

7-2016

Review of *The Armenian Genocide: Evidence from the German Office Archives, 1915–1916*, edited by Wolfgang Gust

Bedross Der Matossian
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, bdermatossian2@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/historyfacpub>

 Part of the [Asian History Commons](#), [European History Commons](#), [Islamic World and Near East History Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), [Political History Commons](#), and the [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#)

Der Matossian, Bedross, "Review of *The Armenian Genocide: Evidence from the German Office Archives, 1915–1916*, edited by Wolfgang Gust" (2016). *Faculty Publications, Department of History*. 179.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/historyfacpub/179>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications, Department of History by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

BOOK REVIEW

**The Armenian Genocide:
Evidence from the German Office Archives, 1915–1916.**

Edited by Wolfgang Gust. New York and Oxford: Berghahn. 2014.

xxviii + 786 pp. £75.00 hbk. ISBN 978-1-78238-143-3

Reviewed by: Bedross Der Matossian, *University of Nebraska-Lincoln*

On 15 April 1915 Germany's ambassador to Turkey, Baron Hans von Wangenheim, in a long report to his Chancellor in Berlin, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, reiterated the German policy with regard to the fate of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire by stressing: 'we have to be specially careful. Otherwise, through the act of intervening [on behalf of Armenians] [f]or a perhaps hopeless cause we may incur the risk of jeopardizing interests that are more important and more vital for us' (p. xix). This was the policy that shaped the German government's relationship towards the Armenians during the fateful year of 1915. Following the defeat of Germany and the Ottoman Empire, the German theologian, missionary, politician, and historian Dr Johannes Lepsius published one of the most important collections of German documents pertaining to the Armenian Genocide. Entitled *Deutschland und Armenien 1914–1918* ('Germany and Armenia, 1914–1918'), the book contained 444 documents from the German Foreign Office Archives (Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes or PAA) that demonstrated the empire's Oriental policy specifically relating to the Armenians in the empire. The publication became the cornerstone of understanding the German policy during the Armenian Genocide (1915–1923). However, despite Lepsius's contribution, willingly or unwillingly, his volume did not include hundreds of other crucial documents about the Armenian Genocide. In addition to this, his collection was devoid of archival identification indices, making it difficult for historians to check the originals (Johannes Lepsius, *Deutschland und Armenien: Sammlung Diplomatischer Aktenstücke*, Berlin-Potsdam, Tempel, 1919, pp. 5–454). The edited volume under review by Wolfgang Gust is an English translation of his *Der Völkermord an den Armeniern 1915/16: Dokumente aus dem Politischen Archiv des deutschen Auswärtigen Amtes* (2005). It fills a major gap by providing detailed information about the archival material used by Lepsius. Besides its contribution in providing ample documents on the genocide itself from the German archives, the book reaffirms in unprecedented ways the veracity of the historical event, which is still under question by denialist historians.

The book is divided into three sections. The foreword section written by Vahakn N. Dadrian, renowned scholar of the Armenian Genocide, discusses the historical importance of the documents compiled by Gust and addresses the vexing issue of German complicity/involvement/responsibility in the Armenian Genocide. Dadrian argues that by word or by deed Germans were complicit at various levels in the organization of the Armenian Genocide (p. xxi). This issue of the German role in the Armenian Genocide is still underdeveloped in the historiography and a major source of disagreement among historians of the period (Vahakn N. Dadrian, *German Responsibility in the Armenian Genocide: A Review of the Historical Evidence of German Complicity*, Watertown, MA, Blue Crane, 1996; Artem Ohandjanian, *Armenien: Der verschwiegene Völkermord*, Vienna, Bohlau, 1989; Wolfgang Gust, *Der Völkermord an den Armeniern: Die Tragödie des ältesten Christenvolkes der Welt*, Munich, Hanser, 1993). While some argue for direct responsibility of the Germans in the Armenian Genocide, others demonstrate this policy as a complex phenomenon, arguing that there was no uniform German position on the genocide (Hilmar Kaiser, 'The Baghdad Railway, 1915–1916: A Case Study in German Resistance and Complicity', in Richard Hovannisian, ed., *Remembrance and Denial: The Case of the Armenian Genocide*, Detroit, MI, Wayne State UP, 1999, pp. 67–112; ed. Hilmar Kaiser, *Eberhard Count Wolfskeel von Reichenberg, Zeitoun, Mousa Dagh, Ourfa: Letters on the Armenian Genocide*, Princeton, NJ, Gomidas Institute, 2001). One important point the book demonstrates is that despite the silence in the upper echelons of German politics about the Armenian Genocide, the situation was totally different in the case of the seven lower diplomats who were serving in the Ottoman Empire's eastern provinces during the First World War in their different capacities as consuls and vice consuls. By overcoming the obstacles and the silence of their own governments, these diplomats became a crucial source of documenting the genocide in its various stages. Despite the fact that their efforts to stop the carnage in their respective provinces did not yield any result because of their subordinate position in the German political system, they nevertheless played an important role in documenting the Armenian Genocide. This happened at a time in which the German imperial government tried to suppress information that was coming out of these provinces.

In the second section of the book, Gust provides an overview of the Armenian Genocide based on the archives of the German Foreign Office. In this section he deals with the anatomy of the Armenian Genocide, beginning from the radicalization of the government's policies towards the Armenians and ending with the latter's annihilation. Despite the descriptive nature of this section, Gust provides important information based on the German documents. For example, in the section on the deportations the reader finds a recurrent method (corroborated by survivors of the genocide) used by the gendarmes to debilitate the deportees by forcing them to walk for days in a circular fashion. According to the German consul of Aleppo Walter Rossler, the aim of this was to 'run them [Armenians] to death' (p. 25). Also interesting is the information provided by the German consuls about the final stages of the genocide: the concentration camps in Syria (pp. 31–39). After discussing these camps, Gust dwells upon the economic dimensions of the Armenian Genocide, demonstrating how, besides the motives of murder and annihilation, a further motive of enrichment was evident in all of the witnesses' reports concerning the deportations (pp. 37–46). In the second section of the overview,

Gust discusses the pretext for the genocide according to the German archives. These include, among others, hatred for Armenians and fear of a rebellion and of revolutionary movements. In this section Gust demonstrates how the statements made by the German ambassador in Istanbul were in complete contradiction to those made by the consuls and the vice consuls in the eastern provinces. For example, while Ambassador Wangenheim, on the basis of solely Ottoman Turkish sources, reported on conspiratorial activities carried out by Armenians, Consul Rossler pointed out that even membership of Armenians in charitable organizations in Aleppo was used as evidence of a plot against the Turkish government (p. 56). On the basis of these reports Gust concludes that these German diplomats had arrived at a unanimous conclusion that the Ottoman government's theories with regard to a grand Armenian conspiracy were untenable (p. 59). In the section on the Armenian uprising and with the exception of Van, Gust argues that these German consuls and their informants 'were able to prove that these so-called uprisings were, in fact, nothing other than Armenians fighting to defend themselves' (p. 59). Furthermore he argues that, in the eyes of these German diplomats, these uprisings were used as propaganda by the Ottoman government, providing a further excuse to eliminate the Armenians (p. 66). In the final section of the overview, Gust discusses the role of the Germans in the Armenian Genocide. Here he distinguishes between two levels of reactions. While at the level of consuls and their informants it was evident that a process of genocide was in the making, at the level of the German embassy in Istanbul there was a noticeable reservation about this process. On the basis of the documents, Gust further elaborates on the issue of Germany's joint responsibility for the genocide, arguing that the German embassy in Istanbul 'confirmed that measures taken against the Armenian population in the eastern provinces were justified for military reasons and represented means of legitimate defense' (p. 91).

The last section, which constitutes the bulk of the volume, is composed of the English translation of the documents from the German Foreign Office Archives and should be considered as the most important section of the book. These documents have been carefully prepared and translated by adhering to the archival methodology of identification indices, providing all the necessary information about each document: location, date, sender, addressee, source information, and signatures.

This edited volume should be considered as a significant contribution to the history of the Armenian Genocide. Gust has rendered an important service to scholarship by reviving for the first time in English the voices of the German diplomats and their informants who became eyewitnesses to one of the first genocides of the twentieth century. Almost all of the German observers, be they diplomats or missionaries from the period, agreed on the fact that what happened to the Armenians was an act of genocide. Now that Gust has furnished historians with a plethora of vital documents, it is the task of historians to analyse these documents and interpret the different dimensions of the Armenian Genocide in general and the German policy during the First World War in particular.