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Righteous Muslims during the Genocide of 1915

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Undoubtedly there was mass participation in the genocide committed during the First World War by the Ottoman Government, led by the “İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti” (Society for Union and Progress) and directed by a group of leaders known as the Young Turks. Ordinary Muslims participated in the loot and tacitly or actively supported the carnage. However, while there was mass participation, it has to be remembered that many ordinary Muslims helped Christians and many administrators refused to follow orders. *Mass* participation does not *necessarily* signify universal participation. Many Muslim groups and individuals including army officers and high ranking public officials either refused to participate, refused to carry out orders and/or assisted any Christians to escape certain death.

Most sources on the genocide readily identify Turks, Kurds, Lazes and Circassians as participants to the massacres. To this the Persians who attacked Armenians and Assyrians in Salmas and Ourmiah should be added. But even this list is not definitive. An Armenian survivor I interviewed, Mr Manuel Kerkesharian, told me that his convoy was attacked by Chechens on the way to Aleppo and in fact he was angrier with Chechens than Turks.¹ The word in Turkish for Chechen is the same as in English (*Çeçen*), while Circassian is *Çerkez*. Because of the similarity of the sounds and the absence – to my knowledge at the time - of any documents identifying Chechens in connection to the massacres, I assumed Mr Kerkesharian meant Circassians. Eventually I came across to a paper by Ara Sarafian, in which he includes a testimony of an Assyrian Chaldean clergyman, who said that “[s]ome Chechens near Ras-ul-ain attacked convoys of Armenian refugees”². Indeed, Mr Kerkesharian was right to name the Chechens in his testimony.

To this ever-growing list of Muslim nations participating in the massacres, the Georgian Muslims can also be added. In 2008, Turkish researcher Oktay Özel in a conference in Tbilisi said that the leader of Georgian Muslims, Ali-Pasha Tavgerizade, was involved in forming armed groupings and that Georgian Muslims were also privy to mass killing of Armenians and Greeks in Ottoman Empire. “It’s hard to say when Georgians were fulfilling the orders of the Ottoman government and when they were driven by their bellicose spirit but

¹ Racho Donef, ‘Three survivors of the Armenian Genocide’, *International Network on Holocaust and Genocide*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 1999, p. 8.

² Ara Sarafian ‘The Disasters of Mardin during the Persecutions of the Christians, Especially the Armenians, 1915’, *Haigazian Armenological Review*, Vol. 18, Beyrouth, 1998, p. 266.

they were killing along with Cherkess [Circassians] and other muhajirs.³ Most likely, they wanted to demonstrate their loyalty to the Sultan”.⁴

I received inspiration for this article from Taner Akçam’s narrative concerning Hadji Halil of Urfa who housed seven people of the same family in his attic to save them from the massacres. The testimony was relayed to Akçam by Sarkisyan in 1995 in Erivan, during the 80th Year Commemoration of the Armenian Genocide. Hadji Halil was Sarkisyan’s maternal grandfather’s friend. Hadji Halil promised his friend that he would protect his friend’s family in the event of calamity. Hadji Halil kept his promise and housed the family for months. Hadji Halil had to overcome logistical problems including how to buy food for seven extra people without raising suspicion. Akçam’s contended that there were hundreds of similar stories.⁵

Many unnamed individuals helped their neighbours to escape. For instance, another Armenian survivor I interviewed, Mr. Hagop Arsenian showed me ‘scars’ he carried from that period of his life. Tattoos on his right arm depicted an Arab knife (*hançer*), the Islamic crescent and star. He always thought that these tattoos were to disguise Armenians as Muslims and were done by local Muslims (mainly Arabs) to save them.⁶

There were also such groups as the Mevlevi order in Konya and the people of Dersim, who helped Christians, as pointed out by Raymon Kevorkian.⁷ Garo Sasuni also reported that the Kurds in the South participated to the massacres to a lesser extent than their northern brethren and that many Kurdish tribes helped Armenians by hiding them. For example, in Dersim 20,000 Armenians were saved because of Kurdish efforts.⁸ In Ras-ul-Ain, while some Chechens attacked Armenians, other Chechens “saved around 400 to 500” deportees and the Jabbur Arabs sheltered many Armenians.⁹

³ Muslim immigrants from the Balkans and elsewhere.

⁴ ‘Georgian muhajirs were privy to mass killings of Armenians and Greeks in Ottoman Empire’, *PanArmenian Net*, 4 June 2008 at <http://www.panarmenian.net/eng/world/news/26120/> accessed on 13 October 2010.

⁵ Taner Akçam, *İnsan Hakları ve Ermeni Sorunu*, İmge Kitabevi, İstanbul, 1999, pp. 11-15.

⁶ Donef, *op.cit.*, 1999, p. 10.

⁷ Burçin Gerçek, ‘Celal Bey ve diğerleri’, *Radikal*, 26 February 2006.

⁸ Garo Sasuni, *Kürt Ulusal Hareketleri ve 15. Yüzyıldan Günümüze Ermeni Kürt ilişkileri*, Med Yayınları, İstanbul, 1992, p. 163.

⁹ Sarafian, *op.cit.*, p. 266.

Sefa Kaplan in an interview with Prof. Selim Deringil stated that “[t]here were many Muslims who took great risks in order to save their Armenian neighbours, there were also those who adopted children in order to save them”. Deringil responded: “Yes, of course, this was done despite İttihat ve Terraki’s orders to the contrary. There was such an order, what can we say to that? It is not possible to deny it. There were even commanders who refused to follow orders.”¹⁰

Indeed there were many such functionaries who did not obey orders and for obvious reasons are overlooked in the official narrative in Turkey. Raymon Kevorkian who conducted research on this topic identified a number of government functionaries who contested government orders. For instance, the *Vali*¹¹ (governor) of Konya, Celal Bey, did not permit the Konya Armenians to be deported because he knew what would have happened to them if they were sent to the deserts of Deir Zor. Where possible he also tried to prevent Armenians from other places to be sent to the deserts. He was removed from his post in October 1915 but he had already saved many lives. He remained unemployed until 1919.¹²

Other examples include, the Governor of Ankara Hasan Mazhar, who was removed from his post for refusing to deport Armenians in the August of 1915, the Mutasarrıf¹³ of Kütahya Faik Ali Bey, who refused to deport about 2,000 Armenians (later he became permanent undersecretary of the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic) and the mayor of Malatya Mustafa Ağa Azizoğlu. Malatya was a transit place for those who were deported from the Eastern provinces. The mayor did not have authority to prevent deportation but saved people in his house by providing refuge. Dramatically, he was killed by his son, a member of Union and Progress, for “looking after infidels”.¹⁴ To this list Reşit, Vali of Kastamonu, who was also dismissed for not complying with the extermination campaign and the Mutassarıf of Yozgat, Cemal Bey, should be added.¹⁵ Last, but not least, Tahsin Bey, Vali of Erzurum should also be remembered as one of the heroes who defied orders.¹⁶

¹⁰ Sefa Kaplan, ‘Tehcir sırasında Ermeni çocuklar kurtaran da var’, *Hürriyet*, 11 May 2005.

¹¹ Vali, Governor of a province (*Vilayet*).

¹² Gerçek, *op.cit.*

¹³ Mutasarrıf, governor in charge of a mutasarrifate/district.

¹⁴ Gerçek, *op.cit.*

¹⁵ Engin Ardiç, ‘Deli Mustafa’, *Sabah*, 26 April 2010.

¹⁶ Ayhan Aktar, *Türk Milliyetçiliği ve Ekonomik Dönüşüm*, cited in Gökçen B. Dinç, ‘Müslümanlar Ermenileri Anlatıyor’, *Yeni Aktüel*, 4 October 2007.

The Vali of Ankara, Hasan Mazhar Bey, refusing to follow orders, had reportedly said “I am a Vali not a bandit. I cannot do this. Another person may come and sit in my chair. They can do it”. Accordingly, he was removed from office in the August of 1915.¹⁷



Mutasarrıf of Kütahya Faik Ali Bey [Faik Ali Ozansoy]

When the *tehcir* (deportation) orders were issued, Faik Ali Bey refused to implement them; to the contrary, he gave orders that any Armenians coming to Kütahya to be treated well. Because of his insubordination, Faik Ali Bey was summoned to Istanbul. He left the Secretary General Kemal Bey in his stead. Kemal Bey was also against deportations. However, Kütahya Police Chief, another Kemal Bey, taking advantage of Faik Ali Bey’s absence, called Armenian notables of the city to a meeting in which he asked them to convert to Islam, or else, face deportation. Kütahya Armenians decided to apply for conversion to Islam *en masse*. When Faik Ali Bey returned from Istanbul, he was enraged. He removed the police chief from his post and asked Armenians to tear apart the collective application for conversion to Islam and said that “till today Kütahya Turks have never participated in any atrocities against the Armenians, and will not participate tomorrow either.” According to Kemal Bey (the Secretary General), it was Faik Ali Bey’s brother, the poet and writer Süleyman Nazif Bey who influenced his sibling to take this stance. When *tehcir* was still only a project to be implemented, Süleyman Nazif Bey wrote to his brother not to participate in this barbarity and thereby staining the family name.¹⁸

¹⁷ Tuncay Opçin, ‘Tehcirde Kol Kanat Geren Türkler, *Yeni Aktüel*, 29 June 2008.

¹⁸ *Loc.cit.*

Ali Fuat Ender, Cemal Paşa's¹⁹ chief of staff during the period when he was the Commander of the Fourth Army, wrote that "a telegram arrived from the Provincial Administration of Aleppo: 'Today the bandits Halil and [Çerkez] Ahmet Beys visited me, they told me that the *business of the killings in Diyarbakır were completed* and now they came to do the same in Syria. I arrested them.'" Cemal Paşa ordered the Vali of Aleppo to free Halil and Ahmet.²⁰ Halil and Çerkez Ahmet had just brutally murdered the Armenian deputies Zöhrab and Vartkes.²¹ The Vali who arrested the two murderers was the aforementioned Celal Bey who was first Vali of Aleppo.

Celal Bey published his memoirs in *Vakit*, in 1919. Recently these three articles were found by Rober Kopta in a municipal library in Istanbul and transliterated by Ari Ekeryan and published in the Armenian newspaper in Turkey *Agos*.²² Celal Bey believed there was no conflict between the Kurds, the Turks and the Armenians and that they lived together in harmony. When he was the Vali of Aleppo, he did not believe that the Armenians carried out any activity contrary to Ottoman interests. Celal Bey blamed an overzealous mutasarrıf in Marash who overplayed the existence of a few Armenian army deserters in Zeitun. The mutasarrıf inflamed the situation and arrested many Armenians. When Celal Bey freed most of the Armenians, the Ottoman administration created an autonomous sandjak (*sancak*) in Marash, independent from the Province of Aleppo, thereby truncating Celal Bey's authority.

Celal Bey admitted that originally he believed that the deportations were an internal and temporary measure necessitated by the War. Celal Bey could not believe that the government would take such measures to actually destroy its own citizens. In any case, as he did not believe any Armenian in Aleppo committed an act which would necessitate their exile, he refused to implement the deportation orders. As a consequence, he was removed from his post and transferred to the position of Vali in Konya. The misery he witnessed in Konya caused him to liken himself to "a person sitting by the side of a river, with absolute no means of saving anyone. Blood was flowing in the river and thousands of innocent children, irreproachable old people, helpless women, strong young men, were streaming down this

¹⁹ Cemal Pasha was one of the members of the triumvirate that governed Union and Progress; the other two being Talât and Enver Pashas.

²⁰ Ali Fuad Erden, *Birinci Dünya Savaşı'nda Suriye Hatıraları*, Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, İstanbul, 2003, p.225; [my emphasis]

²¹ Racho Donef, *Ahmet Refik: Two Committees, Two massacres*, Firodyl Institute, London, 2006, p. 40.

²² These extracts are taken by the article produced by Rober Kopta, "Türkler ve Müslümanlar, bu cinayetlerden dolayı kan ağlıyor", *Agos*, 30 July 2010.

river towards oblivion. Anyone I could save with my bare hands I saved, and the others, I think they streamed down the river never to return.”



Vali of Konya and Aleppo Celal Bey

In his memoirs Celal Bey also made the following observations to state that the Turks and the Muslims have only been used as tools [by the government]:

- 1) When I was in Aleppo I saw with my own eyes Muslim helping the Armenians who were deported there.
- 2) Some farm owners came to me and told me that they wanted to house Armenians in their properties.
- 3) Both in Aleppo and in Konya, many members of the *ulema*²³ and the notables thanked me many times for my treatment of the Armenians and that protecting them was required by the Sharia.
- 4) Both in Konya and in Aleppo, I have not seen or heard of any Turk usurping Armenian property.
- 5) Among the Turks and the Muslims I met no one who supported these murders and who did not find them shameful.
- 6) After I returned from Konya many of my acquaintances congratulated me and that they told me it was more honourable to leave my posting.

Many other high ranking officials have paid with their lives for disobeying orders. As well as being responsible for massacres against the Armenians and Assyrians, Dr Reşit Şahingiray, the governor of the Province of Diyarbakır, was alleged to have murdered a number of Turkish officials who refused to carry out his orders: “Vali of Basra Ferit, *Mutasarrıf* of

²³ Doctors of Muslim Theology; learned men.

Müntefek [part of Basra] Bedii Nuri, *Kaymakam*²⁴ of Lice Hüseyin, Deputy Kaymakam of Beşiri [Batman] Sabit, journalist İsmail Mestan; all socialists and/or humanists”.²⁵

Dr Reşit also tried to assassinate the Mutasarrıf of Mardin, Hilmi Bey, who was removed from office. His successor Şefik [Şefik] Bey was also removed for not following orders. Finally, Bedri Bey who was willing to carry out Reşit’s orders was appointed as Mardin’s Mutasarrıf.²⁶ A telegram to form the Interior Ministry to the Province of Diyarbakır, dated 28 June 1915 informs the governorate that Şefik was being transferred to Baghdad, while Bedri Bey was being appointed to the post.²⁷

The Dominican priest Marie-Dominique Berré in his comprehensive report on the Massacres in Mardin notes that

[t]owards the middle of May 1915, Doctor Raschid [Reşit] Bey, vali of Diarbékir, sent to Mutasarrıf of Mardin, Hilmi Bey, the order to imprison all Christian notables of that city. Hilmi Bey responded by this telegram, the authenticity of which I guarantee: ‘I am not a man without conscience; I have nothing against the Christians of Mardin; I will not execute these orders.’ A few days later Hilmi Bey was discharged. A functionary, his name of which I have forgotten [Bedri Bey], very hostile to Christians became responsible of the management of the mutasarrifate.²⁸

Sister Issa Wareina from the Dominican Sisterhood of St Catherine de Sienne (Catherinettes) wrote that the Kaymakam of Savur Wahabit (Wahib/Wehbi) Efendi, a native of Mardin, protected her and her niece and 200 other Christians by giving them refuge in his property. Sister Wareina reported that “the Kaymakam was of Muslims who preferred suras of the Koran which prescribed compassion towards the Christians, than the savage preaching of massacre of Giaours [infidels]”.²⁹

²⁴ *Kaymakam*: governor of a district.

²⁵ Abidin Nesimi, *Yılların içinden*, Gözlem yayınları, İstanbul, 1977, p. 46; Abidin Nesimi was the son of the Kaymakam of Lice.

²⁶ Sarafian, *op.cit.*, p. 264.

²⁷ BOA [Ottoman Archives], DH. ŞFR. 15.

²⁸ Marie-Dominique Berré, ‘Massacres de Mardin’, 1918, p. 1, Centre du Saulchoir [Dominican Archives], Paris: III, K001 – Mossul.

²⁹ ‘Les Catherinettes de Mésopotamie’, Éditions des “Missions Dominicaines”, Paris, 1930, p. 19.



VEHBI EFENDI

Another Dominican source identifies an army officer, Saudki Bey, who helped Christians escape certain death. In Urfa “Don Jean, leader of the Syrian community escaped death only by the intervention of Bimbachi [Major] Saudki bey, who removed his name from the list of Christians who were to be arrested and put to death. This Sauki Bey had a great sympathy for the oriental Catholics and the Latins. He also informed Deir Wartan, the leader of the Armenian Catholic Community, to run away to Aleppo.”³⁰

³⁰ ‘Recit detaille de la mort des Peres Leonard et Thoma’, *private copy*, n.d., p. 3.

David Gaunt notes that the Kaymakam of Midyat Nuri Bey, who was also an official who “had refused to organise the killing of Christians” had vanished.³¹ “Other kaymakams transferred out of the province for opposition were Mohammed Hamdi Bey of Chermik, Mehmed Ali Bey of Sawro [Savur], and Ibrahim Hakki Bey of Silvan.”³²

The Ottoman government was not happy with the conduct of some of its officers who seemed to defy orders. The following telegram from the Ottoman Archives is about the Kaymakam of Ras-ul-Ain:³³

Babîâli

Ministry of the Interior

Directorate of Public Security

To the Mutasarrifate of Zor

(Cipher)

A number of deserters [from the army] and *comitadjis* from Siverek and Viranşehir found refuge in the district of Ras-ul-Ain and the kaymakam is protecting them and so much so that in this district [...] the Diyarbekir Province was informed that he [the kaymakam] arrested the gendarme who came to pursue about two hundred deserters. Whilst it is necessary to pursue and punish these people wherever they may be, the Kaymakam is unable to comprehend this obligation and, on the contrary, favours [them], without the existence of a compelling responsibility. Investigate the matter immediately and inform of its findings and to crush and punish the deserters and deliver the information.

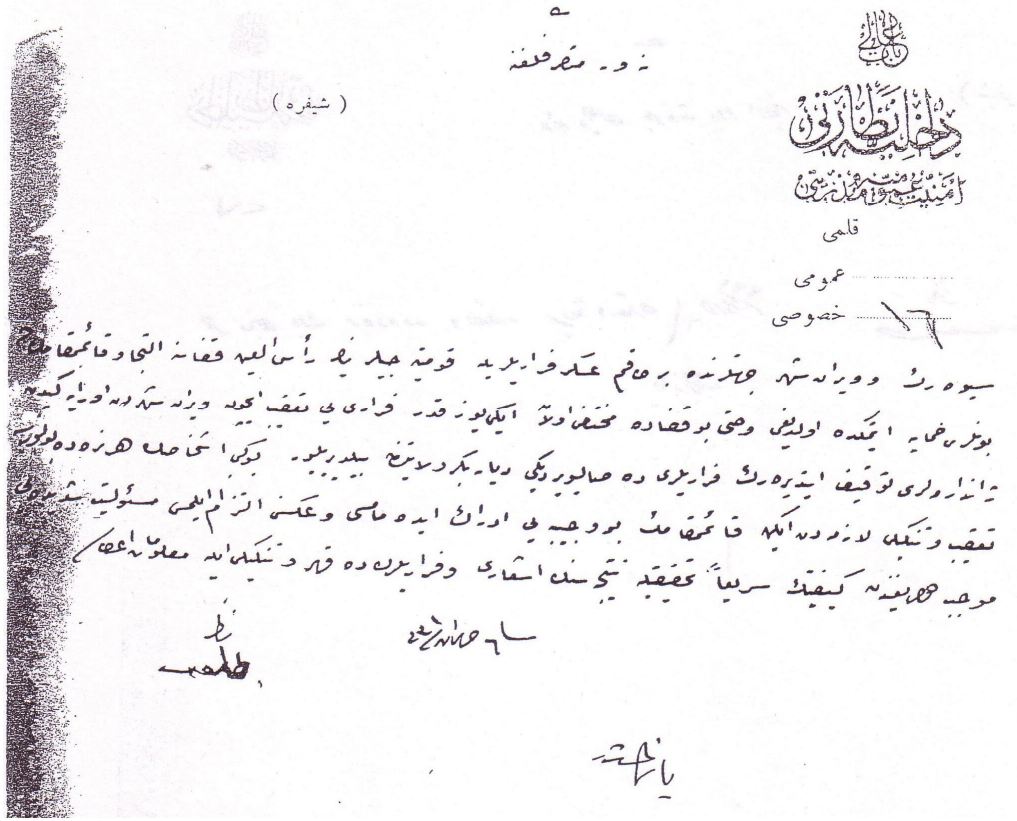
19 June 1915

Minister [Signature]

³¹ Gaunt D., J Beğ-Şawoçe and Donef R., *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors: Muslim Christian Relations in Eastern Anatolia during World War I*, Gorgias Press, Piscataway, 2006, p. 194.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 159.

³³ BOA [Prime Ministerial Ottoman Archives], DH. ŞFR 1333 Ş 6 54/65.



The fact that there were administrators who did not follow orders, the fact that there were ordinary people who did not join in the massacres and did not partake in the loot that it ensued, should have burdened the conscience even more of those who did. Yet, in the official narrative many are treated as heroes, for example Topal Osman (Osman the Lame), or even victims, as can be seen in the case of those high ranking administrators and officers, who were exiled to Malta by the British, for crimes committed during the War (*Malta sürgünleri*).

Talât Pasha's name is given to a thoroughfare in Ankara and Turkish schools are named after him. In 1996 Enver Pasha's remains were brought from Tajikistan, 74 years after his death and were laid next to Talât Pasha and other leaders from the Union and Progress in the Hill of Liberty Memorial (*Hürriyet-i Abide Tepesi*) in Istanbul. On 4 August 1996 in the ceremony Süleyman Demirel, ministers and extreme nationalists from Ülkü Ocakları (Idealist Hearth) took part. Thus, any attempt to disassociate the Republic from the Union and Progress and its crimes would be disingenuous.

Every nation is capable of raising murderers as well as heroes who risk everything to help their fellow humans. I feel that the Turkish nation today should have identified the courageous people and the heroes who did not follow orders and take pride in their resistance, rather than still celebrating and commemorating the deeds and the lives of the murderers. As Ayhan Aktar expresses “I feel proud of having born in the same country as these people and I respectfully bow to their precious memory”.³⁴

³⁴ Aktar, *loc.cit.*