

ANATOMY OF DENIAL

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Denial: Manipulating Sources and Manufacturing a Rebellion **Dikran Kaligian** Turkey's

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One of the key arguments made by genocide deniers is that the deportations were not part of a plan of extermination but rather a response to an Armenian rebellion in the eastern provinces in collaboration with Russia. They go to great lengths to show that those instances, such as in Van, where the Armenian population took up arms against Ottoman troops or paramilitary units that had already committed massacres in neighbouring regions, were not isolated attempts at self-defense but part of a general rebellion. To find the author of this rebellion, the Turkish government and those academics taking part in its denial campaign turn their attention to the only Armenian political party that was organized throughout the Ottoman Empire, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF or Dashnak party).



The crux of the argument is that the ARF, in collaboration with Russia, was conspiring to create a fifth column that would launch guerrilla attacks behind Ottoman lines and stage revolts in Armenian-populated towns and cities. In addition, the argument continues, large numbers of Ottoman Armenians had crossed the border into Russia, where the ARF had formed them into volunteer regiments that had led the Russian invasion of the empire. To properly analyze these claims, it is imperative to look at the actual deliberations and actions of the ARF in the summer and fall of 1914.

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The ARF Eighth World Congress, the highest assembly of the party, began in July 1914, in Erzurum. It was adjourned prematurely because of the outbreak of war in Europe. Therefore, it did not have time to settle all the pressing issues on its agenda. However, it did decide to instruct ARF bodies to do all that was necessary to convince the CUP not to join the war because such a step would have been ruinous not just for the Armenian people but also for the Ottoman government. It also passed a provisional resolution concerning terms of military service, which presumed that Armenian citizens of the Ottoman Empire had an obligation to defend their country.

What happened after the meeting has been a source of disagreement in the historiography. In the years after World War I, Armenian authors wrote that after the World Congress had adjourned, a committee of nine was formed and instructed to complete certain tasks that the congress had been unable to finalize. While the committee was in session, Dr. Bahaeddin Şakir and Ömer Naci Bey arrived as representatives of the CUP and the Ottoman government and met for three days with key figures Rosdom (Stepan Zorian), Agnoui (Khatchadour Maloumian), and Arshag Vramian. Decades of writing since, including works by Richard Hovannisian, Christopher Walker, and Manoug Somakian, has concurred with this narrative. The only exceptions are a handful of authors who express doubt that such a meeting took place and dispute that the CUP proposed the ARF foment rebellion in the Russian Empire during the war. These authors, including Justin McCarthy, Kamuran Gürün, Salahi Sonyel, and Guenter Lewy, all deny that the Ottoman Turks committed genocide beginning in 1915. Recognition that such a meeting between the CUP and ARF occurred would weaken their contention that the ARF was planning and would then execute a rebellion behind Ottoman lines as it would raise the question of what the two parties were negotiating for three days. Yet none of these dissenters provide any sources to support their denial that the CUP was trying to recruit the ARF.

An analysis of their arguments and sources shows that each author bases his position on the work of Esat Uras. Uras' book has long been criticized for the way it misrepresents and exaggerates Armenian revolutionary activism. Second, it is known that Uras was "intimately involved with the machinery of destruction in 1915" as a senior official in the Ottoman Ministry of the Interior. As director of the Directorate for Public Security's Intelligence Department, he received reports from

the provinces on the deportation and extermination of the Armenians. Third, Uras' book can easily be exposed as a highly unreliable source on the topic of the ARF-CUP meeting and on the ARF decision making regarding the war. Its relevant sections include a translation of much of an article by ARF member of parliament Vahan Papazian, that was published in Vem. Uras' version contains critical mistranslation and, while extremely lengthy, omits numerous passages that contradict Uras' thesis. For example, the author directly quotes Papazian's description of how ARF members tried to dissuade the Turkish government from entering the war and mentions a proposal that the CUP "sent to the Erzerum Congress." Rather than conceding that this source confirms that a meeting did take place, Uras omits the footnote specifying that the proposal had been "to take an active role in the Caucasus by creating conspiratorial organizations behind the Russian Army.

Uras also writes that the ARF claimed that there had been an ARF-CUP meeting but that "there are no records or documents to prove these claims." Yet he neglects to inform his readers that the disappearance of all the CUP's papers at the end of the war necessitates a reliance on non-Turkish sources. This type of duplicity is insidious in that it implies that historical claims must have (neutral) evidence to support them while not acknowledging that the actions of the perpetrators have deliberately made this impossible, leaving scholars no other choice but to turn to other available sources—or to exclude an important element of the genocidal process out of fear of criticism. As a result of Uras' faulty scholarship and the failure of his successors to do even a cursory examination of the available sources, there is a manufactured controversy about the meeting.

It has been argued the Committee of Union and Progress members went to the congress to offer the Dashnaks autonomy in Eastern Anatolia if the Dashnaks in the Ottoman and Russian Empires would take part in the war against the Russians, which the Dashnaks refused. There is no real evidence for this assertion, which is based on Armenian sources; but it is not impossible.

Yet, had Uras, Sonyel, or McCarthy examined the Armenian sources, they would have found that a number of the attendees at the World Congress had remained in Erzerum after its adjournment, including ARF delegates Simon Vratzian and Roupen Der Minasian and guest Vahan Minakhorian (a social revolutionary). In their publications, Vratzian and Minakhorian describe a meeting that took place one evening at Erzerum's Sanasarian College. The three ARF negotiators, Rosdom, Agnoui, and Vramian, met with the three World Congress attendees, and Vramian informed them of the details of their negotiations with the CUP representatives. He told them that it was evident that the CUP was convinced that Germany would be victorious and thus, for it, any discussion about the Ottoman Empire remaining neutral was pointless.

Vratzian, Minakhorian, and Der Minasian all published accounts of the ARF-CUP negotiations, including the proposal that the ARF foment rebellion in Russia. According to them, the Armenian representatives had stated that they were adamantly against Turkish entanglement in the war because they believed it could mean the end of the Ottoman Empire in case of Allied victory, which they considered likely. They tried to demonstrate that it was in the Ottoman interest to remain

neutral. The representatives emerged from the negotiations convinced that the party should not alter the stance determined at the World Congress—that during wartime, there should be no rebellion among Ottoman Armenians and all Armenians must do their duty as Ottoman citizens.

Yusuf Halaçoğlu was the long-time president of the Turkish Historical Society, the academic arm of the Turkish government's genocide denial campaign. In his book, he seems to say that the Ottomans offered a deal to the ARF while never admitting that the two parties negotiated; he writes, "But when the Ottoman Empire went to war, the Armenian Congress which met in December 1914 in Erzurum rejected the proposal of autonomy offered by Ottoman officials. Instead it took a decision to support Russia." He cites Joseph Grabill's *Protestant Diplomacy and the Near East* as his source. What is problematic here is not just that Halaçoğlu misses the date of the World Congress by five months, but that he has plucked out the information about the ARF rebuffing the Ottoman offer while ignoring the much more significant information provided on the same page, which contradicts his thesis. Grabill writes that the ARF "worked for Ottoman neutrality" and that the Ottomans had offered autonomy for three Turkish Armenian and two Russian Armenian provinces if Armenians on both sides of the border joined the Ottoman war against Russia. Halaçoğlu also omits Grabill's statement that "the Dashnaksutian demurred, but promised to advise Ottoman Armenians to carry out their citizenship obligations." The omitted passage contradicts Halaçoğlu's claim that the ARF in the Ottoman Empire had decided to support Russia.

Contrary to the denialist historiography, Taner Akçam has found in the transcripts of the post-war military tribunal that tried CUP members a Turkish source confirming an ARF-CUP meeting in Erzerum. The records show that CUP members were sent to meet with the ARF and that "the congress appears to have been simply a means to disguise the true purpose for traveling to Erzerum," which was "to form irregular units of the Special Organization." Şakir was the chief of the political bureau of the Special Organization, and a subsequent instalment of the transcripts indicates that he wanted the ARF members leaving Erzerum at the conclusion of the World Congress to be "apprehended on the way and liquidated." However, the ARF members "succeeded in escaping from the gangs by covering their tracks." Şakir reported to Istanbul on the results of the meetings, and the response from Midhat, the CUP party secretary, is quoted by Akçam: "It has been understood from your communication of 15 August 1330 . . . that the Armenians are not inclined to joint action with us."

Despite the clumsy attempts at sowing doubt that I have described so far, it is clear that several published Armenian sources and the British Parliament's Blue Book present roughly the same account of the meetings between the ARF and CUP negotiators at Erzerum at the start of World War I.

At a later stage in the negotiations, the CUP representatives disclosed that the government had decided to take advantage of the expected German defeat of France and Russia by taking care of some unfinished business. Should the Russians be defeated, the Ottoman army would advance into the Caucasus to either conquer them or incite a revolution there. According to Şakir and Naci, the

Georgians and Azeris in the Caucasus were already preparing for a rebellion against Russian rule. They thought the position of the Armenians could be vital to their success. This was because they were convinced that the ARF had the power and ability to persuade the Russian Armenians to remain loyal to the Russian government until a critical juncture, at which time they would shift their allegiance to the Turks. They assured their interlocutors that the Ottoman government had no interest in occupying the Caucasus but merely wanted to pull it out of Russia's orbit and then give it autonomy. And the extent of such autonomy would be dependent upon how much "dedication and service" to the Ottoman Empire each of the peoples of the region displayed. Finally, they stated that Germany was committed to helping the Ottomans execute the entire plan.

What is clear, then, from the documentary record is that the CUP had unsuccessfully attempted to recruit the ARF into organizing Russian Armenians to form a fifth column behind Russian lines once the war began.

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