
La conversion forcée et la captation des femmes et des enfants arméniens pendant le génocide de 1915-1916

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Cultural Erasure: The Absorption and Forced Conversion of Armenian Women and Children, 1915-1916*

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In his 1944 book *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, Raphael Lemkin states that genocide is composite and manifold, signifying a coordinated plan of action with the singular goal of the destruction of the essential foundations of life of a specific group. This is to say that genocide is directed against an ethnic, religious, or national group as a whole, and the actions involved are directed against individuals, not in their individual capacity, but as members of their respective group. Genocidal acts can but do not necessarily include mass killing. They involve considerations that are political, social, legal, intellectual, spiritual, moral, biological, physiological, religious, and economic.¹ The Armenian Genocide involves a combination of the above acts. During World War I, mass murder, deportation, and forced assimilation were three faces of the same process of destruction organized by the Young Turk regime. The main objective of the whole process was to demographically reduce the Ottoman Armenian

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¹ R. Lemkin, 1944, p. 79-95; A. Curthoys and J. Docker, 2001, p. 5-11.
community from existence to absence as well as erasing their material and cultural presence from the Ottoman heartland and eastern provinces. Whereas Armenian men were mostly perished in the eastern provinces, Armenian women and children were most often deported and absorbed into Muslim households. After enduring forced marches where they were terrorized and forced to bear witness to the execution of their elders, these young women and children were left isolated from their families and were thus deemed prime candidates for absorption into Muslim households, a process referred to as “conversion.”

The conversion process itself is closely related to Lemkin’s definition of genocide, which he describes as a process limited not only to the physical destruction of a specific group but also including construction by destruction. “Genocide has two phases,” he wrote, “one, destruction of the national pattern of the oppressed group; the other, the imposition of the national pattern of the oppressor.” This aspect of the term genocide forces the targeted group, nation, or religious community to espouse the lifestyle, culture, and institutions of the dominant and oppressor group. Unequivocally, assimilation is one of the most convenient strategies to achieve this result. Religious conversion and forced assimilation of Armenian women and children into Muslim households were two of the most significant structural components of the 1915 Armenian Genocide. In other words, the Islamization of Armenian women and children – as well as imposition of Muslim culture, education, and traditions upon them – was one of the most significant aspects of the Armenian Genocide.

Although conversion can be viewed as a survival mechanism for Armenian victims, in many cases, this strategy failed. Along with their friends, neighbors, and families, converts were also deported and exterminated in many provinces and districts throughout the whole of Anatolia during the genocide. As esteemed scholar Raymond Kévorkian underlines, “The possibility of conversion was, since the beginning of the genocidal policy, a sort of myth maintained among the deportees to allow them to believe that they still had a gate to exit”; however, he continues, “The forced conversion of Armenians never was at any moment a serious option envisioned by the Unionist Committee.”

3. R. Lemkin, 1944, p. 79.
4. Ibid., p. 79.
A number of recent works have looked at the fate of Armenians who were not killed in 1915 but transferred into Muslim households. However, these works have not fully examined the Committee of Union and Progress (hereafter CUP) conversion and assimilation policies towards both young and widowed Armenian women, as well as children. This article primarily employs Ottoman archival materials to explore the conversion of Armenians as a bureaucratic process and the assimilation policies of the CUP government in the Armenian deportation and genocide. It analyzes the CUP’s official directives, disclosing how the conversion process was implemented at the local level. Furthermore, it reviews how the Young Turk regime addressed the unforeseen phenomenon of Armenians converting to Islam to circumvent deportation orders, focusing on the government’s orders and decrees that were issued in response to this issue.

Ara Sarafian introduces four categories of how Armenians were transferred and absorbed into Muslim households after the summer of 1915: 1) voluntary conversion of individuals in the initial stages of the 1915 persecutions; 2) selection of individual Armenians by individual Muslim hosts for absorption into Muslim households; 3) distribution of Armenians to Muslim families by government agencies; and 4) the use of Ottoman government-sponsored orphanages as a direct means of assimilating Armenian children. There were several ways for Armenians to be assimilated, including “religious conversion, a temporary policy of dispersed settlement, the reassignment of children from Christianity to Islam, and the forced marriage or concubinage of young Christian women and adolescent girls with Muslim men.” Throughout the entire process of deportation and destruction, the concepts of temsil and temessürl – both Ottoman for “assimilation” – evidently referred to the “settlement of Armenian survivors in Syria, and when suitable, were also used in connection with Armenian boys and girls” in many correspondences between the Ministry of Interior and the governors and district governors of the various provinces and districts. Additionally, bakım and terbiye, meaning “care and upbringing,” were terms used especially for the assimilation of children.

9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
The CUP’s official directives disclose the process by which conversion was to be implemented. Through his orders, Talat Pasha, widely considered to be the architect of the Armenian Genocide, authorized the conversion of untold numbers of Armenians. Besides specific instructions to guide local elites, Talat Pasha issued several national decrees categorizing those to be persecuted and those to be deported. Conversion has been viewed as a practice that “varied from one region to another at the discretion of local administrators and that was primarily motivated by Muslim fanaticism.”\(^{11}\) Most deportees considered conversion a breach of moral and social codes, as well as an infraction of their religious identity; nonetheless, to convert and live inconspicuously in Muslim communities remained their most viable option for survival. Understandably, the act of conversion did not entail an earnest pledge of loyalty to the government, fostering suspicion and distrust in the Young Turks and resulting in stricter policies.

Demands for the conversion of Armenians, who had come to realize that deportation equaled death, began in June 1915. On 22 June 1915, Talat Pasha issued orders via a ciphered telegram to the seven provinces (Erzurum, Van, Mamuretülaziz, Diyarbakır, Sivas, Bitlis, and Trabzon) for the acceptance of all conversions, be they individual or collective, and for the exemption from deportation of converts. However, this acceptance and exemption of converts was conditional upon their being scattered and relocated within the limits of the province or district in which they were.\(^{12}\) To illustrate, the provincial district governor of Samsun stated that the converts were to be “dispersed to the neighboring province and districts, and this matter was included in the telegraphic order of 22 June 1915.”\(^{13}\)

Especially in the Black Sea region, Armenians were converted to Islam en masse. In a telegram dated 30 June 1915 from Ordu, Samsun, and Fatsa, local officials, religious leaders such as imams or müftüs, and groups of Armenians themselves petitioned the government to accept the new converts as Muslims and not deport them.\(^{14}\) By July 1915, it became
apparent that an unanticipatedly high number of Armenians were willing to convert in order to escape certain death, and the policy of exemption through conversion was hence renounced. On 1 July 1915, religious conversion was prohibited, though it was reinstated four months later, albeit with certain restrictions. “It is understood that some of the Armenians being expelled pledged to convert en masse or individually, and in this fashion worked to secure the way for them to remain in their native lands,” observed Talat Pasha in a cable to provincial administrators.\footnote{BOA.DH.ŞFR 54/254, Coded telegram from the Ministry of Interior’s General Security Directorate to the Provinces and Provincial Districts of Erzurum, Adana, Bitlis, Aleppo, Diyarbakır, Trebizond, Mamuretülaziz, Mosul, Van, Urfa, Kütahya, Maraş, İçel and Eskişehir, date 1 July 1915; F. Dündar, 2008, p. 301.}  

Stating that the Armenians chose this course of action because “they saw themselves [...] in danger,” the Minister of Interior directed that “the applications of this sort of people categorically should not be given a favorable importance.”\footnote{Ibid.}  

Talat Pasha warned the governors to be extremely careful as far as insincere requests for conversion were concerned, and, stating that these were done only to escape deportation, he ordered “never to trust conversions that happen in this way,” as “they have long been using conversion as an instrument of deception whenever they see that their interests are endangered.” False converts “would not refrain from issuing intrigues under the guise of Islam,” and he reached the conclusion that they should not be exempted from deportation “even if they convert.”\footnote{BOA.DH.ŞFR 54/427, coded telegram from Minister of Interior Talat to the Provincial District of Kayseri, dated 13 July 2015.}  

The general circular prohibiting religious conversion was reinforced by separate orders in response to questions from the provinces. Kayseri was informed on 13 July 1915 that “the conversion of Armenians shall not delay their deportation, since their conversions are only undergone for the purpose of securing personal advantage.”\footnote{BOA.DH.ŞFR 54-A/49, coded telegram from the Ministry of Interior’s General Directorate to the Provinces of Erzurum, Adana, Bitlis, Aleppo, Diyarbakır, Sivas, Trebizond, Mamuretülaziz, Mosul, and Van and to the Provincial Districts of Urfa, Canik, Zor, Niğde, Kütahya, Maraş, İçel, and Eskişehir, date 20 July 1915.}  

Beginning in August 1915, all conversion
requests from Kastamonu, Konya, Karesi, Urfa, and Eskişehir were declined.

It should be noted that conversion was not a stable process; it was initiated, ceased, and restarted. Thus, there was no all-encompassing, definitive regulation or piece of legislation regarding forced conversion to Islam. Execution and implementation of the policy by the Ministry of Interior and relevant Ottoman bureaucracy was inconsistent. For instance, at the end of October 1915, the prohibition on religious conversion was repealed. Through a “secret” order sent on 4 November 1915 to all provinces and provincial districts, as well as settlement areas in present-day Syria and Iraq, this change was announced. On 5 November 1915, the government issued a regulation establishing the rules for conversion. Accordingly, the only requests for conversion to be accepted were those presented by Armenians who had been permitted to stay after having been subjected to a stringent security vetting. This matter was very clearly underlined some time later: “no conversion would be accepted unless approved by Istanbul.” This suggests that – despite the previous order by the central administration – governors and district governors had been independently authorizing conversions. Records demonstrate that there was disagreement between the central government and provinces such as Erzurum, Sivas, or Trabzon on this matter. Yet the central government was not to be budged: despite all requests, only the conversion of people subjected to a very careful security screening and whose loyalty was not in doubt would be accepted.

Religious conversion was arranged and accepted according to a given set of criteria. Only those whose deportations had been postponed by ministerial order were accorded this right. Beginning 8 March 1916, the right to convert was limited to Armenian women who had already married or had impending marriages to Muslim men. In a coded wire sent from the EUM (Directorate of General Security) to the governor of Kale-i
Sultaniye, the conditions for conversion were listed thusly: “The collective conversions by the above-mentioned non-Muslims at the moment when they are about to be dispatched to other areas cannot be accepted; from now on, if some among them convert through marriage, the conversions of some of them may be accepted individually.”

No exclusion criteria were applied to conversion requests in the deportation zones, and all conversion requests were conceded. As Kévorkian has stated, a large segment of the Armenians who arrived in Der Zor had converted, illustrating that conversion did not guarantee protection.

The policies of religious conversion underwent a significant alteration in the spring of 1916. Armenians who remained in various provinces and districts of Anatolia and those who had been allowed to settle in Syria were forced to choose between Islam and deportation to Der Zor. “At the end of February and the beginning of March 1916, nearly all of the Armenians in the labor battalion of Aleppo, urged upon partly with success, were converted to Islam,” wrote Consul Rössler. A similar report came from Aleppo: “According to mutually corroborating news from Hama, Homs, Damascus, and other places, in the last weeks, those sent away en masse [the Armenians] were pressed to convert to Islam through the threat of further deportations. This [conversion process] took place in a purely bureaucratic fashion: Applying, and then changing of name.” American consul Jackson of Aleppo attested that “at Hama, Homs, Marash, etc., thousands have been forced to become Mohammedans.”

The Ministry of Interior ordered a painstaking police investigation of every prospective convert and formed its decision based on the findings. For example, on 24 April 1916, the Ministry of Interior’s General Directorate of Security informed the Departments of the Judiciary and Sects of the Ministry of Justice that because “Tatyos son of Sahak, of Kayseri origin, who wants to convert” associated with Armenian

27. BOA.DH.ŞFR 61/221, coded telegram from the Ministry of Interior’s General Directorate to Kale-i Sultaniye, dated 8 March 1916.
28. BOA.DH.ŞFR 59/83, coded telegram from the Interior Ministry’s General Security Directorate to the provinces of Aleppo, Damascus, and Mosul, and to the provincial districts of Urfa and [Der] Zor, dated 21 December 1916.
33. See the letter from Mrs. Jesse Jackson, wife of Aleppo consul J.B. Jackson, to the State Department, dated 13 October 1916, in A. Sarafian, 2004, p. 119.
revolutionaries and “it is understood from an investigation of the facts that his conversion was caused by fear,” the refusal of this request was desired.\textsuperscript{34} Talat Pasha played a key role in such investigations. From time to time, there were also attempts to deport converts when their conversions were under question. For example, in mid-June 1916, Armenian converts in the provinces of Edirne and Ankara, most of whom were Catholic, were deported. Particularly, the cause for deporting the converts of Ankara was that there was suspicion that they had returned to attending Catholic mass. However, under pressure from foreign powers – Germany and Austria in particular – Talat Pasha gave orders for them to not be deported.\textsuperscript{35}

It has been demonstrated that even when central authorities had forbidden conversions, some local authorities who opposed the mass exterminations nonetheless continued the practice as a means to save Armenians through assimilation. Despite the general regulation issued by Talat Pasha, requests for conversions continued to arrive from the provinces, possibly signifying a tendency on the part of the provinces to oppose the policies of the center. Armenian converts were being investigated and their movements controlled as late as 1918.\textsuperscript{36} In April of that year, all provinces and districts were required to prepare a detailed list of Armenian converts, including such information as their names, the date and manner of their conversion, the names of members of their families, and their occupations.\textsuperscript{37} Through this, Talat Pasha sought to measure loyalty of the converts to the State.

\section*{The Mechanics of Absorption: Disappearance of Armenian National and Cultural Identity}

The CUP central party tolerated the integration of Armenian women and children into Muslim society. However, the process through which these individuals were incorporated was reliant on isolating them from their former communities, a tactic deployed in order to strip them of a shared national identity and prevent the perpetuation of any semblance of Armenian society. Thus, rather than being physically destroyed, women and children – who were often regarded as spoils of war, slaves,
or even objects of sexual slavery\textsuperscript{38} – were shuffled and reshuffled from one group to another, an official CUP policy intended to slough their cultural heritage and ultimately erase the Ottoman Armenian identity.\textsuperscript{39} It was an official CUP policy which was aimed at eliminating Armenian cultural identity and securing the disappearance of the Ottoman Armenians.\textsuperscript{40} Accordingly, what had to be formally changed, as well as violently and systematically suppressed, was not only religion but also expressions of Armenian language, culture, and even the family names of the survivors, whether in private homes, government-run orphanages, or the public sphere, leaving only the biological “raw material” to be methodically Turkified.\textsuperscript{41} However, the first and most important step of the forced assimilation process was the conversion to Islam, which, for women, could only be ratified by immediate marriage to a Muslim man and the surrender of Armenian children to be brought up as “true Muslims,” with Muslim names in Muslim families.\textsuperscript{42} Thereby, these Muslim families, by participating in the forced conversions and by monitoring the faith and actions of the converted afterward, became crucial agents for what amounted to a centrally organized program of forced assimilation within the grander genocidal design.\textsuperscript{43}

Seeking to create a political culture where national identity was prioritized over family identity and the state’s control over children usurped that of the actual parents, the Young Turk regime pursued as one of its goals the “Turkification” of “valuable” Armenian children.\textsuperscript{44} On 30 April 1916, a regulation prepared by the Ministry of Interior concerning Armenians who were “abandoned and without parents” was sent to all provinces of Anatolia. According to this, families devoid of a head – including the families of soldiers, young girls, women, and children – should be distributed among villages and towns without Armenians or foreigners, “so that they can be educated and assimilated according to local customs.”\textsuperscript{45} This directive pertains to the concepts of \textit{temsil} and \textit{temessül}, Talat Pasha’s framework for the assimilation of orphaned Armenian children. Per the second article of the said regulation, “young women and widows were to be married.”\textsuperscript{46} However,
even marrying a Muslim did not save these women from suspicion from the government. State officials who married a converted Armenian woman were required to obtain permission from the central government to travel freely (though this prohibition was later limited to only travel to Istanbul).  

**ORPHANAGES AND PROSTITUTION BY ARMENIAN WOMEN AS A SURVIVAL STRATEGY**

The Ottoman government organized special orphanages for the direct assimilation of Armenian children under its auspices. During the genocide, Turkish authorities collected thousands of children on the roads of exile and placed them in newly opened establishments, where they received a strictly disciplined education aimed to both “Turkify” and convert them to Islam. Such institutions could be found along the length and breadth of the empire, in locales such as Aleppo, Mardin, Urfa, Kayseri, Istanbul, Adana, Damascus, Ayntura, and elsewhere. Thousands of other abandoned children were taken into Kurdish, Arab, or Turkish families.

The CUP government policy concerning Armenian orphans took its final shape with the regulation of 29 April 1916. According to Article 3 of this regulation, Armenian orphans 12 years or younger were to be sent to orphanages in the provinces. Those who were unable to be taken in by orphanages were to be distributed amongst influential families for their “education and assimilation,” and the remainders were to be distributed among Muslim villages and delivered to poor families, who would receive a monthly stipend of 30 kurus, the smallest denomination of Ottoman currency. On a local level, with many Muslim men serving in the army in times of war, the local population needed cheap or free labor – shepherds, servants, farmhands – which could be provided by the Armenian women and children distributed by the state.

Beyond the starvation, disease, beatings, and general exhaustion endured by all deportees, Armenian females were subjected to a deliberate pattern of constant systematic sexual abuse and humiliation for weeks and even months on end. The increase in widowed Armenian women
Thusly led to the increase in number of female-headed households and unaccompanied women. Desperate, many of these women saw no other choice than to resort to prostitution, entering into what is now termed “survival sex.” Some were manipulated or otherwise forced into it, but most succumbed on their own, having no other means of supporting their families. This process most profoundly impacted the Armenian women who were survivors of the deportations.53

Harput and nearby Mezreh were among the several towns and cities along the deportation routes that became centers for the systematic distribution of Armenian girls and women among the local populations.54 Outside Mezreh, Armenian women and children were encamped under atrocious conditions. This camp turned into a well-organized slave market where the most desirable females – first and foremost women of wealthy families – were identified by local Muslims and given medical exams by doctors to evaluate their health. If a woman refused to follow her new “owner,” she was detained by the local authorities until she acquiesced to her enslavement.55

Conversion experience of an Armenian survivor: Krikor Bogharian’s story

The Ottoman government’s assimilationist policy continued to be implemented in the summer of 1916, a year after the main deportations had started. The case of Krikor Bogharian is a prime example. Bogharian’s case shows the continued genocidal policy of the Ottoman government a year after its emergence. His testimony illustrates in detail the organized nature of the assimilations, with Ottoman bureaucracy, police, judiciary, and clergy being both directly involved and indirectly complicit in the approval of forced marriage, conversion, and adoption, in keeping official records of these acts, and in compiling lists of those who were to be deported, adopted, or converted.56 Krikor Bogharian, a genocide survivor from Aintab, was deported to the provincial district of Salamiyya in Syria Province along with his family members in early August 1915.57 He kept a diary, containing daily entries from 13 August 1915 to 19 December
1916. Bogharian’s diary details the events and experiences of his time in Salamiyya, as well as information about his personal and family life, recounted in a steady, clear voice. He recorded his observations of the topographical characteristics of his destination and its living and economic conditions.

According to his diary, as of late July 1916, religious converts in Salamiyya began to increase in number, as the Salamiyya district governor insisted that Armenian deportees change their religion to Islam. In Hama in August 1916, Armenian deportees were pressured to convert *en masse*, to which they acceded. In Hama and Salamiyya in September 1916, there were reports of forcible conversions to Mohammedanism, targeting many prominent individuals from Aintab and a number of alumni of Central Turkey College.58

In connection with local attempts to force the remaining Christians to “choose” Islamization, these reports led to a brief but critical reaction from the Armenians. The alternative was deportation, the meaning of which was widely understood at this point. However, within a matter of days in September 1916, it became known that the pressure to convert was not a matter of official policy, and the crisis was averted. Bogharian recorded in detail how these conversions were executed. According to his entries, conversions were completed in two ways. In the first option, the head of a household appealed to the *kadi* (Islamic judge) to officially convert and announced in the town center that he had embraced Islam, at which point he received a Muslim name.59 Following the conversion of the other family members, they too were publicly given new names. In the second option, the head of a household would apply to the conversion office along with the names of his family members, their names would be changed, and they would receive new Muslim names and would be reregistered as such in the register office.60

In the registry, there would be a note stating that these people had converted to Islam. Krikor Bogharian and his family chose conversion by

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58. Papers of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions [ABCFM], 16.9.6.1, 1817-1919. Unit 5, reel 667, vol. 2, part 1, no. 247. Central Turkey College was founded in 1876 with professors who were among the most prominent educators in Turkey, with students (75 to 100) marked by their interest in public affairs, with more than 300 alumni. Central Turkey College was the most important American-Protestant institution in Aintab. It was formally established in October 1876 by Rev. Dr. Tilman C. Trowbridge, who served as the first president of the College until 1888. Kevork A. Sarafian, 1953, p. 554-555.
59. K. Bogharian, 1973, p. 188. 60. Ibid.
means of the second option. Without taking his mother, sister, or brothers to the register office, Bogharian completed the process himself. After his conversion, Bogharian changed his name to Şahap (his mother changed her name to Meryem) and had this name added to his registry, at which time it was noted at the register office that he and his family had converted.\footnote{Ibid.}

By August 1916, conversions in Salamiyya began to increase. One of the persons who participated in this process – both by converting to Islam and by assuming an official duty – was Krikor Bogharian himself. In his entry dated 16 August, Bogharian remarks that he had begun working as a clerk in the “conversion bureau,”\footnote{Ibid.} the purpose of which was to maintain records of those who had converted to Islam. Bogharian testifies that people who accepted conversion, including himself, did so in order to survive. He notes in his diary, “In order to save the day, one sometimes has to accept things out of necessity. Either you are Ahmet or Garbis, when the time comes to save your life anything can happen.”\footnote{Ibid.}

Bogharian recorded that 250 families composed of 1,250 people converted to Islam in Hama on 24 August, under watch of a special official sent from Hama to monitor the proceedings.\footnote{Ibid.}, p. 190. Among the registered families were Aintab Armenians such as the families Sulahian, Babikian, Levonian, and Yegavian.\footnote{Ibid.}, p. 191. On 28 August, the total number of families who converted to Islam increased to 500.\footnote{Ibid.} Bogharian writes that the local people thought these conversions were only for show, a means of placating the authorities. The number of people who came from nearby villages to convert also increased, as people were living in fear and did not want to be deprived of their food rations, which were guaranteed to those who converted. On 29 August, the number of Armenian families who converted to Islam reached 750. Among these were Protestant families such as the Jebejians and Barsumians.\footnote{Ibid.}

Around this time, Muslim men started to marry converted Armenian girls. As one can discern from notes in Bogharian’s diary, the deportations were not only intended to exterminate every Armenian in the Ottoman Empire but also to allow a large number of individuals to be absorbed as Muslims.

62. Ibid.
63. Ibid., p. 190.
64. Ibid., p. 191.
65. Ibid.
66. Ibid.
67. Ibid., p. 192.
During World War I, mass murder, deportation, and forced assimilation constituted the destruction scheme organized by the Young Turk regime. This genocidal regime aimed at removing traces of Armenian existence from the entire aspect of life. As stated at the outset, whereas Armenian men were most often summarily massacred, Armenian women and children tended to be deported and absorbed into Muslim households. As demonstrated in this article, a mass transfer of Armenians into Muslim households took place in 1915, which served as a key component in the genocidal designs of the Ottoman state. The early stages of the Ottoman genocide campaign consisted of the systematic destruction of Armenian social structures, then continuing with a deportation program which decimated the Armenian population and served as an effective tool in identifying and isolating the ideal candidates for absorption into Muslim households. The religious conversion of these survivors – invariably young women and children – was the final step in their absorption into the general Muslim population. Ultimately, the same Muslim families who absorbed, adopted, and embraced these Armenians simultaneously acted as agents of the central Ottoman authorities, providing support for their genocidal designs.

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