

Total War and “Genocide” – various aspects of the Armenian massacres

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The massacres of the Armenian people under the Ottoman Empire (present-day Turkey) in 1915 are almost unknown in Japan, other than among a small group of specialists. This reflects the tenuous nature of the relationship between the Middle East and Japan; on the contrary, in the West including Turkey, a significant amount of research has been conducted on the matter. This research can be divided into two schools: researchers of Armenian origin in Europe and the United States, e.g. V. Dadrian, who claim that the Armenian massacres constitute genocide, and the Turkish researchers, e.g. E. Uras, who either see the issue as a response to terrorism by the Armenians, or deny the very fact of the massacres entirely.

There are, however, common problems faced by almost all researchers on this issue. First of all, many of the historical facts about the incident remain unclear, and this is a major obstruction for historians. Another important issue is the strong influence exerted by the political environment surrounding the Armenian people, upon the research of the massacres. That is to say, that since there is no agreement between Armenian society and the Turkish government concerning acknowledgement of the massacres, and it is even now a political issue between Armenia and Turkey, that research often tends to degenerate into a substantiation of the researchers’ own political standpoints. For example, researchers from the Armenian point of view often attempt to link the massacres to the Holocaust, and view the pan-Turkism propagated by the leaders of the Ottoman Empire as equivalent to the anti-Semitism in Europe. Further, although modernization on the military front had proceeded, the Ottoman Empire was still a bureaucratic state heavily reliant on agriculture, and its social structure clearly differed significantly from that of the Nazis, who were completing the industrialization and creation of a mass society. To compare the two while ignoring this crucial difference, will not allow the particular characteristics of the Armenian massacres to surface.

From the Turkish perspective, on the other hand, there is a tendency to project into the past the terrorist activities of ASALA, an extremist Armenian organization, during 1970’s and see all Armenian political action as acts of cruelty based upon separatist movements from the Ottoman Empire, and thus view the 1915 incident as a defensive response to Armenian terrorism, denying the very existence of the massacres.

However, such arguments shed no light upon the questions of why during the massacres of 1915, casualties in Istanbul, the cultural centre of Armenian society at the time, were so light, and why the worst affected areas were the Armenian territories on the border of the Russian

and Ottoman Empires. For this reason, in this thesis, not only the development of the nationalist movements in the Armenian and Turkish nations, but also the influence of the German military mission which were sent into the Ottoman Empire during World War I will be considered.

In terms of conducting research on the incident itself, what is crucial is to examine the specific characteristics of the Armenian national movements, which until now have not been given the attention they deserve for political reasons. I would now like to examine this point closely.

Firstly, the framework of the Christian Armenians being under the rule of the Sultan (Ottoman emperor), is liable to suggest a rule of oppression, but it is untrue that there was political pressure right from the start. In particular, in the nineteenth century Armenian bankers and merchants obtained a farming of a branch of the public revenue (“iltizam”) and trading rights, and were the economic leaders of the empire. Politically, however, while self-government within the Armenian “millet” (religious community) was recognized, political contribution to the national government was insufficient.

Then, brought about by the revolution of 1848 in Europe, democratic movements began, with the intelligentsia at their homeland, but it is important to stress here that at the time the Armenians were separated, with part living in the Ottoman Empire, and another part in Russia. Although they occurred roughly contemporaneously, the Armenian national movements in the Russian Empire and that in the Ottoman Empire were fundamentally different. Most Armenian intellectuals in the Russian Empire studied in Moscow or St. Petersburg, were influenced by the Russian revolutionary movements, and aimed at toppling the czarist (Russian imperial) government. In the Ottoman Empire, on the other hand, many Armenians were influenced by the development of the Young Ottoman movement, of which Turks were the central force, and called for the establishment of a constitution.¹⁾ For this reason, many of those in the Armenian national movements in Russia (such as M. Nalbandian) have criticized the society of their compatriots in the Ottoman Empire as being excessively compromising to other religions, and as lacking in commitment to the revolutionary spirit.²⁾

In 1856, the Ottoman government issued a decree stating the virtues of legal equality between Christians and Muslims, and began upon the road to reforming their social structure. Then, during the Treaty of Berlin of 1878 dealing with the aftermath of the Russo-Ottoman War, Armenian self-government within the Ottoman Empire became a topic of debate. In Article 61 submitted at the meeting, the Ottoman Empire was pressed in the following way: “The Ottoman government office shall, with no further delay, work towards carrying out the requested reform and restoration in the Armenian residential areas, and securing their safety against attacks from Circassians or Kurds.”³⁾

However, suddenly attempting to democratize a society which had been led both politically and militarily by Muslims brought with it many problems, and led to an increasing of the tensions between the government and Islamic conservatives opposed to the reforms, and Christian nationalists in the empire unhappy with the reforms. Armenian society itself was no exception: this situation further encouraged movements for greater political participation, based around intellectuals returning from West Europe, and led to the establishment of several nationalist political parties.

At the same time, their compatriots' national movements in the Russian Empire also got active, and in 1890 the largest Armenian nationalist party, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (the so-called Dashnak Party) was established in Tiflis (presently the Georgian capital Tbilisi). The party conducted military conflict as part of its political activity. With regard to explosives in particular, they learned from the People's Will, one of the Russian Narodniki (Populist) parties, and not only conducted anti-czarist activity, but also planned the "emancipation" of their compatriots in the Ottoman Empire, triggering rebellions there as well.

What must be stressed at this point is the significance of the role of Armenian political groups spurred on by Russian revolutionary movements, in the sudden evolution of these nationalist ones. It can be said that the situation became considerably more complex as a result of their "export" of revolutionary democratic activity to the Ottoman Empire in order to "emancipate" their compatriots. An archetypal example is the Ottoman Bank seizure which occurred on August 24th, 1896. B. Suni, who was seen as a supporter of the Dashnak Party, engineered a military occupation of the Ottoman Bank and demanded further reforms of the imperial political system. The perpetrators fled the country, but days later the Armenian section of Istanbul was attacked, producing many victims.⁴⁾

On July 23rd, 1908 Sultan Abdülhamit II was held incommunicado by the democratic political forces, the Committee of Union and Progress (so-called Young Turks) and the Dashnak Party, leading to a transfer to a constitutional monarchy led by the CUP. However, beginning with the rebellion of the pro-Sultan group on April 13th of the following year, divisions within the CUP along the lines of those supporting centralist authority and those supporting regional authority developed. As a result, the centralist authority faction claimed victory.⁵⁾ Aftershocks from this incident spread to the surrounding regions, and the following day saw clashes between Armenians and Muslims in Adana. However, what is interesting about this is that the legal proceedings concerning these incidents saw the harsher sentences passed upon the Muslim side.⁶⁾

Ultimately, after the defeats of the empire in the 1912 Balkan War the Dashnak Party was left to mount military resistance to the thereafter CUP-based government. Then, with the outbreak of World War I in 1914, and the entry into the war between the Russian and the Ottoman Empires, Armenian activists in Russian territory joined the Russian army, or formed their own battalions, and invaded Anatolia.⁷⁾

At the same time, within the Ottoman government, the coup d'état at the Bab-ı Ali, grand vizier's palace, took place in January 23rd, 1913, and the dictatorship of Talât, interior minister, and Cemal⁸⁾, navy minister. Then, on August 2nd, 1914, Enver, war minister, and his comrades unilaterally decided to form a pact with Germany, thus leading to the Ottoman Empire entering World War I on the German side.⁹⁾ For Enver, this war represented a golden opportunity to reclaim the land which had been continually taken from them by their old enemy Russia, and to eliminate the infiltrating influence of the Dashnak Party from the neighbor country.

Simultaneously, a German military mission led by Otto Liman von Sanders was sent to the Ottoman Empire, and participated in the Ottoman military plans. In particular, the military Chief of General Staff Fritz Bronsard von Schellendorf, Otto Feldmann, and the naval attaché to the German Embassy Felix Guse were highly influential.¹⁰⁾ On October 23rd, the Ottoman navy attacked the Russian one, under the command of Admiral Souchon.

It is considered that the plans for the deportation of the Armenians began during World War I, sparked by the Armenian revolt in the Van region, which is close to the border of Ottoman Empire and Russia, on April 8th, 1915. April 24th of the same year, in which several prominent Armenian politicians and intellectuals (such as K. Zohrab, Siamanto, etc.) were placed in custody by government officials or killed, is known in Armenia as “the memorial day for the genocidal victims”.

According to the Temporary Law of Deportation promulgated on May 27, 1915, the CUP government expelled the Armenians from the region bordering with Russia, towards Syria and Iraq. Malnutrition, sporadic warring with the Kurds and fleeing towards Russia led to a sharp decline in the Armenian population. (It is said that the victims were 800,000) Later, the leaders of Great Britain, France, Russia and the United States charged the German military officers with aiding and concealing genocide, for inciting the CUP to exile and exterminate Armenians, but due to regulation of information in Germany, it never became an issue in the public domain.¹¹⁾

Nonetheless, from 1915 to 1916 Harry Stürmer, Istanbul correspondent for the *Kölnische Zeitung* paper, reported that he heard from “all ranks right up to the highest level”, “venomous expressions, shortsighted condemnations of Armenians based on no awareness of the facts; mindless recitations of official Turkish reports”. Further, he produced concrete examples, that the German officers had “coolly taken the initiative of aiding the mass extermination of Armenians”.

Pastor Graf von Lüttichau, stationed at the German embassy in Istanbul, noted in a report of 1918 that high-ranking German officers, unaware of any political consequences, consistently and repeatedly offered opinions on military strategy which invariably caused much damage. Also, in a telegram sent by Ernst von Kwiatkowski from the German Consulate of Trabzon on October 22nd, 1915, he reports “I learn from usually reliable German sources that the first suggestions towards Armenian neutralization, though not the methods actually implemented, have come from the German side.¹²⁾”

In the debates concerning the trials following the “Talât Pasha Assassination ¹³⁾” which occurred in Berlin on March 15th, 1921, as revenge by an Armenian for the massacres and deportation, part of what occurred during the massacres became clear. During the trial, the *Deutsche Allgemeine* paper unveiled an anti-Armenian campaign, pleading the innocence of Talât. This campaign was carried out under the considerable influence of the marine attaché to the Embassy stationed in Istanbul, Hans Humann. In an article of June 8th, 1921, probably written by himself, it was stressed that as the Armenians had killed thousands of Muslims, the Turks merely acted in “self-defense,” and thus Enver and Talât were not responsible for the crime against the Armenian people. Bronsard von Schellendorf, Otto Feldmann, and Felix Guse also had their roles called into question. Schellendorf claimed that “I had offered myself as a witness to testify that Talât had acted in the legitimate interests of the Turkish people, our allies, when he resettled the treacherous Armenian people, who had been bribed by Russians, to Mesopotamia, for their revolt behind the back of the Turkish army”, thus stressing the relationship between the German and the Ottoman Empires.

Guse was a high-ranking officer in the German army on the Caucasus front from 1914 to 1917, but in the article of June 1921, he heavily criticized all Armenians within the Ottoman Empire, and asserted that the Russian Army had gone on the offensive from May, 1915 as

a result of the Armenian insurrection. Two days after Guse's editorial, Feldmann's article appeared, justifying their own actions by saying that although it is undeniable that they warned the Ottoman army to eliminate the Armenians, it was in fact the Ottoman army which carried out the act ¹⁴⁾.

The above are all examples suggesting involvement of German military advisors in the Armenian massacres, but of course one must not automatically conclude that all of the Germans sent to the Ottoman Empire as part of their alliance were supporters of the removal of the Armenians. The degree of involvement of those Germans who were involved was also diverse. As an example of this, I would like to consider the case of the opposition between the army and the Baghdad Rail Company ¹⁵⁾ concerning the treatment of their Armenian laborers.

The Baghdad Railway Company of the Ottoman general staff was headed by a German officer, Lieutenant Colonel Böttrich, who formulated decisions that were in harmony with the aim of the Ottoman government. By identifying himself with the CUP's deportation policy, the officer secured his own position and gained sufficient Ottoman backing to enact a policy antagonistic toward the railway company. For Böttrich, the issue of the deportation of the Armenian workers became a tool to assert his will over the railway company. Thus, he not only signed an order for deportation but also took an active interest in its enforcement. Moreover, when the deportation of the workers in the Amanus Mountains had brought about an interruption in the supplies of several Ottoman armies, Böttrich still sided with the Ottoman deportation policy and tried to break any resistance on the part of the railway company. Therefore, he has to be seen as a dynamic factor in the execution of the Armenian massacre. Unlike his predecessor, he was not removed from his post at the demand of the German embassy and the railway company. This highlights the crucial duplicity of Böttrich's position as both an Ottoman and a German officer. He could check opposition from either side by stressing his Ottoman or German obligations. As it happened, however, this was not necessary, as he enjoyed the support of both of his immediate superior, Minister of War Enver and Chief of the General Staff, General Bronsart von Schellendorf. Thus, the German Supreme Army Command under General von Falkenhayn did not take any decisive steps to remove Böttrich; on the contrary, it disregarded his critics and then reinforced the officer's position ¹⁶⁾.

The Ottoman government and the ruling CUP were determined to exterminate the company's Armenian employees, just as they were to extirpate the entire Armenian population. They pursued their goal following a double strategy. This strategy is combined, on the other hand, a consistent diplomatic effort to gain the railway company's consent and cooperation in the deportation of its employees, and on the other hand, to use subordinate administrators to create a *fait accompli* at an opportune moment to make believe that the government was not involved. In dealings with their German partners the ruling CUP members tried to hide the close cooperation of the Ottoman central administration, military officers, and local authorities. Therefore, a system of official orders and secret counter orders was employed. The counter orders reversed the former official orders that had been shown to the Germans. In critical situations, such as resistance against the deportation program by the governor of Marash in 1916 or the interruption of railway transportation, special liaisons furnished with full executive powers were used to overcome the problems. Deportations and massacres were directed and monitored closely by officials in Istanbul ¹⁷⁾.

The declared aim of the Baghdad Railway Company’s policy was the protection of its interests. One of these aims was the safeguarding of its Armenian employees. Thus, conflicts with the Ottoman government were inevitable. The company fought relentlessly and used all the pressure it could bring to bear on the government to give up its plan to deport the Armenian workers. In a decisive moment, the head of the company Franz J. Günther, who was the delegate of the Deutsche Bank, warned Talât that the deportation of his employees would interrupt supplies for the armies at Gallipoli (a peninsula along the Dardanelles) and thus bring about the defeat of the Ottoman Empire. Talât temporally gave up the plan of an immediate full scale deportation of the Armenian workers on August 29, 1915. Utilitarian motives were clearly of importance for the company’s pro-Armenian policy, but were not the only reason. Humanitarian considerations stood behind the company’s own relief efforts. Supplying the German embassy with incoming reports of atrocities, the company’s director worked for a change of official German policies. The company’s measures far exceeded mere diplomatic activities. The directors, as well as their staff, engaged in clandestine resistance ¹⁸⁾.

The company’s resistance could not, however, prevent the deportation and massacre of the workers from the Amanus in June 1916. Because after the defeat of the British army at Kut-el-Amara the prisoners of war would replace the Armenian workers and the latter were no longer necessary to the Ottoman government. The destruction of this Armenian labor force amply demonstrates how the Baghdad Railway Company and its German allies had frustrated the Ottoman government’s attempt to co-opt the company in its deportation scheme. The government therefore resorted to a carefully prepared *fait accompli* to defeat German resistance ¹⁹⁾.

Conclusion

It is needless to say that the Armenian massacres were an incident which occurred on the basis of the collision of Turkish nationalism with that of Armenian in the process of declining of the Ottoman Empire. However, the only explanation as to why it was the Armenians in particular who were the objects of deportation and slaughter in World War I, can be found in “the necessity to eliminate the latent fifth-column in the battle with Russia” and “the securing of labor for the advancement of the war effort”, that is, concerns of military strategy. This point suggests that the government selected a given sector of the population for deportation and slaughter, that is, genocide, under the demands of the total war.

It is worthy of note that during this time the German military advisory mission exerted a certain amount of influence on the high-ranking Ottoman officers. However, at present it is difficult to ascertain when and where the military advisors advised Enver or Talât about strategy, or gave instructions about forced deportation, although there is no doubt that the measures adopted with respect to the Armenians were not merely the extermination policy taken by the Ottoman leaders, but were also demanded by the Germans.

Further, during World War I the German military and their supporters worked to spread the image of Armenians as “treacherous”, “avaricious”, and “loathsome merchants”. The striking similarity between this and images of the Jewish people propagated by anti-Semitic groups, is a

noteworthy phenomenon when considering the relationship between the massacres and the later Holocaust.

Notes

- 1) About the detail see V.Artinian (1989).
- 2) T.Yoshimura (2000), pp.53-55.
- 3) C.Walker (1990), p.227.
- 4) J.Salt (1992), pp.106-109.
- 5) M.Arai (2001), pp.113-121.
- 6) K.Shitara (1985), pp.80-82.
- 7) R. G. Huvannian (1969), pp.45-48.
- 8) Cemal was killed in Tbilisi in 1922 by an Armenian, regarding the former as one of the masterminds of the massacres.
- 9) U.Trumpener (1968), pp.21-22. See also I.Ortaylı (1983), H.Bayram Soy (2004).
- 10) J.Zürcher (1993), p.119.
- 11) V. N. Dadrian (2003), p.221, 225. See also Y. Halaçoğlu (2002) pp.67-93.
- 12) C.Dinkel (1991), pp.78-79.
- 13) Talât dispatched a lot of instructions about the Armenian deportation. Thus Armenians took him as the ringleader of the incident. S. Tehlirian, who assassinated him, was found innocent and acquitted at the court. See T. Hofmann (1989) about the detail.
- 14) *ibid.*, pp.93-97.
- 15) See J.S.McMurray (2001) to know the importance of the railways in the 3B policy of Germany.
- 16) H.Kaiser (1999), pp.71-72.
- 17) *Ibid.*, pp.93-94.
- 18) *Ibid.*, pp.78-80.
- 19) *Ibid.*, pp.88-90.

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