

The Chilingirian Murder: A Case Study from the 1915 Roundup of Armenian Intellectuals

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Scholarship on the destruction of the Armenian community of the Ottoman Empire has tended to focus on the genocide's broad historical, political, and sociological aspects. The gradual opening of the Prime Ministerial Ottoman Archive in Istanbul has made it possible to shed light on micro-aspects of the planning and implementation of the Armenian Genocide. On the basis of documents and eyewitness accounts related to the murder of Dr. Rupen Sevag Chilingirian, the author provides important insight into the central authorities' involvement in the murder of Armenian intellectuals.¹

On June 22, 1915, Ottoman authorities arrested Dr. Rupen Sevag Chilingirian, an Armenian physician and poet, as part of an ongoing roundup of Armenian intellectuals. They sent him first to Chankiri (Çankırı), a town in Kastamonu Province. On August 26 they sent him from Chankiri towards Ankara, but during the journey, somewhere outside the village of Kalecik, Chilingirian and other detainees were tortured and murdered.² Records preserved in the Ottoman archives—especially those of the Ministry of the Interior—as well as Armenian accounts reveal that officials of the ruling Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) at the most senior levels of government took an active interest in the murder of Chilingirian and other Armenian intellectuals. The documents strongly suggest that the central authorities not only were fully aware of the murders, but also participated in planning them. In a rare case in which well-meaning local officials caught and prosecuted the assassins, higher officials intervened to obtain their release.

The murders took place in the context of the extensive crackdown on the Ottoman Armenian elite that began with the empire's entrance into the First World War. The Ottoman-Turkish nationalist party in power at the time, the CUP, had seized control in 1908 during the bloodless "Young Turk" revolution. In the initial phase of its rule, the CUP aimed to enact a policy of *İttihad-i Anasır*, or "Union of the peoples, unity of all subjects of the Ottoman Empire." But because of the difficulties it faced in this endeavor, the regime soon had to scale back on the policy, abandoning it completely after the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913. On the

eve of the First World War the CUP launched a new effort to change the multi-ethnic and multi-religious character of empire in favor of Turkish-Muslim ethnic-religious homogeneity. This policy entailed cleansing the empire of Christian elements. The authorities targeted the Greek population first, expelling a large number to Greece by forceful methods that included massacres. During the war years of 1915–1917, the regime's focus turned to the Armenians. In the end, much of the Armenian population of Anatolia was either exterminated or deported to deserts in today's Syria and Iraq.

Ottoman authorities' arrest of Armenian intellectuals on April 24, 1915 is considered the beginning of the Armenian Genocide. Among those detained was Rupen Chilingirian. His well-documented case illustrates the regime's attitudes and priorities in the early stages of the destruction of the Ottoman Armenian population.

Dr. Chilingirian's Arrest

Rupen Sevag Chilingirian (1885–1915) was born near Istanbul in the town of Silivri, where he attended Armenian primary and middle schools. In 1905 he graduated from the Berberian School in Istanbul. He went on to study medicine in Lausanne, Switzerland, but continued to pursue his interest in art and literature. His prose and poetry began to appear in the Armenian press during this period. Against the backdrop of the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, Chilingirian and a few friends created the short-lived *Surhantag* (Courier) newspaper while on summer vacation in Istanbul. In this and other ways, Chilingirian maintained close contact with the Armenian intellectual milieu.

Deeply affected by the 1909 massacres of Armenians in Adana by a Muslim mob with the support of provincial military units, Chilingirian published his first book, *Garmür Kirk* (The Red Book), the following year. Among the poems included in it was the lengthy "Verchin Hayere" (The Last Armenians), which after 1915 would be read as foreshadowing the disaster to come. In 1913 and 1914, Chilingirian's short works were serialized in *Azadamard* (Freedom Struggle) magazine, the official publication of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, a socialist-nationalist revolutionary organization established in 1890 in Tbilisi. The organization fought for the social and political rights of Armenians, with the ultimate goal of obtaining administrative autonomy within the empire.

After graduating in 1911, Chilingirian practiced medicine in Lausanne until May 1914, when he returned to Istanbul with his German wife of four years, Helene (née Apell), and their son Levon. At the outbreak of World War I, Dr. Chilingirian was conscripted and began to serve as a military physician in Chanakkale and Istanbul.³

Chilingirian was arrested on June 22, 1915,⁴ and arrived at Chankiri six days later.⁵ According to his family, the Chilingirian house was not searched during his



Rupen Sevag Chilingirian in Ottoman uniform as a medical lieutenant (early 1915). Courtesy of Hovhannes Chilingirian.

arrest.⁶ The authorities brought no charges—either at the time of the arrest or after the doctor's arrival in Chankiri—and initiated no investigation. As soon as her husband was taken, Mrs. Chilingirian contacted her parents in Switzerland. We know from Chilingirian's letters of July 6 and 13,⁷ as well as from an August 26 letter from his father-in-law, Franz Apell-Dörr, to the German Embassy, that Mrs. Chilingirian's mother, Marie Apell, left Switzerland as soon as she learned of her son-in-law's arrest and arrived in Istanbul on June 26.⁸

Immediately after the arrest, Chilingirian's family contacted the German Embassy and Consular Office in Istanbul. They discussed the situation with Johann Mordtmann, the consul for Armenian affairs, and Field Marshal Colmar von der Goltz, a German advisor to the Ottoman Army.⁹ According to Marie Apell's account, Ottoman officials had promised von der Goltz that Chilingirian would be released to German authorities in exchange for a guarantee that he remain in Germany for the duration of the war. In a July 26 letter to the embassy in Istanbul, H. Filsinger, the German consul general in Lausanne, requested that in view of Mr. Apell-Dörr's reputation as a "well respected, patriotic person" and "a veteran of the 1870–1871 wars," all necessary assistance should be extended to the family in their effort to rescue their son-in-law. Filsinger added that the family was prepared to provide any guarantee necessary to secure Chilingirian's release to German authorities.¹⁰

Enclosed with Filsinger's letter was a note from Mordtmann reporting on a meeting he had had with Bedri Bey, the chief of police in Istanbul. During that meeting Bedri denied that he had made any promise to Goltz concerning the return of Dr. Chilingirian. According to Bedri Bey, the only option was to have Chilingirian sent to Ankara and settled there. Mordtmann concluded on the basis of this meeting that a "release to Germany in exchange for a pledge" was not under consideration. Therefore, in his opinion, nothing more could be done in the pursuit of Chilingirian's release.¹¹

The records show that Dr. Chilingirian's case was a topic of discussion between the Ottoman government and Germany from July 1915 onward. The highest German authorities, including the prime minister, were kept informed as the embassy and the physician's family continued their efforts to obtain his release.¹² The German records also reveal much about why Chilingirian was denied permission to leave the country. According to a communiqué from the German ambassador to the German prime minister, the Ottoman authorities considered him "an intellectual capable of influencing the public," and therefore dangerous.¹³

The Family's Struggle

On August 31, 1915, the provincial governor of Kastamonu forwarded to the Ottoman Ministry of the Interior an August 24 report from the district governor of Chankiri. In his accompanying note, the governor of Kastamonu wrote that he was sending the information in response to the Ministry's August 19 request for a detailed report on the detainees and their condition. Appended to the report was a list of the detainees and a note on the disposition of each case. It appears that the detainees were to be considered formally pardoned. The report stated: "In accordance with ... general pardon number 29 of the high orders of the illustrious Ministry of the Interior, dated August 4, 1915, [Chilingirian and other detainees] are to be transferred to Ayash by way of Ankara under the protection of state forces."¹⁴ Had Mrs. Chilingirian not fought for her husband's freedom, this document likely would have been the sole official record of Rupen Sevag Chilingirian's fate.

Yet in the brief interval between the preparation and forwarding of this report, Chilingirian and his colleagues had been moved out on the planned transfer and killed en route. In a final telegram to his wife dated August 26, Dr. Chilingirian wrote: "I'm going to Ayash with Varujan. Send your letters there." The doctor was murdered that same day. Mrs. Chilingirian responded to the telegram immediately, but receiving no reply, she contacted the embassy, which appealed directly to the Ottoman authorities on August 27. Mordtmann later noted that in response, Interior Minister Mehmed Talat dispatched a telegram to Chankiri asking that Chilingirian be released.¹⁵

Talat's August 28 telegram is preserved in the Ottoman archives. In it, Talat informed the district governor that "the order to have Dr. Rupen Chilingirian left free in Chankiri was sent to the provincial office in Kastamonu in a telegram dated August 25, 1915. Now news reaches us that he is about to be transferred to Ayash. Report the reason why the aforementioned was being transferred and be reminded that there is a strict order that in accordance with this writing he should be set free there."¹⁶

From a summary of the case Mordtmann wrote in mid-September, we can piece together the sequence of events. On September 2, Police Chief Bedri asked the German authorities to send Mrs. Chilingirian back to Germany. The consular staff prepared the necessary documents for her return, but she refused to leave Istanbul without news of her husband. The family received its first detailed account of Dr. Chilingirian's fate on September 11. Mordtmann recounts that a high official of the Interior Ministry named Aziz read to him a long telegram from Chankiri revealing that the physician had been murdered. The news was broken to Mrs. Chilingirian without delay, and in this way she was persuaded to leave the country. The widow and her children departed for Switzerland that very day.¹⁷ From the surviving diplomatic correspondence it seems apparent that her presence in Istanbul and her persistent demands for information about her husband had pleased neither the German nor the Turkish authorities.

According to Mordtmann, Hayg Etkesenyán, an Ottoman citizen working as a liaison to the German Embassy, brought additional news from Aziz two days later. Aziz had told Etkesenyán that he [Aziz] "[could] not talk any more" because "people [were] making problems for him" (man Schwierigkeiten mache). Through Etkesenyán, Mordtmann insisted that Aziz's office continue to forward information regarding Chilingirian. Finally, on September 16, Etkesenyán brought a handwritten note from an unidentified Interior Ministry official stating that "on August 26, 1915, on the way to Ayash from Chankiri, [Chilingirian] was murdered at the Sapali creek near the village of Tüney by Alo, son of Haji Ali [also known as Kurd Ali or Kurd Alo] and ten of his companions from the village of Böyrek in Kalecik." The note adds: "At present, four of the murderers have been captured; investigation ongoing."¹⁸

From German records, we can determine with some precision when the news of Dr. Chilingirian's death reached Istanbul. In a letter to Mrs. Chilingirian, Counselor of Embassy Konstantin Freiherr von Neurath explained that "the date on the telegram sent by the district governor's office of Chankiri [and on which] this news arrived is August 30."¹⁹ Since the investigation would have begun in Chankiri immediately after the murder was discovered, word might well have reached Istanbul by an earlier date [between August 26 and 29], but we possess no definite evidence of this. On August 31st, after news of the murder had reached Istanbul, Interior Minister Talat sent a telegram to the governor's office in

Chankiri demanding "information as to which province held jurisdiction at the site of the apparent murder of Rupen Chilingirian and the four others by Kurd Ali and ten others during the transfer from Chankiri and the immediate pursuit and capture of the murderers."²⁰

The ensuing stream of telegrams from Talat to the Chankiri office was in all likelihood a response to top-level diplomatic pressure from Germany. Indeed, Ambassador Wangenheim reported to Prime Minister Bethmann Hollweg on October 5 that embassy officials had made "countless efforts" to intercede with the Ottoman authorities on behalf of Chilingirian's family, and that it took days to get any information. Wangenheim added that "there is a high probability that the attack during which Dr. Chilingirian was slain was organized by the leaders of the Committee [of Union and Progress] and that even if [state authorities] had not directly supported it, it had come about as a result of their looking the other way." He surmised, however, that it would be impossible to find any evidence that the CUP leadership were in any way accomplices and that the murder trial should not be expected to shed any light on the subject.²¹

On November 5, having arrived in Lausanne, Mrs. Chilingirian wrote to the German authorities in Istanbul to lodge a complaint against the Ottoman authorities. "The Turkish government is responsible for the security of its detainees and by failing to provide adequate security it is directly liable for the attack," she declared. "For this reason, I accuse the Turkish government of aiding in the murder of Dr. Chilingirian and demand at least 500 thousand francs in damages. If this amount is not forwarded voluntarily in the form of gold, I will be forced to initiate a lawsuit Additionally I demand that all twelve [*sic*] members of this gang be hanged."²²

The embassy's response, dated November 26, was quite cold. In it, an unnamed official advised Mrs. Chilingirian that her demands would yield nothing and that, by marrying a Turkish citizen, she had forfeited her own right to German protection. Having refused to extend any further assistance to Dr. Chilingirian's widow, the official suggested that she try to claim her rights through private channels—but hastened to add that to do so almost certainly would be fruitless.²³

The records thus support the perception that neither the German nor the Ottoman authorities wished to pursue the Chilingirian case. The German authorities' disengagement was extremely distressing to Chilingirian's widow. In her anger over Germany's lack of concern for the crimes that were being committed against Armenians generally, and against her own husband specifically, she made an appeal that may be read as a prophetic curse: "If you love God, use every ounce of energy to confront the lying accusations being made. Try to save whatever you can save by using the most definite resolve. If you don't make use of every possibility within your possession, the blood of innocent women, children, the sickly, and the elderly will ascend to the heavens and damn Germany."²⁴

Having received no response to her pleas, Mrs. Chilingirian cut off all relations with German officialdom and later applied to the Armenian Bureau in Lausanne for Armenian citizenship.²⁵ She died on December 28, 1967. So deep was her anger that she refused to teach her children a single word of German. Her son Levon passed away in 2005, and her daughter Samiram, who was born in Istanbul just before her father's arrest, was still living as these lines were being written.²⁶

The Investigation

The manner of Dr. Chilingirian's death was recorded in both Armenian and Ottoman documents, and the facts as reported are mutually corroborative. The Armenian sources are derived from the recollections of other Armenian intellectuals who were with him in Chankiri.²⁷ From those memoirs we learn, among other things, that as a physician he was in demand. "I chase after patients from morning until night," he wrote in a letter of July 28.²⁸ One of those patients, a young girl, fell in love with him, and her father, a driver named Ismail, would play an important role in his murder. As the leader of the cart-drivers in the town, he would have been among those responsible for transferring the Armenian deportees to various destinations. One day he warned Dr. Chilingirian that, like the other Armenians, the doctor was destined for deportation and death, but that he might save himself by converting to Islam and marrying Ismail's daughter. When Dr. Chilingirian declined, explaining that he was already married, Ismail replied that this was not important and urged him to reconsider. Despite Ismail's urging, and despite the ominous news that some two thousand Armenians had been killed near Ankara just four days earlier, Dr. Chilingirian refused the offer.²⁹

A survivor of the roundup of intellectuals later gave the following account:

Finally, between August 13 and 26, 1915, on a Thursday morning, five people occupying three vehicles were sent out accompanied by a mounted gendarme and police. The deputy district governor had shown great good will and done everything within his power to ensure that Sevag arrived in Ayash in one piece. Sevag's driver [Ismail] was the deputy district governor's own driver. He had arrived coincidentally in Chankiri that day. His master had placed Sevag's life in his hands and ordered that he be vigilant in guarding [Sevag's] safety At midnight on the same night news of their murder arrived by telephone at Chankiri. Nureddin, the commander of the local army outpost, and Oğuz, the party secretary for the Unionists, greeted the news with great peals of laughter. That evening the news of his friends' murder upset the deputy district governor tremendously. He called Nureddin to him and reported his serious suspicions.³⁰

Krikoris Balakian, an Armenian priest and one of the intellectuals deported to Chankiri, provides further information in his memoir:

The poor deputy district governor, who had sworn on the lives of his own children that his five friends would reach Ankara safely, and the commander of the military

police of Kastamonu province, mounted horses and in the company of several investigative judges and police, headed towards Tüney, the location of the crime. They found the five victims' corpses mutilated beyond recognition and thrown into the water . . . They buried the remains and captured the murderers. Later, with the cooperation of the civilian and military police, the murderers were imprisoned in Ankara pending their prosecution by the military tribunal. At the trial, four Kurds quite openly admitted that they had perpetrated the crime upon the orders and recommendations of the Unionist Committee in Chankiri . . . and as a matter of fact, they felt that those individuals needed to be brought to trial alongside them.³¹

In a detailed confidential report dated February 6, 1916, the deputy governor of Ankara described the capture and investigation of the suspects. According to this source, a total of nineteen individuals had been investigated, nine of whom were wanted for the murders of six other Christian Ottoman citizens (though it is not clear when these murders were alleged to have taken place) in addition to that of Dr. Chilingirian and his colleagues. The deputy governor's office reported that as of September 2, 1915, five of the nine were in custody, while the other four, including Kurd Alo, had fled. Also still at large were the remaining ten individuals, who were suspected of robbing the victims (again, the document does not specify the timing of the robbery). The police officer and the gendarme who had accompanied Dr. Chilingirian and his friends also had been arrested.

In his report to the Interior Ministry, the deputy governor relayed the investigating tribunal's request for a decision on the trial venue. He noted that regional commissions were responsible for hearing complaints related to crimes committed during the deportation and migration of Armenians; because Kastamonu was not considered a "deportation region" and therefore had no such commission, he recommended that the case file be transmitted under ministry cover to the governor of that province, who could decide objectively the matter of jurisdiction. The decision should be made without delay, the Ankaran deputy governor urged, in view of the length of time the suspects had been in custody.³² In accordance with these recommendations, the Ministry of the Interior forwarded the investigative report to the provincial office in Kastamonu, requesting that the final decision be communicated to the deputy governor of Ankara as well.³³ The ministry's request was sent on February 20, 1916—a date that would prove significant.

While we possess no other documents to reveal the conclusion of this exchange, it is noteworthy that although the murder was committed and investigated in the province of Ankara, no trial was conducted there. The reason for the change of venue, as we shall see, has to do with Talat Pasha's direct involvement in the investigation. Four months after the Interior Ministry received the February 6 report, Talat sent a series of telegrams to the governor of the Ankara district indicating that the case files had been lost in the corridors of the Ministry of the Interior.

The Military Tribunals of 1919 to 1922 and the Trial of Cemâl Oğuz

Detailed information on the assassins' fate would surface later, during the hearings before postwar military tribunals held in Istanbul between 1919 and 1921. Records from these proceedings indicate that the murders were planned by Cemâl Oğuz, the party secretary of the Chankîri branch of the CUP, in collusion with Nureddin, the commander of the local gendarmerie, and several other officials. Also, according to information revealed later, a military tribunal in fact had been established in Ankara, and it had sought prison sentences for the murderers; yet, whether the tribunal reached a conclusion in the matter remains unclear.

Information about Chilingirian's case came to light in the indictment of the CUP officials, whose trial (the "main trial") began in April 1919. In one of the trial documents, the public prosecutor refers to the testimony of a Turkish witness, Cemâl Asaf, concerning the murder of Dr. Chilingirian. According to the prosecutor, "the transcribed account of Cemâl Asaf Bey ... concerning the manner in which some of the deportees ... were killed by the Kurd Alo gang, which was formed by the merchant and former [CUP] Party Secretary for Chankîri Cemâl Oğuz Bey, is but one part of the totality of actions and deeds of the CUP representatives that must be attributed to a centrally-governed design."³⁴

Oğuz was arrested on April 3, 1919 on suspicion of planning the murder, but for unknown reasons he was later released.³⁵ He was re-arrested on the order of Esat Pasha, the newly appointed chief justice of the military tribunal in Istanbul, and his case was merged with the "Party Secretaries Trial" on October 27, 1919. The most serious charge was that Oğuz had planned the murder of Dr. Chilingirian and his colleagues.

During these hearings, several eyewitnesses gave testimony.³⁶ At the October 27 hearing, the Armenian priest Father Garabetyan Effendi gave testimony identifying Oğuz as the murderer of the five individuals who were being transferred to Ayash.³⁷ A pharmacist identified as Krikor Effendi testified on November 12 that deputy district governor of Chankîri Izzet Bey had been so distraught over the murders of Chilingirian and the others that, when describing the incident to an Armenian friend, he had sobbed. A witness by the name of Altunyan gave similar testimony.³⁸ On November 22, the architect Simon Effendi told the court that "the state got involved in investigating the matter." In his written statement, which was also read in court, he identified Oğuz as the ringleader.³⁹ Simon Effendi testified to another particularly significant fact: "I don't know if these five Armenians were murdered by the government or by a gang ... but what I do know is that after the incident the gendarmerie commander [Nureddin] didn't investigate it because that appeared to be against the state's interests."⁴⁰

During the hearings Oğuz repeatedly confronted the chief justice, and while in custody he attempted suicide. His disruptive conduct convinced the judicial board to have him evaluated for competency to stand trial, and he was transferred

to the Gümüşsuyu Hospital. At the November 29 hearing, the tribunal separated his case from the Party Secretaries Trial due to his ill health.⁴¹

The authorities continued to prosecute Oğuz in separate proceedings,⁴² and the tribunal took up the murder of Dr. Chilingirian on February 5, 1920. The witness M. Ohannes testified as follows: "Five individuals from [among our] friends were transferred to Ayash. The vehicle carrying them left on Thursday and returned on Friday. Later, it became known that the guards had taken our five friends and delivered them to bandits along the way. Based on that, Deputy District Governor İzzet Bey went to the scene of the crime and initiated an investigation. It became generally known that Cemâl Oğuz Bey and Nureddin Bey were responsible for this incident."⁴³

On February 8, 1920 Oğuz was convicted of planning the physician's murder. The Istanbul court found that "with [the aid of] fugitive [defendant] Captain Nureddin Bey, Dr. Chilingirian and his identified four friends were murdered ... in the area around the Tüney police headquarters in Chankiri, and that one of the murderers, Kurd Ali, had been sent to Chankiri and given instructions while [Oğuz] had been a ringleader for the planning of the murders. ... By not opposing or preventing the act of murder, [Oğuz] made it easier to commit from the start. ... [He] knowingly gave the actual murderers aid." Oğuz and Nureddin were found guilty of murder in the second degree. Oğuz was sentenced to five years and four months in prison, and Nureddin, who was still at large, was sentenced in absentia to six years and eight months.⁴⁴

Despite the abundant evidence of Oğuz' collusion in the crime, on March 23 an appellate court overturned his conviction on the grounds that, they claimed, an Ankara military tribunal already had found him and other defendants guilty of this same offense and sentenced them to time in prison. The renewed prosecution of this matter in Istanbul was therefore both outside the Istanbul tribunal's jurisdiction and prohibited by law as "double jeopardy."

The tribunal in Istanbul nevertheless took up the matter anew, refusing to abide by the appellate court's decision and insisting on the legitimacy of its own. The lower court observed that even if the "actual perpetrators of the murder in question were tried and convicted in 1915 by the military tribunal in Ankara, the defendant in question was never mentioned in that matter and the ruling of the tribunal in question has, to date, not been affirmed." On that basis, the lower court reaffirmed its original decision, asserting that "no manner of trial was ever initiated in that jurisdiction against Cemâl Oğuz Bey."⁴⁵

The appellate court's judicial statement that the Ankara Military Tribunal of 1915 had tried the case and sentenced the defendants to prison is indeed questionable. Considered together with documents cited earlier, telegrams from Talat Pasha to be discussed below seriously undermine the court's claim that such a trial was conducted in 1915 in Ankara. As we have seen, the military tribunal

established in Ankara had opened an investigative file in 1915. The deputy governor of Ankara had sent this investigative file to Istanbul for the purpose of asking which court should serve as the trial venue. In response, on February 20, 1916,⁴⁶ Talat's office forwarded the file to Kastamonu for a final decision on this question.

The significance of February 20, 1916 now becomes clear. A file sent from Istanbul on that date would have just twenty-three days to reach Kastamonu by the end of the Muslim year (March 13, 1916 according to the Gregorian calendar).⁴⁷ For the authorities in Kastamonu to have ruled on whether to accept the case, communicated their decision to Istanbul, prepared the indictment, gathered the witnesses, conducted the trial and handed down the sentence, all within twenty-three days, is, for all intents and purposes, inconceivable. In an alternative scenario, even if officials in Kastamonu had referred the trial back to Ankara contrary to the wishes of the deputy governor of Ankara and the Interior Ministry in Istanbul (which is what the 1920 appeals courts indicates), it nevertheless would have been impossible for the file to reach Ankara, the trial to be held there, and the defendants to be sentenced—all within just twenty-three days. Similar trials held before military tribunals in Istanbul after the war lasted at least three months from the first hearing to the sentencing.

Finally, a series of telegrams Talat Pasha sent in May and June 1916 establish conclusively that the case had yet to be heard in Ankara. In light of the information to be gleaned from these documents, it appears that the "trial" of Cemâl Oğuz to which the Istanbul appellate court referred most probably was not an actual court proceeding, but an investigation by the local prosecutor's office in Ankara. In fact, as the lower court noted, the outcome of the case in Ankara remained unknown.⁴⁸

Talat Pasha's Involvement in Freeing the Murderers

Why, then, did the investigative file from the Ankara military tribunal never develop into a full-fledged trial? The answer lies in a series of documents preserved in the Prime Ministerial Archives—documents showing that Interior Minister Talat Pasha engaged in an intense effort to free the captured gang members. Talat's actions led directly to the release of the suspects and the suspension of the investigation.

Four telegrams held in the archives reveal Talat's involvement. The first, marked "confidential," was dispatched to Ankara on May 13, 1916. In it, Talat Pasha stated that "individuals who have been convicted or arrested as a result of crimes they have committed may, in accordance with the special statute, be released into the army, to provide service to the army, if they so wish, through either judicial pardon or postponement [of prosecution]." He added that "it is considered appropriate that the aforementioned who have been detained by the military tribunal, be released to the army, singly or in pairs through the processing office reporting to the Ministry of Justice."⁴⁹ With these words, the

Minister ordered the provincial office in Ankara to cooperate with the Ministry of Justice and free the detainees.

Reading this telegram in the context of the other documents, we can also understand that the individuals for whom Talat requested a pardon were none other than the members of the Kurd Alo gang. Though he does not mention it explicitly in the telegram, we can surmise that Talat was referring to the fall 1914 temporary law releasing convicts from prison. The purpose of the law was to provide manpower to paramilitary units associated with the army.

In the second telegram, sent June 5, Talat states: "After reviewing ... a copy of the telegram sent ... from the Ankara detention center to the Central Committee of the [Union and Progress Party] dated 31 May 1916, we demand that the necessary processing in accordance with the contents of official communications 788 and 832, dated 9 and 13 May 1916, be expedited."⁵⁰ Setting aside the fact, itself revealing, that an Interior Minister would answer a letter from a prison within five days, the import of this document is clear. Despite Talat's "confidential" telegram of May 13, the murder suspects had not been released.

The third telegram was sent two to three days later, on June 7 or 8, 1916, and also was marked "confidential." We understand from this telegram that because the wheels of justice had begun to turn, certain obstacles had arisen to the release of the detainees. Talat wrote: "So long as the military tribunal has not issued a ruling on the detained individuals in question, not only will it be impossible to go in the direction of a pardon, but it will be inappropriate to produce an unconditional pardon in this matter since it now possesses political implications. Taken this way, since the continued detention of these individuals is not desired, first, as in similar cases, a ruling of postponement should be obtained. ... The handling of this matter in this way is acceptable."⁵¹

This telegram illustrates Talat's efforts to circumvent the legal obstacles that impeded the release of the suspected murderers. The law on pardons did not apply in this situation because, Talat argued, the defendants had yet to be convicted; indeed, the case was still under investigation. Moreover, the political implications of the case (here Talat referred indirectly to German diplomatic pressure) made the use of a pardon inappropriate. Despite these obstacles, Talat insisted that the defendants promptly be released. Since Kurd Alo and his gang were in a position to expose the CUP's direct involvement in the case, waiting for a conviction was not in Talat's interest. Instead, Talat proposed that the investigation be quietly suspended and the detainees released immediately.

The fourth telegram in our possession touches upon what happened to the Kurd Alo gang in the years that followed. From a 1918 telegram, we learn that the former detainees continued to request—and receive—assistance from the Ottoman government. An "extremely confidential" July 8, 1918 telegram from the Ministry of the Interior to the provincial office in Ankara reads: "[Kurd Alo's request] to be

placed in service on the Syrian front, for example, is acceptable.”⁵² Together, these four telegrams demonstrate convincingly that individuals who were under criminal investigation and headed for prosecution were protected through government actions at the highest level.

Conclusion

In comparison to the documentation on the cases of other Armenian intellectuals, the Ottoman and German archives hold a tremendous amount of information about the murder of Dr. Rupen Sevag Chilingirian. The explanation, as we have seen, is that Dr. Chilingirian’s German wife pressured the German authorities to find out what had happened to her husband. The resulting intervention with Ottoman authorities ensured that Dr. Chilingirian’s murder did not go unnoticed.

Of the approximately 180 Armenian intellectuals who were arrested and transported to Chankiri and Ayash on and shortly after April 24, 1915, only about 30 survived—yet Ottoman documents indicate that most of the intellectuals were released or acquitted, or escaped. Such claims have been made as recently as 2008.⁵³ Ottoman record-keeping policy regarding the fate of these Armenian intellectuals may be surmised through systematic comparison with Armenian as well as other archival sources. This question demands further research; for now, we may point to the Chilingirian case as an exceptionally well-documented example of CUP involvement and concealment as Armenian intellectuals were rounded up and murdered at the beginning of the Genocide.

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Notes

1. I am indebted to Hovhannes Chilingirian, Rupen Sevag Chilingirian’s nephew, for sharing with me documents in his possession and other information about Dr. Chilingirian. This article is a revised version of a chapter of my book *1915 Yazıları* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2010), 15–39. I also thank Fatıma Sakarya for the translation into English and Lou Ann Matossian for a preliminary editing of the text.

2. Confidential statement from the deputy governor of Ankara to Istanbul, February 6, 1916, Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (BOA—Prime Ministerial Ottoman Archive), Dahiliye:

Nezareti Eroniyet-i Umumiye İkinci Şube (DHEUM. 2. Şube—Second Department of General Security of the Interior Ministry), no. 26/20.

3. Information on the life of Dr. Chilingirian was culled from these sources: Pars Tuğlacı, *Ermeni Edebiyatından Seçmeler* (Istanbul: Cem Publications, 1992), 348; Raffi Kantian, "Der Dichter und seine Frau: Rupen Savag und Helene Apell. Ein armenisch-deutsches Paar in den Zeiten des Genozids," *Armenisch-Deutsche Korrespondenz* 139, no. 1 (2008): 46–48; Hovhannes Chilingirian, *Türklerin Sözde Bilmedikleri Gerçekler* (Erevan: n.p., 2005), 50; Theodoros Kahn (Teotig), *Huyartsan* (Istanbul: Arzuman Matbaası, 1919); Teotig's volume is about the Armenian intellectuals of Istanbul, containing short biographies as well as testimonies of survivors.

4. In a 2003 article Hovhannes Chilingirian recalled that Dr. Chilingirian was so upset that his arrest had been so long in coming that he had written to his friends (presumably during the spring of 1915): "Is it not a shame that we are still here?" *Natri* (Armenian-language daily newspaper published in Beirut), February 11, 2003.

5. Dr. Chilingirian's first letter from Chankiri to his wife was dated June 30th. "I arrived in Kangiri (Chankiri) this Tuesday," he reported. "After traveling for six days I'm comfortable now. I'm in the same building as Dr. Dinanyan. [The building] has a garden and woods in the front. Don't worry about me. God willing, I'll be placed before a court of law soon and we'll be together. . . . I kiss our children's eyes." Dr. Chilingirian wrote eight letters in total. The originals are in the author's possession.

6. Letter from Franz Apell-Dörr to Auswärtige Amt Lausanne, September 9, 1915, Politisches Archiv des Auswärtiges Amt/Botschaft Konstantinopel (PA-AA/Bo. Kon.), Bd. 97. Transcripts of the German records available in this archive on Dr. Rupen Sevag Chilingirian can be found at www.armenocide.net. I would like to thank my dear friend Wolfgang Gust for gathering the records.

7. Letters from Dr. Chilingirian to his wife dated July 6 and 13, 1915, originals in the author's possession. In his first letter he asks his wife whether her mother arrived in Istanbul, and in the second he expresses his happiness about his mother-in-law's arrival.

8. Letter dated August 26, 1915, from Franz Apell-Dörr to German Ambassador Hohenlohe Langenburg, PA-AA/Bo. Kon., Bd. 96.

9. Report from the German consul in Lausanne, Filsinger, to the German Embassy in Istanbul, July 26, 1915, PA-AA/Bo.Kon., Bd.96. A letter dated July 9, 1915, from Mrs. Chilingirian's mother, Marie Apell, is attached to this report. German Field Marshal von der Goltz ("Goltz Pasha") was an advisor and adjutant to Sultan Mehmet V (November 1914–April 1915). During the First World War Goltz commanded the First and Sixth Ottoman Armies. He died while on active duty in Mesopotamia in 1916. For more information about his life, see: Colmar Freiherr von der Goltz, *Generalfeldmarshall Colmar Freiherr von der Goltz: Denkwürdigkeiten*, ed. Friedrich Freiherr von der Goltz and Wolfgang Förster, 2nd ed. (Berlin: E.S. Mittler & Sohn, 1932).

10. Note from Filsinger to the German Embassy in Istanbul, July 26, 1915.

11. Report by Mordtmann attached to Filsinger note.

12. One example of such efforts is Mrs. Chilingirian's August 15, 1915 letter to the Ministry of War in which she reminds the addressee that her husband is "the private doctor of the VI Army Corps Commander Hilmi Pasha." In the letter, she demands that her husband be returned to Istanbul so that he may be allowed to continue practicing his profession. Letter from Helene Chilingirian to the Ministry of War, BOA/DH.EUM.3.Şube, 28/19.

13. Report from Ambassador of Germany Wangenheim to Prime Minister Bethmann Hollweg, October 5, 1915, PA-AA/Bo.Kon., Bd. 97.

14. Telegram from the governor of Kastamonu to the Ministry of the Interior, August 31, 1915, BOA/DH.EUM., 2. Şube, nr. 10/73.

15. Note written by Mordtmann and attached to a report sent by the German emissary in Sofia Gustav Michahelles to the German ambassador in Istanbul Ernst Hobenlohe Langenburg, September 17, 1915, PA-AA/Bo.Kon., Bd.97. Mrs. Chilingirian had stopped in Sofia after leaving Istanbul; hence the communication from the emissary there to the German Embassy in Istanbul. We also learn from Mordtmann's note that a letter sent to Dr. Chilingirian from Istanbul on August 21 was stamped "address unknown" in Chankiri on August 26 and returned to Istanbul on September 2.

16. Coded telegram from Interior Minister Talat to the district governor's office in Chankiri, August 28, 1915, BOA/DH.ŞFR., no. 55/275.

17. Note written by Mordtmann and attached to the report sent by Michahelles (see endnote 15).

18. Ibid.

19. Letter from the German undersecretary Neurath to Helene Marianne Tchilingirian (Chilingirian), September 23, 1915, PA-AA/Bo. Kon., Bd. 97.

20. Coded telegram from Interior Minister Talat to the provincial administration of Kastamonu, August 31, 1915, BOA/DH.ŞFR., no.55/338.

21. Report from German Ambassador Wangenheim to Prime Minister Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, October 5, 1915, PA-AA/Bo. Kon., Bd.97.

22. Letter from Helene Maria Anna Tschilinguirian-Apell to the German Embassy in Istanbul, November 5, 1915, PA-AA/Bo. Kon., Bd.98.

23. Letter from the German Embassy in Istanbul to Helene Maria Anna Tschilinguirian-Apell, November 26, 1915, PA-AA/Bo. Kon., Bd.98.

24. Letter from Helene Tchilingurian to the German Embassy in Istanbul, October 27, 1915, PA-AA/Bo. Kon., Bd. 97.

25. I was unable to ascertain whether she received Armenian citizenship.

26. I had the great pleasure of meeting Samiram in Nice in January 2009. Since I don't speak French, and she speaks neither German nor English, the brief opportunity to speak with her was managed through an interpreter. For the dates of death of Helene and her son, see Kantian, "Der Dichter," 48.

27. The information is taken from these sources: Mikayel Şamdancıyan's recollections, in Teotig, *Huşartsan: Xrikoris Balakian, Ermeni Kolkotasi* (Vienna: Press of the Armenian

Mekhitarist Monastery, 1922), chap. 14; Sarkis Kılıbcıyan, "İhtiyarin Anlatıkları," *Djagadamard* (Armenian-language daily newspaper), May 22, 1919.

28. In the author's possession.

29. In a 1922 article published in an almanac produced by Teotig, Püzant Kechian described the driver Ismail this way: "The head of the drivers in Chanlıeri was like a grand Agha [lord] of a small village." See: Kechian, "Tırvag Aksori Şirçanen," *Amenun Daretsuyts* (Istanbul, n.p., 1922): 41. I thank Hovhannes Chilingirian for bringing this information to my attention. Kechian, the head writer of the Istanbul newspaper *Püzantiyon* (Byzantium), was able to survive the deportation of the intellectuals to Chanlıeri.

30. Account by Mikayel Şamdancıyan, published in Teotig, *Huşartsan*, 118.

31. Balakian, *Ermeni Kolkotası*.

32. Confidential report from the deputy governor of Ankara to the Interior Ministry, February 6, 1916, BOA/DH.EUM.2.Şube, no. 26/20.

33. Confidential report from the Interior Ministry to the provincial office of Kastamonu, dated February 6, 1916, BOA/DH.EUM.2.Şube, nr. 26/20.

34. *Taksim-1 Vekayi*, no. 3540, May 5, 1919; from the first hearing on April 27, 1919, left column.

35. Vahakn N. Dadrian and Taner Akçam, *Tehcir ve Taktik Divan-ı Harb-i Örfi Zabıtları İttihad ve Terakki'nin Yargılanması 1919-1922* (Istanbul: Bilgi University, 2009), from the preface written by Dadrian.

36. For more detailed information on the testimony of these witnesses see *ibid.*, the chapters on the Party Secretaries Trial. The names of the witnesses, including honorifics such as "Effendi" and "Bey," are given as they appeared in the trial documents.

37. *Atı* (Istanbul), 28 Teşrinievvel (October) 1919.

38. *Atı*, 13 Teşrinisani (November) 1919.

39. *Atı*, 23 Teşrinisani (November) 1919; Simon Effendi's in-court testimony differed from the written statement that he had given earlier about Cemâl Oğuz. In court he said, "I'm not sure whether Cemâl Oğuz Bey was involved with this incident of murder." The judge then read into the record the witness's prior statement.

40. *İkdam* (Istanbul), 23 Teşrinisani (November) 1919.

41. *Atı*, *Alemdar* (Istanbul), 30 Kanunievvel (December) 1919.

42. *Atı*, 28 Kanunisani (January) 1920.

43. *Alemdar*, February 6, 1920.

44. *Alemdar*, February 9, 1920.

45. *Peşam-i Sabah* (Istanbul), May 2, 1920.

46. According to the Muslim calendar, February 7, 1331.

47. According to the Muslim calendar, March 1, 1332.

48. When I published my previous work, *Ermeni Meselesi Hallokunmuştur: Osmanlı Belgelerine Göre Savaş Yıllarında Ermenilere Yönelik Politikalar*, I was unaware of the existence of the confidential statement from the deputy governor of Ankara to Istanbul, February 6, 1916, (BOA/DH.EUM., 2. Şube, 26/20). Relying on the statements that arose from the prosecutions in Istanbul, I had taken as fact that the matter had been tried in Ankara and concluded there. This information will be corrected in future editions.

49. Coded telegram from Interior Minister Talat to the provincial administration of Ankara, May 13, 1916, BOA/DH.ŞFR., no. 63/301.

50. Coded telegram from Interior Minister Talat to the province of Ankara, June 5, 1916, BOA/DH.ŞFR.DR., no. 64/214.

51. Coded telegram from Interior Minister Talat to the province of Ankara, June 7–8, 1916, BOA/DH.ŞFR.DR., no. 64/257.

52. Coded telegram from the Interior Ministry to the governor's office of the province of Ankara, June 8, 1918, BOA/DH.ŞFR.DR., no. 89/39. This telegram was a response to a query sent by the governor's office, June 27, 1918. Written in the margin is the note: "Repeated on 11 July 1918."

53. Yusuf Sarnay, "What Happened on April 24, 1915? The Circular of 24 April 1915 and the Arrest of the Armenian Committee Members in Istanbul," *International Journal of Turkish Studies* 14, nos. 1–2 (2008): 75–103, Sarnay is the general director of the Ottoman archives.