

THE VATICAN AND THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE OF 1915/6

New book: What documents from the Vatican Secret Archives reveal

Last month, the German historian and author Michael Hesemann (51) published his latest book "Völkermord an den Armeniern" (The Armenian Genocide). Here, for the first time, he reveals the content of never-before-published documents on "the greatest crime of World War I" – and how Pope Benedict XV and Vatican diplomacy tried to stop the deportations into the Syrian desert, save the victims and prevent the massacres.

Since 2011, Hesemann located, studied and evaluated more than 2000 hitherto unpublished documents on the "persecution of the Armenians" ("persecuzione degli Armeni"). These sources not only provide additional information, but also allow an entirely new perspective that sheds light on the true nature of those terrible events, still denied by the Turkish government. Hesemann's most important findings were:

A plan to exterminate the non-Muslim minorities existed

There is strong evidence that a violent "solution of the Armenian question" was planned years before the beginning of World War I. The war obviously offered only the welcome and perhaps long-sought pretext for the implementation of the proposed action by the revolutionary Young Turk movement and their party "Union and Progress" (Ittihat ve Terakki, short Ittihat). Their goal was, similar to that of fascism, to strengthen the Turkish nation by creating a homogenous population with common values. The loss of the Balkan provinces in the following years, whose Christian minorities were supported by foreign nations in their fight for independence, seemed to confirm their worldview: The Turkey of the future must be a nation of Turks alone, held together by the Sunni Islam as state religion. For ethnic and religious minorities was no room in this vision. As US Ambassador Henry Morgenthau reported to Washington on 16/07/1915: *"it appears that a campaign of race extermination is in progress under a pretext of reprisal against rebellion."* Or as the Turkish Secretary of the Interior, Talaat Bey, told Johann Mordtmann of the German Embassy, according to a report to Berlin: *"the (Turkish) government uses the war to get rid of our internal enemies - the indigenous Christians of all denominations – without diplomatic interventions by foreign nations."*

This assessment is also the red thread going through the Vatican documents. *"'Armenia without Armenians' - this is the plan of the Ottoman government"*, the Abbot General of the Mechitarist Friars, Msgr. Ghiurekian, wrote to Pope Benedict XV on July 30, 1915. Of the *"work of the Young Turks, encouraged by the support of the Germans"* spoke the Armenian Catholic Archbishop of Chalcidion, Msgr. Peter Kojunian, in his letter to Pope Benedict XV. from 03/09/1915: *"To the horrors of the current war, shaking the paternal heart of Your Holiness, belong the massacres of the Armenians in Turkey, which were ordered by the Turkish government and already take place for the most part. (...) (It is) the systematic annihilation of the Armenians in Turkey."* The Superior of the Capuchins in Erzurum, Fr. Norbert Hofer, wrote in October 1915 to the Vatican: *"The punishment of the Armenian nation (for alleged uprisings) is merely a pretext used by the Masonic Turkish government to exterminate all Christian elements in this country."* And his compatriot and confrater, the Austrian Capuchin missionary Michael Liebl, learned in Samsun: *"Not the Armenians, the Christians were sentenced (to death) at a secret meeting of the Young Turks 5 or 6 years ago in Thessaloniki."*

No relocation, but a genocide

The detailed eyewitness accounts found in the Vatican Archives actually leave no doubt that it never was the intention of the Turks to relocate the Armenians from the war zone, but to exterminate them. As the Apostolic Delegate in Constantinople, Msgr. Angelo M. Dolci, reported on August 20, 1915: *"It is impossible to get an idea of what is happening within the country. The entire Armenian population is systematically expelled brutally from their towns and villages and taken to unknown locations. Sometimes they allow these unfortunates, the elderly, the sick and the children, to carry their most urgent goods with carts. But in most cases, these poor people were forced to travel in larger groups by foot through the dry countryside, where many of them were killed by complete exhaustion, suffering and privations of all kinds within a few days. Others were sent on their way with armed escorts, under the pretext of protecting them, but unfortunately those escorts often enough turned out to be the greatest danger for the deportees. In fact, many of those caravans were massacred as soon as they came in more remote areas (by those escorts)."* Only about 20 % of the deportees reached their destination, the concentration camps in the Syrian desert. There they either died from hunger or disease, or were sent on further death marches even deeper into the desert to be massacred there. A maximum of 3 % of the deportees survived the following year (1916).

Fr. Norbert Hofer, the Superior of the Capuchins in Erzurum, quoted the Austrian Lazarite D. Dunkl who reported from Aleppo, in what state the Armenians arrived there: *"Normally, only the women come to Aleppo; because the men die earlier either from their suffering or were massacred."*

In the courtyard of a Khan near Aleppo he (P. Dunkl) saw hundreds of women, sitting on the bare ground amidst their own excrements, many of them being mothers with their already dead or still living children at their breast. They were all in an apathetic state or near to die. A Protestant Deaconess -who tried by all means to alleviate the sufferings of those unfortunate women - said that she had to remove some twenty corpses every day from that court. A Catholic nun who had recently arrived in Aleppo, said that she was exiled with six other sisters from Tokat. They were all undressed and had to go on the week-long journey completely naked. Five of the companions died on the way, either from exhaust or the the torture they endured. One got mad near the town (Aleppo) and drowned in a river. The narrator was able to seize the clothes of a corpse lying on a street, to get dressed and to flee to the city, where she was picked up by other nuns who had arrived before." Even worse were the conditions in the overcrowded camps . As Fr. Dunkl reported: "These concentration camps make themselves noticeable from a distance by the unbearable stench of rotting corpses and waste. I counted hundreds of thousands who were deported and supervised there. "

The total number of victims is estimated in the Vatican documents as over a million. A report of the Armenian Catholic Patriarchate, written in February 1916, already mentioned "almost 1,000,000" victims even before the massacres in the Syrian desert, while the Capuchin Fr. Michael Liebl stated on September 30, 1917: **"Of the 2.3 million Armenians living in Turkey, about one and a half million were exterminated by the Turks."** Serious historical research estimates about 1.5 million victims of the Armenocide.

Vatican diplomacy and papal protests unsuccessful

When on 24 April 1915, 870 Armenian intellectuals and dignitaries were arrested in Constantinople and deported to the interior, Msgr. Dolci still believed it was a political measure. But when reports from the interior reached Constantinople, when he learned that women, children and elderly were equally affected by the measures, he got active. First, he asked to pardon at least the Catholic Armenians, who were certainly not involved in any collaboration with the Russians; they had no links with the Orthodox power and were ill-famed among their Orthodox compatriots for their loyalty to the Ottoman state and their aversion to all nationalist aspirations. But Dolci's first petition to the Ottoman Grand Vizier in early July 1915 never received any reply or reaction. Acute got the situation when in late August, the 7000 Armenian Catholics of Angora (Ankara), the largest community in the Ottoman Empire, were threatened with deportation. The first 1500 men were arrested on 27 August and sent on their way into exile. Together with the German and the Austrian Ambassador, Msgr. Dolci presented himself to the responsible Secretary of the Interior, Talaat Bey. In the presence of these diplomats, Talaat telegraphed an order to spare the Catholics to the responsible provincial governor. The Apostolic Delegate had no idea that Talaat revoked the "pardon" the next day. A week later, the deportation of women and children followed, who now had the "privilege" to travel partially in cattle wagons of the Baghdad Railway, after being charged a fortune for the tickets; they never returned to their home town, too.

On September 10, Pope Benedict XV, wrote an autograph to the Ottoman Emperor, Sultan Mehmet V: *"We were told that the populations of whole villages and towns were forced to leave their homes under great pain and untold suffering to be relocated in distant concentration places where they have to endure not only psychological harassment but also the most terrible privations, the most severe distress and even the agonies of hunger"*, the Pope stated and asked the Sultan for mercy for the many innocents of any denomination. The papal appeal was not only published; at the same time, Benedict XV asked the Emperors of Austria and Germany for their support. But it took a full six weeks and needed the intervention of the German Ambassador, until the Apostolic Delegate was eventually received by the Sultan to present him the Papal autograph. Another four weeks later the answer arrived: It was unfortunately *"impossible to distinguish between the peaceful and the rebellious element"*, Mehmet V claimed. Step by step, also Msgr Dolci realized that he had been deceived by the Turks. Their promise to allow at least the Armenian Catholics to return until Christmas was never fulfilled. For Benedict XV there was no longer a doubt that *"the unfortunate people of the Armenians is almost completely led towards destruction"* – as he stated in an allocution at the consistory of December 6, 1915. By the end of the year, Dolci realized, already an "incredible number" of around one million Orthodox Armenians, including 48 bishops and 4500 priests, were murdered. The Catholics lost 5 bishops, 140 priests, 42 religious and 85,000 faithful – not less than 87% of their community.

The killings continued. On June 18, 1916 a further report by the Armenian Catholic Patriarch arrived at the Vatican, which documented the failure of diplomacy: *"The project of the extermination of the Armenians in Turkey is still undergoing. (...) The exiled Armenians ... are continuously driven into the desert and there stripped of all vital resources. They miserably perish from hunger, disease and extreme climate. (...) It is certain that the Ottoman government has decided to eliminate Christianity from Turkey before the World War comes to an end. And all this happens in the face of the Christian world. "*

*** Michael Hesemann is a German historian and author. His book "The Armenian Genocide – according to unpublished documents from the Vatican Secret Archive on the greatest crime of World War I" was just published by Herbig-Verlag, Munich.**

homepage: www.michaelhesemann.info - e-mail: mhesemann@aol.com - Phone: +49 172 2005395