aspects in Armenian Genocide studies: first, the fact that many of these memoirs are written by child survivors and frequently focus on childhood experiences, and second, the significant presence of religious elements–references to God, faith, and prayer–in these texts. The content and function of these spiritual reflections range from expressions of astonishing faith to deeply bitter remarks.

The primary aim is to examine the role of spirituality for children as depicted in the survivor memoirs. However, this cannot be done without careful consideration of the fact that most of these texts were written decades after the events they describe. Consequently, the analysis is grounded in a theoretical understanding of narrative subjectivity and the complexities of retrospective narration. The findings reveal the paradoxical nature of survivors' spiritual experience. After the genocide, religious convictions and beliefs do not coalesce into a coherent system; rather, traditional formulations remain detached units that seem true from one perspective, but hollow from another.

Keywords: survivor memoirs; children; spirituality; religion; God; prayer; providence

This article was submitted on 26.03.2025 and accepted for publication on 27.06.2025.

How to cite: Serafim Seppälä, "Religion and Spirituality in the Memoirs of Child Survivors of the Armenian Genocide," *International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies* 10, no. 1 (2025): 81-101.

International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies 10, no. 1 (2025)
https://doi.org/10.51442/ijags.0064

Introduction

The Armenian Genocide was not only a devastating catastrophe in terms of human lives, property, and culture; it was also a profound religious and spiritual tragedy, and a theological shock that continues to reverberate. It challenges notions of divine providence, efficacy of prayer, and trust in ethical principles such as justice–not only due to the massive scale of suffering but also because of the spiritual and religious vacuum the events left behind. The genocide irrevocably altered the spiritual orientation and cultural ethos of a people whose identity was deeply rooted in the Christian tradition, leaving indelible marks on the soul of a nation once defined by its faith and collective purpose.[1]

Even when lives were spared, the religious consequences could be more devastating than death. From a strictly religious perspective, the forcible transfer of children inflicted an even deeper loss, as it ultimately turns them into the "other" of their original faith, whereas death would render them venerable martyrs of the Church. In that sense, the noteworthy number of suicides during the events was not merely an act of personal desperation to escape abuse but also a Christian rejection of forced conversion.

Before the genocide, the traditional Armenian village life was thoroughly saturated with colourful Christian customs of ancient origin. Christian symbols, contents, and values were vividly present in everyday life, feasts and fasts, work and rest, songs and poems, pilgrimage traditions, customs related to sacred places, prayers for various everyday situations and so forth. In addition, there were plenty of exotic local phenomena, such as drinking songs dedicated to John the Baptist,[2] or sacred springs with sacred fish,[3] that are unknown today even to specialists. For the child survivors, the last times before the catastrophe in this Christian culture were the only happy years in their lives, as Rubina Peroomian has it.[4] In a word, the world they had to leave behind was a thoroughly Christian one.

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1 In Eastern Armenia, most ancient Christian(ized) customs and practices were forgotten, as the principles of atheism, compounded by Soviet persecution of the Church, left a lasting and thoroughgoing impact (cf. Lithuania or Poland). Even today, the Armenian Church is the only eastern Church without a strong monastic movement, which illustrates the depth of the unique transformation that took place. In the diaspora, there was a committed willingness to preserve the Christian identity, but the diaspora setting made this difficult due to the lack of churches, priests, monasteries, holy places, and theological academies, not to mention the fragmentation of families and communities. Compared to pre-genocide culture, the loss of distinctive ethno-Christian traditions and ancient customs related to everyday life largely reduced Christianity to mere Sunday liturgies with declining participation. However, the transformation of Christian identity is a vast topic and would require extensive studies. Personally, I have observed in Armenia that when recounting Christian customs from the pre-1915 culture, the oldest generation may remember hearing about such practices from their parents, while the subsequent generations have no connection to them.

2 Documented in Vahan Hambartsumian, *Village World (Kiughashkharh): An Historical and Cultural Study of Govdoon* (Govdoon Youth of America, 2001), 141.

3 For a vivid description of the sacred fish venerated in the village of Balekhli, see John Yervant, *Needle, Thread and Button* (Zoryan Institute for Contemporary Armenian Research and Documentation, 1988), 6. The practice might even reflect a reminiscence of the ancient cult of Anahit.

4 Rubina Peroomian, *The Armenian Genocide in Literature* (Yerevan: Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, 2012), 86. The author of this article has published a book about the colourful Christian customs embedded in pre-1915 Armenian village life: *Vaienneita* ääniä*. Kunnianosoitus kadonneelle kulttuurille* (Helsinki: Kirjapaja, 2015).

However, the religious dimension of events in the studies on eyewitness accounts and memoirs has received little attention. In academic studies, the religious phenomena have been left to theologians, while genocide issues have not traditionally been part of theologians' repertoire. Moreover, Western theologians in general are suspicious of all national and ethnic features of religion, due to the wretched history of nationalism in Europe. Furthermore, modern studies in general have a strong anachronistic tendency to downplay the significance of religion and spirituality in historical societies, and this trend has affected Armenian Genocide studies as well. This being the case, there is a clear need to reexamine survivor narratives through a theological lens. Combining insights from autobiographical theory with systematic theological analysis, the following study focuses on the role of religion and spirituality–that is, God, faith, and prayer–in sixteen memoirs written by survivors who went through these events as children. The latter fact, however, makes the study of the former challenging.

Children as Witnesses: Memory and the Narrative Subject

Most survivors were children who, at the time, did not comprehend the political, cultural, or religious significance of the events; for them, it was simply an unending human tragedy. They were forced to march hundreds of kilometres while starving, moved from one orphanage to another, relocated to new countries, compelled to learn new languages. Typically, only decades later did they begin to reflect on the events and their significance. It was often at this stage that feelings of anger and bitterness began to emerge. Interview studies indicate that nearly all survivors were thinking about the massacres with increasing frequency as they grew older. This indicates that although attitudes towards genocide and the ways of discussing it may evolve over time, time itself certainly does not heal the wounds.[5]

In studies of the Jewish holocaust, writings by child survivors are considered exceptional cases, given that children were the age group with the smallest number of survivors. In contrast, survivors of the Armenian Genocide were predominantly children, and most existing memoirs are written by child survivors. Consequently, these memoirs have often been treated as the norm, with few scholars drawing a line between children's memoirs and others. As a result, discussions on Armenian survivor memoirs have frequently overlooked the significance of the narrators' young age at the time of the events.

If we seek to analyse narrators specifically as children, what implications does this have for our reading of the memoirs? To begin with, we do not encounter the authentic

5 It is not untypical in these memoirs to have remarks such as: "Even after sixty-six years I recall that night with horror." Elise Hagopian Taft, *Rebirth* (New York: New Age Publishers, 1981), 48. See Donald E. Miller and Lorna Touryan Miller, *Survivors: An Oral History of the Armenian Genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 188–189. This is not only a matter of psychological development, for the frustration intensified also due to the aggressive denial policy of Turkey. See Aida Alayarian, *Consequences of Denial. The Armenian Genocide* (London: Karnac Books, 2008).

voice of the child, not to mention his personality, but rather an interplay between the child protagonist and the adult narrator, though the tension between the two is usually implicit. Academic studies on Jewish child-survivor memoirs often concentrate on this very issue.[6]

However, children and adults perceive and articulate the same events in somewhat different ways. Therefore, the author must choose a perspective. Some writers, such as Antranik Enkababian, have consciously chosen to reflect on events from their present standpoint, while most have sought to immerse themselves in their past, aiming to reconstruct their perspective at the time of the events. Nevertheless, this requires the adult to adopt the position and viewpoint of the child. For instance, Kerop Bedoukian, nine years old in 1915, consciously aimed to achieve historical authenticity through his (re)construction of the narrative subject: "I have chosen to remain true to the memoirs of a young boy who, in the manner of a child, was curious about the nature of the world around him."[7] Yet the voice of a child cannot be reproduced; it must instead be constructed through stylisation.[8]

In most cases, these memoirs were written, or given their final form, only after World War II; hence some writers draw comparative parallels with the Jewish Holocaust. For example, Hampartzoum Chitjian reflects on whether God will wake up to assist the Armenians, just as He came to help the Jews, referring to the emergence of the state of Israel.[9] Similarly, Hagopian Taft (b. 1906) even references Auschwitz as a point of comparison:

> We were dumped from cattle cars and forced to move on foot, again in a southernly direction, which we knew led to the parched semi-arid lands of southern Anatolia. Not the sudden death of Auschwitz by lethal gas, but the slow, agonizing, torturous Turkish method: death by starvation, disease, and exposure.[10]

At this point, it may be useful to distinguish between "I the narrator" and "I the protagonist." For instance, in the sentence "He went" the subjectivity belongs to "I the

6 There is a considerable number of studies on the Jewish child survivors focusing on their psychological coping, while the studies related to their memoirs as literary entities are somewhat less common. See Adi Duchin, and Hadas Wiseman, "Memoirs of child survivors of the Holocaust: Processing and healing of trauma through writing," *Qualitative Psychology*, 6:3 (2019), 280–296; Joanna Beata Michlic, "The Aftermath and After: Memories of Child Survivors of the Holocaust," in *Lessons and Legacies X: Back to the Sources: Reexamining Perpetrators, Victims, and Bystanders*, ed. Sara R. Horowitz (Boston: Northwestern University Press, 2012), 141–189.

7 Kerop Bedoukian, *Some of Us Survived: The Story of an Armenian Boy* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1978), preface. Bedoukian originated from Sivas (Sebastia) and was nine years old in 1915.

8 Cf. Sur Vice, *Children Writing the Holocaust* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 6.

9 Hampartzoum Mardiros Chitjian, *A Hair's Breadth from Death. Memoirs of the Survivor of the Armenian Genocide* (London: Taderon Press, Garod Books, 2003), 99.

10 Hagopian Taft, *Rebirth*, 42. She notes also that "Terrible as was the Nazi persecution of the Jews, that endured by the Armenians at the hands of Talaat and other Ottoman Turks was infinitely more savage and sadistic." *Ibid*, 59.

narrator", the one who is saying "He went"; likewise, in "I saw" two I's coexist, the one who saw (the protagonist) and the one who articulates this (the narrator).[11] In genocide memoirs, especially by child survivors, it is typical that the protagonist yields to the narrator. The protagonist-I seems to dissolve into the collective current of history, while the narrator-I, speaking from decades later, remains ever-present behind the narrative flow, occasionally interrupting the progression of the story. For the reader, both perspectives are always available, offering a possibility of dynamic interplay, but also some insecurity on the coherence of the time frame.

Survivor memoirs are a genre where subtle tensions lie beneath the seemingly simple narrative surface. The process of writing involves selecting and assembling fragments of historical memory, employing techniques of fiction and navigating within their limitations. The challenge is to weave these fragments into coherence, continuity, and meaning– without resorting to too imaginative or artificial narrative devices.

In the case of the Armenians, the aggressive denial of genocide has significantly constrained the use of imaginative devices and literarily sophisticated narrative solutions: instead, the writers seem compelled to constantly substantiate that it did happen. Nonetheless, when crafting a narrative, the author inevitably must construct a storyline and employ storytelling techniques, even when attempting to remain within the realm of authentic memory fragments. The result is a micro-level historiography with a strong narrative charge, where the techniques of storytelling shape the memory material.[12] Ultimately, the significance of the genre lies in the collective testimony of survivors, not so much in individuals' creative efforts.

The narrator is typically neither an atheist nor a devoted believer but a culturally westernized Armenian, somewhat detached from the spirituality of previous generations. In that sense, one may often sense a certain distance between the gloomily reminiscing narrator and the living faith of his/her mother and ancestors. Typically, the narrator recollects their beliefs and prayers, not ours. The problems of memory may also be explicitly acknowledged in the narrative, which paradoxically adds to its trustworthiness. In fiction, the narrator does not pause to deliberate whether he remembers correctly, but in memoir, this gives a taste of authenticity.[13]

Memory is not a mechanistic device but shaped by the reasons for remembering, the purpose of recollection, and even by the intended audience. A text serves as a medium of remembrance and memorizing; it is an intensified memory that transforms into a lasting monument to forgotten realities. The retrospective nature of these texts means that survivors' memories are inextricably linked to the writer's choices regarding what to include, omit, or emphasize. Within the text, psychological realities are always subordinate

11 This differentiation is illuminatively discussed in Amos Goldberg, *Holocaust Diaries as "Life Stories"* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2004), 13–17.

12 For discussion, see Lorne Shirinian, *Quest for Closure: The Armenian Genocide and the Search for Justice in Canada* (Kingston: Blue Heron Press, 1999), 11, 17–20.

13 E.g. "If I remember correctly, it was Egin"; in Yervant, *Needle, Thread and Button*, 18.

to these decisions; yet, at the same time, psychological experiences tend to impose the decision what must be recorded. The passage of time leads to a selective process: some experiences fade into obscurity, while others become unforgettable, though their proportions may be distorted over the decades.[14]

This kind of memory can often prove inaccurate in relation to historical details. Over the decades, places, times, and death tolls may become confused, and in many cases, they were unclear from the outset. This applies to religious phenomena as well. The children did not have the opportunity to grow up within a traditional Christian Armenian culture, with formative experiences such as annual fasts and feasts, pilgrimages to monasteries or sacred caves, witnessing monastic choirs and elders, or Christian(ized) traditions and customs related to agriculture and domestic affairs.[15] As a result, descriptions of Christian customs, including those associated with major feasts, may be confused or mistaken in memoirs and novels.[16] Then again, some meanings may unfold, become distilled, and gain greater clarity over time, as knowledge of the broader events and their consequences has grown.

Among all memories, the experience of facing death is the most difficult to forget. Indeed, many memoirs reveal that survivors struggled with memories of direct encounters with death for decades, despite their efforts to suppress and forget them.[17] The most harrowing moments could remain vividly etched in their minds, even when they longed to erase them. Armen Anush, for instance, who was nine years old in 1915 and wrote decades later, eloquently captures this reality in his account of a tortured priest and the massacre of 75 men:

> Years passed. After my bloody childhood, I lived through the dark adolescence of our generation. I knew men, good and bad, noble and petty, I read the books and the tragedy they convoyed, but I never, ever could forget that day.[18]

In the context of traumatic events, hypermnesia – the abnormally vivid and persistent memory of past experiences[19]—tends to evoke despair and pessimism. Faced with the

14 An excellent discussion on the role memory in the heritage of the Armenian genocide in Lorne Shirinian, *The Landscape of Memory: Perspectives on the Armenian Diaspora* (Kingston: Blue Heron Press, 2004), 34–41. Shirinian's oeuvre has greatly inspired my writing.

15 This is not to say that the orphans could did not maintain their Christian identity; on the contrary, in the dramatic circumstances they could build a very strong Christian identity on tiny components such as a few prayers and private memory fragments (see below). But this very fact again shows how thoroughly the character of Christianity changed, from a bountifully tradition-rich way of life to a fragmentary one.

16 e.g. Dirouhi Ajemian Ahnert even states that the Easter greeting was *Surb Asvadz* ("Holy God"), instead of "Christ is risen". Margaret Ajemian Ahnert, *The Knock at the Door. A Journey Through the Darkness of the Armenian Genocide* (New York: Beaufort, 2007), 48.

17 Chitjian, *A Hair's Breadth from Death*, 111.

18 Armen Anush, *Passage Through Hell. A Memoir. The Odyssey of a Genocide Survivor* (Studio City: H. and K. Manjikian Publication, 2007), 11. His words bear some vague resemblance to Elie Wiesel's famous utterances in *The Night* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1960), 43–44.

19 Levon Boyajian and Haigaz Grigorian, "Psychosocial Sequelae of the Armenian Genocide," in *Armenian*

overwhelming nature of such memories and the inability to process them, many survivors express profound difficulty in initiating their narratives. Ramela Martin noted in her preface: "I find I am frightened of a future filled with the past, filled with memories of terror."[20] Elise Hagopian Taft had to process the matter more than six decades before she was able to start writing:

> For more than sixty years I buried these sights and sounds and experiences of my childhood in the recesses of my mind. I could neither tell them to anyone nor write of them. Whenever the subject came up, I would freeze into silence and withdraw.[21]

Given these circumstances, starting the writing process was often distressing and painful, leading many to postpone the task for decades. In some cases, a dying relative or friend had requested that the events be documented, adding further pressure to undertake the project.[22] Writers thus grappled with the painful tension between suppressing their memories as a means of coping and the obligation to preserve them.[23]

Yet for these very reasons, writing could also serve a therapeutic and cathartic function. Through writing, one could confront traumatic experiences by externalising them and transforming them into objects of reflection. Ramela Martin, a toddler in 1915, examined her own writing process precisely from this perspective: "Writing makes me an observer, and I can examine my life without giving it gloss or glamour."[24]

Many writers were explicitly wrestling with these two approaches during the writing process. Hampartzoum Chitjian, fourteen years in 1915, after having passed the age of one hundred years still continued to describe with vivid detail the scenes of his father being tortured and the piles of bodies he had witnessed. At the same time, he recalled his bitter attempts to forget those images. Ultimately, he was left asking himself: "Did I escape only to relate my experiences as a living witness?"[25] This question alone underscores the profound existential weight that recording memories carried in processing destruction and suffering.

Bertha Nakshian Ketchian framed her writing as an act of bearing witness to the Turkish policy of genocide: "My writing is solemn testimony to the atrocities of the Young

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Genocide in Perspective, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Books, 1986), 179. Cf. Peroomian, *The Armenian Genocide in Literature*, 124.

20 Ramela Martin, *Out of Darkness* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Zoryan Institute, 1989), v.

21 Hagopian Taft, *Rebirth*, 59.

22 Grigoris Balakian, *Armenian Golgotha. A Memoir of the Armenian Genocide 1915–1918* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 287; Anush, *Passage Through Hell*, xv-xvi.

23 Marc Nichanian, "Testimony: From Document to Monument," in: Richard G. Hovannisian (ed.), *The Armenian Genocide: Cultural and Ethical Legacies* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2007), 45.

24 Martin, *Out of Darkness*, v.

25 E.g. Chitjian, *A Hair's Breadth from Death*, 111.

Turk government that robbed me of a normal childhood, my family, and my legacy."[26] Others, such as Hagopian Taft, wrote with the specific intention of passing on their heritage to future generations, stating that she recorded her experiences "so they would know something of their roots, the mass deportations, the atrocities perpetrated by the Turkish government in 1915 and hereafter."[27]

Theology of Genocide Memoirs: A Field of Paradoxes

Survivor memoirs are not ordinary reading; in a certain sense, they can be regarded as sacred documents. Broadly speaking, they hold a sacred status for all who respect and honour the memory of the victims. However, since April 2015, they have acquired an additional, though still not fully defined, ecclesiastical significance, as the martyrs of the Armenian Genocide have been canonised as saints,[28] albeit within an unforeseen category of sainthood. This development underscores a potential tension in academic study: the imperative to honour the suffering of victims and sacredness of these texts may conflict with the objective of engaging with them as problematised documents subject to critical scrutiny.

Theological texts, whether ancient or modern, typically exhibit some conceptual coherence, a hierarchy of thoughts, and an underlying schematic structure– usually an implicit systematic framework that articulates the relationship between God, humanity, and the world. Survivor memoirs, by contrast, do not present theological arguments or doctrinal assertions; instead, their "theology" may consist of raw and anguished exclamations, desperate remarks that defy systematisation. Rather than structured theological reflection, they offer a torrent of forceful outbursts–expressions of suffering that resist codification into a structured theological system.

How, then, should one proceed? Any theology of genocide should take seriously the approach of Elie Wiesel, who repeatedly underscored the inexplicability of the Holocaust. Even in interviews, Wiesel repeatedly responded by subverting or expanding the given paradigm, dismantling its implied logic and instead turning to paradoxical notions. When asked whether forgiveness died in Auschwitz, he replied: "In Auschwitz, everything died, in every way."[29] His conclusion was that Auschwitz cannot be understood either with or without God, rendering any response–whether humanistic or theological–ultimately inadequate.

This kind of paradoxical approach, which challenges established paradigms, can serve

26 Bertha Nakshian Ketchian, *In the Shadow of the Fortress* (Cambridge, Mass.: Zoryan Institute for Contemporary Armenian Research and Documentation, 1988), x.

27 Hagopian Taft, *Rebirth*, vii.

28 Shushan Khachatryan, "A Resumption of Canonization after Centuries-Long Hiatus: The Armenian Genocide through the Lens of Neo-martyrdom," *SCRINIUM Journal of Patristics and Critical Hagiography* 20, no. 1 (2024): 178-216.

29 Elie Wiesel, *Evil and Exile* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 153.

as a methodological tool for theologising about the memory of genocide. The subject itself resists binary logic, as religious themes in survivor memoirs often appear two-sided and paradoxical, defying systematic analysis and escaping logical scrutiny. Whenever survivor memoirs engage with religious or philosophical questions, they frequently present contrasting perspectives, attitudes, and notions. Thus, following the spirit of Elie Wiesel, I will now proceed by questioning certain dichotomies.

To begin with, in the case of survivor memoirs, the question of whether a particular narrative element is "retrospective" or "authentic" is not necessarily a crucial issue. First, in the face of total destruction, all subsequent narrative decisions become a secondary concern. Second, from a psychological perspective, ideas often evolve over time, and this does not have to indicate distortion or alteration; processuality can be seen as their mode of existence. A certain sensation may have been intensely present during the events as an immediate yet indistinct feeling, only to be explicitly formulated decades later. In this sense, the distinction between "authentic memories" and "retrospective interpretations" is not an either–or matter; rather, these two categories overlap and permeate one another. This means that a given expression can be both "authentic" and "interpretative" as both notions refer to the same reality; comprehensions and expressions may develop and mature over time.

Moreover, a narrator may bridge the gap between retrospective reflection and the original perspective during the very act of narration itself. In his vivid account, Chitjian, at the age of 102, drifts into an emotional flow that carries him from the present moment back into the midst of the events, wailing: "Where was God at that time? Why was this happening? What was happening to us? When was my father coming home?"[30] He begins with questions from his present perspective and ends up immersed in the original situation. Here we also face the dichotomy of spoken and literary expression being blurred. Many memoirs contain such rhetorical questions that represent retrospective reflection amidst the historical narration: "Where was God on those terrible days?"[31] "How could He allow such an unconscionable act?"[32] Indeed, one might say that in survivor memoirs, God is a question rather than answer, unlike in standard Christian writing.

Moreover, it seems that both the urge to forget and the urge to remember coexisted already during the events themselves. The compulsion to forget was intensified by physical exhaustion and mental numbness:

> I wanted to block out the memories of death; death and tragedy all around me. I had no idea where I was, or with whom, or what treatment, if any, I had been given. I remember nothing of this period, neither by day or night.[33]

30 Chitjian, *A Hair's Breadth from Death*, 93.

31 Khachadoor and Helene Pilibosian, *They Called Me Mustafa. Memoir of an Immigrant* (Watertown: Ohan Press, 1992), 28.

32 Chitjian, *A Hair's Breadth from Death*, 5.

33 Hagopian Taft, *Rebirth*, 63.

Even the very concept of childhood can be questioned in the context of genocide. There are compelling psychological reasons to argue, as some survivors–particularly women–did themselves,[34] that children who went through the genocidal events were no longer children but had, in effect, become adults, regardless of their age. For example, Taft Hagopian reflected decades later in her memoirs: "I was fast becoming an adult before outgrowing my childhood."[35] Girls and women ceased menstruating, and many who became pregnant because of repeated sexual violence underwent abortions through "local means." However, the young survivors realised the scale of their physical and mental agony only long afterwards.[36]

Furthermore, one may question the modern tendency to separate what is considered "genuinely spiritual" from what is perceived as merely cultural and social conventions. The approach to this distinction inevitably shapes the way we interpret survivor memoirs, even in their smallest details. For instance, they contain numerous religious utterances and expressions, such as "Glory to God," which may easily appear to contemporary readers as nothing more than formulaic cultural conventions.[37] Yet this very division is, in many ways, artificial. There is no objective boundary between a "cultural convention" and what is "genuinely spiritual," given that the same words can be spoken with differing attitudes and intentions, and in any case, momentary emotions are not a criterion of spirituality. In fact, no definitive criteria exist for determining what constitutes something "genuinely spiritual." In the context of life and death, even the most conventional phrases–or indeed, their very absence–may carry profound significance.[38]

Similarly, it has become customary in modern discourse to presuppose a sharp distinction between believers and non-believers. However, in survivor memoirs, the meaningfulness of such a division is highly questionable. In the daily struggle between life and death, such distinctions lose their meaning, as both the foundations of faith and the certainties of atheism, humanism, and common sense are profoundly shaken. Moreover, even before the genocide, ordinary Christians in Armenian villages did not construct their identities around such distinctions. To be Armenian was to be Christian, and the nature or inner quality of one's Christianity was not a matter of debate in the way it is in modern Western culture.

34 Ibid., 70, 80.

35 Ibid., 52.

36 Ibid., 55.

37 Cf. the cases in Anush, *Passage Through Hell*, 7, 49–50.

38 For example, even a phrase like "May God help us all," when spoken by a starving priest amidst death and despair, can carry a unique resonance and haunting effect, as illustrated in Anush, *Passage Through Hell*, 67.

Spirituality of Children during the Genocide

With these reflections on the narrative context in mind, we now turn to the core question. The spirituality of children can be approached through three intertwined themes that appear from time to time in survivor memoirs: the nature of God, the problem of providence, and the role of prayer.

God. Christian theology is founded on paradoxes of the human-divine unity of Christ and the triune character of God. However, the modest theology reflected in survivor memoirs is not less paradoxical, shaped as it is by the surreal circumstances in which ethical and normative principles suddenly ceased to exist. Genocide represents an extreme form of human suffering and, as such, raises theological, ethical, and psychological questions in their ultimate forms.

But how to formulate the core problem? What is the ultimate question? From a practical perspective, it may be encapsulated in a single word. Already during the death marches, children were asking the simple yet profound question: Why? As Armen Anush recalls, "'Why? Why?' I kept asking myself but couldn't come up with an answer."[39] Given that the Armenian worldview was fundamentally religious, this was, at its core, a theological question.

The question "why" could be directed toward what theology calls the problem of divine attributes. Elise Hagopian Taft, eight or nine years old during the deportation, remembers wondering how their God could be so powerless:

> In my young mind I kept asking myself why we had been born Armenians, and why our God and Jesus Christ were apparently unprotective and less powerful than the so-almighty Allah and Prophet Mohamed of the Turks.[40]

Attributes such as "unprotectiveness" and "powerlessness" are certainly not present in any conventional theological scheme. This in turn illustrates the helplessness of traditional theological paradigms when confronted with the reality of genocide.

Where was God? How was He like? The question weighed heavily on children. Armen Anush described moments when religious beliefs clashed with the brutal reality of the death marches, rendering religious truths into clichés that seemed somewhat absurd:

> Mother stroked my hair and said, "God is almighty, son." Yes, God is almighty, but the rain began falling nonetheless, gently at first, then with vengeance. We walked […][41]

39 Anush, *Passage Through Hell,* 47.

40 Hagopian Taft, *Rebirth*, 57.

41 Anush, *Passage Through Hell*, 35 (see also the case of a starving priest in p. 67).

In such circumstances, the only way to sustain faith was to situate God's existence beyond the cruel immediacy of lived reality. Serpouhi Tavoukdjian recalled her father's words, "God has purpose in all, though we may not see it."[42] Notably, such expressions often appear isolated and self-contained, lacking any indication that they belong to a coherent, internalised belief system. Rather, they function as discrete aphorisms–simultaneously resonant and irrelevant–offering meaning while failing to integrate with the surrounding narrative. And they are typically voiced by characters other than the narrator.

Nevertheless, despite the agonising inconsistency with theological realities, and the collapse of existential normality, faith in God could still endure and even sustain the deportees, serving as their last and only hope. As Hagopian Taft relates: "I had been 'skin and bones' after my father's death and only my faith in God and the memory of my parents and brother Garo sustained me."[43]

Providence. The religious question was not solely about God. Many memoirs convey a profound sense of disappointment in the Christian world, culminating in feelings of utter abandonment and isolation. While this sense of dejection was certainly present during the genocide, it appears to have only deepened over the years. Thus, for many survivors, the question of why was directed not so much at God as at the Christian nations and Allied forces–why had they not protected the Armenians? After recounting horrors so unbearable that many lost their sanity, including the mental collapse of her own uncle, Hagopian Taft posed the anguished question: "Where were all the so-called God-fearing Moslem and Christian people of the world?"[44] This may seem like a retrospective reflection, yet it was present from the very beginning. Dirouhi Kouymjian Highgas, thirteen years old in 1915, affirms that "everybody wondered" this very question at the outset of the events.[45] Later, she recalls:

> We still prayed that by some miracle of God, one or another of the Christian nations (who, surely, were aware of these deportations and massacres) would somehow, save us from our fate.[46]

Once again, we encounter a paradox: destruction was all-encompassing yet trust in God remained manifest against all realities. The unfolding events followed the inexorable logic of evil, leading towards utter devastation, yet within this trajectory, some still perceived moments of divine guidance or protection.

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42 Serpouhi Tavoukdjian, *Exiled: Story of an Armenian Girl* (Takoma Park: Review and Herald Publishing Company, 1933), 61.

43 Hagopian Taft, *Rebirth*, 74.

44 Hagopian Taft, *Rebirth*, 59. "Not a finger was raised by the Christian nations to stop the wholesale murder of our people!" Ibid, 45.

45 Dirouhi Kouymjian Highgas, *Refugee Girl* (Watertown: Baikar Publications, 1985), 46.

46 Kouymjian Highgas, *Refugee Girl*, 57.

Many memoirs recount moments where survivors perceived God's providence at work in specific situations. While this belief was undoubtedly present during the events themselves, in some cases, it seems to have emerged as a retrospective interpretation. For instance, Antranik A. Enkababian recalls a harrowing choice he faced at six years old–either suicide with his family or enduring the torments of deportation with his uncle. Looking back, he believed that, in that moment, the Holy Spirit gave him strength to choose the latter.[47] In a wider picture, however, the totality of events renders the notion of protective providence profoundly problematic, even nonsensical.

Despite everything, many maintained their trust in God amidst all things and continued to uphold their belief in providence and Christian principles, even in the face of overwhelming devastation. Indeed, the overall atmosphere appears to have remained one of faith until the end. Armen Anush recounts that when a woman cursed her life and openly blamed God, those around her responded by murmuring, "May God forgive her," reflecting the prevailing reverence.[48]

In other words, while the external course of events led inexorably towards annihilation, punctuated by rare moments of perceived providence, the survivors' inner reality could be the inverse: an enduring faith in God, occasionally interrupted by moments of doubt and despair. These outbursts could become only more intense and bitter over the decades.

Prayer. Spirituality is a complex concept to define, but without doubt one of its most tangible expressions is prayer: the more one prays, the more spiritual one appears. This provides a practical way to approach the concept, though other aspects–such as ethical conduct, theological reflection, existential progress, or charismatic phenomena–should not be excluded. The genocide memoirs offer a rare opportunity of having some glimpses into the inner prayer life of small children more than a century ago.

Some memoirs suggest that even before the genocide, there was a sense of growing threat, met with spiritual response. Shahen Derderian, eight years at the time, recalls how hostility towards Armenians intensified in the spring of 1915, and, in turn, his family's evening prayers at home became increasingly fervent.[49] They also attended church services "with sizeable crowds almost every day." When Derderian asked his mother why they were going to church so often, she explained the gravity of the situation and the need to seek solace and support in their faith:

> She said we were there to supplicate for the Lord's protection against the coming evils. "God save us from the Turks," she used to whisper. "Who knows what calamities they'll subject us to again."[50]

47 Antranik A. Enkababian, *From Slaughter to Survival: An Autobiography by a Survivor of the Ottoman Turkish Genocide of the Armenians* (Catonsville: Aladdin Publishing, 1999), 21.

48 Anush, *Passage Through Hell*, 35.

49 Shahen Derderian, *Death March: An Armenian survivor's memoir of the Genocide of 1915* (Studio City, California: H. and K. Manjikian Publication, 2008), 2.

50 Derderian, *Death March*, 3.

Similarly, at the outset of the deportations, prayer became more intense. As Khachadoor Pilibosian notes, "Many were praying, fearing the trap of death."[51] Chitjian describes his father's unwavering faith, recalling his sincere prayers and firm belief that God would protect them: "Without the will of God, the leaves on the trees do not move."[52]

Yet, it was often the mothers who kept the spirituality alive. John Yervant, then eight years old, recalls how, after his father disappeared, his mother kept saying: "Children, pray to God, he will return." Nevertheless, he bluntly remarks: "We prayed day and night, but we still did not see him."[53] Likewise, Elise Hagopian Taft notes that even when men were present, it was the women who upheld morale–for example, by singing Der Voghormya ("Lord, have mercy").[54] In the same vein, Kerop Bedoukian notes: "I longed to see acts of heroism, but these were rare and usually performed by women."[55] Of course, this was largely due to the fact that men were rarely present, as in many places they had been shot at the outset of the events.

Prayer, too, takes on a paradoxical quality in this context. On the one hand, it could serve as a means of coping with the situation. A child who had lost her relatives is utterly helpless, yet through belief in God and trust in prayer, he/she could create a sense of companionship–an Other to walk with, someone to whom one could speak. One may note that this could provide some solace regardless of the actual existence of God.

During the death marches, the deportees encouraged one another to keep praying in order to endure.[56] Serpouhi Tavoukdjian, for instance, repeatedly recited biblical verses taught by her father[57] and kept praying through the nights, keeping God constantly in mind.[58] This carried a twofold potential: first, it represented something that the perpetrators could not strip away; second, it opened existential perspectives that transcended the immediate hopelessness. In this sense, prayer could function as a vital resource for survival.

For most Armenians, belief in the power of prayer, or at least in its reasonableness, was taken for granted. In a world where God was "the only thing they could rely on," many "truly believed that God would come to their aid," as Karnig Panian (born 1910, Gurin village) recounts.[59] "We'll be keep praying for God's aid until there's no one left alive

51 Pilibosian, *They Called Me Mustafa*, 13.

52 Chitjian, *A Hair's Breadth from Death*, 88–90, 98.

53 Yervant, *Needle, Thread and Button*, 18.

54 Hagopian Taft, *Rebirth*, 40.

55 Bedoukian, *Some of Us Survived*, 45.

56 Hagopian Taft, *Rebirth*, 44.

57 Tavoukdjian, *Exiled*, 33. She mentions "All things work together for good to them that love God" (Rom. 8:28), and "the angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear Him, and delivereth them" (Ps. 34:7).

58 Tavoukdjian, *Exiled*, 27.

59 Karnig Panian, *Goodbye, Antoura. A Memoir of the Armenian Genocide* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 39.

to pray anymore," one woman noted.[60] Apparently, this kind of sentence can be read as a sarcastic note or as an expression of determined conviction; both meanings are applicable to "I the protagonist" and "I the narrator" accordingly.

Then again, after all the praying, the entire spiritual enterprise seemed futile, leading to frustration and anger. Spiritually speaking, the most unsettling aspect was precisely that the Armenians did pray persistently, yet their circumstances only worsened, from disaster to insanity. Thus, the question of God's role is not an abstract intellectual puzzle, but something intricately tied the pressing practical concerns; prayer became like a space where one could navigate this strange tremendum. As Arda Arsenian Ekmekji asks: "Why did the curses and the pleas that erupted like lava from our broken, tormented and torn hearts and rose to the altars of the heaven remain unanswered?"[61] Indeed, survivor memoirs reveal both extremes: on the one hand, a profound trust in and reliance on prayer; on the other, deep despair and frustration at its apparent ineffectiveness. While survival itself could be interpreted as a miraculous providence, survivors rarely view the setting from an individualistic perspective.

However, one should keep in mind that the eastern conception of prayer is meditative rather than simply a presentation of petitions and requests; its function is to foster participation in God rather than engage in a dialogue with him. In that sense, at its deepest, prayer is introspective and contemplative, particularly in spiritual literature and monastic practice.

Moreover, when considering the role of prayer in "coping with tragedy", we must also reflect on the actual meaning of this question. In Western contexts, such an inquiry is typically framed in psychological terms, focusing on individual recovery. Yet, in Armenian survivor memoirs, this is not always the case. Rather, prayer may function as a collective phenomenon, contributing to the preservation and formation of ethnic and national identity. This was particularly crucial for those whose identities were still forming–namely, children.

Perhaps surprisingly, it was precisely the meditative nature of prayer that could serve in the preservation of ethnic identity. During the marches, Karnig Panian silently repeated the Lord's Prayer, realising how a "strange confidence" grew within him each time he uttered the words, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." This confidence did not stem from conscious reasoning or cognitive process but from a meditative one, as he later admitted having repeated the verse "without even understanding the words."[62]

Prayer became a lifeline, allowing children to hold onto something essential from their lost life and threatened identity. Some memoirs describe in detail the systematic efforts to convert children, with some references to prayer as a means of resistance. For example, in Chitjian's village (Perri, in Kharpet area) this process began even before the deportations,

60 Ibid., 49.

61 Arda Arsenian Ekmekji, *Towards Golgotha. The Memoirs of Hagop Arsenian, a Genocide Survivor* (Beirut: Haigazian University Press, 2011), 116.

62 Panian, *Goodbye, Antoura*, 34.

amid the atrocities. The children were first given Islamic names and forbidden to speak Armenian, forced instead to use Turkish; only later were they introduced to some basics of Islam. Soon, however, the Turks realised that older children would retain their Christian identity—and decided to kill them.[63] Why, then, did Armenians not convert to Islam in large numbers, as that would have been an easy means of preserving one's life?[64] The answer does not necessarily lie in individuals' steadfast faith or profound personal experiences, but in the collective and historical depth of Armenian spirituality, cultivated over centuries. In moments of extreme crisis, survivors resorted to this historical perspective. Shahen Derderian records his uncle's explanation: "The Turk has often massacred us, but the Armenian people has always survived and prevailed."[65] Likewise, Hagopian Taft explains this phenomenon through a historical lens, one that had become fundamental to Armenian identity during the centuries.

> Our Christianity had become a way of life for us ever since it had been introduced to Armenia by the Apostles Thaddeus and Bartholomew. Throughout the centuries our ancestors had sacrificed their lives and resisted conversion by a score of conquerors and remained Christian. They had died that our faith might live. We could not do less. Christianity for us was no Sunday morning affair. In life and death we remained Christian.[66]

Yet the pressure on orphaned children was overwhelming. In Turkish orphanages, Armenian children faced a strict ban on speaking their native language as part of a broader policy of forced assimilation. Some memoirs offer striking insights into how they responded to this suppression. Karnig Panian recalls how he and many other boys would cross themselves under their blankets and silently recite Armenian prayers–Hayr Mer and any others they could remember. It is telling that the words of these prayers evoked images of relatives and neighbours rather than thoughts of God or religious experiences.[67] Yet this does not diminish the authenticity of their spirituality; it just shows the down-to-earth character of religious experience. Reflecting on the meaning of prayer, Panian later wrote: "I barely understood the words, but without any family left, this prayer was basically my only connection to my past and my identity. It was my shield against Turkification."[68]

63 Chitjian, *A Hair's Breadth from Death*, 102–4.

64 The option was repeatedly offered by the Turks, especially in the first phases of the genocidal process, but the Armenians "preferred death to deportation," as Hagopian Taft (*Rebirth*, 55) reminiscences.

65 Derderian, *Death March*, 9.

66 Hagopian Taft, *Rebirth*, 55.

67 Panian, *Goodbye, Antoura*, 96, 108–9.

68 Ibid., 108. For a detailed discussion, see Rubina Peroomian, "The Institutions of Turkification and Assimilation in the Eyes of Armenian Orphans Who Fled Them," *International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies* 9, no. 2 (2024): 1–27; Edita Gzoyan, Regina Galustyan, Shushan Khachatryan and Narine Margaryan, "In the Beautiful Heaven, a Golden Cage: Race, Identity and Memory in Turkification of Armenian Children in

Moreover, older boys encouraged the younger ones to pray to "our God," preserve their language, and never forget that they were Armenians.[69] When they finally managed to escape from the orphanage, they immediately declared that from now on, they would "pray out loud, proudly, and in Armenian."[70]

Children facing the "Christian moral imperative"

Spirituality is not only about prayer and contemplation–it shapes one's entire worldview and way of life, particularly in social relationships and ethical decisions. For child survivors, the struggle for survival was not only physical but also an ethical challenge. How could one live according to Christian values while navigating life on the streets? Once again, we encounter two opposing responses.

On one hand, some held firmly to their Christian identity and moral principles despite hunger and hardship. Kerop Bedoukian recalls how, in 1917, he still had a deep sense of honesty and responsibility and was committed to retain them, while struggling to survive on the streets–especially in contrast to a Turkish boy who stole without hesitation. He even admitted to having felt envy towards the Turk who was not bound by the same moral code as the Armenians.[71]

On the other hand, some accounts reject such moral restraint. In Mushegh Ishkhan's autobiographical novel, street boys appear hardened and ruthless, with no regard for their Christian identity.[72] While it would be unfair to judge begging children for ethical lapses, it is relevant to note that both approaches reinforce a common association between Christianity and virtues such as honesty and nonviolence–qualities that, in the brutal reality of the streets, could seem more like liability and weakness than strength.

For young girls, the primary threat, and often their only option for survival, was sexual slavery as concubines. Caught in this harrowing dilemma, many felt compelled to consider suicide. Serpouhi Tavoukdjian recounts how she attempted to drown herself but, upon realising that taking a life was a sin, could not go through with it. Instead, she prayed for death.[73] However, many others did not hesitate and threw themselves into rivers. Such acts of suicide can be understood not only as extreme ethical statements but also as profound expressions of traditional Christian morality—voluntary death as martyrdom, echoing the accounts of the early Church.

State Orphanages During the Armenian Genocide," *Journal of Genocide Research* 26, no. 3 (2024): 243–263; Shushan Khachatryan, "Halide Edip and the Turkification of Armenian Children: Enigmas, Problems and Questions," *International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies* 6, no. 1 (2021): 48–79.

69 Panian, *Goodbye, Antoura*, 119.

70 Ibid., 124.

71 Bedoukian, *Some of Us Survived*, 126–127.

72 See the discussion on Ishkhan's novel in Peroomian, *Armenian Genocide in Literature*, 126.

73 Tavoukdjian, *Exiled*, 61.

Conclusion: Memorizing God after Decades

Survivor memoirs contain a wealth of memory fragments concerning God, prayer, and spirituality. However, these references are often scattered throughout the narrative, with little elaboration or further exploration. This reflects the gradual erosion of the religious context, Christian customs, and spiritual attitudes, which lost their Sitz im Leben amid massacres, deportations, concentration camps, and the challenges of building new lives in exile. Yet the questions never disappeared, and the role of God continued to perplex survivors.

For many survivors, however, God ultimately prevails in the end, even if they cannot fully explain why. Despite all they endured, faith somehow remained. Theologically, their views on God and providence are usually quite simple; undoubtedly this is related to the fact the events were experienced in childhood and remembering them often meant returning to a child's perspective. But there is also a theological reason: after the genocide, religious convictions and beliefs do not coalesce into a coherent system; rather, traditional formulations remain detached units that may seem true from one perspective but hollow from another.

Nevertheless, reflections may become crystallised over time, articulated with the confidence of age. Throughout his memoir, John Yervant is notably reluctant to offer spiritual interpretations. Yet in his concise, almost laconic final chapter–written more than six decades after the genocide, and after having distributed much of his wealth to the Armenian cause–he solemnly declares: "I believe that it was God's wish that I live and become successful: I think I did my share."[74] Similarly, Elise Hagopian, after listing how "poets, writers, scholars, artists, doctors, lawyers, skilled artisans, and priests had nearly all been killed," concluded: "those still alive had survived by the grace of God."[75] This is perhaps a way to say that the courses of life and twists of fate are not in human hands, but they are not random occurrences either.

The most thought-provoking perspectives, however, belong to those who refuse to settle on a single answer, instead holding on to both sides of the dilemma, continuing to wrestle with the paradox. Many grappled with this enigma by engaging with it from opposing viewpoints. Chitjian's memoirs exemplify this struggle: on the one hand, he repeatedly affirmed his faith in divine providence, attributing his survival to God; on the other, he voiced bitter accusations, at times even charging God with deception. At the remarkable age of 102, he was still searching for the ultimate reason behind the events.[76] In other words, the same survivor could express gratitude to God for his life and declare Him a deceiver. Despite his advanced age, Chitjian continued to ask why he had survived. He considered various possibilities: perhaps it was God's will, or perhaps he had been spared

74 Yervant, *Needle, Thread and Button*, 92.

75 Hagopian Taft, *Rebirth*, 71.

76 Chitjian, *A Hair's Breadth from Death*, 85, 90, 93, 99, 105, 109, 113.

to bear witness to the atrocities.[77] Yet, in what may be the most distinctively Armenian response–in all its impossibility–he believed he had survived in order to return home. Indeed, he clung to the conviction that the ultimate purpose of survival was to resettle their ancestral lands: "Why else did I survive?"[78] Chitjian kept asking in his old age.

Finally, Chitjian captured the survivor's reality in a single, haunting phrase: "You never survive from a genocide." In the mouth of a survivor, this is yet another paradoxical truth. Ultimately, each answer is merely one side of an ever-turning coin.

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77 Ibid., 94.

78 Ibid., 219.

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About the Author

Dr. Serafim Seppälä is full professor of Systematic theology and patristics at the University of Eastern Finland, Joensuu. His research interests encompass a wide range of topics in Eastern Christianity, such as Syriac and Greek ascetical literature and mystical theology, Byzantine and Orthodox aesthetics, interaction of Judaism and Eastern Christianity, encounter of early Islam and Christianity, as well as the cultural heritage of the Armenian Genocide. He has published about one hundred scholarly articles, in addition to about twenty books in his native Finnish.

E-mail: serafim.seppala@uef.fi

SLOW-BURN DESTRUCTION: READING "*CONDITIONS OF LIFE*" INTO TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY GENOCIDE

Svetah Chakhmakhchyan
Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, Armenia

Edgar Meyroyan
Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, Armenia

Abstract

This article addresses a persistent gap in genocide law: the under-utilization of Article II(c) of the Genocide Convention ("conditions of life") to prosecute and prevent deliberate deprivation strategies that destroy protected groups over time. When states or armed actors intentionally sever civilian access to life-sustaining resources, through blockades, sieges, or other forms of isolation, the resulting attrition operates as a form of slow-burn genocide. Yet such "slow-motion" atrocities frequently evade timely legal and political recognition because their harm unfolds gradually, lacks the immediacy of mass executions, and presents greater evidentiary challenges for proving *dolus specialis*. Consequently, Article II(c) remains under-enforced: starvation, medical blockades, and other deprivation-based measures are too often framed solely as humanitarian crises or war crimes, rather than as genocidal acts triggering the Convention's obligations of prevention and accountability.

The article advances three contributions. First, it clarifies the doctrinal scope of Article II(c), synthesizing relevant jurisprudence on *actus reus* and genocidal intent in deprivation-based strategies, and identifying evidentiary approaches that do not require a "body-count" threshold. Second, it operationalizes the provision into a measurable early-warning and charging framework by proposing objective triggers, such as sustained supply shortfalls, health-system collapse, and repeated obstruction of humanitarian access, to inform provisional measures, prosecutorial strategies, and domestic legal incorporation. Third, it illustrates the framework's feasibility through a proof-of-concept analysis of the Lachin Corridor blockade, contextualized through historical and contemporary comparators.

The proposed approach shifts the focus from retrospective recognition to prospective prevention, offering a doctrinally grounded tool that enables scholars, courts, and practitioners to identify, prosecute, and interrupt genocide-by-attrition before attrition becomes annihilation.

Keywords: genocide; starvation; blockade; Nagorno-Karabakh; Artsakh; Lachin Corridor; Article II(c) Genocide Convention

Funding: This work was supported by the Higher Education and Science Committee of the Republic of Armenia (Research project N 22rl-040).

This article was submitted on 30.06.2024 and accepted for publication on 25.05.2025.

How to cite: Svetah Chakhmakhchyan and Edgar Meyroyan, "Slow-Burn Destruction: Reading "*Conditions of Life*" into Twenty-First Century Genocide," *International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies* 10, no. 1 (2025): 102-128.

Introduction

Genocide is not always inflicted through bullets and swords. Yet a persistent blind spot in genocide law has left the Genocide Convention's "conditions of life" provision under-enforced, allowing slow-burn methods of destruction to evade timely recognition and accountability. Article II(c) of the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Genocide Convention) explicitly covers the deliberate imposition of "conditions of life" intended to destroy, in whole or in part, a protected group, acknowledging that systemic deprivation of food, water, healthcare, shelter, or mobility can gradually erode a population's existence as surely as direct killing.

Indeed, contemporary blockades offer a stark illustration: when states or armed actors intentionally isolate civilian populations from life-sustaining resources, the resulting attrition functions as a "slow-burn" genocide. Unlike the immediacy of mass violence, such incremental assaults unfold gradually and in plain sight, yet their impact can be equally catastrophic. Because the harm diffuses over time and lacks the immediate body count of mass killings, these deprivation-based tactics often elude timely genocide recognition, with their very gradualness obscuring the perpetrators' genocidal intent and making the requisite *dolus specialis* harder to prove.

Recent cases underscore the urgency of this under-enforcement gap. Since 2007, the Gaza Strip has endured an intensifying blockade that, by 2023–2024, plunged its two million residents into a state of humanitarian collapse, characterized by failing food systems, devastated healthcare, and widespread displacement.[1] A parallel pattern emerged in Nagorno-Karabakh, where Azerbaijan's blockade of the Lachin Corridor from December 2022 to September 2023 effectively severed 120,000 ethnic Armenians from essential supplies, creating life-threatening conditions in violation of international humanitarian norms.[2] Although such blockades are rarely designated as genocide while ongoing, more often cast as humanitarian crises or war crimes, their structural logic, namely, the systematic dismantling of the conditions necessary for group survival, falls squarely within the scope of Article II(c).

To address this blind spot, the article advances a forward-looking legal framework for confronting genocide-by-attrition. It makes three distinct contributions. First,

1 Ernesto Verdeja, "The Gaza Genocide in Five Crises," *Journal of Genocide Research* (2025): 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2025.2452707; Mohammed Nijim, "Genocide in Palestine: Gaza as a Case Study," *The International Journal of Human Rights* 27 *no.* 1 (2022): 165–200. https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2022.2065261

2 Edita Gzoyan, Svetah Chakhmakhchyan, and Edgar Meyroyan. "Ethnic Cleansing in Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh): Issues of Definition and Criminal Responsibility," *International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies* 8, no. 2 (2023): 56-85, https://doi.org/10.51442/ijags.0045. On the comparative perspective of Artsakh and Gaza, see Elyse Semerdjian, "Gazafication and Genocide by Attrition in Artsakh/Nagorno Karabakh and the Occupied Palestinian Territories," *Journal of Genocide Research*, 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2024.2377871; Klara Francesca Junkar, "Artsakh and Gaza: A Parallel Struggle," *Diskrepancija: studentski časopis za društveno-humanističke teme* 19. no. 27 (2024): 86-108.

it clarifies and revitalizes the often-overlooked Article II(c) doctrine, synthesizing jurisprudence on the *actus reus* and special intent behind deprivation-based strategies and outlining evidentiary pathways that do not require a large death toll to prove genocidal intent. Second, it operationalizes this doctrine into a measurable early-warning and charging framework, identifying objective indicators such as sustained supply shortfalls, health-system collapse, and obstruction of humanitarian relief, to better trigger genocide prevention obligations and inform prosecutorial action. Third, it demonstrates the applicability of these tools through a detailed case study of the Lachin Corridor blockade, read against historical and contemporary comparators, to show how an ostensibly slow-onset atrocity can be rigorously qualified and charged as a genocidal act. In doing so, the article seeks to shift the field from retrospective labels to proactive prevention and accountability, equipping courts, advocates, and policymakers with a doctrinally grounded tool to name, charge, and interrupt genocide-by-attrition *before* attrition becomes annihilation.

Part II lays the groundwork by tracing the evolution of blockades from classical sieges to today's multidimensional forms and mapping their treatment under international humanitarian law, human rights law, and the Genocide Convention, while defining key terms such as "starvation," "conditions of life," and "intent to destroy."

Part III examines historical and contemporary cases of mass deprivation, from ancient wartime sieges to the twentieth-century Holodomor and beyond, to identify recurring markers of genocidal intent, including systematic resource obstruction, eliminationist rhetoric, and the destruction of infrastructure essential for group survival.

Part IV analyzes how international criminal tribunals from Nuremberg to the ICTY, ICTR, and ICC have addressed starvation and other life-threatening deprivations as crimes. It clarifies the legal elements and evidentiary standards for establishing genocide in such contexts, delineating when sustained deprivation escalates from a war crime or crime against humanity into a genocidal act under Article II(c).

Part V applies this framework to the Lachin Corridor blockade case study, evaluating whether Azerbaijan's deliberate severance of 120,000 Armenians from vital supplies was calculated to bring about the group's destruction, thus constituting an attempted genocide under Article II(c).

Finally, the Conclusion reflects on the broader implications, proposing reforms to close accountability gaps for "slow-burn" genocides, refining early-warning indicators to detect "conditions of life" attacks, and outlining measures for states and international institutions to prevent attritional atrocities from culminating in annihilation.

From Siege to Slow Death: Understanding Blockades

Blockades have been employed as instruments of warfare to erode enemy resistance since antiquity. During the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE), Spartan control of key sea lanes ultimately severed Athens from its critical grain supply routes in the Black Sea, hastening the city-state's capitulation.[3] Centuries later, the British memorandum to the 1908–1909 London Naval Conference articulated what remains the canonical definition of a blockade: "an act of war carried out by the warships of a belligerent, designed to prevent access to or departure from a specified section of the enemy's coastline."[4] While originally formulated in the context of naval operations, this definition has since been extended by analogy to encompass land and air-based sieges. Although contemporary legal doctrine lacks a unified treaty-based definition of blockade, United Nations bodies have consistently condemned the use of blockades that endanger civilian life, in contexts ranging from Afghanistan to the occupied Palestinian territories.[5]

In the absence of a dedicated international convention governing blockades, the applicable legal norms are derived from a patchwork of legal frameworks. Customary international humanitarian law imposes clear obligations on besieging or blockading powers, notably the duty to allow humanitarian relief when civilian starvation is threatened, a principle codified in Rule 55 of the ICRC's *Customary International Humanitarian Law* study.[6] Complementing this, international human rights law reinforces the protection of civilians under siege. Article 25 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* affirms the right to an adequate standard of living, including access to sufficient food, medical care, housing, heating, and sanitation, all of which may be jeopardized, or deliberately denied, in the course of a blockade.[7]

The critical legal nexus between blockade and genocide is established in Article II(c) of the 1948 Genocide Convention: "*Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life* calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part."[8] [emphasis added]. This clause addresses so-called "'slow death' methods,"[9] – measures that do not result in

3 John Nash, "Sea Power in the Peloponnesian War," *Naval War College Review* 71, no. 1 (2018): 132–133.

4 J. Ramsay MacDonald, "The London Naval Conference, 1930," *Journal of the Royal Institute of International Affairs* 9, no. 4 (1930): 429–451.

5 United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Resolutions 1994/74 and 1995/76; Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Conference of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Resolution 1/7-P (IS).

6 International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), *Customary International Humanitarian Law: Volume I: Rules*, ed. Jean-Marie Henckaerts and Louise Doswald-Beck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Rule 55.

7 UN General Assembly, Resolution 217A (III), Universal Declaration of Human Rights, A/RES/217(III) (December 10, 1948), art. 25.

8 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, December 9, 1948, 78 U.N.T.S. 277, art. 2(c).

9 International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), *Prosecutor v. Kayishema and Ruzindana*, Trial Chamber Judgment, May 21, 1999, para 115.

the immediate killing of group members but are calculated to bring about their physical destruction over time.[10] Such measures include the deliberate withholding of food and water, forced displacement, the systematic denial of medical care, and the imposition of excessive labor or physical exhaustion.[11] The inclusion of the term "deliberately" underscores the necessity of intent: the perpetrator must purposefully employ such measures as a means of physically destroying the group.[12]

During the drafting of the Genocide Convention, the Preparatory Commission rejected a U.S. proposal that would have required proof that the imposed conditions directly caused the group's destruction.[13] The drafters of the Genocide Convention explicitly sought to encompass the full range of atrocities committed by the Nazi regime,[14] including expulsion from homes,[15] the intentional deprivation of life-sustaining resources, inadequate hygiene, forced labor,[16] and other degrading conditions designed to destroy targeted groups gradually. Importantly, the provision does not require that the entirety of the group be targeted; it is sufficient that the conditions imposed are calculated to destroy a part of the group, as defined by national, ethnic, racial, or religious identity.[17] In other words, it is sufficient that the conditions of life are structured in a way that leads to the elimination of a portion of the group. Crucially, Article II(c) does not hinge on the actual death toll resulting from such conditions. What matters is the intentional structuring of life-threatening circumstances with the aim of eliminating a group, in whole or in part. As such, the clause serves as a vital legal tool for capturing genocidal strategies that operate through sustained deprivation rather than immediate physical violence.[18]

Food deprivation is only one vector through which genocidal conditions of life may be imposed. International jurisprudence has increasingly recognized that the systematic

10 Florian Jeßberger, "The Definition of the Elements of the Crime of Genocide," in *The UN Genocide Convention: A Commentary*, ed. Paola Gaeta (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 100; ICTR, *Prosecutor v. Akayesu*, Trial Chamber Judgment, September 2, 1998, para 505; ICTR, *Prosecutor v. Rutaganda*, Trial Chamber Judgment, December 6, 1999, para 52.

11 *Prosecutor v. Kayishema and Ruzindana*, paras. 115–116.

12 Gerhard Werle, *Principles of International Criminal Law* (The Hague: TMC Asser Press, 2005), marg. no. 562.

13 Wiebke Rückert and Georg Witschel, "Genocide and Crimes against Humanity in the Elements of Crimes," in *International and National Prosecution of Crimes Under International Law: Current Developments*, eds. Horst Fischer, Claus Kress, and Sascha Rolf Lüder (Berlin: Berlin Verlag, 2001), 68.

14 Werle, *Principles of International Criminal Law.*

15 International Criminal Court (ICC), *Elements of Crimes*, art. 6(c), no. 3, fn. 4.

16 International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), *Prosecutor v. Radoslav Brđanin,* Case No. IT-99-36-T, Judgment, Trial Chamber, September 1, 2004, para 691, citing ICTR, *Judgment, Prosecutor v. Kayishema and Ruzindana*, para 115.

17 *Prosecutor v. Akayesu*, para 505; M. Lippman, "The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide: Fifty Years Later," *Arizona Journal of International and Comparative Law* 15 (1998): 467, 456.

18 Nehemiah Robinson, *The Genocide Convention: A Commentary* (New York: Institute of Jewish Affairs, World Jewish Congress, 1960), 58.

denial of medical care or access to safe shelter can, in themselves, satisfy the threshold established under Article II(c) of the Genocide Convention. In *Prosecutor v. Radoslav Brđanin*, the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) observed that although some rudimentary medical treatment was available, the detention facilities lacked the resources necessary to address anything beyond basic healthcare needs.[19] The judgment further documented that numerous detainees suffered from serious medical conditions, including pneumonia, diabetes, and dysentery, but were systematically denied adequate medical attention.[20] This failure, in the context of other inhumane conditions, contributed to the Tribunal's assessment of the broader pattern of persecution and destruction.

In *Prosecutor v. Clément Kayishema and Obed Ruzindana*, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) recognized that acts or omissions contributing to genocide may be executed with varying mental states, including not only direct intent but also recklessness or gross negligence. The creation of conditions leading to mass death involves the establishment of circumstances that foreseeably and systematically result in large-scale loss of life. Examples cited in the case include the mass detention of individuals combined with the deliberate withholding of essential resources, such as food, water, and medical care, resulting in widespread fatalities.[21]

A similarly destructive medical strategy was employed during the Cambodian genocide under the Khmer Rouge regime. The systematic denial of adequate medical care, coupled with the regime's reliance on ineffective and often harmful treatments, including rudimentary home-made remedies and the use of untrained child medics, led to widespread suffering and death across the country. Testimonies and historical accounts reveal that untreated illness became a pervasive condition of life, with many Cambodians sharing experiences of chronic fear surrounding medical procedures, which were often arbitrary, dangerous, or fatal.[22] This deliberate dismantling of the healthcare system functioned as a tool of repression and contributed significantly to the regime's genocidal policies, particularly through the imposition of conditions that were incompatible with group survival.

The healthcare system has emerged as a principal target in the ongoing Israeli military operations in Gaza, with numerous international organizations and legal scholars characterizing these actions as bearing genocidal implications.[23] At present, no fully

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19 *Prosecutor v. Radoslav Brđanin*, para. 945.

20 Ibid., paras 958, 962.

21 *Prosecutor v. Kayishema and Ruzindana*, paras. 115, 146.

22 Henry Kamm, "The Agony of Cambodia," *New York Times Magazine*, 19 November 1978, 40; Lewis M. Simons, "Disease, Hunger Ravage Cambodia as Birthrate Falls," *The Washington Post*, 22 July 1977, A16.

23 Al-Haq, *The Systematic Destruction of Gaza's Healthcare System*, submission to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health, 2025, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/health/sr/cfis/health-and-care-workers/subm-health-care-workers-cso-30-al-haq.pdf. For the scholarly work, see, for example, Donald Bloxham, "The 7 October Atrocities and the Annihilation of Gaza: Causes and Responsibilities,"

functional hospitals remain in the Gaza Strip, a direct result of sustained aerial and ground assaults by Israeli forces.[24] The destruction of healthcare infrastructure has coincided with a public health emergency. A serious outbreak of infectious meningitis, particularly affecting children in overcrowded and unsanitary shelters, is underway. The crisis is exacerbated by sewage contamination, accumulated waste, and inadequate access to clean water, conditions that facilitate the rapid spread of disease. According to reports by the Ministry of Health, hundreds of meningitis cases have been recorded amid an acute shortage of antibiotics. Additional concerns have been raised about the potential spread of cholera, gastrointestinal infections, and respiratory illnesses.[25]

The systematic targeting of medical facilities and obstruction of humanitarian assistance has been widely condemned as a violation of international humanitarian law.[26] Too often, such protracted deprivations are legally addressed only as humanitarian crises or war crimes rather than as a genocidal act, reflecting a profound gap in the enforcement Article II(c). While, by crippling the healthcare system and thereby exposing the civilian population to untreated disease, injury, and death, these actions contribute to the creation of conditions calculated to bring about the physical destruction of the people, in whole or in part.

Because hunger is often the earliest and most readily measured symptom of such deprivation, starvation provides a clear empirical lens through which to trace a genocidal plan as it unfolds. The next section therefore follows starvation across time and cases to show how, from Sparta to the present, predictable patterns of hunger expose blockade not as an accidental sideeffect of conflict but as a calculated instrument of group destruction.

Starvation Over Time: Structuring Slow-Burn Genocide

The role of starvation as an indirect yet deliberate means of inflicting death has been significantly undervalued in genocide scholarship and legal analysis. As Sheri Rosenberg has observed, this neglect reflects a broader failure to recognize the causal relationship

Journal of Genocide Research (2025): 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2025.2483546; Abdelwahab El-Affendi, "The Futility of Genocide Studies After Gaza," *Journal of Genocide Research* (2024): 1–7, https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2024.2305525; Verdeja, "The Gaza Genocide in Five Crises."

24 Mohamed al-Astal, "Inside the Siege on Gaza's Largest Remaining Hospital," *The New Humanitarian*, 12 February 2024, https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/2024/02/12/inside-siege-gaza-largest-remaining-hospital-nasser-khan-younis.

25 Fatemeh Beiraghdar, Javad Momeni, Elham Hosseini, Yunes Panahi, and Sajad Sahab Negah, "Health Crisis in Gaza: The Urgent Need for International Action," *Iranian Journal of Public Health* 52, no. 12 (2023): 2478-2483. doi:10.18502/ijph.v52i12.14309.

26 Christa Rottensteiner, "The Denial of Humanitarian Assistance as a Crime under International Law," *International Review of the Red Cross* 81, no. 835 (1999): 555–576, https://international-review.icrc.org/sites/default/files/S1560775500059794a.pdf.

between life-threatening conditions imposed on a group and the policy decisions that create and sustain those conditions.[27] This oversight is mirrored in legal practice. Despite Article II(c)'s design to capture such slow-burn tactics, it remains largely under-enforced. Starvation policies are still more often prosecuted as war crimes or crimes against humanity than as genocide.

Among the earliest recorded instances was the use of starvation during the genocide of the Herero and Nama peoples under German colonial rule in present-day Namibia in 1904. It was later deployed during the Armenian Genocide (1915–1916), the Ukrainian Holodomor (1932–1933), and the Holocaust. Particularly illustrative example is the Nazi "Hungerplan" (1941–1945), which aimed to engineer mass starvation as a means of racial extermination and resource acquisition.[28]

Formulated by Nazi planners in anticipation of the German invasion of the Soviet Union, the Hungerplan sought to divert agricultural production from Ukraine and Belarus to feed the German military, consciously disregarding the subsistence needs of the local civilian population. The resulting policy was not incidental but deliberate: it envisioned mass famine across northern Russia and Soviet industrial regions, with internal planning documents anticipating the death of up to 30 million people through starvation alone.[29] Soviet prisoners of war and so-called "useless eaters" in occupied territories were targeted for elimination through calculated deprivation, exemplifying the use of starvation not only as a weapon of war but as a central pillar of genocidal strategy.

Nearly two decades after the Holodomor, Raphael Lemkin, the jurist who coined the term *genocide*, authored an article titled "Soviet Genocide in Ukraine," in which he explicitly classified the 1932–1933 famine as an instance of genocide.[30] His interpretation gained legal affirmation decades later. On 13 January 2010, the Appellate Court of Kiev, supported by segments of the international community, formally recognized the Holodomor as genocide. The court concluded that Joseph Stalin and other Soviet officials committed genocide within the meaning of the 1948 Genocide Convention by deliberately creating living conditions calculated to bring about the partial physical destruction of the Ukrainian national group.[31] The Holodomor, which claimed an estimated 3,941,000 lives, was thus found to satisfy the definitional elements of genocide under Article II(c) of the Convention.

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27 Sheri Rosenberg "Genocide Is a Process, Not an Event," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* 7, no. 1 (2012): 16-23.

28 Bridget Conley and Alex de Waal, "The Purposes of Starvation: Historical and Contemporary Uses," *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 17, no. 4 (2019): 699–722.

29 Lizzie Collingham, *The Taste of War: World War Two and the Battle for Food* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), 37.

30 Raphael Lemkin, "Soviet Genocide in the Ukraine," in *Holodomor: Reflections on the Great Famine of 1932–1933 in Soviet Ukraine*, ed. L.Y. Luciuk (Kingston: Limestone Press, 2008).

31 "Resolution of the Court," Holodomor Museum, https://holodomormuseum.org.ua/en/resolution-of-the-court/, accessed 13 June 2024.

Starvation was a method of extermination during the Armenian Genocide during the prolonged deportation marches when victims were denied food and water.[32] A parallel can be seen in Khmer Rouge Cambodia, where famine served both genocidal and political purposes. As Murray Hiebert notes, rice played multiple roles: as a weapon against "base people," a symbol of revolutionary success, a marker of internal threats, and a pretext for purges within the regime.[33] In this context, famine was not merely a consequence of failed policy but an intentional mechanism of control and extermination, intricately tied to the regime's genocidal objectives.

The international community had already begun recognizing the criminal nature of starvation as early as 1919. In 1919, following the end of World War I, world leaders gathered in Paris to negotiate the terms of a lasting peace. As part of these efforts, the first international war crimes body, the *Commission on the Responsibility of the Authors of the War and on Enforcement of Penalties,* was established. The Commission was tasked with identifying individuals responsible for initiating the war and recommending appropriate penalties for those guilty of war crimes. Its mandate extended beyond traditional battlefield conduct, as the Commission considered expanding the definition of punishable acts to include serious violations of humanitarian norms. Discussions also touched on the possibility of creating an international tribunal to prosecute such offenses.[34]

On 29 March 1919, the Commission submitted its final report, which catalogued a range of offenses committed by the Central Powers and their allies in violation of the laws and customs of war and, notably, against humanity.[35] The report enumerated 32 specific crimes among which was *the deliberate starvation of civilian populations*, an early and explicit recognition of starvation as a prosecutable international crime.[36] [emphasis added]

While international jurisprudence on starvation as a distinct tool of genocide remains limited, certain landmark cases affirm that international judicial bodies have recognized hunger as an instrument of mass atrocity, including genocide. The judgment of the Nuremberg Tribunal explicitly addressed the systematic starvation of Soviet prisoners of war, noting that many perished as a result of organized schemes designed to bring about their death through deliberate food deprivation and neglect.[37] The Tribunal also

32 George Shirinian, "Starvation and Its Political Use in the Armenian Genocide," *Genocide Studies International* 11, no. 1 (2017): 8–37.

33 Ibid.

34 Harry M. Rhea, "The Commission on the Responsibility of the Authors of the War and on Enforcement of Penalties and Its Contribution to International Criminal Justice after World War II," *Criminal Law Forum* 25, no. 2 (2014): 147.

35 Edita Gzoyan, "From War Crimes to Crimes against Humanity and Genocide: Turkish Responsibility after World War I," *Genocide Studies International* 15, no. 2 (2023): 79-98.

36 Commission on the Responsibility of the Authors of the War and on Enforcement of Penalties, *The American Journal of International Law* 14, no. 1/2 (1920): 114.

37 Tomasz Srogosz**,** "Starvation as an International Crime," in *State's Responsibility for International Crimes Reflections upon the Rosenburg Exhibition,* ed. by Magdalena Bainczyk and Agnieszka Kubiak-Cyrul (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2021), 178.

examined the broader mistreatment of civilian populations, particularly those confined to concentration camps, highlighting the insufficiency of food provision as a constitutive element of crimes against humanity. In occupied territories, the judgment identified policies, notably under Hermann Göring's directives, that involved the seizure of natural resources, raw materials, and food supplies to benefit the German war effort.[38]

This suggests that during the Nuremberg Trials, starvation was recognized both as a war crime, particularly in relation to prisoners of war and civilian populations, and as a crime against humanity when employed as a method of extermination. While the Charter of the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg did not include the crime of genocide as a distinct legal category, the Tribunal's classification of starvation within the framework of international crimes marked a critical foundational step. It reflected an evolving understanding that the deliberate infliction of life-threatening conditions, including hunger, could constitute a prosecutable act under international law. However, although these trials recognized starvation as a grave offense, subsequent jurisprudence has rarely characterized such attritional tactics explicitly as genocidal acts, underscoring the need to reinvigorate Article II(c) as a legal tool for addressing genocide-by-attrition.

Furthermore, at the Tokyo Trials, evidence revealed that camp commanders routinely disregarded official directives by failing to provide even the minimal rations required for prisoners deemed fit for labor.[39] In 1943, additional regulations were introduced stipulating that prisoners who refused to swear allegiance to the Japanese government were to be placed under strict surveillance. In practice, this often resulted in their immobilization for prolonged periods, sometimes days, without access to food, water, or adequate sanitation, and frequently while exposed to extreme heat and direct sunlight.[40]

In this light, it is no less essential to recognize that starvation is fundamentally intertwined with the human right to adequate food, a right enshrined in international human rights law. During periods of armed conflict or blockade, states are not absolved of this obligation; rather, they are required to uphold all dimensions of the right to food, including availability, accessibility, adequacy, and sustainability. States must go beyond token or partial measures and take concrete, effective steps to ensure that this right is fully respected, even in the midst of crisis. Authoritative statements by intergovernmental bodies and legal scholars affirm that the right to food enjoys universal recognition.[41] For instance, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, in *General*

38 International Military Tribunal (Nuremberg), Judgment of 1 October 1946, in *The Trial of German Major War Criminals: Proceedings of the International Military Tribunal Sitting at Nuremberg, Germany, Part 22 (22 August 1946 to 1 October 1946),* 457–58, 498.

39 International Military Tribunal for the Far East, Judgment of 4 November 1948, in J. Pritchard, S. M. Zaide, and D. C. Watt, eds., *The Tokyo War Crimes Trial,* vol. 22 (New York: 1981), 688–698, https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/8bef6f/pdf, accessed 27 June 2024.

40 Ibid.

41 Philip Alston, "International Law and the Human Right to Food," in *The Right to Food*, ed. Philip Alston and Katarina Tomasevski (1984), 9; Human Rights Committee, *General Comment No. 12: The Right to Adequate Food*, UN Doc. E/C.12/1999/5.

Comment No. 12, emphasizes that "the right to adequate food is indivisibly linked to the inherent dignity of the human person and is indispensable for the fulfilment of other human rights enshrined in the International Bill of Human Rights."[42]Additionally, the Committee's General Comment No. 14 states that:

> To comply with their international obligations in relation to article 12, States parties have to respect the enjoyment of the right to health in other countries, and to prevent third parties from violating the right in other countries, if they are able to influence these third parties by way of legal or political means, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and applicable international law.[43]

A cumulative reading of relevant General Comments, particularly those issued by the UN Human Rights Committee and the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, strongly supports the view that a state's obligation to protect extends beyond individuals within its immediate territorial control or jurisdiction. These authoritative interpretations affirm that states have a preventive duty to safeguard individuals from rights violations by third parties, including non-state actors or occupying powers, that may interfere with the enjoyment of fundamental rights, such as the right to adequate food. This extraterritorial dimension of state responsibility reinforces the legal foundation for addressing starvation as a rights-based violation in contexts such as blockades or armed occupation.

Defining starvation

There is no universally accepted definition of *starvation* under international law, and none of the current treaties offers a specific definition that applies broadly.[44] However, it is worth noting that Article 8(2)(b)(xxv) of the ICC Statute does address starvation as a criminal offense, but this provision applies exclusively to situations within international armed conflicts.[45] According to this article, "Intentionally using starvation of civilians as a method of warfare by depriving them of objects indispensable to their survival, including willfully impeding relief supplies as provided for under the Geneva Conventions."[46]

Thus, starvation is framed as a war crime when used deliberately to deprive civilians of essential resources during international conflicts.

42 Ibid, para. 4.

43 Ibid, para. 39.

44 Rückert and Witschel, "Genocide and Crimes against Humanity," 68.

45 ICC, *Rome Statute*, Art. 8(2)(b)(xxv).

46 Ibid.

Precedential rulings on the elements of starvation

After the establishment of international criminal tribunals and the separate recognition of genocide as an international crime, certain elements of starvation can be discerned in the decisions of these tribunals. We can categorize those decisions into several subcategories: deprivation of food, inadequate quantities of food and food that was deemed unsafe for consumption.

a. *Deprivation of food*

In *Prosecutor v. Radoslav Brdanin* the ICTY emphasized that

> deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part" under sub-paragraph (c) does not require proof of the physical destruction in whole or in part of the targeted group. The acts envisaged by this sub-paragraph include, but are not limited to, methods of destruction apart from direct killings such as subjecting the group to a subsistence diet, systematic expulsion from homes and denial of the right to medical services.[47]

In the *Georges Rutaganda* trial, it was further elaborated that:

> the words "deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part", as indicated in Article 2(2)(c) of the Statute [genocide], are to be construed "as methods of destruction by which the perpetrator does not necessarily intend to immediately kill the members of the group", but which are, ultimately, aimed at their physical destruction. The Chamber holds that the means of deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction, in whole or in part, include subjecting a group of people to a subsistence diet, systematic expulsion from their homes and deprivation of essential medical supplies below a minimum vital standard.[48]

The deprivation of food is indicated as a primary element of genocide in other decisions as well.[49]

Read together, these precedents confirm that starvation functions in international criminal law as a distinct method of group destruction encompassed by the proscription on

47 *Prosecutor v. Radoslav Brdanin*, para. 691.

48 *Prosecutor v. Akayesu*, para. 508.

49 Rückert and Witschel, "Genocide and Crimes against Humanity," 68.

"deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction." Liability does not depend on proof that the group was in fact destroyed; it turns on the deliberate engineering of life-threatening conditions designed to push the group below a minimum vital standard. Tribunals have repeatedly treated manipulation of food as central to this inquiry, whether by outright withholding, by supplying quantities insufficient to sustain life, or by providing food that is unfit for consumption. In practice, these techniques rarely appear in isolation. They typically operate alongside expulsions, the severing of livelihoods, and the denial of medical care, each reinforcing the others to render survival untenable.

b. *Inadequate quantities of food*

In the case of Adolf Eichmann, the Jerusalem Court specifically noted:

> Witnesses described cruel corporal punishments - the "Stehbunker" (standing cell), a narrow cell, where a man could not turn around nor move his hands. People were kept standing there for ten to twelve hours and more, and when they emerged, tortured and dazed, they had to go back to work immediately. They related how a man was hanged in the presence of his comrades during roll-call, because of some potatoes he had taken to still his hunger. […].[50]

In light of the broader jurisprudence, the Eichmann judgment illustrates how starvation can be executed not only by withholding food altogether but by calibrating rations to levels that cannot sustain life or labor. Hunger appears as an instrument of domination and punishment: the regime both created scarcity and criminalized any attempt to remedy it, using exemplary violence to enforce compliance. The episode of a prisoner hanged for taking potatoes underscores two legal inferences. First, authorities knew the rations were inadequate, otherwise there would be no need to terrorize those who sought extra food.[51] Second, the system leveraged that inadequacy to break bodies and will, pairing exhausting work with meager provisions and thereby driving conditions below a minimum vital standard.[52]

c. *Provided food was not suitable for consumption*

Evidence of starvation crimes can be found in the *Brđanin* case within the following context: "At Betonirka, the amount of food given to detainees was insufficient and its

50 *Attorney-General of Israel v. Adolf Eichmann*, Judgment, District Court of Jerusalem, 1968, 36 ILR 5, para. 129.

51 Tom Dannenbaum, "Siege Starvation: A War Crime of Societal Torture," *Chicago Journal of International Law* 22, no. 2 (2022): 368–442.

52 Randle C. DeFalco, "Conceptualizing Famine as a Subject of International Criminal Justice: Towards a Modality-Based Approach," *University of Pennsylvania Journal of International Law* 38, no. 4 (2017): 1113

quality deficient: it sometimes consisted of leftovers from the MUP kitchen, which caused the detainees stomach problems."[53]

A pending case where hunger is being discussed is the *Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip* (*South Africa v. Israe*l).[54] International humanitarian aid workers, journalists, government officials, scholars studying famine and legal professionals appearing before the ICJ, all universally recognize that food and essential supplies have been utilized as a tactic of warfare in the Gaza conflict.[55] The counsel team representing South Africa contends that both first-degree (intentional starvation of a group) and second-degree (reckless starvation of a group) actions leading to famine, or induced famine, can be categorized as the actus reus of Article II(c) of the Genocide Convention.[56]

The delivery of humanitarian aid, including water and food, through the Rafah border crossing is closely regulated and contingent upon Israel's requirements to sustain the ongoing conflict.[57] Livestock are suffering from starvation as a result of insufficient food and water, while satellite imagery has uncovered extensive destruction of agricultural areas in the northern Gaza Strip, encompassing orchards, greenhouses, and farmland. The same pattern of devastation is evident in large parts of the southern region, as detailed in a comprehensive report by Human Rights Watch.[58]

Starvation is deliberately employed as a weapon that is intrinsically linked to the deprivation of other essential resources, including medicine and adequate housing. Prolonged nutritional deprivation inflicted upon targeted populations severely compromises immune function, increasing susceptibility to disease and thereby escalating the need for medical care.[59] Nonetheless, the physiological deterioration resulting from starvation often diminishes the effectiveness of available medical treatments and restricts access to healthcare services, which are frequently deliberately withheld. Simultaneously, starvation contributes to the systematic dismantling of socioeconomic stability, eroding the ability of individuals to maintain secure housing and leading to widespread displacement and homelessness. This interconnected deprivation underscores how the denial of food,

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53 *Prosecutor v. Kayishema and Ruzindana*, para. 952.

54 International Court of Justice*, Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel),* No. 2023/77, 28 December 2023.

55 Alex de Waal, "Starvation as a Method of Warfare," *London Review of Books Blog*, 11 January 2024, https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2024/january/starvation-as-a-method-of-warfare, accessed 10 May 2024.

56 *South Africa v. Israel)*, No. 2023/77, December 28, 2023; see also Lasse Heerten and Dirk Moses, Introduction to *Postcolonial Conflict and the Question of Genocide: The Nigeria-Biafra War, 1967–1970*, ed. Lasse Heerten and A. Dirk Moses (London: Routledge, 2017), 27.

57 Abbas Al Lawati, Mohammed Abdelbary, and Rob Picheta. "What Is the Rafah Crossing, Gazans' Last Hope to Escape the War, and How Does It Work?" *CNN*, 1 November 2023, accessed 19 June 2024.

58 Human Rights Watch, "Israel: Starvation Used as Weapon of War in Gaza," 18 December 2023. https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/12/18/israel-starvation-used-weapon-war-gaza, accessed 10 August 2024.

59 Fatima Morales, Sergio Montserrat-de la Paz, Maria J Leon, Fernando Rivero-Pino, "Effects of Malnutrition on the Immune System and Infection and the Role of Nutritional Strategies Regarding Improvements in Children's Health Status: A Literature Review," *Nutrients* 19;16(1): (2023):1. doi:10.3390/nu16010001.

medicine and shelter operates collectively as a strategy of genocide to inflict maximum suffering and accelerate population destruction.

Since in our case starvation is connected with health and housing, it is important to note that each of these elements can independently serve as instruments of genocide. We will now examine these factors individually through a distinct analytical lens.

Note on Dolus Directus

In addition to the objective elements of starvation, the mental or subjective element, *mens rea*, is critical for its legal qualification as an international crime. The inclusion of the term "intentionally" in international legal instruments, including the Rome Statute, indicates that starvation cannot result from mere negligence or accident. The perpetrator must be consciously aware that their actions will cause starvation and must proceed with the intent to bring about that outcome. This aligns with the standard of *dolus directus* in the first degree. Article 30(2)(a)–(b) of the Rome Statute elaborates on this mental element in two parts. First, it requires that the perpetrator intends to engage in the conduct in question, reflecting a volitional act.[60] Second, it signifies an intention concerning the outcomes of the accused's actions (in this instance, starvation), where the accused either intends to bring about that result or is conscious that it will happen in the normal course of events.[61] ICC case law has construed this criterion to encompass direct intent, known as *dolus directus* in the first degree, or alternatively, *dolus directus* in the second degree. In the latter scenario, while the accused may not have specifically intended the consequence (such as starvation), they were aware that it would almost certainly occur as a result of their actions, which is also termed "oblique intent."[62]

The defining characteristic of genocide lies in its unique and elevated intent requirement, *dolus specialis*. This special intent mandates that the perpetrator act with the specific purpose "to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group, as such," as codified in Article II of the Genocide Convention.[63] Crucially, this intent must be directed toward the physical or biological destruction of the protected group, rather than its cultural or symbolic erasure. While cultural destruction alone does

60 International Criminal Court, *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court*. Adopted 17 July 1998, entered into force July 1, 2002. United Nations Treaty Series, vol. 2187, 90. Article 30(2)(a).

61 Ibid, Art. 30(2)(b).

62 Manual J. Ventura, "Prosecuting Starvation under International Criminal Law: Exploring the Legal Possibilities," *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 17, no. 1 (2019): 8; *Judgment, Katanga* (ICC-01/04-01/07-3436-tENG), Trial Chamber II, March 7, 2014, paras. 774, 776; *Judgment, Bemba et al.* (ICC-01/05-01/13-1989-Red), Trial Chamber VII, October 19, para. 29; *Judgment, Lubanga* (ICC-01/04-01/06-3121-Red), Appeals Chamber, December 1, 2014 ("Lubanga Appeal Judgment"), para. 447; *Judgment, Ntaganda* (ICC-01/04-02/06-2359), Trial Chamber VI, July 8, 2019, fn. 2348.

63 Art. 4(2), Statute of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY); Art. 2(2), Statute of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR); Art. 6, Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC); Art. 5, Law on the Establishment of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC); Art. 5, East African Community Treaty (EAC); Art. 28B, Protocol on Amendments to the Protocol on the Statute of the African Court of Justice and Human Rights (Malabo Protocol, 2014).

not constitute genocide under current legal definitions, it may support the inference of *dolus specialis* when viewed in conjunction with acts of physical violence or deprivation.[64]

The Blockade of the Lachin Corridor and the Question of Genocidal Intent: The Case of Artsakh

From December 2022 through September 2023, the sole road connecting Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) to Armenia, the Lachin Corridor, was completely blocked, halting all civilian and commercial traffic. The blockade was initially carried out by Azerbaijani citizens posing as "environmental activists," yet substantial evidence revealed their direct ties to the Azerbaijani government.[65] These individuals claimed to be protesting environmental issues, raising the specter of so-called "eco-terrorism" in the region.[66] However, given the assessment by Human Rights Watch that independent activism, critical journalism, and political opposition are systematically suppressed in Azerbaijan,[67] it is highly implausible that the protest was spontaneous or grassroots in nature.[68] Rather, the blockade appears to have been a state-sanctioned operation, one that effectively isolated approximately 120,000 ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh, depriving them of essential goods and services such as food, medicine, and healthcare, and thereby placing their lives in immediate danger.[69] In effect, Azerbaijan deliberately imposed conditions of life calculated to bring about the group's destruction, precisely the scenario that Article II(c) of the Genocide Convention condemns. Yet tellingly, throughout the blockade the crisis was framed almost exclusively as a humanitarian emergency rather than as an unfolding genocidal act, reflecting the very enforcement gap this article seeks to close.

According to the joint ad hoc public report issued by the Human Rights Ombudsman of the Republic of Artsakh on 12 December 2022, the blockade of the Lachin Corridor,

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64 *Prosecutor v. Radislav Krstic* (Appeal Judgement), IT-98-33-A, International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), 19 April 2004, para 25; *Zdravko Tolimir, Case No. IT-05-88/2-A,* Judgement, 8 April 2015, para 230.

65 International Court of Justice, *Order of the Court: Application of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (Armenia v. Azerbaijan)*, 22 February 2023; Bashir Kitachayev, "What's Next for the Azerbaijani Blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh?," *openDemocracy*, 25 January 2023, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/nagorno-karabakh-blockade-azerbaijan-armenia-citizenship/, accessed 10 June 2024.

66 "Who Really Are Azerbaijan's 'Environmental Activists' Blockading Karabakh?," *CIVILNET,* 14 December 2022, https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/686152/who-really-are-azerbaijans-environmental-activists-blockading-karabakh/, accessed 10 June 2024.

67 Human Rights Watch, *Azerbaijan: Events of 2021*, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/azerbaijan (accessed June 10, 2024).

68 Armenian Assembly of America, *Artsakh Blockade*, https://www.armenian-assembly.org/artsakhblockade, accessed 10 June 2024.

69 "Azerbaijan: Blockade of Lachin Corridor Putting Thousands of Lives in Peril Must Be Immediately Lifted," *Amnesty International,* 9 February 2023, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/02/azerbaijan-blockade-of-lachin-corridor-putting-thousands-of-lives-in-peril-must-be-immediately-lifted/, accessed 10 June 2024.

resulted in the failure to deliver more than 4,000 tons of essential goods over a ten-day period.[70] This disruption in supply severely affected the availability of essential items in local markets.[71] The disruption severely impacted the availability of basic necessities in Nagorno-Karabakh, particularly in Stepanakert, where shortages of fruits, vegetables, sugar, buckwheat, lentils, flour, grains, olive oil, rice, and eggs became increasingly evident.[72] The flour shortage, in particular, posed significant challenges for local bakeries, which were unable to produce sufficient quantities of bread to meet demand.[73]

On 3 January 2023, the Government of Artsakh adopted a decision to replenish selected goods in local stores by drawing on supplies from the State Reserve and Wartime Stocks.[74] The decision particularly sought to safeguard vulnerable social groups, such as children in orphanages and residents of nursing homes, for whom the state holds direct responsibility.[75]

Among the most severely affected social groups during the food shortage were children, whose rights to adequate nutrition and health were significantly violated. Institutions such as the Stepanakert boarding facility, the Mother and Child Health Care Center "Arevik" Children's Hospital, as well as kindergartens and schools that provide specialized diets, were unable to supply proper meals due to shortages of essential food items, including fruits, vegetables, dairy products, and sugar. The disruption in supply chains compromised the nutritional standards required for child development and well-being. Medical professionals reported concerning cases where the lack of vitamin-rich foods resulted in a reduction, or, in some instances, a complete cessation, of breast milk production among nursing mothers, further exacerbating the humanitarian crisis for infants and young children.[76]

Furthermore, following Azerbaijan's establishment of an unlawful checkpoint on 23 April 2023, residents of the villages of Yeghtsahogh, Mets Shen, Hin Shen, and Lisagor in the Shushi district of the Republic of Artsakh were subjected to a dual blockade. This action effectively severed their access to both the capital, Stepanakert, and the Republic of Armenia. As a result, these communities endured a prolonged period without the delivery of essential supplies, including food, medicine, and other critical goods.[77]

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70 Human Rights Defender of Artsakh and Human Rights Defender of Armenia, *Updated Joint Ad Hoc Public Report: The Humanitarian Consequences of Blocking the Only Road Connecting Artsakh with Armenia and the World*, December 12–25, 2022, para. 46.

71 Ibid, para 47.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid, para 48.

74 "Products Will Be Distributed to Stores from State Reserves to Meet the Basic Needs of the Population in Artsakh under Blockade," *Public Radio of Armenia,* 3 January 2023, https://en.armradio.am/2023/01/03/products-will-be-distributed-to-stores-from-state-reserves-to-meet-the-basic-needs-of-the-population-in-artsakh-under-blockade/, accessed 17 June 2024.

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid.

77 "Blockade Created Problems Related to All Four Components of the Right to Food as Defined by the UN,"

The compounded isolation exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in these areas, further illustrating the systematic and targeted nature of the blockade's impact.

The Office of the Human Rights Defender of Artsakh also issued a report specifically addressing the critical shortage of bread during the blockade. The findings revealed an unprecedented deficit, with shortages at times reaching up to 25% of total demand. This recurring shortfall, observed during various phases of the blockade, resulted in long queues at bakeries and further strained access to one of the most basic staples in the local diet.[78]

As a direct consequence of the aforementioned conditions, a resident of Stepanakert, K. Hovhannisyan (born in 1983), died from chronic malnutrition and severe protein-energy deficiency.[79] Additional causes included bilateral polysegmental pneumonia (predominantly croupous on the right side), pulmonary edema, mixed metabolic imbalance, hypoxic encephalopathy, internal organ dystrophy (including the kidneys), anemia, sepsis, right-sided hydrothorax, and chronic malnutrition.[80]

Following the blockade, the Armenian Human Rights Defender reported a case in which a minor fainted upon arrival at a registration center, a direct result of prolonged food deprivation.[81] This incident is one among many that illustrate the widespread absence of adequate nutrition during the nine-month blockade. Such cases support the conclusion that the blockade and resulting starvation created life-threatening conditions, particularly for vulnerable groups such as children.

Beyond the reports issued by Armenian and Artsakh authorities, international actors have also raised concerns. Notably, a bipartisan resolution was introduced in the United States Senate condemning Azerbaijan's blockade of the Lachin Corridor and calling for an urgent response to the unfolding humanitarian crisis.[82] Senator Alex Padilla emphasized the gravity of the situation, stating: "The blockade imposed by Azerbaijan has resulted in a humanitarian crisis, leaving 120,000 Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh deprived of essential supplies such as food and medicine. Our resolution emphasizes the urgent need for the United States to take decisive action to ensure Azerbaijan is held accountable for its actions."[83]

Artsakh Press, 12 May 2023, accessed 17 June 2024.

78 Rayhan Demytrie, "Nagorno-Karabakh: 'People Are Fainting Queuing Up for Bread,'" *BBC News*, 30 August 2023, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66646677, accessed 17 June 2024.

79 "Man Dies of Hunger in Karabakh," *CIVILNET*, 15 August 2023, https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/747294/man-dies-of-hunger-in-karabakh/#:~:text=K.,by%20the%20human%20rights%20office, accessed 24 June 2024.

80 Ibid.

81 "The Protection of the Rights of Artsakh Citizens and the Impact of the HRD Extraordinary Report," *Mediamax,* 19 February 2024, https://mediamax.am/am/news/society/53981/, accessed 24 June 2024.

82 U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Resolution Condemning Azerbaijan's Blockade of the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh and Ongoing Human Rights Violations*, 118th Cong., 1st sess.

83 "Resolution Condemning Blockade of Artsakh Introduced in U.S. Senate," *Public Radio of Armenia,* 9 June 2023, https://en.armradio.am/2023/06/09/resolution-condemning-blockade-of-artsakh-introduced-in-u-s-senate/, accessed 24 June 2024.

Amnesty International has reported that the blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh has led to severe shortages of food and medical supplies, noting that humanitarian assistance delivered by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Russian peacekeepers has been insufficient to meet the population's needs.[84] The organization further emphasized that it is Azerbaijan's legal obligation to ensure that the population of Nagorno-Karabakh is not deprived of access to essential goods, including food and medication.[85]

Similarly, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food underscored that the blockade has severely hindered the delivery of critical supplies, such as food, medicine, fuel, and other basic necessities, to the approximately 120,000 residents of Nagorno-Karabakh.[86] The Special Rapporteur called on the Government of Azerbaijan to fulfill its international human rights obligations, including the rights to food, health, education, and life.[87]

The European Parliament also addressed the crisis in its resolution of 19 January 2023 on the humanitarian consequences of the blockade in Nagorno-Karabakh. The resolution highlighted the acute shortage of food and condemned Azerbaijan's continued violations of international law, urging an immediate cessation of the blockade.[88]

The World Council of Churches expressed similar concerns, noting that fundamental human rights were being violated on a daily basis.[89] This position was echoed by Human Rights Watch, which has consistently raised alarm about the deteriorating humanitarian conditions resulting from the blockade.[90]

As demonstrated earlier, positive international law affirms that a state's obligation to protect human rights extends beyond the mere safeguarding of individuals within its immediate territorial control or jurisdiction. As argued in this article, states also bear a preventive duty to take reasonable measures to protect individuals from rights violations committed by third parties, particularly when those actors operate within the state's territory or under its influence. In this context, given that the so-called "environmental activists" who initiated the blockade of the Lachin Corridor were Azerbaijani civilians, the

84 Amnesty International, "Azerbaijan: Blockade of Lachin Corridor Putting Thousands of Lives in Peril Must Be Immediately Lifted," 9 February 2023, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/02/azerbaijan-blockade-of-lachin-corridor-putting-thousands-of-lives-in-peril-must-be-immediately-lifted/, accessed 24 June 2024.

85 Ibid.

86 UN experts, "UN Experts Urge Azerbaijan to Lift Lachin Corridor Blockade and End Humanitarian Crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh," https://armenia.un.org/en/241142-un-experts-urge-azerbaijan-lift-lachin-corridor-blockade-and-end-humanitarian-crisis-nagorno, 7 August 2023, accessed 25 June 2024.

87 Ibid.

88 European Parliament, Resolution of 19 January 2023 on the Humanitarian Consequences of the Blockade in Nagorno-Karabakh, 2023/2504(RSP), Strasbourg, 19 January 2023.

89 World Council of Churches, "In Joint Letter to European Union, WCC and Conference of European Churches Urge Lifting Blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh," https://www.oikoumene.org/news/in-joint-letter-to-european-union-wcc-and-conference-of-european-churches-urge-lifting-blockade-of-nagorno-karabakh, accessed 24 June 2024.

90 Human Rights Watch, "Azerbaijan: Nagorno-Karabakh Lifeline Road Blocked," https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/21/azerbaijan-nagorno-karabakh-lifeline-road-blocked, accessed 25 June 2024.

Azerbaijani authorities had a clear duty to prevent them from obstructing the corridor and, thereby, to protect the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh from ongoing human rights violations resulting from the blockade.[91]

Moreover, the 2020 Trilateral Statement, signed by Armenia, Russia, and Azerbaijan, explicitly provides that "The Republic of Azerbaijan shall guarantee the safety of citizens, vehicles and goods traveling along the Lachin Corridor in both directions,"[92] while also stipulating that "the Lachin Corridor shall remain under the control of the Russian Federation's peacekeeping contingent."[93] Although these clauses assign distinct obligations to the signatories, they nonetheless reflect Azerbaijan's formal acceptance of the obligation to ensure the secure and unhindered passage of persons and goods.[94] This, in turn, implies that Azerbaijan possesses, and has acknowledged, some degree of control or influence over the Lachin Corridor, further reinforcing its responsibility for preventing and remedying rights violations occurring in connection with the blockade.[95]

Azerbaijan's obligation and capacity to end the blockade is further reinforced by the reasoning of the ICJ. In its Order on Provisional Measures dated 22 February 2023, the Court indicated that Azerbaijan must "take all measures at its disposal to ensure unimpeded movement of persons, vehicles and cargo along the Lachin Corridor in both directions."[96] This is yet another supporting argument that Azerbaijan was able to influence the protesters to end the blockade.[97]

Since the initiation of Azerbaijan's blockade of the Lachin Corridor, the region has faced acute shortages of medications and medical supplies, resulting in a severe public health crisis. Over the seven-month period from January to July 2023, mortality rates rose sharply, particularly due to cardiovascular diseases. Deaths from heart failure, myocardial infarction, and stroke increased by two to three times, while mortality from malignant neoplasms rose by 15.9%, largely attributable to the lack of essential medications, restricted access to medical care, and malnutrition. Anemia among pregnant women surged to 90%, driven by inadequate food and medication, and newly diagnosed cases of cancer and cardiovascular conditions increased by 24.3% and 26%, respectively. Alarmingly, medically indicated abortions rose fourfold, and incidents of fainting increased by 91% in July alone, reflecting the devastating impact of prolonged

91 Jolanda Andela and Tatevik Manucharyan, "130 Days and Counting: A Responsibility to End the Blockade of the Lachin Corridor," *EJIL:Talk! Blog of the European Journal of International Law*, 2 May 2023, https://www.ejiltalk.org/130-days-and-counting-a-responsibility-to-end-the-blockade-of-the-lachin-corridor/ (accessed 25 June 2024).

92 Statement by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, and President of the Russian Federation, point 6, 10 November 2020, https://president.az/en/articles/view/45923, accessed 25 June 2024.

93 Ibid.

94 Andela and Manucharyan, "130 Days and Counting."

95 Ibid.

96 ICJ, *Armenia v. Azerbaijan*, Order, February 22, 2023, para. 62.

97 Andela and Manucharyan, "130 Days and Counting."

stress, insufficient nutrition, and the overall collapse of the health system. Emergency medical calls related to hypertension rose by a factor of 5.6.[98]

The Ministry of Health of the Republic of Artsakh issued warnings that, should the full siege continue, these health indicators would worsen dramatically, resulting in a substantial rise in preventable deaths and a further deterioration in the population's overall health.[99] These warnings were echoed by international bodies.

The European Parliament, in its resolution, noted that the lack of medication in the region had caused serious health consequences for vulnerable groups, including pregnant women, cancer and diabetes patients, and children.[100] Additionally, Azerbaijan obstructed the International Committee of the Red Cross from transporting patients requiring urgent medical treatment to Armenia, further compounding the humanitarian crisis.[101]

Taken together, these elements demonstrate that genocidal intent was present, or at the very least can be reasonably inferred. Azerbaijan's sustained obstruction of the Lachin Corridor, despite the predictable and documented mass suffering it caused, constitutes more than mere negligence or indifference; it reflects a deliberate pattern of conduct aimed at inflicting conditions of life calculated to bring about the destruction of the Armenians of Artsakh as a protected group. The operative method, systematically depriving a civilian population of life-sustaining goods and medical care, and continuing this deprivation even as children starved, patients died, and health systems collapsed, fits squarely within the scope of Article II(c) of the Genocide Convention.

Genocidal intent rarely manifests in explicit declarations; it is most often discerned from consistent and targeted actions that produce foreseeable outcomes. Here, the pattern was unambiguous: under its effective control, Azerbaijan created and prolonged a humanitarian catastrophe with consequences that were both foreseeable and avoidable. This calculated use of starvation and deprivation exemplifies genocide by attrition. While a formal judicial determination would require adjudication before an international criminal tribunal or the International Court of Justice, the evidence presented in this case study strongly supports the conclusion that the Lachin Corridor blockade constituted an attempt to commit genocide under Article II(c). Recognizing such blockades as potential indicators, and not merely as humanitarian crises or geopolitical disputes, is essential if the international community is to fulfil its preventive mandate under the Genocide Convention.

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98 "Nagorno-Karabakh Healthcare Authorities Report Blockade-Induced Rise in Morbidity and Mortality Rates," *Armenpress*, https://armenpress.am/en/article/1116962, accessed 26 June 2024.

99 "Nagorno-Karabakh Health Ministry Reports Sharp Rise in Diseases and Death Rates Due to Azerbaijan Blockade," *Arka News Agency*https://arka.am/en/news/politics/nagorno_karabakh_health_ministry_reports_sharp_rise_in_diseases_and_death_rates_due_to_azerbaijan_bl/?sphrase_id=2220048, accessed 26 June 2024.

100 Attila Ara-Kovács (S&D), Question for Written Answer E-002520/2023/rev.1 to the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Rule 138, European Parliament, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2023-002520_EN.html.

101 Ibid.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that modern blockades, when used deliberately to deprive a population of food, medicine, and other essentials, can meet the legal definition of genocide even before the first death tolls appear. In highlighting this reality, it directly addresses a critical gap in genocide law, the tendency to overlook or under-prosecute such slow-acting atrocities under Article II(c). The blockades of the Lachin Corridor and the Gaza serve as a stark illustration of this evolving reality. No longer can starvation, the denial of healthcare, or engineered deprivation be dismissed as mere side effects of war; rather, they have become intentional instruments of destruction, capable of satisfying Article II(c) of the Genocide Convention. When a state, or actors acting with its tacit approval, deliberately severs a population's access to life-sustaining resources, it crosses a legal and moral line, one that was first drawn at Nuremberg and reaffirmed by international courts in the decades since.

The ICJ's February 2023 order to Azerbaijan, demanding that it take "all measures at its disposal" to ensure unimpeded movement along the Lachin Corridor, signals an important shift in the legal and normative landscape. The message is clear: denying subsistence to a vulnerable population is not simply a humanitarian issue, it is a potential genocidal act that triggers international responsibility.

Building on both legal analysis and empirical evidence from the Lachin blockade, this article suggests a three-part path forward to address the current gaps in prevention and accountability.

First, we must enforce the legal obligations that already exist. International law is not silent on the duties of states during siege or blockade. Under customary humanitarian law, states are required to admit humanitarian relief when starvation threatens, and they are prohibited from inflicting conditions of life intended to destroy a group. Yet, the translation of these norms into domestic practice remains weak. Too often, national laws fail to recognize blockade-induced deprivation as a criminal act, let alone as a form of attempted genocide. Where international courts, from *Brđanin* to *Kayishema*, have acknowledged starvation and medical denial as genocidal tools, these precedents must now be echoed in domestic criminal codes, military manuals, and judicial reasoning. Only then can prosecutors and judges respond effectively when starvation is wielded as a weapon.

Second, we must become better at seeing the warning signs. The data from the Lachin blockade shows a tragic but predictable pattern, sudden drops in imports, long bread lines, skyrocketing maternal anemia and child malnutrition, preventable deaths from untreated diseases, and blockages to medical evacuations. These are not isolated tragedies; they are measurable indicators of an unfolding catastrophe. Yet, international institutions often act too late, when the crisis has already turned into mass suffering. The current crisis in Gaza serves as a stark example. What is needed is a system of early warning that responds not just to mass killings, but to the precursor events that make such outcomes likely. Embedding objective triggers, such as sustained import shortfalls,

the collapse of reproductive healthcare, or repeated denial of humanitarian access, into monitoring systems could ensure that threats of genocide are addressed proactively, not retrospectively.

Finally, this article calls for timely and decisive action. When deprivation is not incidental but *calculated*, protest is not enough. Legal and political pressure must follow. The blockading state must be compelled to lift restrictions. Third-party states must move from words to deeds, leveraging diplomacy, conditional aid, or establishing land or air corridors to ensure relief reaches those in need. And regional organizations and UN bodies must invoke their mandates to demand immediate access and protection, especially when early warning thresholds are breached.

What is ultimately at stake is the credibility of the international legal order. If starvation and engineered deprivation can unfold in plain sight, with little more than diplomatic rebuke, then the promises of "never again" ring hollow. But if states and institutions treat the denial of subsistence as a signal for urgent, collective response, if they recognize it as a deliberate act of violence rather than an unfortunate side effect, then prevention becomes possible.

By grounding accountability in Article II(c) of the Genocide Convention, and by translating humanitarian data into actionable early warning, the international community can begin to close the painful gap between law and lived reality. Only then can we interrupt blockades before they become extermination, and stop counting victims only when it is too late.

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About the Authors

Svetah Chakhmakhchyan is a PhD student at the Russian-Armenian University and a Junior Researcher at the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute.

Email: svetlana.chakhmakhchyan@genocide-museum.am

Dr. Edgar Meyroyan is a senior researcher at the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute. His research interests include international public and human rights law.

Email: edgar.meyroyan@yahoo.com

BOOK REVIEW

SEROB KOSYAN, *«Նորահայտ» Շատախը. Հայոց ցեղասպանությունը վերապրած շատախցու հուշագրություն* ["Newly Discovered" Shatakh: A Memoir of a Shatakh Survivor of the Armenian Genocide], *Memoirs of Survivors of the Armenian Genocide 14.* Editor, author of the preface and references Elina Mirzoyan. Yerevan: AGMI, 2025, 344 pages.

Elina Mirzoyan
Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, Armenia

The history of Shatakh's Armenian population during the massacres of 1894–1897 and WWI remains relatively underexplored. Existing accounts are scattered across contemporary press reports and a few specialized studies, providing only a fragmented picture of local experiences.[1] However, beyond these materials, there are unpublished primary sources that shed unique light on the period. Among them, the memoir of Serob Kosyan stands out as a particularly valuable testimony, preserving voices and perspectives otherwise absent from the historical record.

Serob Kosyan was born in 1899 in Tagh, the administrative center of the *kaza* of Shatakh (Van vilayet), and was the sole surviving member of his family during the Armenian Genocide. Coming from a family of weavers, he completed seven years at the parish school before choosing to follow in his father Hovhannes's footsteps as a weaver. His adolescence was disrupted by the events of 1915 when, at the age of sixteen, he was expelled from his birthplace along with thousands of others. Reflecting on this moment years later, he recalled that on 22 July 1915, "like millions of others, [they] too left behind [their] homes and possessions, taking only a piece of bread," and that they set out "without knowing for what crime [they] were punished or where [they] were being driven."[2]

The retreat quickly turned into a scene of relentless violence and death. According to Kosyan, the surviving Armenians fled day and night, driven by hunger, thirst, exhaustion, and constant fear. Pursued by Ottoman forces and Kurdish auxiliaries, they reached the Berkri valley, where they were surrounded and subjected to another wave of massacres. He described how the defenseless population scattered in panic, abandoning children,

1 A-Do, *Մեծ դեպքերը Վասպուրականում 1914-1915 թուականներին* [The Great Events in Vaspurakan 1914–1915] (Yerevan: Luys, 1917); Hamlet Gevorgyan, *Ազատագրական պայքարի ռազմավարությունը և էջեր նրա հերոսապատումից* [The Strategy of the Liberation Struggle and Pages from Its Heroic History] (Yerevan: n.p., 2012); Hayrik Muradyan, «Շատախի հերոսական անցյալից» [From the History of the Heroic Past of Shatakh], *Etchmiadzin* 5 (1968): 39–48; Anahide Ter Minassian, "Van 1915," in *Armenian Van / Vaspurakan*, ed. Richard Hovannisian (Costa Mesa, CA: MAZDA, 2000), 209–244; Raymond Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History* (London: I. B. Tauris., 2011), 331–333.

2 Serob Kosyan, «Նորահայտ» Շատախը. Հայոց ցեղասպանությունը վերապրած շատախցու հուշագրություն ["Newly Discovered" Shatakh: A Memoir of a Shatakh Survivor of the Armenian Genocide], *Memoirs of Survivors of the Armenian genocide 14*, editor, author of the preface and references Elina Z. Mirzoyan (Yerevan: AGMI, 2025), 36.

possessions, and even the bread tied to their backs, while the cries of the wounded filled the valley. Those who escaped the slaughter faced yet another peril: the Bendimahi River, whose swift currents "completed what the sword had left unfinished," sweeping countless deportees away. Among those lost to the river was Kosyan's twelve-year-old sister, Arshaluys. With this, the last of his family perished, leaving him utterly alone.[3]

Together with other survivors, Kosyan reached Ejmiatsin after fifteen to eighteen days of wandering. Their condition was desperate: skeletal, starving, and destitute. He remembered that in the makeshift refugee camps, no one was able to contain the spread of cholera, which claimed thousands of lives. Wagons could not carry the dead to mass graves quickly enough, and in many families, no one survived at all. As he observes, the epidemic of cholera "completed the massacres left unfinished by the Turkish government." Having lost his entire family, Kosyan spent nights without shelter until he was able to find work.[4] He labored in the cotton fields of Noragavit, weeding from dawn until sunset for Persian employers, and later in a tannery and other workshops in Yerevan. His survival in these years depended on hard physical labor performed under dire conditions.

In 1916, like many other refugees from Van, Kosyan attempted to return on foot to his birthplace in Vaspurakan. After a month of travel, however, he was forced to abandon his journey, acknowledging that "[he] could not succeed in reaching Shatakh. Vostan had become the border between Armenians and Turks." For the next several years, he moved between Turkey, pre-Soviet Armenia, and eventually Soviet Armenia, enduring what he described as a life of poverty and hardship. "My biography," he later reflected, "has been a painful one. We endured many years of famine and suffering, like many others in pre-Soviet Armenia."[5] The establishment of Soviet rule marked a decisive change in his life. Only then, he explained, did his circumstances begin to improve.

In 1924, he married, eventually raising five children, all of whom received higher education and entered professional careers. In 1958, he was granted a modern apartment in Yerevan, complete with amenities. In contrast to his youth, which had been shaped by genocide, dispossession, and famine, his later years were defined by stability and security. He described himself as enjoying a "happy old age," a striking conclusion to a life that had begun in the crucible of mass violence and displacement.[6] Serob Kosyan died on the night of 28-29 January 1982.

In 1968, Serob Kosyan composed a remarkable two-part memoir of his experience, a work that he intended to serve as both a personal record and a legacy for future generations. The memoir is divided into two volumes: *The Valley of Shatakh* (Book One, 370 pages, of which 10–20 were damaged but later restored) and *The Daredevils of Shatakh* (Book Two, 76 pages). The originals are preserved in the collections of the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute (AGMI), having been donated to the institution by

3 Ibid., 37.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., 38.

6 Ibid.

the author's son, Suren Kasyan, on 26 April 2008 (AGMI Museum Collection, Part 8, files 119–120). They are accompanied by a surviving photograph of Kosyan in his school years and a hand-drawn map of Tagh created by the author himself.

The first volume, *The Valley of Shatakh*, presents the author's birthplace, the town of Tagh. It is written with the double perspective of childhood memory and old age reflection, bringing together the beauty of the landscape, the lives of successive generations, and the deep sense of loss following genocide and displacement. Kosyan described the act of remembering in vivid language: "Every time you remember the happy and carefree days of childhood spent in your beautiful, incomparable homeland, especially when you have been violently torn away from that sweet paradise, the mountains, forests, rivers, springs, and green meadows of Shatakh rise again before your eyes and mind, and you cannot but sigh with longing." [7] Writing in his later years, he admitted that "when the breath of darkness and death reaches the back of your neck, one must not despair, but summon all one's strength and return to old memories, finding in them new life and feeling once more the breath of youth."[8] The memoir, therefore, was not only a personal act of recollection but also a conscious effort to preserve a world that had been destroyed. Kosyan stated clearly that he wrote so that his children and grandchildren would "form at least some idea of the land and life of their ancestors."[9]

The second volume, *The Daredevils of Shatakh*, is shorter but distinctive in character. It contains portraits, anecdotes, and satirical sketches of individuals from Shatakh and surrounding villages. In this way, he combined personal observation with stories collected from others, preserving a record of character and mentality that otherwise would have vanished. Kosyan also used the second volume to recall the neighboring village of Kajet', whose inhabitants played an important role in self-defense during the massacres. He remembered, for example, the fate of Petros Ter-Hovhannisyan, an important figure in the self-defense battle in the village of Kajet', mentioned in other sources, who was treacherously killed while a guest in the guardhouse of Khumar.[10] With sorrow, he described how one by one the Armenian villages of the district – Kajet', Jnuk, Hinents, Kaghp, Sak, and others - were destroyed in those years. These recollections connected his more humorous and ethnographic sketches to the tragic historical events that reshaped the entire region.

Taken together, *The Valley of Shatakh* and *The Daredevils of Shatakh* form a rare and invaluable source. The first volume reconstructs the land, life, and traditions of the district, while the second depicts its personalities and social fabric. They combine autobiography with ethnography, testimony with folklore, and personal memory with communal heritage. In doing so, Serob Kosyan ensured that the stories, language, and traditions of

7 Ibid., 47.

8 Ibid., 46-47.

9 Ibid., 44.

10 Petros Ter-Hovhannisyan is mentioned in the article authored by ethnographer Hayrik Mouradyan. See Mouradyan, "From the Heroic Past of Shatakh," 39–48.

his birthplace did not disappear with the generation of survivors. His memoirs allow us to see him not only as a survivor of genocide but also as a careful observer and preserver of culture - an "unknown folklorist of Shatakh," whose writing safeguarded the memory of a community that might otherwise have been lost forever.

The significance of Kosyan's memoirs lies in their wide scope. By recording folklore, humorous tales, proverbs, anecdotes, moral parables, and poems, he preserved fragments of Shatakh's oral tradition. Many pieces are given in the Shatakh dialect, some in mixed colloquial language, and others in modern Armenian, making the text valuable not only for history but also for the study of language and folklore. At the same time, his detailed descriptions of the environment, customs, and community life provide a cultural and ethnographic portrait of Shatakh on the eve of the Genocide.

The memoirs of Serob Kosyan cover a wide chronological and thematic range, stretching from the author's earliest memories of childhood to his reflections in old age. Within this frame, he addresses his youthful life in his native homeland, his family home and its surroundings, daily customs, traditions, school, classmates, local habits, and the oral lore of the community. Alongside these depictions of everyday life, the memoir also includes brief yet poignant episodes of the Hamidian massacres, recalled through sketches and anecdotes, as well as accounts of the Armenian Genocide, with vivid portrayals of massacres, deportations, and the subsequent struggle for life in Armenia.

The chronological arc begins with Kosyan's own childhood and school years, reaching its turning point in 1914, when he was fifteen years old, on the eve of the Genocide. This section introduces figures from the Kurdish and Turkish ruling classes, whose presence and actions foreshadow the destruction that was to come. At the same time, through the framework of short stories and vignettes, Kosyan looks back further, to the heroic moments of Shatakh's Armenians in the 1890s. He recalls the resistance struggles of 1890–1900, and in particular the Hamidian massacres of 1896 in the town of Tagh, embedding them in the broader history of Armenian endurance and self-defense. Thus, his narrative is not only personal but also historical, tying the fate of his own generation to that of earlier ones.

The memoir's last chronological layer emerges in the author's old age, when his memories are interwoven with his own poetic compositions. Both volumes of the work close with a series of his original poems. Although the second volume repeats the same poetic samples found in the first, the preserved collection demonstrates that Kosyan considered poetry an inseparable part of his remembrance. His verses are not the spontaneous outbursts of an untrained pen but rather carefully crafted literary works, with rhyme, richness of content, and smoothness of imagery. They confirm that, while he never sought to be a professional writer, Kosyan possessed a natural literary talent.

This talent is equally visible in his prose. Through flexible and artful narrative solutions, Kosyan succeeded in recounting reality without embellishment and without turning away from the harsh truth of events. His aim was never simply artistic expression but rather the preservation of memory. He wrote, above all, to leave a record for his people

and to rescue from oblivion the rich heritage of his native land, of which he himself had been a living bearer. The memoirs thus move through time from childhood to genocide, from survival to old age, but they remain united by a single purpose: to ensure that the land, culture, and traditions of Shatakh would not perish with the generation that had witnessed their destruction.

About the Journal

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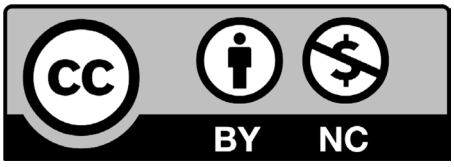

Cover design by Kristine Vardanyan
Layout by Arax Aleksanyan

Printed by