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### Title

The Armenian Genocide: Evidence from the German Foreign Office Archives, 1915-1916

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/348535c1>

### Journal

HOLOCAUST AND GENOCIDE STUDIES, 29(3)

### ISSN

8756-6583

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### Publication Date

2015

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Peer reviewed

Margaret Lavinia Anderson, Review of:

•Göran Gunner, *Genocide of the Armenians – Through Swedish Eyes*

•Wolfgang Gust, ed., *The Armenian Genocide. Evidence from the German Foreign Archives 1915-1916*

in:

**Holocaust and Genocide Studies (Winter 2015) 29 (3): 483-488.**

ability to resist is not borne out by the archaeological evidence. As Sturdy Colls notes, various personal items of sentimental and actual (economic) value were found in the small pit excavated in the location of the former gas chamber at Majdanek. She posits that the items were buried by the victims to keep them out of the hands of the perpetrators; the items thus served as “material witnesses” to the victims’ resistance to the Holocaust up until the end (p. 256).

The only deficiency in this important and timely volume is its poor production quality. The text contains many grammatical errors and typos, the photographs are small and fuzzy, and the captions could have been more explicit. Readers should not allow these problems to detract from the overall content and message of the volume, however. Sturdy Colls’ crucial and ambitious volume has provided the foundation for a desperately needed practical and ethical protocol for archaeological investigation of Holocaust sites—one that will aid students and archaeologists considering entering the field, allow educators to keep their courses timely and relevant, inform interested laypeople, and spur debate about the future of Holocaust archaeology.

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doi:10.1093/hgs/dcv050

\*The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and are not to be viewed as official statements of the USHMM.

***Genocide of Armenians: Through Swedish Eyes*, edited by Göran Gunner (Yerevan: Armenian Genocide Institute-Museum, 2013), 370 pp., paperback \$42.50;**

***The Armenian Genocide: Evidence from the German Foreign Office Archives, 1915–1916*, edited by Wolfgang Gust (New York: Berghahn, 2014), xxviii + 786 pp., hardcover \$85.45.**

On March 11, 2010, in spite of years of resistance from its foreign minister (“it is not the duty of the Government to establish a historical course of events” [p. 349]), and a no-vote from its own Committee on Foreign Affairs (which found it inappropriate for a representative body to decide matters of international law), Sweden’s parliament voted across party lines—131 to 130—to ask its government to recognize the Genocide of Armenians, Assyrians, Syrians, Chaldeans, and Pontic Greeks. Göran Gunner’s *Genocide of Armenians: Through Swedish Eyes* offers an unpretentious (many photographs, no index), but fascinating survey of how Sweden got to that decision.

A scholar with the Church of Sweden’s research unit, Gunner asks two questions: what did faraway Swedes know of the fate of the Armenians, and what can Swedish sources tell us about it? Beginning with the massacres of the 1890s, Gunner draws his answers from three categories of material: newspapers, which published fifty articles on the Armenians from 1914 to 1920; reports from military intelligence

and Stockholm's legation in Constantinople; and church archives, especially those of the Kvinnliga Missions Arbeitera (KMA, Female Mission Workers). Gunner supplements these with interviews he conducted with survivors in 1985, along with travelers' accounts and memoirs.

The Swedes were told a lot, but heard conflicting stories. Those living in the Ottoman Empire reported the genocide, at first writing in German in order to get their messages past the censors, then using references to Biblical passages, and finally writing in parables. But in postwar Turkey—for reasons Gunner does not try to explain—Sweden's diplomats espoused the Turkish narrative. And in Stockholm, Turkey's ambassador reminded the Swedes: "Another thing to bear in mind is that both Kurds and Armenians are nomadic people. They are to be found constantly on the move, and during these movements they often come into conflict with each other about pastures and the like . . . which sometimes had a very bloody process" (p. 310).

On the other hand, perhaps the first person ever to employ the term "genocide" (*Folkmord*) regarding the Armenians was the Swedish writer and traveler Maria Anholm, in her 1906 book on the Hamidian massacres.<sup>1</sup> *Folkmord* was used again by Hjalmar Branting, Social Democratic leader and later a Nobel laureate and three-time prime minister—at a huge public meeting in March 1917, arguing that the recent destruction of the Armenians was "systematic" and "without counterpart" (p. 209). The assembly unanimously called on their government, "alone or in cooperation with other neutrals," to "put in their word" for the Armenians in "quarters where . . . influence can be exercised" (pp. 214f). Did this breathtakingly anodyne resolution have anything to do with the fall, three days later, of Prime Minister Hjalmar Hammarskjöld, thought to be friendly to Germany? If so, Gunner does not mention it. The modest demand to "put in a word" for the Armenians was rebuffed by Sweden's foreign minister as "interfering in the domestic affairs" of another land.

Readers might wish for more context. Did Swedes lean towards the Entente or the Central Powers? What were the constraints on their governments—with the British navy so close and German food supplies so far? By the end of the war, Sweden was sometimes described as near starvation. Does that help account for why, when newspaper headlines announced "Armenia must be saved" (p. 289), its government declined requests to extend humanitarian assistance? In 1920 Sweden refused a League of Nations mandate over the short-lived Republic of Armenia (although it is not clear that one was ever formally offered).

*Genocide of Armenians* has not been carefully edited. Gunner relays his sources without always noting their contradictions: e.g., the 1909 Adana massacres were the work of the sultan/his opponents; Britain desired postwar Turkey to remain independent/to become a League of Nations mandate. There are occasional misprints, odd translations (Pontiacs for Pontic Greeks; PMs for MPs), and some errors: November 11, 1914, is the date of the jihad declaration, not of the Ottoman entry into the war; Franz Werfel's *Forty Days of Musa Dagh* is represented as a short story (p. 199,

n. 422), although it is correctly identified as a novel on the same page. *Armenian Atrocities: Murder of a Nation*, a book of 117 pages is described as “Lord Bryce’s speech to the House of Lords”—a common mistake since the name of the author, Arnold J. Toynbee, appears in tiny black letters only on its cover, while that of Lord Bryce (a viscount, after all) is emblazoned on the same cover in large red letters and his speech serves as Toynbee’s preface.

Gunner’s work shines, however, with the accounts of Swedish witnesses. Especially moving are those of Alma Johansson, who arrived in Anatolia at twenty-one to work with the Frankfurt-based German Christian Charity Organization for the Orient. In 1915, when the Genocide began, she was running a girls’ orphanage in Muş, a town with a large Armenian population. Twenty thousand soldiers arrived in June, killed the men, and, as Alma watched, amused themselves by taking pot shots at bleeding women and children being marched out of the city. Alma hid Armenians in her orphanage and, even after it was bombarded, stood at the door, denying the troops entry. With a rifle pointed at her breast, she admonished the soldier “to remember with whom he spoke. He could very well shoot me, but he’d pay for it. . . . This,” she informed his commandant, “was a *German* home” (pp. 191–92). But her fugitives’ desperate gamble on Alma’s connection with Germany proved vain. Even the orphan girls were dragged out and those who weren’t buried alive were burned. Afterwards, the Turks sat around “telling about their achievements. . . . One gendarme boasted about how he had set our children on fire. . . . *My* children!” (p. 194).

Some of Alma’s testimony has already appeared in what for decades had been the best collection of primary materials on the Armenian Genocide: the 667 pages of eyewitness narratives compiled by Arnold J. Toynbee and published as a blue book in 1916. Entitled *The Treatment of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire*, by 1918 it had been translated into Dutch, Swedish, French, and Spanish.<sup>2</sup> Toynbee’s sources were overwhelmingly persons from neutral countries and employed in Turkey (although Alma was mistakenly identified as a German); their names were a matter of record. But by spring 2005, as the approaching Genocide centennial was becoming increasingly a matter of discussion, the volume’s origins in Wellington House—the center for British war propaganda, where Toynbee was also turning out shorter works whose titles screamed their political purpose (e.g., *The Destruction of Poland: A Study in German Efficiency*)—provided those wishing to cast doubt on the Genocide an excuse to dismiss the veracity of the accounts.<sup>3</sup> In spring 2005, the Turkish National Assembly went so far as to demand that the British parliament apologize for the volume.

In some quarters “witness” testimony (*Zeitzeugen*) itself was in bad odor that year. Thus, after news leaked that the Turkish consul-general’s importunities had led the Bundesstaat of Brandenburg to remove the Armenian Genocide from its new list of possible electives for school history courses, a columnist for the *Istanbul Post* pooh-pooed the ensuing scandal (“it was not obvious why, ninety years after the event,

such discussions were occurring at all”), and—clearly referring to witness accounts—deplored the “compassion jargon” (*Jargon der Betroffenheit*) that infused these discussions. The testimony of a witness, he reminded readers, was only one document among many. To assess it, one needed to do what contemporaries could not: consult documents in the *state* archives, which were now open.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, within weeks a massive edition of documents appeared from precisely the kind of archives the *Istanbul Post* demanded—albeit from the German, not the Turkish, state.<sup>5</sup> Although the archive of Germany’s Foreign Office had been open to scholars since 1945, many of its materials were in Sütterlin cursive, all but illegible to most people educated after 1918. As demand for its Armenian files suddenly exploded in the nineties, the archive withdrew the originals for safekeeping; on microfiche, they became even more difficult to read. But with his wife Sigrid, Wolfgang Gust, a former editor of *Der Spiegel* who had already published an excellent study of the Genocide,<sup>6</sup> began painstakingly transcribing what was, for all practical purposes, the entire run of Armenian files (including marginalia, when visible) for the years 1915–1916, posting them on their website, [www.armenocide.net](http://www.armenocide.net). The edition Gust published in 2005 contained an extensive index, a key to the more than two hundred arcane abbreviations, and an appendix abstracting each document in English. Now, with an edition in English, Gust has made his superb collection available to the many specialists and teachers of genocide studies who do not read German.

This treasure trove (modestly described by Gust as 250 core documents, but in fact, almost twice that many if one counts the lengthy enclosures and commentaries of bureaucrats) allows the reader to follow, often on a day-to-day basis, the unfolding story of deportations, massacres, and sufferings of the Ottoman Armenians as seen through the eyes of their oppressors’ allies: German consular officials in Samsun, Sivas, Trabzon, Erzurum, Adana, Alexandrette, Aleppo, and Mosul, as well as in Tabriz across the border in Iran, who reported these horrors to their embassy in Constantinople. Although the Reich had no consulates in three of the regions most heavily affected—Mamuret-ul-Aziz, Diyarbekir, and Van (Mosul’s vice-consul did sometimes reside in Van during the summer), Germans and neutral nationals working there were not reticent about sending in their own reports. A succession of ambassadors forwarded them to Berlin, along with Ottoman communiqués and accounts of conversations with leading Turks. As Germany, alone of the countries with personnel in Turkey, was permitted to use diplomatic cipher, these dispatches and telegrams are astoundingly candid, often graphic in detail. Among these documents are also the rationales for their own actions that Germany’s officials offered to critics, to the Reichstag, and to each other.

Not the least of Gust’s services is to render obsolete the 500 pages of diplomatic documents, *Armenien und Deutschland, 1914–1918*, published in May 1919 by Johannes Lepsius. Famous internationally for his work on behalf of the Armenians, Lepsius was the perfect person (thought the new foreign minister, who commissioned

the edition) both to guarantee the authenticity of the collection and to signal to Paris peacemakers that a genuine regime change had taken place. Yet, in the 1960s, scholars noticed significant omissions and certain deviations between Lepsius's documents and those in the Foreign Office. We shall probably never know to what extent Lepsius himself, as opposed to the German Foreign Office, was responsible for these discrepancies. When Gust began to expose in full detail the volume's shortcomings on his internet portal, however, it had the unintended consequence of providing fuel for those who wished to deny the Genocide altogether. But as Vahakn N. Dadrian, one of the first to write about the importance of the German archives, emphasizes in his Foreword (perhaps with the recent attacks on the Toynbee volume in mind), no one can accuse *Gust's* documents, produced by Turkey's allies and often marked "very secret," of being war propaganda. In 2012, when the human rights activist Ragıp Zarakolu brought out a Turkish translation, Mehmet Alı Bırand, reviewing it for the mainstream daily *Hürriyet*, declared: "If you read the book and look at the documents, if you are a person who is introduced to the subject through this book, then there is no way that you would not believe in the genocide and justify the Armenians."<sup>7</sup>

Gust's helpful, well-organized, 126-page "Overview of the Armenian Genocide" acknowledges the outrage and sympathy expressed by individual Kurds and Turks, from officials and soldiers down to ordinary people. "When people speak of how the Armenians are treated, I'm ashamed to be a Turk," an Aleppo sheikh confessed (p. 81). But in considering Germany, both Gust's Overview and Dadrian's Foreword present a prosecutor's case for indictment. Dadrian even sees Germany's failure to put a stop to the Genocide prefigured in its unwillingness to protect Armenians during the Hamidian massacres in the 1890s (p. xviii). But Germany was no outlier then. Armenians, and their Swedish and French advocates, were far angrier at the three countries who would later make up the Entente than at Germany (not even mentioned by the critics quoted in Gunner (pp. 83, 85). While all of the Powers protested the Hamidian massacres, none was willing to use force to stop them. Why would they have been more willing during a world war?

These documents provide considerable food for reflection—and for teaching. Among my favorites are drafts (pp. 705–10) drawn up by the Foreign Office to respond to a Reichstag interpellation: they are nearly identical, one originating as an answer to an inquiry by the Budget Committee, the other as a reply to the grand duchess of Baden, who had pleaded for the government to save the Armenians. The final paragraph of each, which follows a rehash of Turkey's official claims to self-defense against Armenian rebels, offers material for vigorous classroom discussion. They begin by saying that Germany has done all that was possible—and here I quote from the version sent to the grand duchess—"going to the utmost limit with its pressure on the Turkish government" (the volume includes documents both supporting and rebutting this claim). But then, says the writer, although it was most regrettable

that “hundreds of thousands of innocent people are having to perish under the Turkish hand, more important to the German government . . . are the sons of Germany.” To break with Turkey would expose Germany’s southeastern flank, a responsibility that “could not be borne by any German government,” especially since such a step would not save the Armenians and be more likely to “deliver them up to Turkish revenge” (p. 710). The passage, although translated awkwardly, poses not only the dilemma “Should we defend our neighbor at the expense of our own sons?” but also raises a question useful for students to grapple with even today: “Does dissociation from a murderous regime help those it is murdering?”

### Notes

1. *Det dömdsdömda folkets saga* (Stockholm: AG Ljus, 1906), p. 3, quoted in Gunner, pp. 16, 114.
2. An Armenian translation came out in 1965, the English original was edited and re-issued by Ara Sarafian in 2005, and an abridged version appeared in Turkish: *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu’nda Ermenilere yönelik muamele, 1915–1916: Vikont Bryce tarafından Fallodon Vikontu Grey’e sunulan belgeler* (Istanbul: Pencere Yayınları, 2005). Ayşe Günaysu compared the Turkish edition with the original and found that passages associated with massacres or atrocities had been omitted. Günaysu to the Workshop of Armenian and Turkish Historians [WATS] listserv, January 24, 2006, archived at Bentley Library, University of Michigan. The Gomidas Institute then published a Turkish edition of its own in 2011.
3. Even scholars of the stature of Halil Berktaş have mistakenly conflated the document collection Toynbee *compiled* with the above-mentioned *Armenian Atrocities*, which he *authored*—as Ayşe Günaysu pointed out in her exchanges with Berktaş on the WATS listserv, January 24–26, 2006. Library catalogues contribute to the confusion by erroneously listing James Bryce as co-author of both books, and he shares equal billing with Toynbee on the cover of Sarafian’s re-issue of *The Treatment of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire*. Bryce’s contribution was limited to a kind of preface for both volumes.
4. Stefan Hibbler, “Einige Anmerkungen zur Diskussion über die Vernichtung der Armenier im Ersten Weltkrieg,” *Istanbul Post: Das wöchentliche deutschsprachige Internetmagazin der Türkei* 4, no. 5 (January 31, 2005).
5. Wolfgang Gust, ed., *Der Völkermord an den Armeniern 1915/16: Dokumente aus dem Politischen Archiv des deutschen Auswärtigen Amtes* (Springer: zu Klampen, 2005).
6. *Der Völkermord an den Armeniern: Die Tragödie des ältesten Christenvolkes der Welt* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1993).
7. “We Are Surrendering Ourselves to ‘Genocide,’” [www.hurriyet.dailynews.com](http://www.hurriyet.dailynews.com), accessed Apr. 24, 2013, reviewing Wolfgang Gust, *Ermeni soykırımı 1915/16: Alman Dışişleri Bakanlığı siyasi arşiv belgeleri* (Istanbul: Belge Yayınları, 2012).

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doi:10.1093/hgs/dcv051