

The Executions of some of the Arch-perpetrators of the Armenian Genocide by the Ittihadists and Kemalists, 1915-1926.

By Prof. Vahakn N. Dadrian

Published December 12, 2000

The Turkish version of this article appeared in two installments in the November 2 and 3, 2000 issues of the radical-liberal Turkish newspaper *Yeni Gündem*, arousing great interest among many readers as well as among some officials and intellectuals. Despite the abundant exposure of the crime of genocide in this article, Turkish authorities were hard put to confront the newspaper. The reason is not difficult to surmise: they are confounded by the fact that these Ittihadist chieftains were caught in a web of conspiracy to have Mustafa Kemal assassinated and seize power by overthrowing the fledgling Kemalist regime. What Mustafa Kemal and his subalterns did was nothing short of a wholesale liquidation through a series of executions by way of public hangings.

The existing literature on the World War I Armenian Genocide has but scant references to the acts and methods of retribution against the principal authors of the wartime mass murder. The reasons are obvious.

First of all, those who were tried, convicted, condemned to death and eventually executed by the Turkish Military Tribunal in the 1919-1920 period of the Armistice, were an embarrassment to Turkey herself. The post-war Ottoman authorities only grudgingly and with much trepidation agreed to institute these courts martial. Pressing national interests, such as prospects of favorable or mild terms of a peace settlement, were considerations making these trials for Turkey an urgent necessity at the time. After all, the Allies had let it be known in so many ways that unless Turkey redeemed herself by severely punishing those responsible for the massacres against the Armenians, the terms of the projected peace were most likely to be very severe.

Furthermore, the punishment of the key actors of the genocide, who had managed to escape and had become fugitives of justice, required elaborate measures of secrecy, detective work and many illegal arrangements. The Armenian Revolutionary Federation (A.R.F), otherwise known as Dashnags, which masterminded these punitive operations, did not provide many details revealing organizational contacts, resources and methods of intelligence. What we know about the series of executions against such architects of the Armenian Genocide as Talaat, Dr. Behaeddin Şakir, Trabzon governor **Cemal Azmi**, Grand Vizier **Said Halim** and some other lesser figures, derives from the memoirs of the Armenian avengers who were assigned by the A.R.F. to carry out the executions. These memoirs are inevitably embellished accounts in which the dastardly and criminal image of the victim is counterposed with the heroic saga of the individual executioner. What was common to both categories of Young Turk Ittihadist leaders or functionaries is the level and duration of apprehension with which they were haunted until they died on the scaffold or by bullets.

There is, however, a third category of Turkish perpetrators, whose fatality has thus far escaped general recognition. Among these were brigand chiefs, the so-called *çetebashis*, who wrought havoc upon thousands of trapped Armenian deportees by subjecting them to barbarities unexcelled even in Turkish history. They were most effective in their pursuit primarily because their charges, whom they led and directed, were almost entirely felons, carefully chosen bloodthirsty criminals who were released from the many prisons of the Ottoman Empire mainly, if not only, for this purpose. Then there are the chief Ittihadists who closely collaborated with Talaat and the Special Organization in organizing and implementing the massacres. Many of these were tried, convicted and condemned to death in 1926 by the Independence Court of the Ankara government on charges of conspiracy to kill Mustafa Kemal and take over the Turkish government.

The brigand chiefs were killed individually by either Ittihadists or by Kemalists, whom they had joined in the Armistice period. Other perpetrators died as a result of heart attacks or strokes they suffered in connection with events related to the Armenian massacres. Finally, there is the category of suicide resulting from post-war despondency of one kind or another, and death by fatal accidents.

I. Death by Conviction and Hanging

Nearly all of these defendants were prominent ex-Ittihadists whose trials were divided into two judicial proceedings with venues in Izmir and Ankara. The first series started in Izmir on May 26, 1926 and ended on the day of the verdict, i.e., on July 13, 1926, when seven conspirators were condemned to death and hanged the same day at midnight. Of these, three were involved in the organization of the Armenian genocide, with two of them having played a key role.

1. **Halis Turgut** was a party operative and Parliamentarian. During the war he served as commander of a Special Organization contingent operating in Sivas province. He later operated at the Caucasus front, including the Nakhichevan region in the 1917-18 period. To escape prosecution by the Turkish Military Tribunal, investigating the crime of Armenian deportations and massacres, he had escaped in Sivas to the mountains with a small guerilla unit.
2. **Ahmed Shükrü** was wartime Minister of Education, a fanatical Ittihadist and arch foe of the Armenians. He was hanged twice as the rope on his neck snapped the first time, with Shükrü collapsing on the floor half-dead and finally expiring on the gallows while emitting death-rattle sounds. This man, who helped send tens of thousands of inoffensive Armenian peasants to their gruesome deaths, was sufficiently terrified to cry out "Oh! Alas, Oh! Alas," (Vah! Vah!) upon seeing the gallows on his way to execution.
3. **Ismail Canbolat**. He was the right hand man of Talaat, was in charge of the Empire's Public Security office (Emniyeti Umumiye), the Prefect of the Ottoman Capital, and later in the war, Interior Minister.

The second series started at Ankara on August 2, 1926. It was set aside for a group of top Ittihadist leaders accused of plotting to kill Mustafa Kemal to restore the Ittihadist regime and rule. The trials ended on August 26, 1926, and four very prominent Ittihadists were executed on the gallows at 10 p.m. the same night. One of them was Economic Minister Cavid, whose role in the scheme of the Armenian genocide, if any, was negligible. But the other three were perhaps the most ferocious organizers of it - next to Talaat.

1. **Dr. Nazim**. A central figure in the Supreme Directorate of the party and in many respects the braintrust of the very conception of the wholesale destruction of the Armenians. He operated behind the scenes and exerted great influence in the councils of the party leadership, including Talaat. He approached the gallows in a state of shock and trembling, protesting his innocence with such words as "vallahi" (I swear, I swear!)
2. **Yenibahçeli Nail**. Was Ittihad's Responsible Secretary for the province of Trabzon, and at the same time the head of the Special Organization forces of the province, whose Armenian population was subjected to the most severe forms of expulsion and destruction through massacres, sparing neither children, the infirm nor the old. On the gallows he pleaded with his son to take good care of his mother and siblings.
3. **Filibeli Hilmi**. Was Ittihad's Delegate for the province of Erzurum, where he served as Dr. Behaeddin Şakir's right hand man and as the chief of the Special Organization total forces of the entire region. The deportation and extermination of that province's large Armenian population was supervised by him. Like ex-Education Minister Shükrü, he too fell from the gallows as the rope snapped during the execution, and he too was hanged twice.

It is significant to note that already during the Armistice Mustafa Kemal had decried the Ittihadist leaders for their war crimes, including the Armenian massacres. In an interview with Maurice Prat, the special correspondent of *Petit Parisien*, he had exclaimed: "Qu' attendent les Alliés pour faire pendre toute cette canaille?" (Why do the Allies delay having all these rascals hung?).

II. Ittihad Executed Some Brigand Chiefs Involved in the Genocide

Foremost among these are two party officers who devastated the border regions in the east of Turkey with inordinate savagery and repeatedly boasted about their lethal role in this respect.

1. **Çerkez Ahmed.** Major in the army. He was the main assistant of Van governor Cevdet in the campaign to liquidate the Armenian population of the province. He later served under Diyarbekir governor Dr. Reshid and in the process carried out the murder of Vartkes and Zohrab, the two Armenian Deputies in the Ottoman Parliament. Charged with the crime of murder and plunder. He was court-martialed, convicted and hanged, along with his consort, Lieutenant Halil, by Cemal Pasha in Damascus on September 17/30, 1915. When commenting on this execution, Cemal's Chief of Staff, General Ali Fuad Erden noted, "Indebtedness to executioners and murderers is bound to be heavy... those who are used for dirty jobs are needed in times of exigencies [in order to shift] responsibility. It is likewise necessary, however, not to glorify but to dispose of them like toilet paper, once they have done their job." When ordering his court martial and sentencing, Talaat, for his part is quoted as saying, "His liquidation in any case is necessary. Otherwise he will prove very harmful at a later date" [on account of his knowledge of and involvement in the massacres).
2. **Yakub Cemil.** Major in the army. Like Çerkez Ahmed, Cemil played a major role in the extermination of large clusters of the Armenian populations in eastern Turkey. However, he had a falling out with Enver and Talaat and began to threaten them. He too was then tried, convicted and executed on September 11/24, 1916 as a result of the intervention of Talaat and his crony Kara Kemal, who succeeded in railroading his conviction.
3. **Kurdish Brigand Chief Amero.** After he carried out the mutilation and murder of 636 Armenian notables of Diyarbekir on the orders of Governor Dr. Reshid, he was set upon by 10 Circassian brigands and killed on the order of the same governor and Diyarbekir **Deputy Feyzi**, two arch organizers of the mass murder.
4. **Kurd Murza Bey.** Kemach Defile Brigand Chief. He boasted of having killed 70,000 Erzurum province Armenians passing through the Kemach defile. He was shot dead following a decision by his superiors that he could prove dangerous afterwards on account of his penchant for boasting.
5. **Cemal Pasha** hanged a number of Kurds for participation in atrocities against Armenians in Islahiye.
6. **Vehib Pasha** hanged two officers of the Special Organization for organizing the massacre of 2,000 Armenian labor battalion soldiers in Susehir, Sivas.

III. Kemalists liquidating Brigand Chiefs

Involved here are three prominent Special Organization chieftains, whose brutality and bloodthirstiness against their Armenian victims constitute legends in the macabre saga of the World War I Armenian Genocide.

1. **Yahya Kaptan.** He was in charge of the massive drowning operations at Trabzon harbor on the Black Sea littoral. Thousands and thousands of Armenian children, women and old men would be loaded on lighters, taken to the high sea and thrown overboard after being bayoneted by boatmen from other boats accompanying them. Yahya Kaptan later joined the Kemalist insurgents without completely severing, however, his ties to the Ittihadists, especially Enver. This suspected duplicity sealed his fate; he was ambushed and killed by unknown assassins in Trabzon in July 1922. It should be noted, however, that **Yahya Kaptan** during inquiries into his loyalties had threatened to reveal all he knew about state secrets in the event he was to be pressed hard with such inquiries and investigations.
2. **Topal Osman.** Milice Colonel. A veteran guerilla from the days of the 1912-1913 twin Balkan wars, Osman during the war operated in the eastern border regions, as a Special Organization brigand (chétté). He too repeatedly had bragged about his murder missions against the Armenians. After the war he too joined the Kemalist insurgents and in the process organized extensive massacres against Greek populations in the Trabzon area as reprisal, as well as against clusters of surviving Armenians. He eventually was awarded by Mustapha Kemal with the position of Chief of the Personal Guard Contingent with duties to protect M. Kemal. But he incurred the wrath of the Kemalist Deputies in the fledgling Parliament in Ankara when he lured a deputy to his home and out of spite strangled him. He was killed during an exchange of gunfire with military units trying to capture him, and his corpse was subsequently hanged in front of the Parliament in March 1923.

3. **(Deli) Halit. Colonel**, later General in the Turkish Army. As a Special Organization officer, he too was a participant in the killing operations in the eastern provinces. An ardent Ittihadist, he subsequently became an ardent Kemalist, while being sought by the post-war Turkish Court Martial as a suspect in the crime of massacres. A cantankerous and defiant man, he became embroiled in altercations with other Kemalist leaders and deputies and was shot dead during one of these altercations in the vestibule of the Turkish parliament on February 9, 1925.

IV. Suicides of Top Ittihadists Involved in the Genocide

1. **Dr. Reshid**. Governor of Diyarbekir Province. Following his arrest, escape from Bekiraga prison, and recapture by Istanbul police, Dr. Reshid shot himself to death in January 1919. He was one of the most ferocious governors, who with great zeal executed Ittihad's plan of genocidal destruction of Diyarbekir Armenians, as well as multitudes of other Armenians who had to pass through that city, which was a hub for deported convoys, en route to the deserts of Mesopotamia.
2. **Mahmud Kâmil**. General. Commander of IIIrd Army, 1915-1916. His command zone encompassed the six "Armenian provinces," plus Trabzon province, whose extermination was entrusted to him by Ittihad and of which he was an ardent member. He gave special orders not to spare the old, the infirm, or the pregnant women from the perils of deportation. He also threatened to hang in front of his house any Muslim who might dare to provide shelter to any Armenian. On November 28, 1922 he took his life through suicide.
3. **Kara Kemal**. A top leader of Ittihad and the alter ego of party chief Talaat. All secret deliberations and plans of the party were under the supervision of Kemal at Ittihad's headquarters in Nuriosmaniye. He was indicted along with other Ittihadists by the Independence Court in 1926 on charges of conspiracy to murder Mustafa Kemal but managed to escape until he was caught in a chicken coop. He shot himself to death on July 29, 1926, four days before he was formally indicted.

V. Death by Accidents

1. **Nuri Pasha Killigil**. Commander of Army of Islam, Transcaucasus and Baku. Brother of War Minister Enver, Nuri was responsible for the perpetration of a series of massacres in Russian Armenia and Azerbaijan, especially the 1918 September Armenian massacre in Baku. After World War I, Nuri became a businessman and by the end of World War II he had become an industrialist, operating in Istanbul a factory for weapons and ammunition. On March 2, 1949, he perished along with others in the rubble of that factory which was blown to pieces following a huge explosion and a holocaust engulfing the entire complex in massive flames.
2. **Mehmed Memduh**. Erzincan District governor, Erzurum province. (Subsequently consecutively Governor of the provinces of Bitlis, Baghdad, Musul). He was the chief organizer of his district's massacres, in close cooperation with the local operatives of the Special Organization. He accumulated great wealth he acquired through his Armenian victims but died in a fatal auto accident while trying to establish a business in Smyrna (Izmir) after the war.

VI. Heart Attacks and Strokes

1. **Hashim Beg**. Deputy from Malatya in the Parliament. A fanatic Ittihadist and foe of the Armenians, he sponsored his son Muhammed Beg's operations as a brigand chief of the area, carrying out a series of massacres annihilating Malatya's Armenian population. Following a quarrel with an old Kurd about a stolen horse and an attack on him, Muhammed Beg was shot by the son of the Kurd. Deputy Hashim, his father, thus suffered a stroke and after much agony he died in 1917.
2. **Sagir Zade**. Mufti of Malatya. He directed the strangulation of the Armenian Catholic Primate of Malatya after subjecting him to manifold tortures and body mutilations for refusing to convert to Islam. Barely back home, the Mufti suffered a stroke and died instantly.