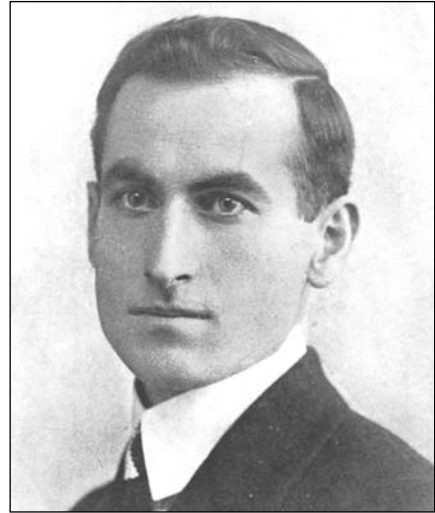


## Reading 5 — ACQUITTING THE ASSASSIN

In 1918, Talaat Pasha fled Turkey for Germany, Turkey's ally during the war. By March 1921, he was living in Berlin with his wife under an assumed name. There, Talaat became the center of a group of Turkish nationalists and led an active social life. On March 16, Soghomon Tehlirian, a 24-year-old Armenian survivor of the genocide, shot and killed Talaat and wounded Talaat's wife. Tehlirian showed no remorse for the murder. He told police: "It is not I who am the murderer. It is he [Talaat]."

After Talaat's death, the press mourned him as a loyal friend to Germany. In early June, when the trial began, it was widely believed that the German courts would enact the harshest punishment on Tehlirian, especially since Germany had been sympathetic to the Young Turks and had provided refuge for several Turkish leaders after the war.



Courtesy of Project SAFE Armenian Photograph Archives, Inc.,  
Courtesy of Faith Cass

**Soghomon Tehlirian**

Tehlirian's lawyers planned a two-part defense. First, they would argue that Tehlirian was temporarily insane at the time of the murder. To support his claim, Tehlirian told the court that two weeks before the murder his mother, who had been killed during the genocide, appeared to him in a vision, exhorting him to kill Talaat as an act of revenge for the atrocities committed against the Armenian people. The second part of the strategy was to put the victim on trial.

To support their case, Tehlirian's lawyers were able to get support from two prominent Germans, Johannes Lepsius, who had recently published a book about the atrocities perpetrated against the Armenians by the Turks, and General Liman von Sanders, the former leader of the German military mission in the Ottoman Empire. Testifying in Tehlirian's defense, Lepsius detailed the systematic plans for what he called the elimination of the "Armenians in Armenia." Lepsius testified to Talaat's role in the massacres of the Armenians and told the court that he had physical documentary evidence to prove his allegations. Lepsius's overview was followed by the testimony of General von Sanders, who described the callousness of German military officials who watched the massacre of Armenians but failed to intervene. During the trial, five messages with Talaat's signature were entered into evidence including one in which Talaat ordered that Armenian children who were living in orphanages after the murder of their parents be killed "in order to eliminate further danger from antagonistic elements."<sup>136</sup>

After one hour of deliberations Tehlirian was acquitted.

In an editorial titled "They Simply Had to Let Him Go," the *New York Times*, outlined the jury's dilemma.

*By acquitting the young Armenian who shot dead Talaat Pasha on the street in a Berlin suburb where that too eminent Turk was quietly living, the court before which he was tried practically has given, not only to this young man, but to the many others like him and with like grievances, a license to kill at discretion any Turkish official whom they can find in Germany.*

*That was going rather far. Of course, death was about the least of the punishments for his innumerable and most atrocious crimes that was deserved by Talaat Pasha. The world's atmosphere is the more safely and pleasantly breathed now that he is gone, and there will be little sympathy with his fate or regret for his loss. The fact remains, however, that he was assassinated, not put to death with the judicial formality that is the right of even such as he, and to hold, as the German jurors did, that his taking off was "morally right" both reveals a queer view of moral rightness and opens the way to other assassinations less easily excusable than his or not excusable at all.*

*And yet—and yet—what other verdict was possible? An acquittal on the ground of insanity, the usual device of jurors who do not want to punish a killing of which they approve, would have been more than ordinarily absurd in the case of a man as obviously sane as this Armenian is, and to have hanged him, or even to have sent him to prison, would have been intolerably to overlook his provocation. The dilemma cannot be escaped—all assassins should be punished; this assassin should not be punished. And there you are! The solution lies further back and long ago, when German officers in Turkey permitted the massacres of Armenians, though they had the power to prevent them.<sup>137</sup>*

## CONNECTIONS

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- What was the German court's dilemma? Should the court have acquitted Tehlirian? How do you decide?
- Who did Tehlirian's lawyers believe was responsible? Who did the prosecution believe was responsible? Who did the *New York Times* believe was responsible? What arguments could be made in each case? Whom do you hold responsible? Explain your thinking.
- Historians now believe, as did the prosecutors, that Tehlirian was working with Operation Nemesis, a group of Armenian radicals who, in the absence of international justice, plotted to target individual Turkish leaders they held responsible for the genocide. Does that information alter your thinking about Tehlirian's acquittal?
- What is the danger of letting people like Tehlirian, and his compatriots in Operation Nemesis take the law in their own hands? What is lost when a man like Talaat dies without a public trial?
- How did the failure of international efforts to hold the leaders of the genocide responsible affect Tehlirian's actions?