# REAL TURKISH HEROES OF 1915

*Posted on August 24, 2013 by Keghart*



**Category:** Opinions

Raffi Bedrosyan, Toronto, 24 August 2013

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If the above statement were to be true, how would you react? How do you think Germans would react? How do you think Jews still living in Germany would react? My guess is that you, the Germans, and the Jews would all find it inconceivable, offensive, and unacceptable.

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And yet, it is true in Turkey, where it is acceptable to name several neighborhoods, streets, and schools after Talat Pasha and other *Ittihat ve Terakki* (Committee of Union and Progress) "heroes" who not only planned and carried out the Armenian Genocide, but were responsible for the loss of the Ottoman Empire itself.

At last count, there were officially 8 "Talat Pasha" neighborhoods or districts, 38 "Talat Pasha" streets or boulevards, 7 "Talat Pasha" public schools, 6 "Talat Pasha" buildings, and 2 "Talat Pasha" mosques scattered around Istanbul, Ankara, and other cities. After his assassination in 1922, Talat was originally interred in Berlin, Germany, but his remains were transferred to Istanbul in 1943 by the Nazis in an attempt to appease the Turks. He was re-buried with full military honors at the Infinite Freedom Hill Cemetery in Istanbul. The remains of the other notorious *Ittihat ve Terakki* leader, Enver Pasha, were also transferred in 1996 from Tajikistan and re-buried beside Talat, with full military honors; the ceremony was attended by Turkish President Suleyman Demirel and other dignitaries.

Is this hero worship misguided or deliberate? Is the denial of 1915 only state policy, or is it wholeheartedly accepted by the Turkish public, brainwashed by the state version of history?

Undoubtedly, there was mass participation in the genocide committed by the *Ittihat ve Terakki* leaders, resulting in the removal of Armenians from their homeland of 3,000 years, as well as the immediate transfer of their wealth, property, and possessions to the Turkish and Kurdish public, and to thousands of government officials. Yet, despite this mass participation and the hero worship, there were also a significant number of ordinary Turks and Kurds, as well as government officials, who refused to participate in the massacres and plunders. There is complete silence and ignorance in Turkey about these righteous officials who refused to follow government orders and instead tried to

save and protect the Armenians. They paid dearly for their actions, often with the loss of their positions or even their lives as a consequence. This article will cite some examples of these real and unsung heroes.

Celal Bey was the governor of Konya, a vast central Anatolian province and a hub for the Armenian deportation routes from north and west Anatolia to the Syrian desert. He knew exactly what the Armenians' fate would be along these routes, or if they survived the deportations and reached Der Zor; he was previously the governor of Aleppo and had witnessed the atrocities there. Celal Bey had attempted to reason with the *Ittihat ve Terakki* leaders, saying that there was absolutely no Armenian revolt in Anatolia, nor in Aleppo, and that there was no justification for the mass deportations. However, one of his subordinates in Marash inflamed the situation by arresting and executing several Marash Armenians, triggering a resistance by the Armenians. As a result, Celal Bey was removed from his governor's post in Aleppo and transferred to Konya. Once there, he refused to arrange for the deportation of the Konya Armenians, despite repeated orders from Istanbul. He even managed to protect some of the Armenians who were deported from other districts and arrived in Konya. By the time he was removed from his post, in October 1915, he had saved thousands of Armenian lives. In his memoirs about the Konya governorship, he likened himself to "a person sitting beside a river, with absolutely no means of rescuing anyone from it. Blood was flowing down the river, with thousands of innocent children, irreproachable old men, and helpless women streaming down the river towards oblivion. Anyone I could save with my bare hands, I saved, and the rest went down the river, never to return."

Hasan Mazhar Bey was the governor of Ankara. He protected the Ankara-Armenian community by refusing to follow the deportation orders, stating, "I am a *vali* , not a bandit. I cannot do this. Let someone else come and sit in my chair to carry out these orders." He was removed from his post in August 1915.

Faik Ali (Ozansoy) Bey was the governor of Kutahya, another central Anatolian province. When the deportation order was issued from Istanbul, he refused to implement it; on the contrary, he gave orders to keep the deported Armenians arriving in Kutahya from elsewhere, and treat them well. He was soon summoned to Istanbul to explain his insubordination, and the police chief of Kutahya, Kemal Bey, took the opportunity to threaten the local Armenians—either convert to Islam or face deportation, he said. The Armenians decided to convert. When Faik Ali Bey returned, he was enraged. He removed the police chief from his post, and asked the Armenians if they still wished to convert to Islam. They all decided to remain Christian, except one. Faik Ali's brother, Suleyman Nazif Bey, was an influential and well-known poet who urged his brother not to participate in this barbarism and stain the family name. Faik Ali Bey was not removed from his post despite his offers of resignation. He ended up protecting the entire Armenian population of Kutahya, except for the one who converted to Islam and was deported.

Mustafa Bey (Azizoglu) was the district governor of Malatya, a transit point on the deportation route.

Although he was unable to prevent the deportations, he managed to hide several Armenians in his own home. He was murdered by his own son, a zealous member of the *Ittihat ve Terakki* Party, for "looking after infidels ."

Other government officials who defied the deportation orders included Reshit Pasha, the governor of Kastamonu; Tahsin Bey, the governor of Erzurum; Ferit Bey, the governor of Basra; Mehmet Cemal Bey, the district governor of Yozgat; and Sabit Bey, the district governor of Batman. These officials were eventually removed from their posts and replaced by more obedient civil servants, who carried out the task of wiping out the Armenians from these locations.

One of the most tragic stories of unsung heroes involves Huseyin Nesimi Bey, the mayor of Lice, a town near Diyarbakir. While the governor of Diyarbakir, Reshit Bey, organized the most ruthless removal of the Armenians in the Diyarbakir region—with a quick massacre, rather than lengthy deportation, immediately outside of the city limits—Huseyin Nesimi dared to keep and protect the Lice Armenians, a total of 5,980 souls. Reshit summoned Huseyin Nesimi to Diyarbakir for a meeting, but arranged to have his Circassian militant guard Haroun intercept him en route. On June 15, 1915, Haroun murdered Huseyin Nesimi and threw him into a ditch beside the road. Since then, the murder location, halfway between Lice and Diyarbakir, has become known as *Turbe-i Kaymakam*, or the Mayor's Grave. The Turkish records document this murder as "Mayor killed by Armenian militants." In an ironic twist of history repeating itself, in October 1993 the Turkish state army attacked Lice, supposedly to go after the Kurdish rebel militants there; instead, they ended up burning down the entire town and killing the civilian population. This became the first case the Kurds took to the European Human Rights Court, resulting in a 2.5 million pound compensation against the Turkish state. At the same time, several wealthy Kurdish businessmen were targeted for assassination and murdered by then-Turkish Prime Minister Tansu Ciller. One of the victims was a man named Behcet Canturk, whose mother was an Armenian orphan who had managed to survive the Lice massacres of 1915.

Governor Reshit was also responsible for firing and murdering several other government officials in the Diyarbakir region who had defied the deportation orders: Chermik Mayor Mehmet Hamdi Bey, Savur Mayor Mehmet Ali Bey, Silvan Mayor Ibrahim Hakki Bey, Mardin Mayor Hilmi Bey, followed by Shefik Bey, were all fired in mid- to late-1915. Another official, Nuri Bey, the mayor of first Midyat and then Derik, an all-Armenian town near Mardin, was also fired by Reshit Bey, and subsequently murdered by his henchmen. His murder was blamed on Armenian rebels. As a result, all of the Armenian males in Derik were rounded up and executed, and the women and children deported.

The names of these brave men are not in the history books. If mentioned at all, they are labeled as "traitors" from the perspective of the official Turkish version of history. While the state and the masses committed a huge crime, and while that crime became a part of their daily life, these men rejected the genocidal campaign, based on individual conscience, and despite the temptation of enriching themselves. These few virtuous men, as well as a significant number of ordinary Turks and

Kurds, defied the orders and protected the Armenians. They are the real heroes, and represent the Turkish version of similar characters in “Schindler’s List” or “Hotel Rwanda.”

Citizens of Turkey today have two choices when remembering their forefathers as heroes: to either go with the mass murderers and plunderers who committed “crimes against humanity,” or the virtuous human beings with a clear conscience who tried to *prevent* the “crimes against humanity.” Getting to know these real heroes will help Turks break loose from the chains of denialist history over four generations, and start to confront the realities of 1915.

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