

Primary Source Analysis on the extract from: Foreign Office, *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire 1915-16: Documents Presented to Viscount Grey of Fallodon, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs*, by Viscount Bryce (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1916), pp. 20-21.

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Source:

Extract from: Foreign Office, *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire 1915-16: Documents Presented to Viscount Grey of Fallodon, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, by Viscount Bryce* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1916), pp. 20-21.

Letter, dated 3rd/16th August 1915, conveyed beyond the Ottoman frontier by an Armenian refugee from Cilicia in the sole of her shoe

"In haste and in secret I seize this opportunity of bringing to your ears the cry of agony which goes out from the survivors of the terrible crisis through which we are passing at this moment. They are exterminating our nation, mowing it down. Perhaps this will be the last cry from Armenia that you will hear; we have no longer any fear of death, we see it close at hand, this death of the whole people. We are waifs who cry for the lives of our brothers. These lines cannot describe our misery; it would need volumes of reports to do justice to that.

- a. At the present moment there are at ----- more than 10,000 deported widows and children (among the latter one sees no boys above eleven years of age). They had been on the road for from three to five months; they have been plundered several times over, and have marched along naked and starving; the Government gave them on one single occasion a morsel of bread – a few have had it twice. It is said that the number of these deported widows will reach 60,000; they are so exhausted that they cannot stand upright; the majority have great sores on their feet, through having had to march barefoot.
2. An enquiry has proved that, out of 1,000 people who started, scarcely 400 reached ----- . Out of the 600 to be accounted for, 380 men and boys above eleven years of age, and 85 women, had been massacred or drowned, out of sight of the towns, by the gendarmes who conducted them; 120 young women and girls and 40 boys had been carried off, with the result that one does not see a single pretty face among the survivors.
3. Out of these survivors, 60 per cent are sick; they are to be sent in the immediate future to -----, where certain death awaits them; one cannot describe the ferocious treatment to which they are exposed; they had been on the road for from three to five months; they had been plundered two, three, five, seven times; their underclothes even had been ransacked; so far from being given anything to eat, they had even been prevented from drinking while they were passing a stream. Three-quarters of the young women and girls were abducted; the remainder were forced to lie with the gendarmes who conducted them. Thousands died under these outrages, and the survivors have stories to tell of refinements of outrage so disgusting that they pollute one's ears.
4. The massacres have been most violent in the eastern provinces, and the population has been deported wholesale towards the Hauran Desert, Gereg and Mosul, where the victims are doomed to a death from natural causes more infallible than massacre. When one remembers that these people were leading a comfortable European life, one is forced to conclude that they will never be able to survive in an alien and inhospitable climate, even if the knife and the bullet do not previously do their work.

My friends, I have no time to tell you more; one may say with truth that not a single Armenian is left in Armenia; soon, there will be none left in Cilicia either. The Armenian, robbed of his life, his goods, his honour, conveys to you his last cry for help – help to save the lives of the survivors! Money to buy them bread! There is a rumour here that the Government will allow the women and the children under seventeen years of age to leave the county. How are they to do it? Where are they to go? What ship is to take them? Who will provide the funds? From moment to moment, we are waiting for relief, to stave off the death of the Nation. Be quick, never mind how; send us money; we have no means of communication!

Send, through the agency of the American Government, *money, money, money*; the bearer of this letter deserves every reward; she will tell you all the details. Zohrab, Vartkes Daghavarian and their five companions have been murdered by the gendarmes at Sheitan-Deré, between Ourfa and Diyarbakir, where thousands of headless corpses make the passers-by shudder; the Euphrates bears down its stream thousands of corpses of men and women; photographs of this have been taken by Europeans. Fifteen thousand Zeitounlis have been deported to Der-el-Zor, where they are suffering the worst atrocities. Thousands of babies at the breast have been thrown into rivers or abandoned by the wayside by their mothers. The urgent need is *money!* Make that clear to the Armenian colony in America. *Money! Money!*

One thousand six hundred Armenians have had their throats cut in the prisons at Diyarbakir. The Arashnort was mutilated, drenched with alcohol, and burnt alive in the prison yard, in the middle of a carousing crowd of gendarmes, who even accompanied the scene with music. The massacres at Beniani, Adiaman and Selefka have been carried out diabolically; there is not a single man left above the age of thirteen years; the girls have been outraged mercilessly; we have seen their mutilated corpses tied together in batches of four, eight or ten, and cast into the Euphrates. The majority had been mutilated indescribably.

The above facts have been gathered from official sources and eye-witnesses.

The American Consul is able to arrange for the despatch of funds. We are unable to realise any of our property, either national or private, because it has all been confiscated by the Government. The Government has even confiscated the convents, the churches and the schools. Black famine reigns in this town; we have 15,000 deported Armenians here, who are being sent on in batches to Arabia. The whole of Armenia is being cleared out.

I sign this letter with my blood!"

The source, a letter from "The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire 1915-16: Documents Presented to Viscount Grey of Fallodon, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, by Viscount Bryce", was dated 3/16 August 1915. The author of the source is unknown, but it could be inferred that it was someone facing persecution in the Ottoman Empire. The author was in a hurry, mentioning their lack of time multiple times in the letter.

What is known is that the letter was delivered to London by an Armenian refugee from Cilicia in the sole of her shoe. The woman who transported the letter did so covertly, as shown by how she had to hide it in her shoe.

The context of the letter is vital in understanding it as a primary source. Before the creation of this letter in early August 1915, the Armenian genocide was well underway. March 1915 saw massacres of Armenians throughout Anatolia and Persia, as well as the deportation of many civilians from the region.¹ In April of 1915, there were mass arrests of Armenians, with Armenian soldiers being disarmed and the silencing of Armenian intellectuals.²

By 27 May 1915, the Temporary Law of Deportation had been passed, authorising the deportations of Armenians in the area. The Ottoman government minimised the experiences of Armenians that were deported, referring to them as ‘displaced.’³ However, the reality was that Armenians were dying in mass numbers. By July of 1915, there had been an estimated 200 thousand Armenian men killed using methods such as shooting them or working them to death.⁴ This figure came about only a month before the letter was produced.

The significance of the context of this letter could be found in the fact that much of the radicalisation of the Ottoman’s policies and actions against the Armenians had already begun. The author of the letter had reason to be scared and a reason to plead with the United States for help. Violent actions had long been taken against the Armenians by August 1915, and despite the letter writer’s pleas, it would continue for years to follow.

The letter was presented in England to Viscount Grey of Fallodon, who was the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, by Viscount Bryce. The secrecy of the transport of the

¹ Ronald Grigor Suny, *They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else: A History of the Armenian Genocide* (Princeton University Press, 2015): 225-6.

² Suny, *They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else*, 244.

³ Anastasia Lekka, “Legislative Provisions of the Ottoman/Turkish Governments Regarding Minorities and Their Properties,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (2007): 138. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10474552-2006-038>.

⁴ Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (Cambridge, 2005).

letter meant that not many people would have had access to it, perhaps just government officials in the United Kingdom or the United States. The author intended to have the Armenians' cries of misery and suffering heard. They asked the intended audience to send money to the Armenians through the American government.

The author was ultimately successful in their aims, but their success came about due to a more significant movement for aid towards the Armenian genocide. By 1916, there had been funds distributed by America to Turkey for Armenian relief. These funds were the result of many eyewitnesses and missionaries pleading with Woodrow Wilson and the American government for aid.⁵

One key theme addressed in this source is the theme of death. The author repeatedly mentioned death and the threat of death concerning the Armenian people at the hands of the Turkish. These deaths were horrific in nature and explained using purposeful language. The language used provoked violent imagery. This included the description of drowned children, headless corpses, starving people, naked marchers, and women who were forced into sexual intercourse with those who were persecuting them. There was a use of words and phrases like "misery," "massacre," "ferocious treatment," "mutilated corpses," and "blood." Language such as this was used in order to provoke a response from America and the Western world.

Another theme addressed in this source is the lack of time that those going through crises such as this have. While genocides are the result of extended, thought-out plans that have a basis in ideology and hate, once they are underway, the victims do not have time to flee. The Armenian genocide began in the spring of 1915,⁶ and by July 200 thousand people were dead.⁷ In the letter, the author stressed the rushed nature of their pleas. They claimed that they did not have time to explain further, time to give more detail, or time before all of the Armenians in the region perished.

⁵ J.M. Winter, *America and the Armenian Genocide of 1915* (Cambridge University Press, 2003): 193.

⁶ Suny, *They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else*, 253.

⁷ Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy*.

The final theme mentioned by the author is that of international aid. The main thing that the author of the letter urged the Americans to provide as relief was money. They claimed that money would help the Armenians facing persecution. It is interesting that they did not ask for more concrete, physical measures to be taken, such as taking up arms against the Ottomans to liberate the Armenians.

While the source included a lot of important information, there was plenty missing. If one looked at the letter by itself, one could not discern the context in which these events took place. A reader would be left with questions regarding why the Ottomans felt the need to exterminate the Armenians from the region. There was no mention of the genocide in the context of the War. If one did not have background information regarding events in 1915 or the Armenian genocide, one would have no inclination that it took place in the context of total war.

There was also no mention of who the perpetrators of the genocide were. The author mentioned “the Government” and “gendarmes” but did not specify which government or political actors were involved. The source was one-sided in this way, as there was no testimony from the Ottoman perspective.

Finally, the letter did not explicitly state how the money that the author was asking for would be used. While there were insinuations about it helping to feed the population and flee the region, no specific course of action was mentioned, and no course of action was set in place. For example, there was no mention of the methods that Armenian refugees would take to get out of the region of persecution.

The source was, as previously mentioned, a letter. While the intended audience was an American audience, by nature, a letter is a personal source. The implication of interpreting letters as personal sources is that they are not vetted for correctness, and therefore, objectivity and fact can be an issue.

Letters, like all primary sources, are interpretations of an event in the eyes of a person who was living during the time. For example, official reports, court documents, and government documents are more likely to have had judgment placed on them regarding validity as they are intended for a wider audience. Letters, diaries, and even personal memoirs lean into personal feelings, opinions, and experiences more than a more “official” document, which means that Historians must be aware of these particular biases when interpreting them.

All primary sources have unique strengths and weaknesses. One strength of this type of source is that it provides a personal, firsthand account of historical events. While emotion can be considered a weakness of letters, it is also a strength if a historian’s goal is to understand how people felt about the events taking place at the time. This letter would be an excellent source to use when looking at the experiences of those persecuted during the Armenian genocide, what the victims thought of the actions taken against them, and what some victims wanted the world, notably America, to do about the circumstances.

Some weaknesses of letters as a source include bias and contextual limitations. Bias is something that all historians must be aware of when it comes to any source, but biases in letters can be particularly prevalent. These biases could come from the author’s lived experiences, the author’s intention behind the creation of the source, or the way that the historians themselves read the source. As long as one acknowledges letters for what they are, that being personal accounts, then they can see past potential biases.

Since letters are written through the eyes of the author, missing context can be a given. Issues with missing context were mentioned previously, but another contextual problem could be found in the lack of information about the aftermath of these events. Without further research, one could not discern what happened after this letter was delivered.

This source could inform studies on eyewitness accounts of the Armenian genocide and how Armenians viewed the events. It could also explain how Armenians saw the outside world – the author of this source believed that Americans would be able to help them escape persecution, which could be due to a feeling of kinship between Armenians in the Ottoman Empire and those in America who left throughout the nineteenth century. This idea lines up with scholarship on the Armenian diaspora in America, such as writing done by Daniel Fittante, which discusses Armenian immigration to the United States.⁸

The insights within the source support the main historical narrative that the Ottomans attempted a violent extermination of the Armenian people in and around World War I. The letter described horrific conditions, people suffering, death, rape, deportation, and the confiscation of property. There is a consensus within genocide studies that these were acts of genocide, and the horrific events described in the letter were most definitely in line with acts of genocide.⁹

In terms of scholarly debates, this source would address the discussion of balancing international response with human rights. The language used in this source was meant to rouse an emotional response, leading to aid in the name of human rights. It could be assumed that the author used such graphic language, knowing that the Americans may need more intense provocation in order to provide aid.

There are some genocide deniers of the Armenian events within academia. This letter would address any questions on how horrific the acts committed against the Armenian people were and what the effects of these events were. Again, the graphic nature of the letter was intended to garner attention for the atrocities endured in Anatolia at the time.

⁸ Daniel Fittante, "But Why Glendale? A History of Armenian Immigration to Southern California," *California History (San Francisco)* 94, no. 3 (2017): 3-4. <https://doi.org/10.1525/ch.2017.94.3.2>.

⁹ Imge Oranlı, "Epistemic Injustice from Afar: Rethinking the Denial of Armenian Genocide," *Social Epistemology* 35, no. 2 (2021): 121, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2020.1839593>.

The letter written by an Armenian in August of 1915 provided a powerful account of the horror that Armenians faced in the Ottoman Empire in the first few months of the genocide. The author of the letter conveyed their message through graphic descriptions of death, the dire situation that the Armenians endured, and the urgent nature of the genocide. The aim of the letter was to rouse their intended audience, the Americans, to send monetary relief to the Armenians. Overall, the letter addressed themes such as death, urgency, and international aid. The letter was missing political context concerning the genocide and the events in the context of World War I. Letters have both strengths and weaknesses as primary sources, mainly concerning the personal and emotional nature of them. While this nature can foster bias, it can also be helpful in understanding the human perspective on atrocities.

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