

## **GENOCIDE OF THE ARMENIANS IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE: LAST WEEK OF MAY, 1915<sup>1</sup>**

**Safrastyan Ruben**

*Institute of Oriental Studies, NAS RA*

My discussion will be centered on the last week of May 1915. This week was largely rich in events and needed a detailed study. At the beginning of the week the Entente powers - France, Great Britain and Russia issued a Joint Declaration, sharply condemning the massacre of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. In a few days it was followed by the adoption of the “Resolution” and “The Law” of deportation by the Ottoman government. In the meantime, Turkey, led by Germany, began preparations for diplomatic response of Ottoman government to the Declaration.

The week began with the publication of the Entente powers joint Declaration about the massacres of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire and personally accusing the members of the Ottoman government for this crime. The detailed prehistory of this document is well known. However, in our opinion, little attention has been paid to the fact that the initiators of this document were the representatives of the Armenians, not the Russians, as it is witnessed in Western archives.

The Armenian elite cleared up the enormity of the massacre early in March. They began to enquire into the ways to save the civilian Armenian people. At first their hopes got into touch with possible joint English-French landing operation in Cilicia. In other words, they expected armed humanitarian intervention and Armenian volunteers were ready to take part in. M. Varandyan, one of the leading representatives of the Party of “Dashnaktsutyun”, who was in Sofia at that time, supported the idea. However, when the allies gave up this plan, the idea of diplomatic intervention, which intended to end the massacre, was actualized. The concept originated as a diplomatic demarche of powerful neutral countries - the United States and Italy. Russian sources give an opportunity to conclude that the author of the idea was Varandyan himself. A. Khatsov, the Mayor of Tiflis and deputy chairman of the Armenian National Bureau in Tiflis, who carried great authority with the Russian administration in the Caucasus, actively supported it. He regularly accumulated the information about the terrible massacre, which he turned over the Russian officials and The Catholicos of All Armenians Gevorg V. One of the received eyewitness accounts, which are kept in the Armenian Central Archives, said: “A terrible picture! Corpses, corpses, corpses ... men, women and babies. Maimed, mutilated, brutally abused. You can’t keep the tears”. In response to the telegram sent by Varandyan from Sofia he raised the question of diplomatic protests to the Russian Governor in the Caucasus. This fact was reported in Russian diplomatic sources.

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The official initiator became Gevorg V, who surely had his own sources of information. According to the Russian diplomatic documents, on April 20<sup>th</sup> he applied to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia S. Sazonov for “humanitarian support”. At the same time the Catholicos submitted a similar proposition to the neutral United States and Italy. Sazonov’s subsequent approval to this initiative was originated from his aspiration to enlist the support of the Eastern Armenians against the Ottoman Empire. Later it turned out that Britain and France would not hasten to uphold Russia in a joint diplomatic demarche. Again the Catholicos Gevorg showed activity. This time he sent a letter to French President Poincare and British king George V.

So, the Armenians hoped to end the massacre with diplomatic intervention. That’s why immediately after the proclamation of the Entente’s Joint Declaration the prominent Armenian officials thanked the Entente countries. We can name Paris located Poghos Nubar, the head of the Armenian National Delegation, and well-known Western Armenian intellectual A. Chopanyan. The Declaration inspired the remaining Armenian activists in Constantinople with hope in justice. On June 1 Grigor Zohrab, the prominent Armenian activist and the member of the Ottoman Parliament met the leaders of the Young Turks - Tala’at and Midhat Shukri - and proclaimed that they would answer for their actions sooner or later. A day later he was arrested...

But the machine of killings was in action and cannot be stopped. The massive preplanned slaughter of the Armenian population continued in Western Armenia. Here is a brief summary of mass murder only during those days, according to Armenian sources:

**May 24** - in Diyarbekir, 614 Armenians were killed.

**May 25** - near Urfa, 1500 Armenian soldiers were disarmed and killed; earlier they were drafted into the Ottoman army.

On **May 28** Catholicos Gevorg received a letter from Manzikert, where the murder of thousands of innocent Armenians was described in the very town and surrounding villages. It notes that “the government leads the massacre”. The foreign diplomats also witness about those days. Particularly they survey the vilayet of Erzurum.

On **May 30** Bulgarian diplomatic sources reported the murder of 200-300 deported Armenians of Hinus.

Thousands of killings of innocent men, women, and children only during this last week of May of 1915...

Available Turkish, German, Austrian and American sources reveal a picture of events happened in Constantinople during this week. Turkish leaders took the Declaration as directed personally against them. The internal diplomatic correspondence testifies this fact. Their response was quite hot. The ambassador of Austria-Hungary to Ottoman Empire reported to Vienna that it drove Sadrazam Said Halim Pasha furious. US Ambassador H. Morgenthau described in his diary Said Halim Pasha’s state after he had become familiarized with the note as “very much annoyed”.

Tala'at was the first to familiarize with the contents of the Declaration. There is no reason to be surprised. According to his contemporaries, including his wife, Tala'at had a telegraph machine at home, and the cable connecting the Ottoman Empire with Europe, which passes through his house. He was the first to read all important telegrams received by the Ottoman government. By the way, before the Young Turk revolution Tala'at had worked as a telegraph operator for two years.

Tala'at was threatened with the Declaration, as by his orders deportations and massacres had started and were in progress. He obviously feared that the whole burden of guilt should be laid onto his and only his shoulders. In an attempt to avoid it, he initiated a process aimed to disperse the guilt for the crime among the government members, making it a matter of collective amenability, rather than his personal. As a rule, the criminal realizes very well the measure of his responsibility. Tala'at's unique confession on that subject has been preserved in the memoirs of his close friend Halil, a leading figure in the Ottoman Empire and in the "Committee of Union and Progress". According to him, Tala'at once acknowledged that he was the one to make the decision about the deportation of Armenians.

As a result of the secret Report of Tala'at submitted to the Sadrazam, the Government adopted "Provisional Law on Deportation" on May 27 and Governmental Resolution on Deportation on May 30.

I have to underline that the process of large scale Genocide was already on the way beginning from the March.

The Governmental Resolution was signed by seven members of the government: Sadrazam Said Halim Pasha, Minister of Internal Affairs Tala'at, Minister of War Enver Pasha, Minister of Social Affairs Abbas Halim Pasha, Minister of Education Ahmed Shukri, Minister of Commerce Ahmed Nesimi, and Minister of Justice Pirizade Ibrahim Hayrullah.

The next day the original text of the "Resolution" was officially copied for the purpose of sending to respective ministries. One of those copies which is kept in the Archive of the General Headquarter, was included in the collection of documents published by General Headquarters of the Turkish armed forces.

The original document being published by Turkish historians has been widely used as a proof of a hypothesis of the Turkish official historiography as if the purpose of the deportation was only the deportation of Western Armenians and not their massacre. It mentions all the "dangers" as if coming from Armenians, a number of resettlement problems connected with the deportees. At the same time, special attention was paid to the organization of their lives in the new places of their settlement, as well as questions of abandoned property in their native places of habitation etc. A lot of provisions of the Resolution obviously did not pursue the goal of having a real influence on the deportation process by imparting it a seemingly "organized" character outwardly or just formally. According to Tala'at and his accomplices, it had to create a "legal" ground that

would give them an opportunity to elude the responsibility of committing the extermination of the Armenian nation under the cover of deportation.

But the expression “to fully exterminate and liquidate” (*imhâ ve izâlesi kat’iyyen muktezî*) reveals not only the real purposes of the highest authorities of the Ottoman empire, but also, in the framework of modern conceptual approaches of Genocide Studies, gives an opportunity to reveal its intent to commit genocide under the cover of deportation.

Realizing that danger, the Turkish authors, representatives of “resmi” (official) historiography, resort to a number of tricks the purpose of which is to conceal the meaning of the above-mentioned expression and to delude the reader by distorting it. Thus, for example, the “classics” of official Turkish historiography, Y.H. Bayur and K. Gürün, and the representatives of the new generation unanimously avoid translating the expression “*imhâ ve izâles i kat’iyyen muktezî*” (“to fully exterminate and liquidate”) into modern Turkish and do not hesitate sometimes to use translations of the Ottoman words incomprehensible for those who knows modern Turkish.

Such a trick can certainly be described as rather “delicate”. But the Turkish authors who carry out an official order are not limited to it. The authors of the collection of documents published by the General Headquarters of the Armed Forces go even further and turn to evident falsification. This collection includes modern Turkish and English translations of the copy of the “Resolution”. Its translators have tried to “mitigate” the meaning of the expression.

For instance, the English translators who obviously made use not of the Ottoman original text, but the modern Turkish translation, unhesitatingly shortened the above-mentioned expression and presented it as: “ought to be eliminated effectively”. Let us compare the Ottoman original of the “Resolution” passed by the Ministerial council with the English translation. It is mentioned in the original: “to fully exterminate and liquidate” and in the English translation we read: “ought to be eliminated effectively”. The change of meaning is obvious; it was falsified.

Thus, it is clear that by publishing the original text of the “Resolution” of the Ministerial council, the official Turkish historians try to make its real meaning difficult to understand for the non-specialists in every possible way. By publishing that document, they try not to throw light on the poorly studied pages of the history of the Armenian Genocide, but to use it as an additional “argument” for substantiating the false hypothesis that the Ottoman authorities “showed concern” towards the Armenian people during the deportation.

The “Law on Deportation” was published by the official newspaper on June 1 and enforced immediately under the title “Provisional Law on Measures to Be Taken from Military Point of View against Those Who Act in Opposition to the Government’s Activity in Wartime”. It was signed by the Sultan, Sadrazam and Minister of War Enver and consisted of four Articles. Enver was personally made responsible for the enactment.

The “tradition” of falsification, adopted by Turkish official historians, can be discovered also concerning the “Law on Deportation”. It began back in 1916, at the time when the Armenian Genocide was still in progress. The Ottoman government, seeking to mislead the world community and avoid the potential responsibility, published a massive reference book, first in Turkish, then in the European languages, in which the reality is impertinently falsified and an attempt is made to shift the responsibility for the Armenian Genocide onto Armenians. The distorted text of the “Law on Deportation” with only three Articles is brought there; Article 4 is missing, as well as the last paragraph. The names of those who signed the Law are not brought either. It should be noted that the Ottoman government did attain its goal. Many of the contemporary and future historians based their works on the version of the “Law on Deportation”, placed in the governmental reference book, not the one in the official newspaper.

A question arises, what was such an approach of the authorities of the Ottoman Empire conditioned by? The Ottoman official documents, presently in circulation, do not give a clear answer. We may only presume that it is because that the then ruling Turkish elite, in this case Enver, strived to shake off the responsibility for the deportation of Armenians, cost what it might. As ordinary criminal...

The Joint Declaration caused an instant reaction from leadership of German Ministry of Foreign Affairs. On the May 25 Under-Secretary A. Zimmermann sent a copy of the Declaration to Ambassador in Constantinople, indicating to assist the rapid preparation of the Turkish response. He wanted to publish it in the German press in conference with the Turkish response. But the Turks, certainly, did not manage to prepare the response quickly. It was ready only on June 6. Germany’s reaction illustrated the Declaration importance from the point of view of War Propaganda.

Let me sum up what has been said:

1. The idea of a diplomatic intervention aiming to stop the wholesale slaughter of the Armenian population in the Ottoman Empire was initiated by the Armenians. I think they were continuing the preceding experience gained in the struggle for the solution of the Armenian Question in late 19<sup>th</sup> - early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.
2. The publication of the Declaration gave birth to hopes among Armenian leaders. They thought it would be possible to stop or, at least, to commute the massacre policy, led by the Ottoman authorities.
3. The Turk leaders took the Declaration as a serious danger. In haste they took certain steps to avoid personal responsibility for the crimes committed against the Armenian people.
4. The adoption by the Ottoman government of the “Resolution” on the deportation reveals the true aims of Ottoman leader’s criminal design: to eliminate Armenian people under the cover of deportation. Although the authors targeted at a very different goal: to create an official cover for already increasing destruction of the Armenian population in the Ottoman Empire.

5. Modern Turkish official historians are trying to conceal the true meaning of the above-mentioned document.
6. Germany accepted the Declaration as the Entente's dangerous attack in the War Propaganda and tried to take countermeasures, having made the Ottoman Empire to prepare a response to it.
7. On those days in May the terrible wholesale slaughter of the Armenian population continued in the Ottoman Empire, especially in Western Armenia. The policy of Genocide was increasing.

Here is a multilevel cross-section of the last week in May 1915. I think that some key features of the whole process of the Armenian Genocide in the Ottoman Empire are consolidated in it.