

Henry H. Riggs

DAYS OF TRAGEDY IN ARMENIA

Personal Experiences in Harpoot, 1915–1917



**Days of Tragedy in Armenia:
Personal Experiences in Harpoot
1915–1917**

**Days of Tragedy in Armenia:
Personal Experiences in Harpoot
1915–1917**

Henry H. Riggs



Gomidas Institute
Ann Arbor, Michigan

Gomidas Institute, PO Box 4218, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106-4218, USA
© 1997 by the Gomidas Institute
All Rights Reserved. Published 1997

Printed in the United States of America

04 03 02

5 4 3

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 96-77782
ISBN 1-884630-01-4

Editor's Introduction

HENRY RIGGS, a third generation American missionary in the Ottoman Empire, wrote *Days of Tragedy in Armenia: Personal Experiences in Harpoot, 1915–1917*, after his departure from Harpoot (Kharpert) in 1917.¹ This account, which was never fully edited, was submitted in 1918 to an American government commission investigating various aspects of World War I, including the destruction of Armenian communities in the Ottoman Empire.² These reports supplemented the United States State Department's

1. On 22 March 1918, Rev. Henry Riggs asked James L. Barton for his old letters from Harpoot to help him write an account of his experiences between 1914 and 1917. Rev. Barton obliged, and Riggs thanked him on 19 April 1918 upon receipt of the correspondence in question. See Riggs to Barton, St. Louis, 22 Mar. 1918, and Oakland, Calif., 19 Apr. 1918, file ABC 16.9.7 vol. 25d, Houghton Library.

2. See "Special Reports and Studies," RG 59, General Records of the Department of State, National Archives. Rev. Riggs's manuscript is doc. no. 482. For a general discussion of this archival collection, see Lawrence E. Gelfand, *The Inquiry:*

own diplomatic and consular records, written by American officials, on the Armenian Genocide.³

Historiographical Significance of the Text

Days of Tragedy in Armenia is actually a first-hand account of life in Harpoot during the fateful years of the Armenian Genocide. Set within the context of the First World War, the Ottoman war effort, and the attitude of local Ottoman officials, private citizens, and resident foreigners, Rev. Riggs describes how ordinary Armenians were rounded up and destroyed by the Ottoman government after June 1915. As Riggs explains, this destruction was not anticipated by onlookers and came quite as a surprise (p. 45).

The first convoys of “deportees,” as the Ottoman government termed its victims, were Armenian men who were rounded up and “exiled” in June–July 1915 (p. 75). The destruction of these men was followed by the exile of Armenian women, children, and elderly. The first convoy of these “exiles” was marched out of east Harpoot in early July 1915, while the second left west Harpoot in late July 1915 (p. 119). These deportations were carried out in a systematic manner, with Ottoman gendarmes seeking out individuals, chalking up the homes of the intended victims, and ensuring the removal of Armenians in an orderly fashion.

Rev. Riggs also observed the results of such “deportations” when he visited convoys of Armenians passing through the Harpoot plain from further

American Preparations for Peace, 1917–1919 (New Haven and London, 1963). For a more focused discussion of the reports on the Armenian Genocide collected by this inquiry, see Armen K. Hovannisian, “The United States Inquiry and the Armenian Question, 1917–1919: The Archival Papers,” *Armenian Review* 37, no. 1–145 (Spring 1984), pp. 146–63.

3. See “Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1915, Supplement, The World War,” (Washington D.C., 1928); RG 59, General Records of the Department of State, Internal Affairs of Turkey 1910–1929, National Archives (also available on microfilm); Henry Morgenthau, “The Papers of Henry Morgenthau, Sr.,” Library of Congress, Washington D.C. (also available on microfilm); Armen Hairapetian, “‘Race Problems’ and the Armenian Genocide: The State Department Files,” *Armenian Review* 37, no. 1–145 (Spring 1984), pp. 41–145; Rouben Adalian, ed., *The Armenian Genocide in the U.S. Archives, 1915–1918* (Alexandria, Va.: Chadwick-Healey, 1991) (microfiche compilation); R.G. Hovannisian, *The Armenian Holocaust: A Bibliography Relating to the Deportations, Massacres, and the Dispersion of the Armenian People, 1915–1923*, 2d ed., (Belmont, Mass.: Armenian Heritage Press, 1980); *United States Official Documents on the Armenian Genocide*, comp. and intro. Ara Sarafian (Watertown, Mass.: Armenian Review Books, 1994–).

north and concluded that “deportations” were part of an extermination program organized by the Ottoman government. The abuses and murder of ordinary Armenians during these “deportations” were too persistent to be dismissed as simple aberrations of a purportedly benign official policy of population transfer (Chapter XV: The Turkish Idea of Deportation).

The most powerful aspects of Riggs’s narrative are his commentaries, sometimes in gruesome detail, regarding the destruction of his friends, neighbors, and acquaintances. Although Rev. Riggs’s descriptions are tempered by his peculiarities, including his Protestant missionary zeal, disdain for Turks, and sympathy (or was it pity?) for Armenians, the resulting account lends itself well to a serious reading. This is because the author provides a great deal of detail regarding the events he describes, and he distinguishes between what he personally observed, what he was told, and what he thought. Furthermore, Rev. Riggs’s account can also be corroborated by other contemporary sources from Harpoot, including the dispatches of the American consul at Harpoot Leslie A. Davis, the diaries of the Danish missionary Maria Jacobsen, and the reports of American missionaries, such as Dr. Tacy W. Atkinson, Mary W. Riggs, and Isabelle Harley.⁴

Harpoot: Insights 1915–17

Since Harpoot and its neighboring town of Mezreh became military training and hospital centers in 1914, Rev. Riggs observed the operation of these institutions at first hand. The Ottoman war effort is a common theme throughout Riggs’s account, and his insights regarding these institutions are particularly discerning. According to Riggs, the Ottoman government was ill prepared to conduct a war in 1914, at least in this region, for a variety of reasons: the Ottoman authorities did not have suitable personnel and administrative records to conscript soldiers efficiently (Chapter I); the Ottoman army could not quarter, supply, and meet the basic needs of soldiers adequately (Chapter V); Ottoman military hospitals could not provide the necessary care for their wounded soldiers (Chapter III); finally, there was a

4. See, for example, *United States Official Documents on the Armenian Genocide*, comp. and intro. Ara Sarafian, vol. 3, *The Central Lands* [Harpoot] (Watertown, Mass.: Armenian Review Books, 1995); *Maria Yakobsenin Orakroutiwnnere 1907–1919* (The Diaries of Maria Jacobsen, 1907–1919), translated from Danish into Armenian by Bishop Nerses Pakhdikian and Mihran Simonian (Antelias, Lebanon: Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia, 1979); *Special Reports and Studies, 1917–1919: The Inquiry Documents on the Armenian Genocide*, comp. Ara Sarafian (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Gomidas Institute, in press).

serious cultural gap between officers and men, especially as many of the latter were Kurds who were not conversant in Turkish. These factors resulted in brutal beatings of junior officers and men (p. 41), unpleasant confinement of soldiers in barracks (p. 37), and an amazing rate of draft-dodging, desertions, and various forms of corruption (pp. 4, 20). Many Turks and Kurds did not even serve in the Ottoman army; some managed to make a small fortune during the process! (p. 160)

Riggs took a particular interest in the Kurdish population of the Harpoot region, and pointed out the semi-independence of many Kurdish tribes and the crucial role Dersim Kurds played in saving thousands of Armenians during this period (Chapter XII). Riggs's testimony in this latter regard is also corroborated by other witnesses who lived through this period. For example, according to one Armenian observer, a certain Kurdish leader, Mehmed Ali Agha, was said to have helped close to 10,000 Armenians escape to safety behind the Russian lines between 1915 and 1916.⁵ Later, Rev. Riggs asserted that the Kurds had done "vastly more in the way of the rescue and relief of Armenians than the American missionaries," and that, in some cases, many Kurds had even "carried their friendliness with Armenians to the point of actually suffering with them."⁶

Rev. Riggs was not unaware of the suffering of the Muslims during this period, and he discussed many of the hardships suffered by Turks and Kurds as well (Chapter XX). However, Riggs was careful to point out, that there was a categorical distinction between the fate of Armenians and Muslims during this period: while Armenians were victims of a genocidal policy, the Muslim population suffered primarily as a result of wartime privations, military defeats, and even the destruction of Armenian communities (p. 179).

Some Details Withheld in Rev. Riggs's Original Narrative

Rev. Riggs avoided mentioning a number of people by name in his narrative. This was presumably to maintain some sense of anonymity for the victims of genocide, and to safeguard the well-being of certain individuals who still remained in the Ottoman Empire in 1917. Fortunately, most of these characters can be readily identified by historians today. For example, the Bishop of Diarbekir, who was tortured and murdered in 1915, was Mgrditch Vartabed Chlghadian (p. 53). The three Armenian professors at

5. Haroutioun Pekmezian, "Enver Pashan Kharpertı Mech," in *Kharpert Yev Anor Vosgeghen Tashie*, ed. Vahe Haig (New York, 1959), p. 1429.

6. Riggs to James L. Barton, Reading, Mass., 1 Jan. 1918, in ABC 16.9.7 vol. 25d, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

Euphrates College, who were murdered in the first caravan of eight hundred Armenian men sent out of Harpoot and Mezreh, were Professors Tenekejian, Boujicanian and Nahigian (p. 47).⁷ The only known survivor of this caravan was Melkon Lulejian. He escaped execution and returned to Harpoot to relate the fate of the others (reported on p. 77).⁸ The Armenian children who survived a massacre near Diarbekir and came to Dr. Floyd Smith's office for treatment were from the village of Karabash (p. 52).⁹ The Protestant pastor of Diarbekir whom Riggs mentions was Rev. Hagop Andonian (p. 54). He was killed on the road to Kara-Baghtche.¹⁰ The Protestant pastor of Chunkoush was Reverend Bedros Khachadourian (p. 58). He was murdered while in the custody of Ottoman officials in 1915.¹¹ The Armenian Primate of Harpoot was Bsadz Dzayrakouyn Vartabed Der Khorenian (p. 77).¹² He was killed after being exiled from Harpoot on 23 June 1915.¹³ The "prominent party of Catholics" who were marched out of Harpoot and massacred (around 13 July 1915) included the Catholic Primate of Harpoot, Mgr. Israelian, as well as a French national, Mademoiselle Marguerite Gamat (p. 103).¹⁴ The mixed party of Americans who examined the mass graves of Armenians killed near Harpoot was composed of the American consul Leslie A. Davis, the American missionary Dr. Atkinson, the American consular

7. Dr. Ernest Riggs to Mr. W.W. Peet, Harpoot, 19 July 1915, ABC 16.9.7 vol. 25d, Houghton Library. According to this letter, Prof. Vorperian was killed near Malatia, while Prof. Lulejian and Khachadourian managed to flee into hiding. Also see James Bryce and Arnold Toynbee, *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, 1915–16: Documents Presented to Viscount Grey of Falloden by Viscount Bryce* (London, 1916), doc. no. 69.

8. *The Diaries of Maria Jacobsen*, entry for 6 July 1915.

9. Dr. Smith provides details of these massacre victims in his report to Rev. Barton. See doc. no. 822, deposition by Rev. Floyd D. Smith of Diarbekir, Rowley, Iowa, 21 Sept. 1917, in "Special Reports and Studies," RG 59, General Records of the Department of State, National Archives. This document has been reproduced in *Special Reports and Studies, 1917–1919: The Inquiry Documents on the Armenian Genocide*, comp. Ara Sarafian (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Gomidas Institute, in press).

10. Teotig, *Koghkoto Hay Hokevoraganoutyan*, ed. Ara Kalayjian (New York: St. Vartan's Press, 1985), p. 264.

11. Ibid., p. 282; Karnig Kevorkian, ed., *Chnkoushabadoun*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: St. James Press, 1970), pp. 95–96.

12. Teotig, *Koghkoto Hay Hokevoraganoutyan*, p. 249.

13. Leslie Davis to Ambassador Morgenthau, report, Harput, 11 July 1915, in *United States Official Documents*, vol. 3, p. 14.

14. Leslie Davis to Morgenthau, report, Harput, 24 July 1915, *ibid.*, pp. 20–21, 26. Also see Mgr. J. Naslian, *Les Mémoires de Mgr. Jean Naslian, Évêque de Trébizonde, sur les événements politico-religieux en Proche Orient de 1914 à 1928*, vol. 1 (Beyrouth: Imprimerie Mechitariste, n.d. [circa 1955]), p. 258.

dragoman Haroutioun Pekmezian, and the two cavasses of the American consulate, Garabed and Ahmed (p. 151).¹⁵ Leslie A. Davis subsequently wrote a vivid account for the Department of State, where he described tens of thousands of Armenian corpses he had observed during these trips to the shores of Lake Geoljuk (Lake Hazar today).¹⁶

Editorial Policy

This is the first printing of *Days of Tragedy in Armenia*. Additional introductory materials which accompanied the report are included (pp. xiii–xv). Other than the front matter, an index of proper nouns has been added to the archival manuscript. Rev. Riggs's account is reproduced with the silent editing of spelling errors and punctuation, the insertion of new paragraph breaks, and the incorporation of Riggs's handwritten notations into the printed text. There has been no attempt at standardizing place names, except according to Rev. Riggs's own common rendition of such names.¹⁷ All other changes and comments are noted in brackets.

This publication is an equitable reproduction of the original document, but it does not constitute an archive in print. Those interested in such a level of examination should consult the originals of this manuscript or photographic reproductions.

Ara Sarafian

Gomidas Institute, Ann Arbor, Michigan

14 June 1996

15. Haroutiun Pekmezian, "Pagoum Kharperti Amerigian Hiwbadosaranin," in *Kharpert Yev Anor Vosgeghen Tashte*, p. 1438.

16. Leslie Davis to Ambassador Morgenthau, report, Harput, 30 Dec. 1915, and Leslie Davis's final report written to the Department of State, Port Jefferson, N.Y., 9 Feb. 1918, in *United States Official Documents*, vol. 3, p. 33 and pp. 83–91. Also see *The Slaughterhouse Province*, ed. Susan K. Blair (New Rochelle, N. Y.: Aristide D. Caratzas, 1989).

17. Consequently, Rev. Riggs's rendition of "Harpoot" also appears alongside the American State Department's "Harput," and the more common Western Armenian use, "Kharpert."

Biographical Sketch: Rev. Henry Harrison Riggs

Born Sivas, Turkey, 2 March 1875.

Died in Jerusalem on 17 August 1943.

Professional Life

Graduated from Carleton College, Northfield, Minnesota, 1896.

Taught at Anatolia College, Marsovan.

Graduated from Auburn Seminary, 1902.

Studied in Talas, 1902.

President of Euphrates College, 1903–1910.

Took up evangelistic work in the Harpoot region, 1912.

In the United States from 22 August 1917 to 16 January 1919.

Returned to Harpoot, May 1919 (kicked out by the local authorities without charge or trial).

Arrived in Constantinople, 22 December 1920.

Worked on translating the Kurdish Gospels into Arabo-Kurdish text with a Kurdish scholar.

Transferred to Beirut, September 1923. Took up evangelistic work amongst Armenian refugees in Lebanon and Syria. Also taught in Near East School of Theology.

Served as Executive Secretary of the Near East Christian Council.

Left Beirut for the United States on 15 June 1940.

Returned to Beirut on 14 May 1943.

Family Life

Married Annie C. Tracy on 13 July 1904 at Athens, Pennsylvania. Annie died 23 July 1905.

Married Emma M. Barnum at Harpoot on 2 May 1907. Emma died 27 April 1917.

Married Annie M. Denison in Harpoot on 7 May 1920.