

Reading 6 → REWRITING HISTORY



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Turkish soldiers posing for a picture during World War I.

The three men considered most responsible for the Armenian Genocide—Talaat, Enver, and Djemal—escaped from Turkey at the end of World War I with the help of the German government. They were tried in absentia by a Turkish military tribunal, convicted of war crimes, and sentenced to death. Nevertheless, the tribunal sentences were never carried out, since Talaat and the other principal authors of the genocide remained outside Turkey and the Allied Powers made little effort to hunt them down.

Talaat's memoirs, published after his death, contain the core arguments that have been used by those that have sought to rewrite the history of the Armenian Genocide. Although it is important to compare conflicting interpretations, by analyzing data, identifying sources, and reading critically before making judgment, it is not legitimate scholarship to give credence to denial or intentional distortion or falsification, to revise the history beyond the recognition of its survivors. Israel Charny, editor of the *Encyclopedia of Genocide*, describes denial as a celebration of the crimes of genocide. He believes that killing the record of the truth of the genocide is also killing recorded human history.¹³⁸

Talaat's narrative of the history is crafted to explain away the systematic nature of Young Turk attacks on Armenians. In the opening section, Talaat argues that Turkey had tried to remain neutral at the outset of World War I. A series of political events, Talaat continues, left Turkey with no choice but to join the Germans against Great Britain, France, and Russia: Turkey needed to preserve its own interests against encroachments of the Russians. Moreover, Talaat maintained that there were no deliberate plans for the massacres of Armenians. He wrote:

I admit that we deported many Armenians from our eastern provinces, but we never acted in this matter upon a previously prepared scheme. The responsibility for these acts falls first of all upon the deported people themselves. Russia, in order to lay hand on our eastern provinces, had armed and

equipped the Armenian inhabitants of this district, and had organized strong Armenian bandit forces in the said area. When we entered the great war, these bandits began their destructive activities in the rear of the Turkish Army on the Caucasus front, blowing up the bridges, setting fire to the Turkish towns and villages and killing the innocent [Muslim] inhabitants, regardless of age and sex. They spread death and terror all over the eastern provinces, and endangered the Turkish Army's line of retreat. All these Armenian bandits were helped by the native Armenians. When they were pursued by the Turkish gendarmes, the Armenian villages were a refuge for them. When they needed help, the Armenian peasants around them, taking their arms hidden in their churches, ran to their aid. Every Armenian Church, it was later discovered, was a depot of ammunition. In this disloyal way they killed more than 300,000 [Muslims], and destroyed the communication of the Turkish Army with its bases.

The information that we were receiving from the administrators of these provinces and from the commander of the Caucasian Army gave us details of the most revolting and barbarous activities of the Armenian bandits. It was impossible to shut our eyes to the treacherous acts of the Armenians, at a time when we were engaged in a war which would determine the fate of our country. Even if these atrocities had occurred in a time of peace, our Government would have been obliged to quell such outbreaks. The Porte, acting under the same obligation, and wishing to secure the safety of its army and its citizens, took energetic measures to check these uprisings. The deportation of the Armenians was one of these preventative measures.

I admit also that the deportation was not carried out lawfully everywhere. In some places unlawful acts were committed. The already existing hatred among the Armenians and [Muslims], intensified by the barbarous activities of the former, had created many tragic consequences. Some of the officials abused their authority, and in many places people took preventative measures into their own hands and innocent people were molested. I confess it. . . . I confess . . . that we ought to have acted more sternly, opened up a general investigation for the purpose of finding out all the promoters and looters and punished them severely.

But we could not do that. Although we punished many of the guilty, most of them were untouched. These people, whom we might call outlaws, because of their unlawful attitude in disregarding the order of the Central Government, were divided into two classes. Some of them were acting under personal hatred, or for individual profit. Those who looted the goods of the deported Armenians were easily punishable, and we punished them. But there was another group, who sincerely believed that the general interest of the community necessitated the punishment alike of those Armenians who massacred the guiltless [Muslims] and those who helped the Armenian bandits to endanger our national life. The Turkish elements here referred to were short-sighted, fanatic, and yet sincere in their belief. The public encouraged them.... They were numerous and strong. Their open and immediate punishment would have aroused great discontent among the people, who favored their acts. An endeavor to arrest and to punish all these promoters would have created anarchy in Anatolia at a time when we

greatly needed unity. It would have been dangerous to divide the nation into two camps, when we needed strength to fight outside enemies. We did all that we could, but we preferred to postpone the solution of our internal difficulties until after the defeat of our external enemies. . . .

*These preventative measures were taken in every country during the war, but, while the regrettable results were passed over in silence in the other countries, the echo of our acts was heard the world over, because everybody's eyes were upon us.*¹³⁹

CONNECTIONS

- What strategies help historians distinguish between conflicting versions of the same historical event? Why is it important to make judgment and recognize that not all historical accounts are equally valid?
- How does Talaat try to rationalize the mass murder of the Armenians? What strategies does he use? What language do you find striking? Whom does he hold responsible for the deaths?
- *Takvim-i-Vekayi*, the official gazette of the Turkish government carried reports on the trials of the Young Turk leaders including the indictment of the military court from April 27, 1919. A passage from the indictment counters many of Talaat's claims.

The disaster visiting the Armenians was not a local or isolated event. It was the result of a pre-meditated decision taken by the central body . . . and excesses which took place were based on oral and written orders issued by that central body. . . .The truth is that Talaat, Enver and Jemal ordered the massacres willingly. In a cipher [telegram] dated July 11, 1915, signed by Talaat Bey, and addressed to the Governors of Diarbekir province of the Urfa district, Talaat ordered the burial of all corpses left along the roads, that they may not be thrown into ditches, caves, lakes or rivers; that it was necessary to burn all the effects of the dead.

*This operation has been confirmed by another secret telegram sent by Jemal [Djermal] Pasha, Commander in Chief of the 4th Army in Syria, dated July 1, 1915, addressed to the Governor of Diarbekir. . . . In it, Jemal advised the Governor General to circulate false rumors that "dead bodies found in rivers were possibly those of Armenians who had revolted."*¹⁴⁰

Compare Talaat's version of events with the excerpt from the indictment. Notice the choice of language of the indictment. How does it counter Talaat's claims? After reading the indictment, which words or phrases do you find most significant?