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# SYRIAC NARRATIVES ON THE OTTOMAN GENOCIDE IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Tessa Hofmann

*He who fights with monsters should look to it  
That he himself does not become a monster.  
And if you gaze long into an abyss,  
The abyss also gazes into you.*  
Friedrich Nietzsche, aphorism 146

This contribution explores the narrations and narrative styles of three Syriac authors and genocide survivors from the Diyarbakır province of the Ottoman Empire: Naaman Abed *Qarabashi*, Ishāq bar Armalto (Armale) and Henno, comparing them with the Armenian and Greek survivors Rev. Grigoris Balakian (Գրիգորիս Պալազեան, Grigoris Palagean), Yervant Odian (Երվանդ Օտեան – Eruand Ōtean<sup>1</sup>), Elias Venezis and Dido Sotiriou, who all wrote and published memoirs of events they were close to. The three Syriac authors developed an antagonistic narrative shaped by biblical narrative styles, Christian martyrology and their perception of contemporary events as inter-religious war and traditional *Jihad*. The non-Syriac authors that have been considered here replaced, in various degrees, this approach by internalization. Greek authors from Asia Minor, such as Venezis or Dido argued, in their narrations, against the ethnic or religious ascription of guilt by emphasizing cases of solidarity between Ottoman Turks (Muslims) and Orthodox Greeks. The two Armenian authors examined here represent a middle position between Syriac moral antagonism and the differentiating introspection of Greek authors. In spite of their very different backgrounds and professions as clergyman and secular journalist, both tried to present their testimonials as documentary, unvarnished and “unliterary” as possible.

Is it possible to survive in a system based on violence and terror without the loss of human empathy and dignity? The Syriacs saw this possibility mainly in individual martyrdom. Elias Venezis and Dido Sotiriou, however, named culprits and victims on both sides of the ethno-religious divide and included Muslim rescuers in their narrations. The Armenian authors Yervant Odian and Grigoris Balakian focused their narrations on suffering as such. In the face of their numerous compatriots who had been silenced forever, they cleared their “survival debts” by writing about the unspeakable and witnessing genocidal destruction.

*Key-words:* survivor’s memoirs, Syriac Christians, Christian minorities, Ottoman Empire, genocide, literary narration, literary narratives.

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1. Also transcribed as Yervand Otyan (Otian).

## Introduction

The experience of genocide frequently leaves survivors, eyewitnesses and sometimes rescuers speechless. The high degree of traumatization that their parents underwent also affects the post-genocidal generation, i.e. the children of genocide survivors, and, to a lesser degree, subsequent generations. Besides psychological and inter-generational long-term effects, there are further reasons for the delayed attention given to testimonials and reports on the Ottoman genocide against Christians and, in particular, against Syriac Christians by academia. Not only was the number of Syriacs lower by a factor of 3.5 compared to Armenians and by more than a factor of 4 if compared to Greek Orthodox Christians but, as David Gaunt, a Swedish scholar of the Assyrian genocide pointed out, high denominational fragmentation appears as an additional major obstacle:

The declining Ottoman Empire found Oriental Christians that, for centuries, were split into antagonistic churches which had been locked into denigrating one another. Each cult had a strong exclusive in-group identity that militated against the very idea of a multi-layered pan-Assyrian identity. (...) One aspect of this invisibility is that the narratives of the Assyrian genocide are built on testimonials of survivors whose perception was limited to local issues such as the struggle with nomadic tribes for agricultural land and the religious fanaticism of local Muslim sects. In the final analysis the Assyrians had no clear idea why they were being annihilated. They recognized only the local dimensions of their sufferings and had no understanding of the overall policies and interests of the Young Turk government.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, most of the people that identified themselves as Suryoye, Suraya, Assyrians or Chaldeans lived dispersed over vast territories in remote and rural areas, with the exception of some more urban communities in provincial cities such as Diyarbakır, Bitlis, Mamuret-ül-Aziz or Kharberd (Harput), in district towns such as Mardin, Midyat, Siirt, Nusaybin, Hakkari, Başkale or the Iranian towns of Salmast and Urmia. Moreover, the societal fragmentation of Syriac Christians was increased by tribalization, which seemed to be particularly strong among the Eastern Syriacs, who, perhaps under Kurdish influence, described themselves as “ashirets,” or “tribes,” as did Patriarch Benyamin Shimun in his declaration at Salmast in October 1918:

My people comprise 80,000 souls, who live in Turkey as free ashirets. Like Kurdish ashirets, they neither have taxes to pay nor men to send to conscription. Not a single Turkish functionary ever set foot in our regions. Our tribes have been armed since time immemorial and our children are taught from the age of ten how to use weapons so that, with our 20,000 armed men, we can always defend ourselves against attack from the Kurds that surround us.<sup>3</sup>

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2. David Gaunt, “Failed Identity and the Assyrian Genocide,” in *Shatterzone of Empires: Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian and Ottoman Borderlands*, ed. Omer Bartov, Eric Weitz (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013), 317.

3. Joseph Yacoub, *Year of the Sword: the Assyrian Christian Genocide: a History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 52.

Western Syriac Christians in Diyarbakır province were characterized by extended families or clans.

As the Syriac scholar Joseph Yacoub summarized, the testimonials of Syriac survivors recount “*in detail, with striking similarities, the nature of the tragedy.*”<sup>4</sup> Despite their small numbers, geographic dispersion and denominational fragmentation, there are numerous accounts and testimonials written close to the events by Syriac survivors, usually in Aramaic, and in some cases in foreign languages such as Arabic, French or English. Most authors and editors of such testimonials were male clerics or tribal leaders and their descendants such as Malik Yacoub, chief of the Upper Tyari tribe, or Joseph Malik Khoshaba, son of the leader of the Lower Tyari. The memoirs of Surmad’ Bait Mar Shimun, sister of the murdered Nestorian patriarch Benyamin Shimun, were released in London as early as 1920 in an English edition, but this was a rare exception. Journalism in Aramaic or Arabic languages existed predominantly in clerical contexts, for example in the monthly journal *Mghalto Phatriarqueto, The Review of the Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate* in Damascus, where articles on the events that took place during the First World War were published. As was the case with Armenian memoirs, recollections and testimonials, most accounts were translated into internationally used languages, English in particular, only six decades after their first release in the original Eastern languages. Only with the emergence of Syriac communities in Europe were translations into English and German released from the 1980s onwards.

## **Qarabashi, Armale and Henno: Survivors, Witnesses, Documentarists**

This contribution explores the narrations and narrative styles of three Syriac authors from the Diyarbakır province of the Ottoman Empire, comparing them with the Armenian and Greek survivors Grigoris Balakian (Palagean; 1876-1934), Yervant Odian (1869-1926) and Elias Venezis (*a nom-de-plume*; he was born in Mellos in 1904 and died in 1973), who all wrote and published similarly contemporary memoirs.

Chronologically, the first survivor and collector of survivors’ testimonials was Naaman Abed (Abdal) Mshiho *Qarabashi* (Abd al-Masīḥ Numān, 1903-1983)<sup>5</sup> from the Syriac village of Qarabash (Qarabashi), east of Diyarbakır. He was a novice at the seminary of the fortified Zafaran Monastery (Dayro d-Mor Hananyo, in Ottoman Turkish *Deyrüz Zaferân Manastırı*) and, at the age of just 15 years old, began to write down and cross-check the testimonials of those co-religionists who had sought refuge in that monastery during the years 1915-1918. In the introduction to his collection, known under the title “Spilled Blood,” Qarabashi explains the motives of his work:

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4. Yacoub, *Year of the Sword*, 62.

5. Aydin Polycarpus, George Kiraz, “Qarabashī, ‘Abd al-Masīḥ Nu‘mān,” in *The Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage*, eds. Sebastian P. Brock et al. (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), 343.

I have also recorded them so that they, on the one hand, can sound in the ears of future generations like a warning voice as they open their ears to hear the complaints of the oppressed and, secondly, as a warning presented to the sight and mind of mankind in order to stir it to tears of repentance. It is also presented as a terrible example, in order to show this unjustly treated people the truth, once it has been relieved and can breathe freedom once more.<sup>6</sup>

Father Ishāq bar Armalto (Isaac Armale, 1879-1954) was a Syriac Catholic archpriest and scholar from Mardin who survived the massacres, deportations and kidnappings there and where he spent his entire time during the First World War. He was one of those Christian clerics who were used by the Ottoman authorities as a point of contact, among other things: these “clerical, responsible people” as Armale called them, had to communicate orders from the authorities to their congregations and ensure their implementation. The authorities expected Christian clerics to betray deserters in their denominations and to surrender suspected weapons caches. On various occasions, Armale conveys the tremendous psychological pressure put on the clergymen. Although the author lived deep in the province, he received information and news from abroad, to which he could compare official Ottoman information.

In his epilogue, Armale speaks with the authority of an eyewitness who also included the testimony of other survivors and eyewitnesses:

If you ask what has happened to me, I'll answer you only with tears. For I have seen how my parents and brothers were thrown into prisons without any explanation, beaten, slapped, whipped like sheep, humbled and obediently led to slaughter, as well as actually being slaughtered as despised people in the mountains, in caves and being thrown, thirsty and hungry, into rivers and wells. (...) Dear Reader, please note that what we did not see with our own eyes, we took from the mouths of eyewitnesses who were saved from death by divine care, to tell us what they had had to endure with the purpose of having their reports spread in order to reprimand the oppressors and to comfort the mourners.<sup>7</sup>

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6. Abed Mschiho Na'Man Von Qarabasch, *Vergossenes Blut: Geschichten der Greuel, die an den Christen verübt, und der Leiden, die ihnen 1895 und 1914-1918 zugefügt wurden* (Glane/Losser: Bar Hebraeus, 2001), 19.

7. The first and original edition of Armale's memoirs was published in Harissa (Lebanon), 1919, in Arab under the title "*Al-Qusārā fī nakabātin-Nasārā*" and translates as "The worst of all catastrophes for the Christians" (Harissa: Imprimerie des Paulistes, 1919). In 2017, a French edition was released: Père Isaac Armalet, *Les calamités imposées aux chrétiens: Par un témoin oculaire - Recueil des événements malveillants, injustices, kidnappings, déportation, massacres, exode, injures et autres actes hideux survenus en Mésopotamie, principalement à Mardin, en 1895-1914-1919* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2017). The references and quotations used in this article come from a recent German translation from the Arab original, which will soon be released in the Peter Lang publishing house. I relate to the unpublished manuscript, which was provided by courtesy of Amill Gorgis. The full title and subtitle of the German edition read: "Die schlimmsten aller Katastrophen für die Christen: Eine seltene historische Abhandlung, die ausführlich beschreibt, was den Christen in der Türkei und in Mesopotamien, insbesondere in Mardin, an Unterdrückung, Übergriffen, Entführungen, Vertreibung, Verschleppung, Massakern, Ermordung und vielfältigen Abscheulichkeiten widerfahren ist, die sich im Jahre 1895 und in den Jahren 1914 bis 1919 zugetragen haben." Armale, *Katastrophen*, 10.

In 1919, Armale settled in the Syriac Catholic monastery of Dayr Charfe (Sherfat)<sup>8</sup> in Harissa (Lebanon), to which he belonged from the age of 16 and where he spent the rest of his life. There he transcribed the notes that he had secretly made and preserved, in constant fear of being discovered during the period of persecution, i.e. from July 17, 1914 until the end of the war.<sup>9</sup> In the same year, Armale published, still in fear of persecution, a voluminous book of 504 pages, sub-divided into five parts, as an anonymous eyewitness.<sup>10</sup> During the war years and the period of deportation, writing a diary or taking notes was a highly hazardous pastime for Ottoman Christians. The Armenian deportee and journalist Yervant Odian mentioned in his memoirs that only in Hama (Syria) did he feel safe enough to keep a diary: “*In this way I’d filled three notebooks, which I kept with great care in the niche above my window.*”<sup>11</sup>

Armale’s book appeared at a time, when France, enthusiastically paraphrased in Armale’s recollections as the “mother of kindness and helpfulness,” controlled the north of Syria, Lebanon and Alexandretta according to the Sykes-Picot agreement of May 1916 and when the surviving Ottoman Christian deportees in Syria and Lebanon gained hope for the return to their homelands and the restitution of, or compensation for, their properties.

In contrast to Qarabashi and Armale, the Syriac Orthodox sub-bishop and archpriest Süleyman Henno (Sleman Henno, 1918-2006) was neither an eyewitness, nor a survivor. Born in the village of Arkah (Harabali) in the Tur Abdin region, he served the community of Syriac refugees in Syria as an ordained priest; he gathered the information used in his account *Gounhé d’Souryoyé d’Tour Abdin*, which was published in the Netherlands in its original Aramaic version as late as 1987, from among his flock. Again, in contrast to Armale and Qarabashi, Henno’s account saw translations into Turkish (Athens, 1993), Swedish (Örebro, 1998), German (Glane/Losser, 2005) and Arabic (Syria, 2004).

## **Syriac “historicism”**

Typically, Syriac authors of genocide accounts do not limit their self-imposed task to the documentation of more-or-less recent events, but reach far back into history, including ancient and medieval times, in order to contextualize the present. Armale, for example, starts his historical introduction with the Assyrian ruler Tiglath-Pileser I (1114-1076 BC), but as it is the case with other Syriac authors, his focus is on the Christian period

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8. Sébastien Courtois, *The Forgotten Genocide: Eastern Christians, The Last Arameans* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2004), 160; Yacoub, *Year of the Sword*, 51.

9. “On Thursday, April 22, Ḥabīb Tarzī Dī Ğarwe delivered, through a high-ranking person, the following message to the Syriac community: “Hide all your letters, documents and books related to politics, as well as any French and Armenian writings because the government is determined to seek inexorably and severely punish the holders of such writings!” All (...) began to burn, among other things, their letters and to hide the important ones. For example, the author hid his manuscripts, the transcript of the daily events which he had written since the declaration of the World War until that day, in a pit, and burned all Armenian and French books out of fear.” Armale, *Katastrophen*, Part II, Chapter 19, 78

10. Armale, *Katastrophen*, 9.

11. Yervant Odian, *Accursed Years: My Exile and Return from Der Zor, 1914-1919*, translated by Ara Stepan Melkonian (London: Gomidas Institute, 2009), p. 111.

and the Christian denominations of the Near East. In this context, much attention is given to the history of the Armenian people (Chapter 11) and their church (Chapter 12), albeit with several flaws and inaccuracies; for Armale, the “Armenian Church” is almost synonymous with Armenian Catholicism (Uniates). In general, Armale narrates and evaluates history from a non-secular, clerical and Catholic perspective. For example, he praises the reign of the early Armenian catholicos Nerses I the Great (died 373) for the harmony between church, state and society: “*Thus Armenia at that time became like a group of monks: a monastery with an abbot.*”<sup>12</sup>

By and large, Armale’s extensive historical introduction represents an enumeration of atrocities and cruelties committed against Oriental Christians by non-Christians, mainly by Muslims; only turning to the present in the 15<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Part I. By contrast, *Abed Mshiho* Na’man Qarabashi focused his 7<sup>th</sup> Chapter (“Suffering and persecutions to which Christians have been exposed throughout the centuries”) on the early Christians and their persecution by Jews, Romans and Persian rulers, while the events that took place between the Islamization of Mesopotamia and the reign of the Ottoman Sultan Abdül-Hamid II (1878-1908) are treated summarily. Henno starts his historical introduction relatively “late” in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

As a result of the historicist approach, the events of WWI appear as the continuation or climax of events that had developed centuries before. The persecution, deportation and subsequent annihilation of Ottoman Christians are therefore embedded in a literary tradition, which is characterized by the authors’ self-perception as being martyrs of faith. Thus, martyrology and its enumeration of the martyrs’ virtues are the models for Armale’s narration.<sup>13</sup>

## **German Guilt? Interpreting the Motives for War and Extermination**

In addition to the continuity of religious antagonism and subsequent persecution, Armale and Qarabashi (the latter perhaps under the influence of the former) blamed the Great Powers - and Germany in particular - for the persecution of Ottoman Christians during

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12. Armale, *Katastrophen*, Part I, Chapter 11, 22.

13. For example, he presents one of the Syriac Catholic victims from Diyarbakir in the following way: “*Al-Maqdasi Ḥabīb belonged to the noble Dī Ġarwe family from Aleppo, known for their zeal for the Catholic faith since the mid-eighteenth century. He is the son of Malkē, son of Ġabrā’īl, son of deacon Yūsuf, son of noble Miḥā-īl, son of cavalier Ġabrā’īl, son of deacon Ni’matullāh, son of Miḥā-īl, son of Aṭallāh Dī Ġarwe. His grandfather migrated from his home town of Aleppo to Mardin. He liked the weather there, so he stayed there. Out of this family emerged the very ingenious thinkers and heroes who defended the Catholics and protected Aleppo and Mardin by their influence and power. The best-known among them are: Ġriġōryōs Šukrallāh Dī Ġarwe, the Metropolitan of ‘Urshalīm (†1773), the Blessed Patriarch Miḥā-īl (†1880), the late Patriarch Buṭros (†1851), the Archpriest Rafā-īl (†1892), son of Faṭhallāh Dī Ġarwe and the priest Miḥā-īl, son of Shukrallāh, son of the deacon Ni’matullāh Dī Ġarwe. Maqdasi Ḥabīb was, like his great and noble grandfathers deeply faithful, eager in his faith. He went to Syria several times. He was arrested on June 14, 1915, imprisoned with the other Christian prisoners, and after six days taken away from the city with the others, where he was martyred.*” – Armale, *Katastrophen*, Part I, Chapter 16, 32.

WWI. As many reports in the *Political Archives of the German Foreign Office* reveal, the assumption that Germany, as the most important military ally of the Ottoman Empire, had extraordinary political influence on the ruling nationalist Committee for Union and Progress (C.U.P.: *Ittihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti*) was widespread among Christian and Muslim Ottomans at the time. For example, Grigoris Balakian was convinced that the C.U.P had planned the systematic destruction of the two largest Christian nations of the Ottoman Empire - the Armenians and Greeks - for years “with the tacit agreement and indirect encouragement of the militaristic and imperialistic Hohenzollern government.”<sup>14</sup>

For Armale, Germany was not only a tacit accomplice and beneficiary of Armenian forced labor on the Berlin to Baghdad Railway, but a direct culprit, because it had incited Muslim hatred of Christians. As an ardent Catholic, he was especially shocked that Catholic Austria was in alliance with the Ottomans, too, without any consideration for religious or denominational solidarity:

If so, how could Austria, the Catholic Empire, go with Germany and let the crime against Christians happen for no reason? The same question can also be raised as far as Germany is concerned, for it is also a Christian empire and today more than 30 million Catholics live there. How could it harbor hatred and resentment against Christians among the Turks, instructing them to shed the blood of the guiltless? (...) Unfortunately, we met neither an Austrian nor a German who condemned the genocide of Christians (in the Ottoman Empire) or fought for their rights. On the contrary, they, the Germans and Austrians, gave the Turks a free hand to do what they wanted, inciting them against Christians, encouraging them to do the most frightful and inhuman things to them. It went so far with the Germans, that when they came to Mesopotamia after the massacres and abductions, when we thought they would help us to gain our rights and to get out of our poverty as well as protecting us from attack, they did not recognize us; on the contrary, they settled in our homes, ignoring the injustices committed against us. Their main concern lay in their personal interests, the increase of the importance of their state and the extension of their rule over all countries.<sup>15</sup>

Qarabashi, who treats the Ottoman entry into the World War, including some of Armale’s errors,<sup>16</sup> in a very similar way, blamed German business and lust for power:

The Germans do not even have a false reason to escape the responsibility of participating in the slaughter of Christians. For if they wanted to save these wretched souls, a hint by them would suffice to put an end to, or relieve, all the

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14. Grigoris Balakian, *The Armenian Golgotha: A Memoir of the Armenian Genocide, 1915-1918* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 48.

15. Armale, *Katastrophen*, Part II, Chapter 3, 48.

16. For example, Armale and Qarabashi believed that Field-Marshal Otto Liman von Sanders was the German ambassador to Constantinople; both mention an incident in Dört-Yol, where four Germans allegedly disguised as British, provoked the local Armenians to rebel against the Ottoman authorities, as evidence for German complicity. Both mistook the Prussian cavalry general and Ottoman Marshal Otto Liman von Sanders with the German Ambassador to Constantinople, wrongly accusing Sanders of having ordered “kill the Christians.”



ferocity of reckless repression, but their sole and only aim was to conquer, even if all Christendom is destroyed and annihilated.<sup>17</sup>

Both Armale and Qarabashi mention the “Dörtyol unrest” of early March 1915 as a key event in terms of German treachery against the indigenous Ottoman Christians<sup>18</sup>:

Woe to mankind if Germany had won the war! The Germans were not content with words alone, but their treacherous spirit led four spies to Dörtyol, where several influential Armenians lived, with the order to pretend to be English and to demonstrate. And when they reached the agreed end point of the demonstration, they were to gather the inhabitants of the village around them, have them write on a sheet of paper words of reproach, reproach, and abuse about Turkey, and make an urgent appeal to the English to save them from the claws of their enemies. Then, in January 1915, they delivered those leaves of the capital, rushed the Turks against the Christians, especially against the Armenians, and so the Turks burned in rage and hatred, shed blood of Christians and planned their annihilation.<sup>19</sup>

Neither Armale, nor Qarabashi were residents of the town of Dörtyol, which was mainly inhabited by Armenians and surrounded by Turkish villages. Nevertheless, both Syriac authors constructed an implausible tale about alleged German intelligence activities by German spies, disguised as Englishmen, whose purpose was to discredit the Ottoman Christians and, specifically, the Armenians in the eyes of the central Ottoman government. Although Armale does not disclose his sources on the alleged German spies and their mission in Dörtyol, we may assume that this “information” stems from Catholic and/or French channels. Like many Ottomans, Armale and Qarabashi had rather exaggerated ideas of German influence in the Ottoman Empire and on its ruling Muslim elites. But this belief in German omnipotence somehow contradicts the fantastic Dörtyol episode: if Germany had direct influence on Ottoman decisions it would not need to disguise Germans as Englishmen to incite hate against Ottoman Christians.

An opposing and more detailed contemporary report, written by the Armenian Simon Agabalian, who was an assistant official at the German consulate at Adana, was sent to the German Ambassador Wangenheim in Constantinople on 13 March 1915,<sup>20</sup> indicating

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17. Qarabasch, *Vergossenes Blut*, 48.

18. Qarabashi's version of the “Dörtyol unrest” starts with the same phrase as Armale's Dörtyol paragraph: “Woe to humanity if Germany had won victory. It would destroy humanity. One of the diabolical means the Germans used to justify the extermination of the Christians was that they had disguised four Germans as Englishmen, sent them to Dörtyol to the Armenians, where they met in secret with the Armenian leaders, who were deceived into writing letters of complaint about the torments inflicted by the Turks, appealing to the English to help them and to quickly come to their aid in order to free them from the evil deeds of the Turks. In January 1915, the four men brought these letters to Constantinople and incited the Turks to persecute Christians, and especially Armenians. From that time began the torments and hardships that weigh heavily on the Christians, for the Turks called them ‘traitors.’” Qarabasch, *Vergossenes Blut*, 49.

19. Armale, *Katastrophen*, Part II, Chapter 3, 48.

20. “A few weeks ago a former deserter by the name of Saldshian, who received his education from the local Jesuits and who later taught French at the Armenian school, went to Dört-Yol. He had gone to Cyprus two years before and had most likely joined the English. He went with an Armenian from Alexandretta to Dört-Yol and stayed there for 6-7 days. You could almost say he tried to recruit the

that behind the “Dörtyol unrest” were just two or three local Armenian residents with links to the British fleet, which nevertheless served the Ottoman authorities as a pretext for mass arrests and forced labor among Dörtyol’s Armenian population. In his report to the German Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg, Ambassador Wangenheim summarized the information in the following way:

At the beginning of March [1915], after Englishmen from the fleet had repeatedly landed and made various purchases undisturbed, there were two Armenians staying in the Armenian town of Dörtyol who originated from that area and who were acting on behalf of the British. One of these emissaries fell into the hands of the Turkish authorities and was executed in Adana. A further consequence was that the whole of the male population of Dörtyol was conscripted and led to the Aleppo Vilayet where they were set to building roads; three individuals, because they tried to flee, being shot. Another fact was that at the time of these occurrences numerous deserters were hiding in Dörtyol; it had also not been forgotten that the townspeople had defended themselves against the Turks with weapons in their hands during the massacre of 1909.<sup>21</sup>

With his focus on Germany, Armale scarcely mentions internal Ottoman political factors and developments that led to the “catastrophes,” as he paraphrased the deportations and massacres of Ottoman Christians (“Nazarenes” in the Arabic original). Neither the Unionist coup d’état of 1908, nor the C.U.P. are mentioned at all; nor is the triumvirate of the “three Pashas” Talaat, Djemal and Enver, as architects of the “catastrophes.” Instead, Armale singles out the 1914-1918 War Minister Ismail Enver, whom he presented as a German-friendly and corrupt traitor to his Ottoman homeland:

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*inhabitants for the British Foreign Service. It is not known how far he succeeded and some merchants’ claim the trip involved Saldshian’s private business and had nothing to do with the general public. The notables of the town did not know about the visit and some of them were not even there at that time. Saldshian managed to obtain identity papers and introduced himself as a merchant. Even the police were informed of his presence. By sheer coincidence, after Saldshian returned to the English warship, the police became aware of the fake merchant, and could only arrest the man who had accompanied him. A few days later another Armenian by the name of Köshkerian from the village of Ocakli came ashore from the warship. After the murder of his wife during the massacre by the Turks he had gone abroad. This man is supposed to have carried money with him amounting to 40 Ltq. One cannot deduce, from all these actions and events, that the Armenians had any kind of conspiratorial or revolutionary organization. But one can surely say that the arrival of the warships and their aggressive behavior generated joy among the majority of the Christian populace and especially among the Armenians. If it should ever be possible for the English or French to reach land, they would be heartily welcomed by the Christians. One night all the male Armenians of the town were arrested and sent from the area due to the emphatic requests from the Turkish population of the neighboring houses to remove the Armenians from Dört-Yol and because they wanted to arrest deserters and avoid any unforeseen actions. The Armenians were sent to Aleppo under strict supervision and are now employed on road construction. During the arrests the Armenians were submissive and did not resist the officials. Three people were shot while trying to flee. Even these did not use any weapons. – Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes (PA/AA), Botschaft Konstantinopel, Bd. 168, zitiernach, [http://www.armenocide.net/armenocide/armgende.nsf/\\$\\$AllDocs/1915-03-13-DE-012](http://www.armenocide.net/armenocide/armgende.nsf/$$AllDocs/1915-03-13-DE-012).*

21. Report of 15 April 1915 at [http://www.armenocide.net/armenocide/armgende.nsf/\\$\\$AllDocs/1915-04-15-DE-002](http://www.armenocide.net/armenocide/armgende.nsf/$$AllDocs/1915-04-15-DE-002)

As a result, we can say that Turkey, Germany's friend and accomplice, consecrated itself to death, according to Enver's plans, because Enver was a puppet in the hands of the German ambassador, who played with him whenever and wherever he wanted, like a game ball. It must be noted that the decline of Turkey was not without price: Enver received large sums of money from Germany and Turkey in return for his contribution to the demise of his country. In 1916, his share in money alone was 40 million. He thus became one of the richest people in a very short time and continued to collect wealth until recently, removing some people from office, while hiring new ones, until he himself left office, turned his back on Turkey, and went to the land he had loved, honored, and did everything to make his name famous. His love for Germany was so great that he even betrayed his homeland.<sup>22</sup>

Remarkably, none of the three Syriac authors mentioned the prominent German military commander, Field Marshal Colmar von der Goltz Pasha, who was commissioned by the German Foreign Ministry on 26 September 1915 to mediate between the Ottoman authorities and the "rebellious" Syriacs (and some Armenians) in Azakh (in Arab Azekh). However, this mediation materialized not *en lieu*, but in correspondence, for von der Goltz did not want to delay his advance with the 51st and 52nd Ottoman Divisions to Baghdad. On November 12, 1915, the German Embassy in Constantinople notified the Consulate of Mosul in the name of the Field Marshal:

The Minister of War wishes to achieve a peaceful settlement with the rebels near Hazik<sup>23</sup> [Azakh; Azekh, sic!] in return for their immediately laying down their arms, but he refuses to allow participation by German officers and public officials. The 4th Army commander and Vali of Diyarbekir informed along these lines. I will approve instruction for Vali with the Minister of the Interior. Goltz.<sup>24</sup>

On February 14, 1916, the German *Chargé d'affaires* in Constantinople, Paul Count Wolff-Metternich zur Gracht, notified the German Chancellor:

The difficulties that have arisen between the Syriac Christians near Mardin and Midia, and the Turkish authorities have now been resolved. Part of this was due to the influence which Field Marshal Freiherr von der Goltz was able to exert in the military field.<sup>25</sup>

Next to the Germans and Minister Enver, Armale ascribed the responsibility for the destruction of Ottoman Christians to the Muslims, emphasizing once again the continuity of their collective guilt and their wickedness. According to Armale, the Muslims' main motive was revenge. However, it remains unclear why the Muslims wanted revenge on the Christians and how this vindictiveness related to the massacres of 1895:

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22. Armale, *Katastrophen*, Part II, Chapter 2, 47.

23. In German diplomatic correspondence also spelt "Azik".

24. The diplomatic correspondence about the Azakh/Azekh mediation is available on [http://www.armenocide.net/armenocide/armgende.nsf/\\$\\$AllDocs/1915-11-04-DE-001](http://www.armenocide.net/armenocide/armgende.nsf/$$AllDocs/1915-11-04-DE-001); see also Carl Alexander Kretlow, *Generalfeldmarschall Colmar Freiherr von der Goltz Pascha; eine Biographie* (Paderborn, München, Wien: Schöningh, 2012), 690, footnote 787.

25. [http://www.armenocide.net/armenocide/armgende.nsf/\\$\\$AllDocs/1916-02-14-DE-001](http://www.armenocide.net/armenocide/armgende.nsf/$$AllDocs/1916-02-14-DE-001)

We cannot mention all the hardships to which Christians were initially exposed: capital crimes, the looting of their wealth and the damage suffered later for these reasons. Those responsible, yes, all Muslims without exception, hated the Christians since 1895, but hid their feelings, waiting for a suitable opportunity to avenge them. When they realized that the government was willing to oppress the Christians, their evil souls rejoiced and waited until the beginning of summer 1915, then showed their malice, attacking Christians and doing everything God forbade (...).<sup>26</sup>

## Events during World War I

Which events were covered in the accounts and testimonials and are the basis for the three Syriac collections mentioned above, and how do they differ from the narratives of Armenian and Greek survivors?

Suleyman Henno's *Gounhé d'Souryoyé d'Tour Abdin* recounts, village by village and town by town, the massacres and atrocities in the Tur Abdin region and adjacent areas that were committed by combined forces of Ottoman regular soldiers and Kurdish irregulars.

Father Armale's narration covers, in chronological-thematic order, events in Diyarbakır province during 1895 (Part I, Chapter 16) and the deportations and massacres of the period 1914-1919; of these, the "Hamidiye massacres" of 1895 are described town by town.

Mardin, "lying in the heart of Syriac territory,"<sup>27</sup> was the center of an administrative unit – (*kaza*) of same name, with a population of "12,609 Orthodox Syriacs and 7,692 Armenians, the vast majority of them Catholic. All were Arabic-speaking."<sup>28</sup> Armale gives a total of 20,000 Christians in Mardin "before the terrible war".<sup>29</sup> In order to understand and interpret the events of 1915, it is necessary to remember that in the Ottoman political and societal system, ethnicities in the sense of the German term "Volksgruppen," did not exist. The Ottoman *millet* system differentiated between Muslim and non-Muslim populations, the latter traditionally divided into the Jewish, Greek-Orthodox and Armenian *millets*, or religious communities, to which, under Austrian, French and British pressures, Catholic *millet* and Protestant *millet* were added in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, as was the case in Mardin, denominational and linguistic commonalities blurred the boundaries between Armenian and Syriac Catholics.

It should be noted that several Christian families from Mardin that were counted as belonging to the Armenian Catholic denomination did not automatically derive from the Armenian community in the ethnic sense of the word. Many Syriac families that wanted to convert to Catholicism during the 18<sup>th</sup> century turned to the Catholic Armenian church since there was no Syriac Catholic clergy in the city. In fact, the

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26. Armale, *Katastrophen*, Part II, Chapter 5, 54.

27. Raymond Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 371.

28. *Ibid.*

29. Armale, *Katastrophen*, Part I, Chapter 1, 11.

notion of “nationality” did not exist between Armenians and Syriacs, since they were all Arabic speakers, like the Armenians from Aleppo. An “Armenian” could become a “Syriac,” and vice versa, by simply changing churches.<sup>30</sup>

Starting in summer 1914, house searches, confiscations of property, general conscriptions into the army, recruitment into the *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa* units and massive arrests of priests and secular notables all preceded the deportations and massacres that took place as they did in all other Ottoman settlements. Frequent, arbitrary actions created a general atmosphere of terror and helplessness. After the arrival of Mardin’s new police chief Memduh and the replacement of the mutasarrıf Hilmi by government officials more to the liking of the C.U.P., the majority of Mardin’s Christians were all deported, starting from June until late October 1915. Father Armale mentions deportations to Aleppo and Ras al-Ayn (Turkish Rasüleyn) taking place on June 10, June 14 and July 2, 1915, comprising ““martyrs of all denominations.”<sup>31</sup> The first convoy comprised Mardin’s Christian elite of more than 400 men – 405 according to the Catholic Father Simon, 417 according to Father Armale, 470 according to Patriarch Rahmani<sup>32</sup> – which left Mardin very early on the morning of June 10, 1915, through the west gate.

Mardin’s leading citizens were killed in three groups: 100 were massacred in caves in Şeyhan; 100 more had their throats slit and were thrown into the “Roman wells” at Zirzavan, an hour from Şeyhan; the last 200 were liquidated the following morning, 11 June, in a gorge further north.<sup>33</sup>

The death toll in the second convoy was 88 and in the third convoy 600, according to Armale.<sup>34</sup>

Most scholars of genocide studies dispute that Syriacs were deported during WWI. Hans-Lukas Kieser stated in a recent article:

Assyrian Christians were not deported to Syria. In the provinces of Diyarbakir, Bitlis and Van, 250,000 of them were massacred, with regional representatives of the Unionist government responsible. Explicit orders from Istanbul are not known.<sup>35</sup>

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30. Courtois, *The Forgotten Genocide*, 171.

31. Ibid 166.

32. Ibid 166.

33. Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 374.

34. Armale, *Katastrophen*, Part III, Chapter 18, 135.

35. Hans-Lukas Kieser, Aus Anlass der Beratungen des Bundestagesam, 2 Juni 2016: Deutschland und der Völkermord an den Armeniern von 1915, accessed June 06, 2019, <http://www.zeitgeschichte-online.de/kommentar/aus-anlass-der-beratungen-des-bundestages-am-2-juni-2016>. The conclusion is, however, that the Unionist Turkish central government in Constantinople accepted the indiscriminate “persecution of Christians” in the province of Diyarbakir. After a formal diplomatic protest by the German embassy in Constantinople on 12 July 1915 against the conduct of provincial governor Mehmet Reşid Şahingiray, Minister of the Interior Talaat reprimanded him in two telegrams (12 and 25 July 1915), but kept him in office without the governor improving his conduct. For a more detailed characterization cf. Tessa Hofmann, “Statt eines Nachworts: eine Ergänzung,” in *Die Verfolgung und Vernichtung der Syro-Aramäer im Tur Abdin 1915, gesammelt vom Erzpriester Sleman Henno aus Arkab, Tur Abdin* (Glane/Losser: Bar Hebräus-Verlag, Holland, 2005), 159-167.

But even in the case of the Armenians, explicit deportation orders were not given: the Ottoman *Sevkve İskân Kanunu (Relocation and Resettlement Law)* passed by the Ottoman Parliament on 27 May 1915, which was enacted on 1 June 1915, does not contain any ethnonym, neither “Armenian(s)” nor others. Instead, it paraphrases the designated victim group as “suspicious persons” and as the “*population of towns and villages that they [the military commanders; TH] suspect guilty of treason or espionage.*”<sup>36</sup> The common practice of the central government was to send emissaries into the provinces in order to personally (and in oral form) interpret how such paraphrases were to be understood.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, the law was very explicit on those groups that were to be exempted from deportation: (1) the ill, (2) the blind, (3) Catholics, (4) Protestants, (5) soldiers and their families, (6) officers, (7) merchants, some workers and masters. As a rule, these provisions were violated in countless cases, when Armenian Catholics and Protestants, the wives and families of Armenian Ottoman officers and soldiers, merchants and craftsmen, ill and disabled persons were deliberately and indiscriminately deported.

Armale “quotes” the *Relocation and Resettlement Law* of 14/27 May 1915, in a very deliberate way:

From the other side, the “Committee of Unity and Progress” said: “Because the Armenians act against the law and use every opportunity to disturb the government, store weapons, bombs and explosive substances to fuel the fire of revolution in the country in order to kill Muslims and support Russia, we have decided to deport them to the regions of Mosul, Syria and Deir-ez-Zor and to accommodate them there. Their honor, souls and wealth will stay intact and will be protected against invaders and offenders. We have already enacted the necessary laws to settle them in those regions until the end of the war.”<sup>38</sup>

Armale added that “*this official announcement concerned only the Armenians.*”<sup>39</sup> In contrast to this qualification are the numerous depictions of “all Christians” as victims of local, regional or central C.U.P. officials and local Muslim tribes.

Were the “calamities” directed against the Armenians alone, or were all Ottoman Christians equally targeted? There are various indicators that Armenians were the main targets, even in a multi-denominational province like Diyarbakır, where in the districts (*kazas*) of Mardin and Diyarbakır “*conditions have led to a true persecution of [all; TH] Christians,*” as the German vice-consul at Mosul, Walter Holstein, telegraphed to his Embassy in Constantinople as early as on June 13, 1915. In the town of Mardin, Armenian and Syriac Christians were conscripted and formed into labor units (*Amele taburları*) of the Ottoman Army for road works and construction and a Syriac Orthodox Christian

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36. *Deutschland und Armenien 1914-1918*, Sammlung diplomatischer Aktenstücke, ed. Johannes Lepsius (Potsdam: der Tempelverlag in Potsdam, 1919; reprint, Bremen: Donat and Temmen Verlag, 1986), 78.

37. The usual practice was that a central government deportation inspector (*müfettiş* - inspector) presented the government’s deportation order to the regional and local incumbents, or read it out, explained it, but did not hand it over.

38. Armale, *Katastrophen*, Part III, Chapter 2, 91.

39. *Ibid.*

was appointed to head this unit. But soon the Armenians were singled out to be killed, presumably on order of Mardin's mayor:

Then came Šukrī Bēg al-Mullī [Šükrü; TH] with a notebook in his hand containing the names of the remaining workers, with the Armenians' names marked in red ink, a color that only the *Mutasarrıf* was allowed to use. They let the Syrians go and kept the Armenians there. On the morning of August 11, Elyās went to the Citadel to visit the Armenian workers who had been detained there. He was told that they had been transported to Zinnār and thrown into the well there. Only one could escape: Elyās Ğirġī, which stayed in that well for about a month. Then he returned to Mardin and still lives today.<sup>40</sup>

Equally indicative of the particular hazards faced by the Armenians is their camouflage as members of other Christian denominations. Qarabashi mentions an incident in the village of Akpınar near Mardin, where Mkrtich, one of the Armenian laborer soldiers claimed to be a Syriac, in order to escape certain death. The Syriac Salim, whom the Armenian had named as a witness for his claim, confirmed this and was killed together with the Armenian laborers.<sup>41</sup> The two other cases of massive killings ("liquidations") of Christian labor units, mentioned by Qarabashi, were indiscriminate (190 men on 16<sup>th</sup> June, 1915) and selective (112 Armenians out of 212 workers).<sup>42</sup> In the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of his memoirs, the Greek author and survivor Elias Venezis narrates the young pianist Jacques of Soma's story. He had to join Elias' labor unit. His strange Greek accent and his inability to read Greek betrayed Jacques' non-Greek origin, but it is only after the young Armenian's death that Elias learnt the tragic details about this comrade in suffering:

It must have been something like pleurisy. He did not last more than a week. One night he remembered me. In his feverish delirium he had called me: "Elias, Elias." Then he seemed to call another person, with a lower voice, tenderer. They did not know whom he meant but assumed that it was his mother. He spoke Armenian to her, and they realized that he was an Armenian. Just think, a comrade said, "For how long we've not noticed! They are a cunning people, the Armenians, are they not?" In tears, I listened to him silently. Just a movement of the head - yes, yes, a cunning people ...<sup>43</sup>

According to Armale, Armenians in the entire Ottoman Empire were the main victims. In Mardin and its vicinity, however, he saw both Armenian and Syriac Catholics as the main victims. This may be explained with the above-mentioned fact that in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century there were still no precise ethnic boundaries between the two Christian denominations; linguistic, denominational and cultural commonalities made it obviously difficult for the Ottoman authorities and Muslim perpetrators to differentiate between Armenian and Syriac Catholics, at least in Mardin and Midyat. An even more relevant reason, emphasized by Armale, is the fact that on April 14, 1915, the local Syriac

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40. Armale, *Katastrophen*, Part III, Chapter 34, 172.

41. Qarabashi, *Vergossenes Blut*, 68.

42. Ibid.

43. Elias Venesis, *Nr. 31328: Leidensweg in Anatolien* (Mainz: Philipp Zabern, 1969), 126.

Orthodox community gained an “amnesty” from deportation,<sup>44</sup> seemingly as the result of bribing and successfully distancing themselves from their less fortunate Armenian and Syriac Catholic brethren:

On Tuesday, when the Jacobite Metropolitan, the priest Elyas Dolabani, and a band of their responsible men were in the government house, their church bell rang. Young and old hurried to the church. The Catholics inquired about the reason. “The news has arrived that the government would be sending soldiers to massacre the Armenians in their homes. That is why we hastened to the church so they will not destroy the guilty and innocent indiscriminately.” Then their metropolitan came and ordered his followers to return to their homes immediately. After the Jacobite men had been released from the prison, thanking the government and praying for its victory, the leaders of the wicked began to torture the Catholic men.<sup>45</sup>

Summarizing the difficult question of main and collateral targets and the subsequently difficult inter-denominational relations, one cannot but agree with the conclusion of the French-Armenian scholar Raymond Kévorkian, who differentiates between the town and the *kaza* of Mardin:

In the whole kaza of Mardin, as we have seen, only the non-Armenian Christians of the administrative seat of the kaza were, to a certain extent, spared. Elsewhere, in the countryside, the inhabitants of the Syriac villages were condemned to a fate similar to that of the Armenians. The procedures used were similar.<sup>46</sup>

All Christian chroniclers of Ottoman history in the First World War emphasized the corruptibility of Ottoman officials at all administrative levels. To a certain degree, this particular feature undermined the Unionist intention to carry out extermination; for as long as arrested and deported Christians still possessed money or other valuables, they were able to bribe and to buy food or protection from attack by Muslim residents, in particular by Kurdish and Arab tribesmen. However, in order to get hold of the possessions in the hands of the deportees and arrestees more quickly, the guards would make sure that these possessions changed hands as soon as possible, if not by violence, then by guile. Armale quotes an example from the report of a Syriac Catholic priest:

The tribes and Kurds circled around us like the wasps, carrying axes, rifles, daggers, knives, swords and batons. They wanted to do us evil. We all started to tremble with fear. Then the officer came and started talking to us: “My children, you will spend the night here, but I am afraid that the Kurds and the tribes will attack you and take away your money, gold and silver rings. It is better for you if you trust them all to me, and I shall register them on a piece of paper; I will give them back to everyone when you reach Diyarbakir.” So the officer collected a lot of jewelry, filled his bag with gold, silver, watches, rings and chains, with which he made off in exultation; then the soldiers came and searched for what was left, taking what remained of our valuables, shoes, fezzes and clothes, leaving nothing but what we wore.<sup>47</sup>

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44. Armale, *Katastrophen*, Part IV, Chapter 21, 228.

45. *Ibid*, Part III, Chapter 4, 95.

46. Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 376.

47. Armale, *Katastrophen*, Part III, Chapter 13, 120.



Bribery didn't always save the endangered Christians. Monsignor Gabriel Tappouni, the Metropolitan of the "Syriacs," as Armale usually paraphrases the Syriac Catholics to differentiate them from the "Jacobites" or Syriac Orthodox Christians, paid 2,000 Turkish gold *liras* to the police chief Memduh. Nevertheless, Monsignor Tappouni could neither have the already deported Syriac Catholic families of Mamarbaşı and Doqmaq returned, nor could he prevent the deportation of more families, such as the Ayn Malak family.<sup>48</sup> It is not quite clear whether this bribe included the release of the monks of the Syriac Catholic monastery of Mar Afram (Efrem), who had been temporarily jailed, or whether Tappouni had to pay an additional amount of 2,000 gold *liras* to do so. Furthermore, Memduh confiscated the valuables that Armenian and Syriac Catholic people of Mardin and other places had trusted to the abbot of Mar Afram.<sup>49</sup>

### **Jihad or Genocide?**

In recent genocide studies, the WWI genocide carried out by the C.U.P. regime is generally perceived as a crime that was committed in a transitional period, i.e. during Turkey's nation-building process. Most scholars of today agree that the crimes were rather motivated by nationalism and the intention to forcibly homogenize the multi-religious and multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire into a culturally and linguistically unified and stabilized state. Interestingly, neither Sleman Henno, nor Qarabashi mention the Ittihadists, or "Young Turks" at all, Father Armale refers to them only six times in passing. Did the Young Turks' responsibility for the "catastrophes" escape their attention? To answer this question, we have first of all to remember that the present perception of those events differs greatly from those of Ottoman contemporaries in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Second, until today the role of religion and its instrumentalization for genocidal purposes has not been fully clarified. Obviously, the C.U.P. regime used Islam and traditional religious antagonism to implement its genocidal intentions. When on November 14, 1914, the Sheikh-ul-Islam, as the spiritual leader of Sunni Muslims, declared a Holy War, or *Jihad*, in the Fatih Mosque in Constantinople, this was understood to be not just a call to all Muslim citizens of the Empire to fight against foreign non-Muslims, but also against the Ottoman Christians who had already been branded as internal enemies since the Balkan Wars (1912/3). On the other hand, the Young Turkish coordinators of this genocide did not intend to convert the Armenians and other Ottoman Christians to Islam, but to destroy them. Time and again, the Young Turkish leadership and the Interior Ministry pointed out that the conversion of the "suspected persons," i.e. the Armenians, would not save them from deportation. However, as was often the case, this policy of the central government and the C.U.P.'s Central Committee was undermined at local and regional levels.

Yervant Odian mentioned that Hayri (Khayri) Feruzan, the mutasarrif of Hama (province of Damascus), whom the author praised as "*a very good, noble and enlightened man, who had the affection of both Arabs and Armenians,*" ordered the Armenians' conversion to Islam within two days; otherwise he would not be able to protect them. This

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48. Ibid, Chapter 29, 159.

49. Ibid, Chapters 30-31, 161-169.

official was obviously seriously intending to save the Armenian deportees in his realm from further persecution and destruction.

That sort of suggestion, concluded Odian, coming from such a man, was indeed very strange and showed that we were under the threat of something dire. The mutesarraf, by suggesting conversion, was trying to keep the danger away. We learnt later that it was exactly at this time that the terrible massacres at Der Zor were taking place.<sup>50</sup>

Odian himself did convert but admitted that conversion was far easier to accept for individuals than for families or fathers as the heads of families, who feared that their daughters might be compelled to marry Muslims to prove the seriousness of their conversion.

The perspectives and the style of Syriac narrations differ greatly from Armenian or Greek Orthodox testimonials. As mentioned before, Syriacs from the Diyarbakır province interpreted the events as a continuation or the apex of a permanent religious antagonism. This point of view was seemingly confirmed by the attitude of Muslims, Kurdish tribal leaders in the province of Diyarbakır “mistook” ethnic homogenization for religious war or traditional “jihad.” The ideological intricacies of the essentially irreligious, “modern” approach of the Young Turks’ demographic policy may have escaped their notice. For them, the “Grand Alliance” with Turkish nationalism was predominantly religiously based, i.e. a pan-Islamic alliance, which Sultan Abdül Hamid II was the first to forge when, in 1892, he founded the irregular Kurdish *Hamidiye* cavalry that was named after him. This idea of religious war between Islam and Christianity was still common among the Kurds in the First World War and shared their perception with their Syriac victims, who, according to the Syriac authors, opted in large numbers for a martyr’s death, instead of gaining survival by denying their Christian identity.

In this “Jihadist” spirit, Sleman Henno interprets the massacres of 1915 as an integral part of repeated Muslim persecution of Christians:

Since the emergence of Islam, the Christians have been killed, robbed and plundered wherever they were. The Turks and the Kurds, who are known for their hard-heartedness and injustice, with or without reason, are especially to be mentioned in this regard. (...) Each epoch records testimony about the bloodbaths they organized.<sup>51</sup>

Henno also refutes the assumptions that the reason for the treatment of the Armenians in 1915 was of a secular or political nature: “*Just because they were not Muslims, they (the Armenian; TH) were merciless exterminated.*”<sup>52</sup>

Henno’s account mixes elements of a documentarist and biblical, archaic style of narration, including many quotations from poems, the traditional genre of lyrical lament or elegy in particular, called *dourekta*<sup>53</sup> in Aramaic. His narrator frequently appeals to the reader: “*O knowledgeable reader, see and reflect on this unparalleled barbarism!*”<sup>54</sup> Such

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50. Odian, *Accursed Years*, 13.

51. *Die Verfolgung und Vernichtung*, 29.

52. *Ibid*, 34.

53. Yacoub, *Year of the Sword*, 57.

54. *Die Verfolgung und Vernichtung*, 33.

stylistic peculiarities are likewise to be found with Armale and Qarabashi. Typically, the focus of Armale's interpretation is on the unshaken steadiness of the Christian martyrs and their refusal to renounce their faith; with their principled morals, they excelled over their tormentors:

I see the faces of the Muslims and their women radiate with joy among the Christians, whose eyes are full of tears. They could freely choose among them whoever they liked: children, boys, women and especially girls. They forcibly tried to make them renounce their faith, but without success! They promised to save them from death if they said "yes" to conversion, but without success! The Christians, though they suffered greatly and were subjected to various torments and sufferings, showed great courage and faithfulness which confused their tormentors. They repeatedly said, "We do not renounce our faith, we do not deny our God. Rob us, plunder us, abduct us, kill us, send us into the Sahara, throw us into the wells! We will endure everything until God brings us and you to account, since He is the righteous judge."<sup>55</sup>

Armale idealizes the Christian martyrs of both sexes as triumphant heroes, giving numerous examples of prominent victims, such as the Armenian Catholic bishop Ignatios Maloyan (1869 - 6 June 1915), and other examples of anonymous victims, such as a mother with a six-year-old son, who decided to be slaughtered rather than to accept the "offer" of a Muslim:

The soldiers arrested two women at a time and handed them over to the Kurds standing at the mouth of a well, who told them, as usual: "Convert to Islam or we'll kill you!" Then they slaughtered them and threw them down the well. Finally, they called the steadfast woman. The man who wanted her tried to approach her, making big promises. But she said to him fearlessly, "Do you want me to betray my God and go with you, you mean man? Do you want me to deny my beliefs and confess your religion, you low person? No, no! Kill me, I'm no better than the others." Then she grabbed her son, threw him into the well with her own hands, laid her neck for slaughter and said, "Kill me and let me follow my son!" Full of anger, he killed her and threw her into the well. She and her child, crowned with the crown of victory went to heaven, to eternal life.<sup>56</sup>

In Chapter 54, titled "Divine signs and various narratives that indicate the firmness of Christians in their faith," Qarabashi tells the incredible story of an orphaned Christian baby in Mardin that refused to be breastfed by Muslim women, but recognized and accepted Christian breasts. In the rigid, antagonistic structure of Syriac chronicles, converts appear as despicable anti-heroes. While Armale displays some understanding for Christian women who converted to Islam – the weak sex - he does not accept the conversion of men. In the 28<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Part III, titled "Armenians, who renounced their faith," he lists the full names of Armenian converts.<sup>57</sup> Armale's magniloquent narrative style corresponds with that of a ubiquitous narrator, who allegedly recites the last words

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55. Armale, *Katastrophen*, Part III, Chapter 23, 147.

56. *Ibid*, Chapter 37, 178f.

57. Armale, *Katastrophen*, Part III, Chapter 21, 143.

of the dying, executed or raped victims, who all express their motives with the same eloquence.

There is a remarkable contrast between Armales, Henno's or other Syriac authors' attempt to overwhelm their reader with emotion and to convince them of the wickedness of the Muslim perpetrators on the one hand, and the approach of the Armenian satirical author, journalist and survivor Yervand Odian on the other. The latter's autobiographical recollections *Accursed Years* (*Aniceal tariner*), about his deportation to Deir ez-Zor were printed shortly after the events in Constantinople in 1919 as a series in the Armenian paper *Žamanak*. In his memoirs, the professional journalist resigns himself as an author, and reports only as far as necessary about his personal fate. On January 23, 1919, Odian wrote in a letter about the challenges of his task as documentarist:

After three and a half years of a terrible, unimaginable odyssey, I am alive. I was driven to Der-Zor and beyond to El-Busera (...), where Ezekiel had his vision. I do not know if I can adequately describe what I saw, but I will try. It will be a great work, perhaps in several volumes.<sup>58</sup>

At the end of his report Odian summarized:

This is the story of the three and a half years of my exile. The reader will, of course, have noticed that I have written them in the simplest manner and in a non-literary style. But above all else I wanted it to be a truthful story in which no fact was distorted, no event was exaggerated.<sup>59</sup>

Odian's aesthetic ideal of a 'photographic', undisguised truth-log is especially evident in the conscious withdrawal of the evaluating and commenting narrator. In direct opposition to the narration of Sleman Henno, Isaac Armales or other Syriac survivors, Yervand Odian leaves evaluation and interpretation largely to the reader, before whom the author places all stages and actors of the genocide drama with equal distance: the victims and the perpetrators, the traitors and the countless informers. Odian himself remained faithful to satire in his "Accursed Years," but, as in his other work, this satire seems cool and distant, so that the protagonists appear neither sympathetic nor contemptuous. "*divine laughter*" is, according to Odian's conviction "*free from resentment and hatred*."

In a similar vein, Father Armales claimed preciseness as the guiding principle of his account:

We tried very hard to be as precise as possible, which is why we made sure to cite only those accounts that we heard from the very mouths of the rare survivors who escaped death, in our work.<sup>60</sup>

But the literary approaches that Armales chose are the reverse to those used by Odian, and he is far from not being resentful and hateful.

The question about the historical reliability of Syriac accounts, in particular those of Syriac church leaders, has been raised. The French scholar Sébastien de Courtois pointed

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58. Odian, *Accursed Years*, XII.

59. *Ibid*, 307.

60. Cited from: Courtois, *The Forgotten Genocide*, 160.

out that the comments made by the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch Barsaum on the events of 1915 and other events frequently coincided with those of the official Turkish version.

“How could such indulgence on the Patriarch’s part be justified?”, asked de Courtois in his doctoral thesis, giving the following explanation: “The reason is to be found in the more recent history of the Syriac Orthodox church, for as the Patriarch was writing his memoirs after the Second World War, the majority of the Syriac community was still living in Turkey, in Tur Abdin, and he had reason to fear reprisals. This could also explain the Syriac Orthodox authorities’ hesitation to defend the memory of the genocide.”<sup>61</sup>

The long-lasting dependence of the Syriac Orthodox Church on the Turkish state caused self-censorship. As late as 2013, David Gaunt stated: “*Until recently it has sometimes been impossible to discuss the genocide issues within the official framework of the Syrian Orthodox Church.*”<sup>62</sup>

The strong influence of biblical, archaic narratives on Syriac chronicles and testimonials shows also in the key word that is used to summarize the experience of extermination and catastrophe. While Armenian contemporaries used the term *Medz Yeghern* (or *Mec Yeğern*)<sup>63</sup>, i.e. the *Great Sacrilege* or *Heinous Deed* and Greek Orthodox Christians spoke of *Sphagi*, or massacres, distinguished into *red* and *white massacres* as synonyms for massacres and deportation or indirect killings, Syriac contemporaries from the Diyarbakır province used individual and rather vague paraphrases: “fatalities” (*gunhe* in Aramaic; S. Henno;), “bloodshed” (*D’mo Zliho*; Qarabashi), “calamities” (Armale). In more recent usage, the Aramaic noun *Sayfo* – sword – prevails. The semantic connotation of “sword” comprises both the victimization, as suffered between 1914 and 1918 and one’s own violence, as exerted during cases of self-defense and retribution. This ambivalent term also includes the connotation of martyrs and the *militia Dei*, i.e. spiritual or armed fighters for the sake of the faith.

Seen from a psychological perspective, it is certainly easier to focus on cases of successful or attempted self-defense, than to face the profound helplessness, humiliation and destruction that victims of genocide suffer. Subsequently, Sleman Henno interprets the events in Tur Abdin as an inter-religious war:

From the following chapters the reader will learn how the war in the Tur Abdin ran, who was killed, who waged and lost the war, who fought, won and could not be conquered by any enemy.<sup>64</sup>

The besieged village of Aynvardo (Invardo) that withstood attacks for several weeks and, in particular, the large village of Azakh, holding out until the end of the First World War and existing even until 1926, are recalled as epitomes of successful Christian self-

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61. Ibid, 108.

62. Gaunt, “Failed Identity and the Assyrian Genocide,” 330.

63. Remarkably, this term contains a juridical connotation, for a “deed” or a “sacrilege” are crimes in secular and/or religious context. In difference to *Yeghern* as related to the 1894-96 massacres during the reign of Abdülhamit II.

64. *Die Verfolgung und Vernichtung*, 43.

defense. According to Sleman Henno's interpretation, God himself was on the side of the Syriacs:

The Syriacs attacked the enemy with great rage. God helped them and they won a victory over the godless, who had lost the fight, escaped, and had to leave some dead.<sup>65</sup>

As this quotation also indicates, Henno explicitly qualified the Turkish and Kurdish besiegers as infidels, and at many other places as devious, wicked, bloodthirsty enemies; the same vocabulary is used by Armale and Qarabashi. However, Henno does not conceal the retributive violence exerted by Syriacs, such as the plunder and destruction of the Kurdish village of Shveshka by 350 young Syriacs from the village of Kafro on August 21, 1915:

Then they attacked the village, killed everyone they found and the rest fled from the village. (...) They plundered the village and then set it on fire.<sup>66</sup>

The Syriac retribution is morally justified by the previous massacre in the district town of Nusaybin (Nisibin) on June 15, 1915, that became the epitome of the destruction of Syriac Orthodox Christians in the province of Diyarbakır. Father Armale conjures divine retribution and quotes, starting with Kain, biblical examples of the divine punishment, if the blood of the innocent was shed.<sup>67</sup>

Elias Venezis sees retributive blood feuds as a senseless succession of mass violence that always hits the innocent and is harmful for civilization. To illustrate this opinion, his narrator mentions the approximately 40 Greek soldiers who had been horseshoed then slaughtered near Pergamon (Bergama) by Turks during the Hellenic occupation of Western Anatolia (1919-1922). This atrocity first caused numerous retaliations by the 4<sup>th</sup> Hellenic regiment then, after the withdrawal of the Hellenic Army, brutal acts of violence by the local Turkish population against local Ottoman Greeks.<sup>68</sup>

Two sub-chapters of Henno's account are titled "Thanksgiving." The first contains the explicit gratitude to the Kurdish sheikh Fathallah, son of sheikh Ibrahim and head of the village Aynkaf, who attempted to mediate between the government forces and Kurdish tribes that besieged Aynvardo. According to Henno, Fathallah "...reprimanded the Muslims, telling them not to kill Christians, for there is no difference between the killing of a Christian and of a Muslim. Murder is murder. And he damned every Muslim who killed a Christian."

The second Muslim who sparked Henno's praise was Çelebi Ağa, son of Isma'il, the head of the Haferkan tribe from Mzizah: "He was a well-known chieftain under the tribal leaders at that time. Individuals who resided with him testify that he treated all the people belonging to his area of influence equally and without any difference, whether they were Christians, Muslims or Yazidis."<sup>69</sup>

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65. Ibid, 89f.

66. *Die Verfolgung und Vernichtung*, 73.

67. Armale, *Katastrophen*, Part III, Chapter 36, 174 f.

68. Venesis, *Nr. 31328*, 59.

69. *Die Verfolgung und Vernichtung*, 140.

Unfortunately, during the First World War, Çelebi Ağa was imprisoned in Ayntab and subsequently unable to exert his influence in favor of the Christians.

Father Armale dedicated three chapters to the Ezdi (Yazidi, Yezidi) people of the Sinjar Mountains (Jabal Sinjar), where many Christians found refuge during 1915-1918:

The Muslims, for their part, are disgusted by the name Yezīdī, reviling their dogma and their customs. But the Yezidis performed great deeds these days, showing nobility and self-sacrifice that will honor their memory, and also because they did no harm to Christians, but on the contrary, helped them, welcomed them warmly, were hospitable, defended them, made their lives easier.<sup>70</sup>

Yervand Odian explains the pro-Armenian stance of the Yezidis in a more political way, quoting a discussion with an Arab in El Bousera: “*Is it true that the Yezidis are friends with the Armenians?*” “*Yes, because they’ve [the Armenians; TH] rebelled against the Turks. No Turk or Arab can approach their [the Yezidis; TH] mountain. But they accept Armenians with pleasure.*”<sup>71</sup>

## **Empathy, Internalization and Self-Criticism**

As shown before, Syriac authors framed the genocidal events in the Diyarbakır *vilayet* a) in the tradition of Muslim *Jihad* and religious conflict between Muslims and Christians and b) in the tradition of Christian martyrology. Subsequently, Armale’s ideal is the female martyr, happily accepting the complete loss of her home, possessions and family, and even accepting sexual violence and, finally, her conscious death instead of conversion:

We cannot fail to mention how Christian women rejoiced while they were being led away. They sang happy and cheerful hymns as if they were going to a wedding to feed their eyes on the sight of their favorites, who had sacrificed themselves for them.<sup>72</sup>

In the concept of antagonizing religions there is scarcely a mention of rescuers, with the previously cited exception of the Yezidis and a few Kurdish chieftains or neutral protagonists. Ottoman society, as perceived by Henno, Qarabashi and Armale, is divided into Christians and Muslims, just and unjust, faithful and infidel. This dualistic perspective excludes differentiation, self-criticism or criticism of members of one’s own ethno-religious group, as displayed by Odian. He was an acute observer, not just of the misery of his people; he also realized the sufferings of others. His criticism is likewise indiscriminate and includes Armenians. In Aleppo Odian met Greek deportees from the Syrian coast<sup>73</sup> and Hellenic nationals who were deported once Greece had entered the war.<sup>74</sup> In Deir ez-Zor he learnt

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70. Armale, *Katastrophen*, Part IV, Chapter 8, 204.

71. Odian, *Accursed Years*, 157.

72. Armale, *Katastrophen*, Part IV, Chapter 21, 229.

73. Odian, *Accursed Years*, 235.

74. *Ibid*, 251.

...that the police had requisitioned the Chaldean church and transformed it into a brothel ... to satisfy the Germans,<sup>75</sup> who had demanded the establishment of controllable brothels in the name of hygiene. It must be said that a few Armenian women preferred to leave work, resign from honorable wages and find their living in dirty voluptuousness.<sup>76</sup>

Odian described the late Ottoman Empire as a police state that was shaped by denunciation and spying; Armenians were an integral part of that system. In his place of exile, El Bousera, Odian encountered the Armenian “*betrayed and spy*” Santur Oğlu Aram (Aram, son of Santur) from Hajin (Cilicia), whose crimes against his compatriots even aroused the otherwise disinherited Odian with considerable indignation: “*I think there are very few people to be found who are monsters with such evil, corrupt, detestable characters. This young man had no moral sense and he would tell us of his evil deeds and crimes with a sort of boastful pride and bragging.*”<sup>77</sup>

Aram had been arrested in his hometown with six other Armenians as a revolutionary and sentenced to death. He escaped execution because he offered his services to the authorities and betrayed not only the arsenals of the Hadjin Armenians, but also the 36 notables of the same town, whom he heavily burdened by his false statements. He whispered to Odian, “*I was present at this ceremony [of execution, TH] and pulled the chairs away from under the feet of some of them myself.*”<sup>78</sup>

Asked about his motives, Aram frankly admitted, “*simply for pleasure and to give the Turks a good impression.*” Aram then married the 14-year-old daughter of one of his victims and moved up to become a deportation official and even a police lieutenant. In this position he blackmailed the Armenians of Adana with threats of deportation. After returning to Hajin, he brutally whipped his own father for a bet during an interrogation. But since Aram failed to smash an Armenian resistance group at Islahiye according to orders, he was released and finally, after another blackmail attempt in Adana, deported to Deir ez-Zor.<sup>79</sup>

Elias Venezis narrates a similar case of profound betrayal among Ottoman Greeks: in a concentration camp near Manisa, the Greek overseer (*kapo*) Mikhál and a Turkish officer sold a column of Greek laborer soldiers to the Turkish population of Manisa who wanted to take bloody revenge for the burning of their city during the withdrawal of the Hellenic Army from Anatolia;<sup>80</sup> they bought the defenseless slave laborers in order to torture and eventually kill them.

Venezis wrote his memoirs as early as 1924, soon after the massive Greek-Turkish exchange of populations. A Greek youth of just 18 years from Ayvalık (Kydonies in Greek), Venezis was conscripted into a labour battalion and “*remained a slave without*

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75. Ibid, 197.

76. Ibid.

77. Ibid, 169.

78. Ibid.

79. Ibid 170.

80. Venesis, Nr. 31328, 160f.



*any rights and even without any official recognition of existence for fourteen months.*"<sup>81</sup> In his memoirs, Venezis tells how the Ayvalık conscripts were kept in the local prison several nights, and how 15 were singled out to march outside the town to be bayoneted to death while the remaining 43 were marched to the various labour and concentration camps of Western Anatolia. His group was the fourth such convoy from Ayvalık, but in contrast to the first three convoys, numbering hundreds, his was fated to die in a slower way.<sup>82</sup>

Despite the time of the year and the already cold nights – it was the end of October 1922 – the Ayvalık conscripts had to undress, with the exception of their underwear and were marched, without proper footwear, to the town of Manisa (Magnesia, Magnisa). En route, they were not allowed to drink anything but polluted swamp-water, with the clear calculation that typhus and other epidemics would decimate the undernourished, exhausted men. They were deliberately kept under catastrophic conditions without hygiene. Under such fatal circumstances, the mortality rate of the Greek slave labourers from Western Anatolia was extremely high. Out of the roughly 3,000 male labour conscripts from Ayvalık, only 23 survived – less than one percent!<sup>83</sup>

One of the first tasks of Venezis' *taburu* in Manisa was to clear the area of the corpses of 40,000 Christian men, women and children from Manisa and Smyrna who had been tied to one another with wire before being killed and dumped in a huge ravine of Mount Sipylo (Kirtikdere). The corpses had already begun to disintegrate, and the water drove them to the ravine's edge, where "*they reached the road and railroad tracks.*"<sup>84</sup> The Turkish authorities feared that the floating remnants of the massive killings might be seen by the Spanish official Dellara, who was appointed to examine the conditions and treatment of the prisoners.<sup>85</sup>

The most repugnant feature of genocide is its corruptive nature. Venezis exemplified this by two episodes as experienced by his narrator during the march from Ayvalık to Manisa. The completely exhausted Greek deportees were compelled by their guards to carry an infant whose parents lacked the strength to carry the child themselves. But each deportee tried to avoid this additional burden:

My turn came. It was a real martyrdom - because we had to walk; we were naked and starving and so exhausted that we ourselves fell at any given moment. I staggered away, then called out that someone else should take the child. Everyone ran to escape to the front ranks. (...) The child had become a specter. Anger hardened more and more in our tortured hearts.

"Why doesn't it want to die?" one suddenly said wildly.

"It will not last anyway," said another, looking for a reason. "Someone should kill it, so it could rest."

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81. Speros Vryonis, "Greek Labor Battalions in Asia Minor," in *The Armenian Genocide: Cultural and Ethical Legacies*, ed. Richard Hovannisian (New Brunswick, London: Transaction Publishers, 2007), 276.

82. Vryonis, "Greek Labor Battalions," 278.

83. *Ibid.*, 288.

84. Venezis, *Nr. 31328*, 207.

85. *Ibid.*

Nobody said that it would be a pity.  
Was that hatred for a baby? Yes, it was hatred.<sup>86</sup>

The growing lack of empathy also showed when the military escort of the convoy raped the girls that had been captured by the soldiers:

The two girls we had with us since Pergamon provided us with a lot of relief. They were still untilled ground and there were always rests. The soldiers divided them among themselves, withdrew with them, returned; then we marched on again. These marginal ornaments of the march did us good. We rested.<sup>87</sup>

The interludes with the girls provide not only frequent rests for the exhausted deportees, but also saved the two 18-year-old male Greeks in the battalion from being raped themselves, as the narrator's friend Arjiris realizes: "*Without the girls it would have been our turn, the two boys...*"<sup>88</sup> Sexual violence against boys and men seems to have been a taboo among Armenian contemporaries, for it is not mentioned in the testimonials of Armenian survivors. The most outspoken in this context is Father Armale's report on the young Syriac Īsā Qaryō, who was raped, tortured and murdered in Mardin on May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1915.<sup>89</sup> Even more taboo-breaking is Venesis' revelation about the sexual exploitation of Greek captives by Greek *kaḡos*.<sup>90</sup>

It is interesting to compare the Syriac authors with the Armenian survivor and later bishop Grigoris Balakian, who had the same theological background and vocation as Armale, Qarabashi and Henno, albeit with the difference that he was the only one of the six authors under consideration here with a higher education gained abroad, in Germany. As the biblical title of Balakian's memoirs – "Armenian Golgotha" – indicates, this Armenian author mostly remains in the tradition of antagonistic narration and Jihadist traditions, for example, in his summary of the description of a massacre, committed against Armenian deportees on the road between Maraş and Bahçe:

It was obvious that the killers, after murdering these deportees, had played with their corpses for hours, stripping them naked and cutting them to pieces. That which centuries of human history had never witnessed in its blackest pages was carried out here, in the name of the Koran, in the name of Jihad.<sup>91</sup>

However, parallel to the traditional concepts of religious antagonism and martyrology, Balakian also offers a secular and political explanation of the event, contradicting the merely religious interpretations by differentiating between Turkish and non-Turkish Muslims. For Balakian the divide between the evil and the innocent runs between the Young Turks and others, including non-Turkish Muslims. This becomes evident in his Volume II, Chapter 8, where he deplors the sufferings of British prisoners of war who were brought to the Baghdad Railway construction sites in order to replace

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86. Ibid, 61 f.

87. Ibid, 75.

88. Venesis, *Nr. 31328*, 78.

89. Armale, *Katastrophen*, Part II, Chapter 21, 83.

90. Venesis, *Nr. 31328*, 188.

91. Balakian, *Armenian Golgotha*, 292.

the Armenian workers, the vast majority of whom had been deported on the orders of the Ottoman War Ministry. Balakian explains the inhuman treatment of the British Indian POWs, of whom many were Muslims, in the following way:

As we gradually became familiar with these officers and enjoyed their friendship, they told us of the horrible suffering they had endured in the deserts. Thirteen thousand British and Indian soldiers, along with their general, had been awaiting reinforcements from the auxiliary British army in Kut-al-Amara, near Baghdad. They had been unexpectedly besieged by a large Turkish army and taken prisoner. They had walked for more than two months from Baghdad via Der Zor to Amanos. (...) The Ittihad officers had selected the roads across the longest deserts, in order to subject the defenseless prisoners to “white massacre.” They had committed all sorts of cruelties so that the prisoners would die along the way. (...)

These loyal agents of the Turkish state, who had formerly sent propaganda to the hundred million Muslims of India, now treated the Muslim Indian prisoners even more harshly for having dared to serve the Christian armies against the Muslim caliph and take up arms against the Turks.

Isn't it true that the Turks had always burned, broken, destroyed, violated, and massacred Arabs, Albanians, Circassians, and Persians under their dominion, even though they were their Muslim brothers? For this reason, all the Muslim races had wished to throw off the Turkish yoke, attempting revolt down the centuries. (...) the Turks were deeply convinced that in the end, owing to the invincible German armies, they would defeat the Allies; they would occupy the Caucasus, Persia, India, Egypt, and all the Muslim lands of North Africa and establish a huge Muslim world empire... Image the likelihood that a Turkish race numbering bare four million – two thirds of whose far-flung empire had already been lost, the remainder facing the threat of division – would be able to realize this dream. This says something about the extent of the chauvinism, pan-Islamism, and pan-Turkic dreams that the young leaders of Turkey had embraced.<sup>92</sup>

## **Summary and Conclusion**

All six Christian survivors and authors who are under consideration in this article relate to the same events during the last decade of the Ottoman rule with, however, with strong differences. Shaped by biblical narrative styles, Christian martyrology and the perception of contemporary events as inter-religious war and traditional *Jihad*, the three Syriac authors developed an antagonistic narrative. Nearly all Muslims without exception are perceived as evil, while martyrs offer role models for the behavior of good Christians. Members of other religions or denominations are good – like the Yezidis – if they protect Christians, and suspicious, if they, like some Syriac Orthodox, collaborate with the Ottoman authorities. As mentioned before, such an approach gives meaning to otherwise unbearably irrational genocidal destruction, at least in retrospect. Even more relevant perhaps is the fact that it allows survivors to interpret themselves as the moral

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92. Balakian, *Armenian Golgotha*, 296f.

victors despite all humiliation and degradation that the victims suffered before they were eventually physically destroyed. A martyr's conscious decision to die for his or her faith is an act of self-determination instead of the extreme abuse of a helpless victim.

However seductive such literary procedures may be, they are useless in analyzing the most troubling aspects of mass violence and genocide because the dualistic view of the world does not permit differentiation and, above all, no internal, self-critical exploration or insight. The non-Syriac authors that have been considered here replaced, in various degrees, the dualistic and antagonistic approach by internalization. Greek authors from Asia Minor such as Elias Venezis, or Dido Sotiriou (1909-2004)<sup>93</sup> argued in their narrations against the ethnic or religious ascription of guilt by emphasizing cases of solidarity despite the religious divide between Ottoman Turks and Greeks. These authors also touched upon the aspect of guilt for violence against Muslim 'others' as well as against Greek compatriots. In Chapter 17, Venezis wrote about the elder Anatolian deserters of WWI, who were recruited after the war to guard the Greek "slaves," as the deported Greek Ottoman laborers were called. But soon these men from both sides of the divide discovered that they suffered equally from the violence, ill-treatment and corruption of the *kapo* system:

The soldiers who guarded us were elderly. All were from the interior of Anatolia. What made them different, whether they were Christians or Turks? How did they differ? We were unbelievers, captives. And they who were free? The blood ran in streams from all nine bodies - what was the difference?

(...)

So, over time, unexpectedly, without realizing it, we came closer to each other, the soldiers and us. In the evenings they came more regularly to keep us company. We told each other our sufferings. And in conversation, they no longer called us 'yes, sir' (prisoner). With their deep Anatolian voices, they spoke with warmth and kindness, calling us "arkadás," comrade.

When we went to work, they no longer beat or cursed us. If none of our Greek ks were around, they acted as if they saw nothing and let us sit down. These kapos, however, feared their merciless officers.

(...)

'What should we do, comrade? God have mercy on you and us.' He may have mercy on "you and us". That became almost a permanent saying for them. They could no longer distinguish the two destinies, theirs and ours. They were afraid of their officers and our kapos. We hated the same people, too. They longed for their homes: huts somewhere. Like us. So?<sup>94</sup>

Venezis replaced the typical ethnic or religious divide of Armenian and Syriac narrations by a moral, transnational divide. During deportation, physical suffering led to

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93. Her novel "Matomena Chomata" ("Bloodied Soil", 1962; English title "Farewell, Anatolia!"), bases on the 360 handwritten pages that were trusted to her by the Ionian survivor and eyewitness Manolis Axiotis from the village of Kirkica (today Şirince). Cf. Tessa Hofmann, "'Only those who look back, move forward!': Four Literary Responses to Genocidal Trauma in Greek and Transnational Prose," *International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies* 2, No. 1 (2015): 19-37.

94. Venesis, *Nr. 31328*, 199-205.

the loss of empathy and humanity, bringing the Greek captives closer to their tormentors, while in the camp and during slave labor, the segregation between ‘them’ and ‘us’, between the evil and the good materialized differently. The discovery of similarities and even commonalities between the old Turkish soldiers and the exploitation by their own Greek compatriots, i.e. the kapos, is a counterweight to the loss of humanity and to a certain degree a way of healing:

The camp became better organized. We were, so to speak, a small state. With each passing day, it got harder and more merciless. Our kapos knew who the good artisans and workers were; they made a list of them and agreed it with the Turkish camp commander, a major. All these “cream” workers and artisans would each be hired out to private individuals for a day’s wages. Most of the money accrued as a result would go to the Turkish major - with a little going to the corrupt slaves. (...)

Thus, two camps gradually emerged from the one. On one side were the slaves who gave the orders and received bribes; on the other we, the people that sweated and polluted the air with our moans. (...) After money started circulating in our camp, our kapos thought of something else: they opened canteens. They sold tobacco, salted fish, white bread, whatever was wanted. These small shops did golden business over time. The ‘aristocracy’ bought things and cooked them separately. We saw them and our mouths would start salivating.

Evening after evening, the kapos invited one of the slave companies to be their hosts. They also drank schnapps secretly. They also had hashish. (...) <sup>95</sup>

The exploration of the dehumanizing force of genocidal violence connects Venezis with the Polish author and Auschwitz survivor Tadeusz Borowski (1922-1951). Similar to Venezis, he described the *kapo* system as the ruthless exploitation of profound human suffering, including the exploitation of compatriots. Both authors featured the genocidal system as a self-sustaining, profitable and hence corruptive mechanism. In his story “Please, the gentlemen to the gas!”, Borowski described the routine work of the international “Canada” command, which consisted in emptying the railway wagons with which Jews deported to Auschwitz arrived - a privileged activity offering the “Canadians” and especially their *kapo* extensive opportunities for personal enrichment and for their survival in the genocidal universe: <sup>96</sup>

The kapo is busy with a big teapot stuffing silk, gold, and coffee into it. This is for the sentries at the gate, so they will let him pass the command post without being checked. The camp will live off this transport for a few days, will eat its ham and its sausages, drink its liquor and its liqueurs, wear its linen and trade with its money and its jewelry. (...) For a few days the camp will speak about the transport “Bendzin-Sosnowiec.” A good, rich transport it has been. <sup>97</sup>

Is it possible to survive in a system based on violence and terror without the loss of human empathy and dignity? The authors from the Ottoman Empire give diverging

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95. Venezis, *Nr. 31328*, 187.

96. Tadeusz Borowski, *Die steinerne Welt* (München: Erzählungen, 1963), 105-133.

97. *Ibid*, 132.

answers. The Syriacs saw this possibility in individual martyrdom. Elias Venezis and Dido Sotiriou, however, named, albeit to different degrees, culprits and victims on both sides of the ethno-religious divides and included Muslim rescuers into their narrations. The Armenian authors Odian and Balakian focused their narrations on the suffering as such. In the face of their many compatriots who had been silenced forever, they cleared their “debts of survival” by writing the unspeakable and witnessing genocidal destruction.

*“I faced a painful and weighty responsibility,” wrote Grigoris Balakian. “Writing this history meant reliving, on a daily basis, all those black days, whose very reminiscences filled me with horror. While I felt physically healthy, I was spiritually ill. Yet I had a sacred obligation to write this bitter story for future generations.”*<sup>98</sup>

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98. Balakian, *Armenian Golgotha*, 430.