

Handout

Responses to the Armenian Genocide

1. An Ambassador's Dilemma

Directions:

1. Read the handout out loud together, pausing at the end of each one- to two-paragraph section to annotate. Use the following symbols to annotate:
 - **Star** information in the text that helps you understand the international response to the atrocities committed by the Turkish government against the Armenians.
 - **Underline** information in the text that helps you understand what might have led the individual, group, or nation to respond in that way.
 - **Put a question mark** next to information that you have questions about or you would like to revisit.
2. Discuss the questions after the reading and record your group's answers on this handout.

After the coup of 1913 that brought a radical faction of the Young Turks to power, German-Ottoman military cooperation became national policy. Despite intimate knowledge of the Young Turks' intentions, German Ambassador Baron von Wangenheim pronounced that diplomats had no right to interfere in Turkey's wartime decisions.

On October 25, 1915, Wangenheim died and was replaced in November by Count Paul von Wolff-Metternich. Almost immediately, Wolff-Metternich looked for ways to protest Turkish treatment of the Armenians. In December 1915, he wrote the Reich Chancellor (a top government official) in Germany that he would like to take a "firmer stance" against the way the Armenians were being treated:

Our annoyance about the persecution of the Armenians should be clearly expressed in our press and an end be put to our gushings over the Turks. Whatever they are accomplishing is due to our doing; those are our officers, our cannons, our money. Without our help that inflated frog would be slowly deflated. There is no need to be so afraid in dealing with the Turks. It is not easy for them to switch sides and make peace. . . . In order to achieve any success in the Armenian question, we will have to inspire fear in the Turkish government regarding the consequences. If for military considerations we do not dare to confront it with a firmer stance, then we will have no choice but, with further abortive protests which tend rather to aggravate than to be of any use, to stand back and watch how our ally continues to massacre.¹

¹ "From the Ambassador in Extraordinary Mission in Constantinople (Wolff-Metternich)" to the Reichskanzler (Bethmann Hollweg), German official archive 1915-12-07-DE-001.

The Reich Chancellor rejected Wolff-Metternich's proposal, objecting that "public reprimand of an ally in the course of a war would be an act which is unprecedented in history."²

1. Summarize the main idea(s) of this source.

2. The German Reich Chancellor rejected Wolff-Metternich's proposal, saying that "public reprimand of an ally in the course of a war would be an act which is unprecedented in history." Compare the way the Reich Chancellor framed his universe of obligation with the way that Wolff-Metternich constructed his. What differences do you find most striking?

² Ibid.

2. The Limits of Diplomacy

Directions:

1. Read the handout out loud together, pausing at the end of each one- to two-paragraph section to annotate. Use the following symbols to annotate:
 - **Star** information in the text that helps you understand the international response to the atrocities committed by the Turkish government against the Armenians.
 - **Underline** information in the text that helps you understand what might have led the individual, group, or nation to respond in that way.
 - **Put a question mark** next to information that you have questions about or you would like to revisit.
2. Discuss the questions below and record your group's answers on this handout.

In the United States, President Woodrow Wilson was determined to maintain neutrality. It was better not to draw attention to the atrocities against the Armenians, lest US public opinion get stirred up and Americans begin demanding US intervention. Because the Turks had not violated the rights of Americans, Wilson did not formally protest. But in Turkey, America's role as a bystander was contested. Henry Morgenthau Sr., a German-born Jew who had come to the United States as a ten-year-old boy and had been appointed ambassador to the Ottoman Empire by President Wilson in 1913, agitated for U.S. diplomatic intervention.

Morgenthau often met with leaders of the Armenian government to protest the treatment of Christians in Turkey. Later he recounted an exchange with the Ottoman Minister of the Interior Talaat Pasha. Morgenthau recalled:

"Why are you so interested in the Armenians anyway?...You are a Jew; these people are Christians. The [Muslims] and the Jews always get on harmoniously. We are treating the Jews here all right. What have you to complain of? Why can't you let us do with these Christians as we please?"...

"You don't seem to realize," I replied, "that I am not here as a Jew but as American ambassador. My country contains something more than 97,000,000 Christians and something less than 3,000,000 Jews. So, at least in my ambassadorial capacity, I am 97 percent Christian. But after all, that is not the point. I do not appeal to you in the name of any race or any religion, but merely as a human being. You have told me many times that you want to make Turkey a part of the modern progressive world. The way you are treating the Armenians will not help you to realize that ambition; it puts you in the class of backward, reactionary peoples."

"We treat the Americans all right, too," said Talaat. "I don't see why you should complain."³

3 Morgenthau, *Morgenthau's Story*, 330.

1. Summarize the main idea(s) of this source.

2. Talaat assumes that Morgenthau, as a Jew, will be unsympathetic toward Christians and inclined to support Muslims. Compare the way Talaat and Morgenthau construct their “universes of obligation”?

3. A Soldier's Orders

Directions:

1. Read the handout out loud together, pausing at the end of each one- to two-paragraph section to annotate. Use the following symbols to annotate:
 - **Star** examples in the text that demonstrate Lieutenant Said Ahmed Mukhtar al-Ba'aj's obedience to authority.
 - **Underline** examples in the text that illustrate resistance to authority.
 - **Put a question mark** next to information that you have questions about or you would like to revisit.
2. Discuss the questions that follow and record your group's answers on this handout.

Lieutenant Said Ahmed Mukhtar al-Ba'aj, an Ottoman officer, was one of four Arab Muslim soldiers who defected to the Russian Army. The Russians turned the men over to the British, who interviewed them. In December 1916, the officer testified about his role in the deportation of Armenians from Trebizond and Erzerum.

An order came from Constantinople that Armenians inhabiting the frontier towns and villages be deported to the interior. It was said then that this was only a precautional measure. I saw at that time large convoys of Armenians go through Erzeroum. They were mostly old men, women and children. Some of the able-bodied men had been recruited in the Turkish Army and many had fled to Russia. The massacres had not begun yet. In May 1915 I was transferred to Trebizond. In July an order came to deport to the interior all the Armenians in the Vilayet of Trebizond. Being a member of the Court Martial I knew that deportations meant massacres....

In July 1915 I was ordered to accompany a convoy of deported Armenians. It was the last batch from Trebizond. There were in the convoy 120 men, 700 children and about 400 women. From Trebizond I took them to Ghumush-Khana. Here the 120 men were taken away, and, as I was informed later, they were all killed. At Ghumush-Khana I was ordered to take the women and children to Erzinjian. On the way I saw thousands of bodies of Armenians unburied. Several bands of "Shotas"⁴ met us on the way and wanted me to hand over to them women and children. But I persistently refused. I did leave on the way about 300 children with [Muslim] families who were willing to take care of them and educate them. The "Mutessarriif" of Erzinjian ordered me to proceed with the convoy to Kamack [Kemakh]. At the latter place the authorities refused to take charge of the women and children. I fell ill and wanted to go back, but I was told that as long as the Armenians in my charge were alive I would be sent from one place to the other. However I managed to include my batch with the deported Armenians that had come from Erzeroum. In charge of the latter was a colleague of mine Mohamed Effendi from the Gendarmerie. He told me afterwards that after leaving Kamach they came to a valley where the Euphrates ran. A band of Shotas sprang out and stopped the convoy. They ordered the escort to keep away and then shot every one of the Armenians and threw them in the river.⁵

⁴ Special organization gangs who terrorized and murdered Armenians were known as "chetes" or "shotas."

⁵ "First-hand account by a Turkish army officer on the deportation of Armenians from Trebizond and Erzerum, December 26, 1916," the British Public Record Office, FO 371/2768/1455/folios 454-458.

1. How does Lieutenant Said Ahmed Mukhtar al-Ba'aj describe his role in the deportations?

2. What orders did he receive?

3. What did he know about the deportations before he received his orders? How would you describe his role in the genocide?

4. Daring to Rescue

Directions:

1. Read the handout out loud together, pausing at the end of each one- to two-paragraph section to annotate. Use the following symbols to annotate:
 - **Star** information in the text that helps you understand Haji Khalil's response to the atrocities committed by the Turkish government against the Armenians.
 - **Underline** information in the text that helps you understand what might have led Khalil to respond in that way.
 - **Put a question mark** next to information that you have questions about or you would like to revisit.
2. Discuss the questions below and record your group's answers on this handout.

Although many people were aware of the massacres of Armenians, very few reached out to save others. Yet the stories of ordinary Turks who did what they could to save Armenians are recorded in the stories of survivors.

Kourken Sarkissian, the son of two survivors of the Armenian Genocide, recalls that his family were among those that were rescued by Turks:

The story of my mother's family was different, atypical, but not to be neglected for that reason. My maternal grandfather was hanged in front of his family, which included his pregnant wife, my grandmother, and four children between the ages of two and eight. A Turkish businessman, Haji Khalil, had been my grandfather's partner, and had promised to care for his family in case of misfortune. When a disaster greater than anything either of them could have imagined struck, he kept his promise by hiding our family in the upper story of his house for a year. The logistics involved were extremely burdensome: including my grandmother's niece, there were seven people in hiding. Food for seven extra mouths had to be purchased, prepared and carried up undetected once a night and had to suffice until the next night. Khalil's consideration was such that he even arranged for his two wives and the servants to be absent from the house once a week so that my grandmother and her family could bathe.

When two of the children died, he buried them in secret. He took tremendous risks and his situation was precarious, because his servants knew what he was doing. Had he been caught sheltering Armenians, he would almost certainly have shared their fate. Luckily, his household was loyal and discreet, and so I was one of the few children of my generation and neighborhood to grow up with uncles and aunts, all of whom remember the Turk Haji Khalil—may God bless his soul.

I grew up in the predominantly Armenian districts of Aleppo and Beirut, attended Armenian schools and joined Armenian organizations like the Zavarian movement. The dream of a free, independent Armenia and of the nightmarish genocide perpetrated by the Turks became the obsessions of my life. Both from Armenian organizations and from other survivors I learned that Turks had been inhuman monsters, and indeed many had behaved as such. Yet the memory of Haji Khalil

was also part of my consciousness, and so I grew up with a dichotomy, knowing the story of a humane Turkish man, his family and household.⁶

1. How did Haji Khalil define his universe of obligation? What factors influenced him to go against his government, putting him in grave personal danger?

2. Often entire groups of people are blamed for mass atrocities like the Armenian Genocide. In an essay titled "Intervention and Shades of Altruism during the Armenian Genocide," Richard Hovannisian writes:

Even in the extreme circumstances of 1915, there were thousands of Turks, Kurds, and others who opposed the persecution of the Armenians. Some of them tried to intervene. The testimony of the victims attests to the fact that kindness and solace were manifest amid the cruelty and suffering, and that the human spirit was never fully extinguished.

How do stories like Kourken Sarkissian's story break down generalizations and stereotypes?

⁶ "The Story of Haji Khalil," The Zoryan Institute website, accessed May 15, 2019.