

**Interview of Ambassador Morgenthau with
Halil Bey, Minister for Foreign Affairs, on Nov. 12, 1915,
at the American Embassy.***

On November 12th, Halil Bey, the new Minister for Foreign Affairs called on the Ambassador for a social visit. In the course of conversation the Ambassador pointed out to him, and the Minister agreed, that very serious mistakes had been committed in the handling of the Armenian Question by the Ottoman Government. The harm was already done, but the Government should use every effort to bring remedy and to correct errors. The Ambassador said that he spoke not with the idea of interfering in internal affairs or criticizing the Government, but as a friend who wishes to see such a serious error corrected.

The Minister, while stating that he deplored the tragic results as well as the excesses and violations committed in this matter, desired to tell the Ambassador the point of view of the Porte not as a justification of those results, but as an explanation which anyone who would judge this matter should take into consideration as attenuating circumstances of the action of the Ottoman Government. He said that, soon after the declaration of war, the Armenian deputy of Van, Vramian, had presented to the Governor General of Van a Memorandum about the local administration. This Memorandum was sent by the Governor General to the Minister of Interior. Talaat Bey had handed it to him and from a perusal of the same it appeared clearly that this Memorandum was the beginning of an independent action on the part of the Dashnagist Committee, as Vramian was one of the leading members of that Committee. Halil Bey said that his Party had wished to act in cordial harmony with the Armenians and believed they had succeeded in doing that until Nubar Pasha started the agitation in the European Cabinets for the so-called reforms in the Eastern provinces. From the action of the Armenian committees, backed by the Armenian press, even by newspapers published in Constantinople, it was clear that the Armenians had national ambitions which, at least in the Government's opinion, were not compatible with Ottoman interests.

The Minister continued: "When I carefully studied this Memorandum and arrived at the conclusion which I mentioned, I wished to warn my Armenian colleagues in the Chamber of Deputies, as I was then Speaker of the House. As Vramian was a Dashnagist, I decided to speak to Zohrab or Vartkes. I did not care to speak to Armenian deputies of any other party because I knew that they mutually hated each other. I therefore called Vartkes to my room and told him that if the Armenians wanted an independent action independent of Ottoman interests, they should await a propitious moment. If our troops were conquered by the Russians and the Russians would occupy our Eastern provinces and our Allies were defeated, then I could understand that the Armenians would like to do something for themselves, but while we were fighting we would not allow the Armenians to jump at our backs;

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if per chance near the war zone, the Armenians would in any way act against our troops, then in self-defense the Ottoman Commander would not only deal with those in the war zone but having in view the fact that the Armenian committees had branches and ramifications all over the country, it would be a duty of the Commander to dispose of all Armenians who happened to be on the rear of the army, and the way to dispose would be to send them a safe distance to the south. Therefore I warned him that they use every effort not to allow any Armenian movement so long as our troops were near the frontier. This same warning was given by Enver Pasha to the Patriarch, but notwithstanding these friendly warnings, there was a revolution at Van and armed action by Armenians elsewhere.”

After Halil Bey’s departure, the Ambassador said as regards this explanation that “This was the pleading of a clever lawyer who was defending a bad case.”

As regards relief, the Minister said that as the Government had ordered these measures, it was the duty of the Government to see that these people were properly settled, housed and fed until they could support themselves. The Government would naturally do its duty; as regards foreign help, he said that the amount of Ltq. 20,000 which the Ambassador has on hand, is in reality nothing in the presence of such a great need. The Ambassador said that if they would permit him to distribute money to the needy, he was sure that he could get 200,000 pounds, to which Halil Bey replied: “Enver Pasha’s opinion is that no foreigners should help the Armenians; whether his reasons are right or wrong, I give them to you as they are. Enver Pasha states that the Armenians are idealists and the minute they see foreigners approach them and help them, they will be encouraged in their national ideals. He therefore wishes to cut and sever for ever all relations between Armenians and foreigners.” The Ambassador said: “Does that mean what Enver Pasha desires is that the Armenians should not in this way be encouraged in realizing their national ideals and attempt further action?” Halil Bey replied, with a smile, “They have no further means of any action whatever.”

The Ambassador asked him how many people are now in the southern provinces and in actual need for help. The Minister said he did not know. The Ambassador asked him if he could not give an approximate figure. He said he could not. The Ambassador asked if they were several hundred thousands. He said he believed so, but could not say how many hundred thousands.

Halil Bey stated that the Director of the Bureau of refugees and Ismail Jambolad had gone to Syria to consult with Djemal Pasha and advise means to settle all these people. They would be settled in small groups in the different villages. When it was pointed out to Halil Bey that that meant they would have neither shelter, nor sufficient food because there was nothing to spare in those villages, even for the villagers themselves, he said that all the people of this country are used to a very frugal life and tight circumstances. “Hereafter,” he said, “they will not die of hunger”. He further stated that the Government had decided to deport no other Armenians: for instance, those of Smyrna and Constantinople will be left alone. When the

Ambassador asked him why was it that, that was due to the personal initiative and the excess of zeal of the new Governor General who, without any instructions from Constantinople, had started the deportation thinking that he would please the central Government. Talaat Bey had called him to the Telegraph Office and given him most categorical instructions to put an end to the deportations.

When Halil Bey was defending the position for deportation while condemning the excesses which were committed in the course of the deportations, he said that as they needed all the regular troops against the enemy, Enver Pasha had been unable to assign more than one battalion for the protection of all the caravans for their homes to their destination. These regular troops of course acted well and forty of them lost their lives in defending the Armenians against the Kurds, but he admitted that as the regular and experienced gendarmes had been enrolled in the army, they had had a new set of gendarmes who also assigned to go with these Armenians and these gendarmes themselves committed many deplorable excesses.

When it was pointed out to Halil Bey that the majority of the Turks themselves entirely disapproved these measures, he did not deny it.

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It is stated that Halil Bey himself is opposed to these measures, but as Minister for Foreign Affairs in the U. & P. Cabinet, he would naturally try to defend the Government for what it had done.