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# Marsovan 1915

The Diaries of Bertha Morley

*Second Edition*

*Bertha B. Morley*

Marsovan 1915  
The Diaries of Bertha B. Morley

Edited by  
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## Contents

|                       |     |
|-----------------------|-----|
| Editor's Introduction | ix  |
| Biographical Sketch   | xiv |
| Map                   | xv  |
| Diaries               | 1   |
| Glossary              | 83  |
| Index                 | 85  |

## Photographs

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Anatolia College, Marsovan. General view                 | 9  |
| Anatolia College, Marsovan. Main building from the back  | 17 |
| Anatolia College, Marsovan. New library-museum in 1912   | 44 |
| Anatolia College, Marsovan. New library-museum completed | 53 |

## Editor's Introduction

Bertha B. Morley served at the Western Turkey Mission of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), the largest foreign missionary organization in the Middle East. The board operated a network of missionary establishments, including hospitals, orphanages, and educational institutions. The individual missions regularly reported to the board in Boston, thereby creating a detailed record of their activities. When in the spring of 1915 the Ottoman government started the extermination of its Armenian citizens, the American missionaries in the interior provinces of the empire bore witness to the crime. In order to conceal their doings, Ottoman officials attempted, with considerable success, to interrupt all missionary communications between the interior of the empire and the outside world. Unable to send dispatches, many missionaries recorded their experiences after their return home in comprehensive reports and autobiographical writings.<sup>1</sup> Others recorded what they saw and heard on a daily basis in their diaries. However, when the missionaries were forced to leave Turkey, many of them left their diaries behind in order to avoid their detection and seizure by the Ottoman customs authorities. In the early 1920s the diaries left behind were smuggled to Constantinople and the United States, where they were handed back to their owners and later remained with their families.

Morley's diary is a detailed account of the initial phase of the Armenian Genocide.<sup>2</sup> She narrates how the crime of genocide was carried out in the Ottoman provincial town of Marsovan and its surroundings. It documents her life in detail, revealing her thoughts and feelings as her friends and neighbors were destroyed. The diary covers the period between May and September 1915. Almost every day she wrote between one-half page and several pages. Sometimes, however, she did not find time to write down her experiences, but filled in later from notes she kept. We therefore have a fairly continuous narrative on the persecution of Armenians in Marsovan.

Morley's notes show how American missionaries and Armenians around them tried to discover the aims of the Ottoman government in

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1. See, for example, Henry H. Riggs, *Days of Tragedy in Armenia: Personal Experiences in Harpoot, 1915–1917* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Gomidas Institute, 1997) and James L. Barton, comp., *"Turkish Atrocities": Statements of American Missionaries on the Destruction of Christian Communities in Ottoman Turkey, 1915–1917* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Gomidas Institute, 1998).

2. A copy of these diaries can be found in the possession of Taderon Press, Reading, England.

1915. Isolated from the outside world, they developed strategies and tricks to get messages through to the American consulate in Samsun and the American Embassy in Constantinople.

Faced with complete social disintegration of their communities, some Armenians chose to convert to Islam in order to save themselves. Others preferred to go on *sevkiat* (deportation) as witnesses to their true faith in Christ. Morley's account reveals her strong religious convictions on this point. Later, when news began to trickle through of the organized mass slaughters accompanying deportations, Morley panicked. In a last note written in 1916 she expressed her fears of future horrors.

As these notes were not intended to be made available to others, they contain information usually not included in correspondence and reports by diplomats, officials, and missionaries who witnessed the Armenian Genocide. As if looking through a window, we are able to grasp, through the diaries of Bertha Morley, a sense of what might be called the beginning of the end for Ottoman Armenians.

Morley's chronicle of events clearly demonstrates the systematic execution of the initial phase of the Armenian Genocide. She describes how Ottoman officials, such as Muammer Bey (governor of Sivas), Sirri Bey (district governor of Amasia), Faik Bey (local governor), together with Mahir Bey and Emin Bey (military commanders) destroyed Armenian communities before the main deportations organized by the Ottoman government.

Like in other places, first community leaders and businessmen were intimidated and blackmailed into paying ransom. Then they were arrested and killed while in prison or during transport to other locations. Having destroyed the communities' leadership, the local authorities now offered conversion to Islam as a way to escape certain death during forthcoming deportations. While most resisted the offer, some tried to save their lives and property through apostasy. The ensuing conflict eliminated internal communal cohesion and ruled out the last chances for resistance on the part of the victims. The authorities could now easily deport whomever they wanted and at whatever pace they desired. They enriched themselves by taking over Armenian properties and coerced Armenian girls and women into forced marriages. These were some of the elements of the genocide of Ottoman Armenians starting in 1915.

The present publication is a complete transcript of the diaries of Bertha Morley covering the period May to September 1915.<sup>3</sup> The original narrative has been silently edited, abbreviations and sentences have been written

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3. An analysis of these diaries will appear as part of the conference proceedings of "Armenia Minor/Pokr Hayk-Sebastia/Sivas" (UCLA, May 1999).

out in full, and an index and new front matter appended. I wish to thank Ara Sarafian and Vincent Lima for making this publication possible.

Hilmar Kaiser  
Bochum, Germany, 1999

## Biographical Sketch

- 1878 Born in Mentor, Ohio
- 1895 Attends Oberlin College, Ohio. Does not graduate due to poor health
- 1898–1900 Attends Lake Erie Conservatory of Music
- 1904 Joins New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. First contacts with the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions
- 1905–10 Teaches at Pleasant Hill Boarding School, Tennessee
- 1911 Visits her sister Lucy and brother-in-law in Marsovan
- 1911–13 Takes up temporary position at the American School in Gedik Pasha, Constantinople
- 1913–16 Joins ABCFM Western Turkey Mission at Marsovan
- 1916 Returns to the United States following closure of Marsovan missionary institutions by Turkish government
- 1916–17 Attends Oberlin Conservatory of Music
- 1918 Joins American Red Cross Commission in Lebanon and Palestine
- 1916-19 Takes over Antoura orphanage near Beirut. This orphanage was set up by the Turkish government for the assimilation of Armenian and Kurdish children in 1915
- 1919 Returns to Marsovan and becomes head of Anatolia Girls' School
- 1921, March Turkish authorities close Anatolia College and American Girls' School. Several Greek teachers are put on show trials and executed. Morley moves to Smyrna (under Greek control) and joins American Collegiate Institute, Smyrna. Witnesses Turkish occupation of Smyrna and ensuing massacre of Christian population. Smyrna is torched. Morley saves a large number of children and others in American institutions. Evacuated to Piraeus, near Athens, where she is engaged in relief work
- 1922–23 Stays at American Girls' School, Salonica
- 1923 Becomes principal of Marsovan Girls' School after it reopens by consent of Turkish government
- 1924 Returns to the United States due to poor health. Receives a B.A. from Lake Erie College
- 1929–41 Becomes principal of Girls School of Anatolia College in Salonica  
Anatolia College in Salonica is closed due to German invasion of Greece.  
Morley returns to the United States
- 1945 Retires
- 1973 Passes away in Claremont, California

Sources: Harriet Morley, *Not by Bread Alone: The Life of Bertha B. Morley*, written for her foster family ([n.p.]: College Press, 1967); "A Case in Point" in *Missionary Herald*, vol. 109 (1913), pp. 100–101; ABCFM Individual Biographies, Box 42, folder 32, Houghton Library (Harvard University).

Map Showing Sivas-Marsovan Region (circa 1914)

