

Secret Archives Show Vatican Tried to Stop Armenian Genocide

The evidence for Pope Francis' condemnation of Turkey's extermination of Christians

Diane Montagna

VATICAN CITY — Why did Pope Francis' controversial comments on Sunday about the "Armenian Genocide" cause such a furor in Turkey?

To help understand the true history behind the 1915-16 atrocity, Aleteia interviewed the German historian and author, Dr. Michael Hesemann, who was in Rome for Sunday's Mass in St. Peter's Basilica commemorating the 100th anniversary of the genocide, otherwise known as Metz Yeghern [the Great Evil].

The atrocity involved the Ottoman government's systematic extermination of its minority Armenian subjects inside their historic homeland which lies within the territory constituting present-day Turkey. The total number of people killed in what is also known as the Armenian Holocaust is estimated at between 1 and 1.5 million.

In a new book entitled, *The Armenian Genocide* [Völkermord an den Armeniern], Hesemann reveals for the first time the content of never-before-published documents on "the greatest crime of World War I," and how Pope Benedict XV and Vatican diplomacy tried to stop the deportations of the Armenians into the Syrian desert, save the victims and prevent the massacre of an entire people.

In this interview, Hesemann shares his findings, which include evidence of Masonic involvement, and expresses both his admiration for Pope Francis for drawing attention to the genocide of Christians and ethnic minorities, and his disappointment over the absence of the German Ambassador to the Holy See at Sunday's commemorative Mass.

Dr. Hesemann, what led you to write a book on what documents contained in the Vatican Archives reveal about the Armenian Genocide?

Actually it was a kind of coincidence. I work as an historian for the "Pave the Way Foundation" in an intensive study of all the aspects of the life of Eugenio Pacelli, the man who eventually became Pope Pius XII.

From 1917-1925, Pacelli was Nuncio in Munich, so I went through the files of the Apostolic Nunciature in Munich, only to discover one folder with the title "Persecution of the Armenians".

I opened it and found a letter of the Archbishop of Cologne, Cardinal von Hartmann, to the Chancellor of the Reich, Graf (Count) Härtling, in which he calls the persecution of the Armenians "not less brutal than the persecutions of the Christians in the first centuries of Christianity." The Archbishop requested an urgent German intervention, unfortunately in vain.

In the same file I found a copy of a letter written by Pope Benedict XV to the Sultan, asking for mercy for the innocent Armenians. These documents both touched me and aroused my curiosity. I felt I had just touched the tip of an iceberg and was sure I would find more data, and indeed I did — some 2500 pages so far.

I soon realized that no historian had ever worked with most of these documents, and that all this information was obviously unknown even to the leading experts on the Armenocide.

Given the importance of their content, I decided to write a book, putting the documents in the

context of what we already know about the events of 1915-18.

What was the most surprising and unexpected insight you discovered in the Vatican Archives about the Armenian genocide?

The most surprising insight was that the Armenian genocide was in fact just part of a bigger plan – the extermination of all non-muslim minorities in the Ottoman Empire.

The ruling “Young Turk” movement came in contact with European ideas of nationalism and the concept that only a homogenous state can be a strong state. That is why they believed that the weakness of the Ottoman Empire was caused by its multi-religious and multi-ethnic character.

They wanted to “heal” this “weakness” by eliminating all foreign elements, which first meant the Christians who numbered 19% of the population in early 1914. Besides the Armenians, also Aramaic and Assyrian Christians, Catholic and Greek Orthodox Christians were persecuted and murdered.

The Turkish claim of a conspiracy between Russia and some Armenian leaders was nothing but a lie to justify those measures. If that were really the case, why did they kill innocent women and children, too? And why didn't they spare the other Christian groups, which were never under suspicion? Indeed, the Turkish Secretary of the Interior, Talaat Bey, quite frankly told Johann Mordtmann of the German Embassy, according to a report to Berlin: “The (Turkish) government uses the war to get rid of our internal enemies – the indigenous Christians of all denominations – without diplomatic interventions by foreign nations.”

This is also what we read in some of the Vatican documents, e.g. a report written by Fr. Michael Liebl, an Austrian Capuchin missionary, who learned in Samsun: “Not the Armenians, the Christians were sentenced (to death) at a secret meeting of the Young Turks 5 or 6 years ago in Thessaloniki.”

What measures did Benedict XV take diplomatically to help save the Armenians from deportation into the Syrian desert?

Already in June 1915, the Vatican had a vague idea of what had happened in Eastern Anatolia. One month later, there was no doubt about the horrible massacres carried out against most of the male Armenian population. For the whole of August 1915, Msgr. Dolci – the Apostolic Delegate in Constantinople – did everything humanly possible to interfere diplomatically – without any success.

When drastic reports reached the Vatican in September 1915, Pope Benedict XV wasted no more time and decided to act. He sent an autograph to Sultan Mehmet V, pleading for mercy for the Armenians. The Turks refused even to receive it. For two months, Msgr. Dolci tried everything to present it to its addressee, but it was not received by the Sultan.

Only when he asked both the German and the Austrian ambassador for help was he granted an audience. When another four weeks later the Sultan answered, most of the deportations were already completed. All promises of the Turks to end the massacres or spare one group or the other – or to let them return home – turned out to be lies.

In December, Pope Benedict referred to the failure of any diplomatic intervention in his allocution to the Cardinals at the Consistory of December 6, 1915. In it, he spoke of “those sorrowful people of the Armenians, almost completely driven into their extermination.”

In June 1916, the Armenian Catholic Patriarch had to inform the Holy See: “The project of the extermination of the Armenians in Turkey is still going on. (...) The exiled Armenians ... are continuously driven into the desert and there stripped of all vital resources. They miserably perish from hunger, disease and extreme climate. (...) It is certain that the Ottoman government has decided to eliminate Christianity from Turkey before the World War comes to an end. And all this happens in the face of the Christian world.”

Why is this only coming to light now?

Well, good question. Of course, the files from the pontificate of Benedict XV have only been open since the 1990s. Besides this, not too many historians have access to them. And perhaps just

nobody had any idea what he would find there — it's only a guess.

Among the documents contained in your book, you include a letter written by the Superior of the Capuchins in Ezrurum, Fr. Norbert Hofer, to the Vatican in October 1915, which states: "The punishment of the Armenian nation (for alleged uprisings) is merely a pretext used by the Masonic Turkish government to exterminate all Christian elements in this country."

Many readers may be surprised to hear mention of the Masons in relation to the Armenian Genocide, particularly in light of the desire at the time to unite Turkey, with Sunni Islam as the state religion? Can you explain how the Masons factor into the Armenian genocide, and who are the "Young Turks" which you referred to earlier?

Yes, of course. It would have been easy and rather populist to blame Islam for the Armenian genocide, especially as we are facing the horrible events of our own time in the very same region, with Islamic States' massacre against Christians and Yazidis in the north of Syria and the Iraq.

But none of the responsible politicians, neither Talaat nor Enver nor Cemal Pasha, was a fanatic Muslim. The Young Turks were anything but fundamentalists. They were a young, revolutionary movement started by Turkish academics who had studied in most cases in Paris, where they came in contact with both the ideals of Masonry and European nationalism. Many of them were accepted by Masonic lodges and indeed the lodge of Thessaloniki became a kind of national headquarters for them.

Talaat Bey — the man responsible for the Armenocide — was even Grandmaster of the Grand Orient of the Turkish Masonry. That's a historical fact. The ideology of the Young Turks can be described as "proto-fascism." Only race did not play any role as the unifying element, since there is nothing like a "racially pure" Turk. Rather, it was substituted by religion, namely Sunni Islam.

Islam was therefore instrumentalized for political reasons. It gave all those who were involved in the killings a rationale, a justification for their deeds. But behind it was the master plan of a political ideology, which misused religion for its purposes, and so sought the homogenization of the Turkish nation.

As an historian who has studied in depth the events and circumstances surrounding the Armenian genocide, particularly those documented in the Vatican archives, what do you make of Turkey's reaction to Pope Francis' statements on Sunday in which he called the Armenian massacre a "genocide"?

I am very grateful to the Holy Father. On Sunday, we not only saw a beautiful, worthy and solemn commemoration of the Armenian martyrdom, we also experienced the victory of truth over diplomacy.

If you know how fanatically Turkey tries every means to debunk the events of 1915-1916, if you follow the chronology of their threats against nations much bigger and more powerful than the Vatican — nations such as France, Germany and the US — you get an idea what it takes to stand up and call a "genocide" what was indeed the first genocide of the 20th century. Thank you, Pope Francis! What a great, wonderful, political pope who indeed acted as the moral conscience of the world and taught us that, as Christians, we should never be afraid of the truth.

The Turkish reaction to his brave remark could be expected. It is always the same. They claim that the Pope was misinformed, although he knows the truth from his own archives. By the way, when will the Turks open theirs?

The Turks even spoke of racism. Should we now assume that, from the Turkish point of view, it is not racist at all to kill nearly a whole nation, a religious and ethnic group, but it is racist to call this a genocide?

It is so sad that the Turks don't realize how they exclude themselves from the community of civilized nations by such acts. I mean, I am German and my nation committed the most horrible crime in history, the Shoah. But at least we admitted what we did, we deeply regret it and we tried anything possible for reconciliation and compensation.

As a Catholic, I believe that every sin and every crime can be forgiven, if you only confess and regret. But what you neither regret nor confess cannot be forgiven either. Turkey only has one chance to overcome the trauma and guilt of the darkest chapter of its history, and that is to confess and regret! And we will all forgive. If not, these wounds will always be wide open, even after 100 years.

What lessons does the history of the Armenian Genocide hold for us today, particularly in light of the present day persecution of Christians in Africa and the Middle East?

If there is one lesson we should learn from the Armenian genocide, it is this: Never turn around, never look away when your brother suffers persecution.

We all, all nations of the civilized world and first of all Germany – Turkey’s ally – share the Turkish guilt, because we allowed this to happen. By opportunism, by giving other topics priority, by what Pope Francis rightly called “the globalization of indifference,” which is so evil. “Cain, where is your brother Abel?” That’s why nobody can ever say that he has nothing to do with the Armenian genocide, the holocaust or the fate of our Christian brothers in Syria and Iraq.

For ignoring their fate and their suffering makes us guilty, too. Not preventing a crime which happens before your very eyes makes you an accomplice of the perpetrator. We should never be ignorant, we should never be indifferent, but rather learn to act responsibly.

This is why I was so very ashamed that, of all the diplomats present in St. Peter’s Basilica that morning commemorating the Armenian martyrs, the one who was missing was Annette Schavan, the German Ambassador to the Holy See. Especially since, as I explained before, Germany as Turkey’s ally holds a special responsibility for their martyrdom. In her case, opportunism won over the truth. And that is a shame. We can only be people of the future if we are not afraid of the past.

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