

BOOK REVIEWS

Wolfgang Gust, ed., *The Armenian Genocide: Evidence from the German Foreign Office Archives, 1915-1916* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2014), 816 pages,

Reviewed by Suren Manukyan, Deputy Director, Armenian Genocide Museum & Institute, Yerevan, Armenia

The Armenian Genocide scholarship is ongoing struggle against denialism. The Turkish state denial policy became more sophisticated and aggressive politically. But academic level is also still in the spotlight of revisionist scholars.

One of the main arguments propounded by the professional denialists of the Armenian Genocide is the lack of sources credibility. For example “Blue Book” (The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, 1915–1916) by James Bryce and Arnold J. Toynbee is attempted to call product of wartime propaganda¹ as well as the authenticity and veracity of the ambassador’s witness memoirs of Henry Morgenthau (1856–1945), the American ambassador to the Sublime Porte² is undermined by pointing him as “confirmed ‘Turcophobe’ whose hatred for the Turks was matched only by his unabashed support for the Christian minorities under Ottoman rule.”³

But one sort of sources is out of these allegations. They cannot identified as incredible, propagandistic of non-objective.

These sources are German documents. Germany was ally of Ottoman Empire in the WWI and had great and in many cases critical and decisive impact on policy making and implementation of Constantinople. More than 7-8 thousands German officers, 12 thousands soldiers served in Ottoman Empire during the WWI. Ottoman army was mostly administrated by German military stuff. Moreover, important decisions were made directly by German officers. Thus one of the Turkish generals Ismet pasha even complained that the German military mission was allowed to follow what was going on in the country and Germans were entrusted with all state secrets, both political and military. In particular, German officer was heading the Second Department Ottoman Army General Staff (or investigation department).⁴ This shows the huge degree and level of information access the German soldiers and, therefore, the diplomats had.

1. On Blue Book case see, Taner Akcam, *Anatomy of Genocide Denial: Academics, Politicians, and the “Re-Making” of History*, www.chgs.umn.edu/histories/occasional/akcam_anatomy_of_denial.pdf

2. *A Question of Genocide: Armenians and Turks at the End of the Ottoman Empire* ed. by Ronald Grigor Suny, Fatma Müge Göçek, and Norman M. Naimark Suny (Oxford University Press, 2011), 15, see also, Vahakn N. Dadrian, *The key elements in the Turkish denial of the Armenian genocide: a case study of distortion and falsification* (Zoryan Institute, Toronto, 1999), 40-42.

3. Heath W. Lowry, *American Observers in Anatolia CA. 1920: The Bristol Papers*

4. V.N. Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide. Ethnic Conflict from the Balkans to Anatolia to the Caucasus*, (Providence-Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1995), 252

German diplomatic network in the Ottoman Empire was very spread: Even after outburst of war they continued their stay in Turkey and their reports, notes and letters designed the pervasive canvas of planned and state-implemented policy of total annihilation.

For example, from the report of Ambassador in Constantinople (Wangenheim) to the Imperial Chancellor (Bethmann Hollweg) at 7 July 1915 “The expulsion and relocation of the Armenian people was limited until 14 days ago to the provinces nearest to the eastern theatre of war and to certain areas in the province of Adana; since then the Porte has resolved to extend these measures also to the provinces of Trebizond, Mamuret-ul-Aziz and Sivas and has begun with these measures even though these parts of the country are not threatened by any enemy invasion for the time being. **This situation, and the way in which the relocation is being carried out shows that the government is indeed pursuing its purpose of eradicating the Armenian race from the Turkish Empire...**” (p. 230)

The reports of German diplomats embraced the entire territory of the Ottoman Empire, where consuls and vice-consuls were informing the ambassadors and foreign ministers of their countries about the deportations and massacres of the Armenians by “strictly confidential” or “top-secret” inscriptions. These documents considered the deportation and massacres of the Armenian population as equivalent occurrences as a method of Armenians’ extermination. From the report of Rossler, Consul in Aleppo to Wolff-Metternich, the Ambassador in Constantinople when he shared disruption of Imperial Vice-Consul Hoffmann from Alexandretta “It can be regarded as an established fact that in the actual Armenian Vilayets – quite apart from the war zone near Van – the deportation has been accompanied by the massacre of the adult male Armenians, but also partly of the whole population of Armenian towns and villages.” (p. 505)

The German documents do not evoke any doubt, because the officers’ reports of war ally of Ottoman Empire of course could not be in favor of the Armenians. Moreover, there is also another feature, which makes the German sources trustworthy. The authors of these reports did not have any positive opinion about the Armenian population in the Ottoman Empire, and sometimes negatively tempered towards them. Thus, in 1915 ambassador Wangenheim transmits to Berlin that the situation of the Armenians is quite hopeless, and it is for Germany’s supreme interest not to interfere, and at the same time announces to Morgenthau that the Armenians were simply traitorous vermin.⁵

Representatives of the German diplomatic staff working many years in the Ottoman Empire were in close contact with the Armenian people, they ere well aware of the situation, and the involvement of the Armenians in the economic life of the Empire, therefore they easily denied the Turkish hypotheses about the Armenians’ rebellion (“There only seems to be agreement on one point: that the Armenians have given up their ideas of a revolution since the introduction of the Constitution and there is no organization for such a revolt” by the Ambassador in Constantinople (Wangenheim) to the Imperial Chancellor (Bethmann Hollweg) (p. 169), they also reveal the real purpose of deportation (“...At this stage I will disregard the fact that these measures by the government were carried out in such a way that they meant the absolute extermination of the Armenians. Also, I do not believe that it is possible in any other way to destroy a culture that is older and much higher than of the

5. H.Morgenthau, *Ambassador Morgenthau’s Story* (NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1918), 370

Turks” in Memorandum concerning the Armenian question from Administrator in Erzerum to the Imperial Chancellor Bethman Hollweg) (p. 295) and the economic disaster which will cause the Empire in case of the Armenians destruction.

Although the German diplomats and consuls were sending countless messages to Berlin with details about the massacres, however they received clear command from the authorities: “not to interfere and keep the confidentiality”. (From the note of Imperial Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg to the Telegram of Ambassador in Constantinople Wolff-Meternich “The proposed public reprimand of an ally in the course of a war would be an act which is unprecedented in history. Our only aim is keep Turkey on our side until the end of the war, no matter whether as a result Armenians do perish or not...” (p. 492)

This corpus of 240 documents uncovers so large visions and horizons, that questions raised by their compiler and editor Wolfgang Gust sounds very natural: Was Imperial Germany a driving force in the Genocide of the Armenians, or possibly even the source of the ideas, as some non-German historians have suspected? Did Imperial Germany view the Armenian Genocide with indifference or with sympathy? Did some Germans or part of the leading class resist the deportations and mass killings? And finally, did Germany have the power to stop the Armenian Genocide, and if they were able to so, why did they not make use of this power? (pp. IX-X)

All of these questions are discussed in this volume, and furthermore discussed directly by the language of documents. German officials narrated this reports without any compassion and preconditions about nameless brutalities perpetrated in the ally state and by their allies and whose even that time called Extermination of whole nation. Wartime conditions were increasing the degree of already high leveled diplomatic secrecy. Therefore the German diplomats being sure of their reports’ secrecy did not constrain in any way while composing the contents of their letters.

This condition makes the book so attractive, exciting and important. Very important as Dadrian mentioned “The network of German diplomatic and military officials deployed throughout Turkey afforded them to rare opportunity to observe first-hand the atrocities in progress.” (p. XV)

The book includes an interesting foreword by the one the coryphaeus of Armenian genocide scholarship Vahakn Dadrian. Professor Dadrian being well informed in the topic as an author of noted German Responsibility in the Armenian Genocide: A Review of Historical Evidence of German Complicity, was published in 1996 gives analysis of critical import of official German documentation, historical legacy of German attitude to Armenian question and finally complicity, of German government in the Armenian Genocide. (pp. XIV-XXVIII)

The volume has also 130-pages overview strong written and covered the topic of Armenian Genocide in general as well as analyze meticulously different aspects reflected in the documents by group them into chapters (e.g. Deportation and Annihilation Campaigns with subchapters Labour Battalions, The Murder of Adult Males, Acts of Extermination in Home Towns, The Annihilation of Entire Deportation Convoys etc.). In one of the Chapters Gust dives into the details of the Role of Germans and their Joint Responsibility for the Genocide (pp 82-126) by describing the reactions of German Politicians and the Attitude of the German Ambassadors and the Consuls as well as Central Headquarters in Berlin.

To conclude, we should stress that the book “Armenian genocide, Evidence from the German Foreign Office Archives, 1915-1916” provides a unique, disturbing and close-up view of how German diplomats faced, reacted and accounted the violent annihilation of entire nation.

This fascinating, and highly informative book is one of the cornerstones of Genocide studies and its English translation was must for a scholar who researches any aspect of Armenian genocide. For that reason, alone, this book is highly recommended to those who are serious about attempting to begin to understand the history of Armenian Genocide.

At the foreword V. Dadrian evaluates German Documentation by the four attributes: reliability, explicitness, incontestability and verifiability (p. XV) and work of the author. “The corpus is the product of hard labour, diligence, discipline and, above all, tenacious persistence. Historical scholarship owes to Wolfgang Gust and his spouse Sigrid a great dept of gratitude”.

I surely should join to an appreciation.