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*Pour mon collègue de l'université d'Athènes, Hervé Georgelin, éminent chercheur et traducteur pour tant de sujets qui m'intéressent, à commencer par Smyrne, mais aussi pour les populations non musulmanes de l'Empire ottoman, Juifs, Arméniens et autres chrétiens orientaux de notre temps, sujets abordés diulement, grâce à une précieuse polyglotie,*

# The Righteous and People of Conscience of the Armenian Genocide

*en très amical hommage, et en souvenir des rencontres avec mon père, Charles Dédéyan, gardien, avec son frère Christian, de la mémoire de Smyrne,*

*Montpellier, le 4 mars 2024*

*Gérard Dédéyan*

Preface by

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## JOHANNES LEPSIUS (1858–1926)

*'Guardian angel of the Armenian people'*

*A pioneering missionary in the Near East*

Born in Potsdam on 15 December 1858 into a distinguished family, the Protestant missionary, theologian and humanist Johannes Lepsius was the son of Professor Karl Richard Lepsius, the founder of Egyptology in Germany, and Elisabeth Klein, also from a family of intellectuals. It was on a trip to Egypt with his father that the young Johannes first came into contact with the Armenians. His first wife, Maggie Zeller, was the daughter of Reverend Johannes Zeller, from a well-known missionary family in Württemberg. The couple met in Jerusalem, then part of the Ottoman Empire, and had six children, before Maggie's early death in 1898. In 1900, Lepsius married Alice Breuning.

From 1884 to 1886, Lepsius was on the board of the Syrian orphanage in Jerusalem, founded after the massacre of the Christian population in 1860, and so became familiar with the problems affecting the community in Jerusalem. He became one of the founders of the Deutsche Orient-Mission and worked with Johannes Avetaranian (1861–1919), originally from Erzurum in Turkey, from a family reputed to be the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad.

The son of a Dervish, Avetaranian had been a mullah before converting to Christianity, changing his name from Mehmet Sükri to the Armenian Avetaranian, meaning 'son of the Evangelist', at his baptism in Tiflis in 1885. From 1892 to 1897, he worked with Swedish missionaries in the east of present-day Turkestan, and

translated the New Testament into the Uyghur language, a close relative of Anatolian Turkish. From 1899, he worked for the Deutsche Orient-Mission and spent nine months travelling in the Middle East with Lepsius.

After training as an evangelical pastor, Lepsius began his missionary work in Turkey in the 1890s, when he became an eyewitness to crimes committed by the Turkish government at this time. At Urfa in 1895, with the American missionary and educator Corinna Shattuck, he witnessed what she described as the 'Holocaust', when Turkish troops set fire to the Armenian cathedral in the city, immolating the 3,000 Armenian Christians who had sought refuge within it. Shattuck had been sent to Turkey under the auspices of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and lived and worked there from 1873 to 1910. She was particularly active in Urfa, where she founded orphanages and a school for the blind and set up a programme to produce braille editions of Armenian texts. During the First World War, the work Lepsius had begun in Urfa was carried on by the Danish missionary Karen Jeppe.

#### *Work towards German–Armenian solidarity*

Greatly distressed by the massacres suffered by the Armenians in 1894–6 under Sultan Abdul Hamid II, Lepsius devoted all his energies to the Deutsche Orient-Mission, of which he was the president. In 1914, he helped to found the Deutsch-Armenische Gesellschaft (German–Armenian Society), and in parallel with his humanitarian work he continued to study the political context and the causes behind the massacres of the Armenians.

In 1896, Lepsius published *Armenien und Europa* (Armenia and Europe), which he subtitled 'An indictment of the Christian Great Powers and an appeal to Christian Germany'. His first written account of the horrors committed by Abdul Hamid, an ally of Kaiser Wilhelm II (reigned 1888–1918), the work was translated into French and later into English, with extracts translated into Russian. To provide aid to the victims of these persecutions, he founded the Armenisches Hilfswerk, which funded support for Armenian refugees in Anatolia, Persia and Bulgaria. Between 1912 and 1914, he took part in conferences on the Armenian question in Constantinople, Paris, London and Bern.

When he heard about the massacres and deportations in 1915, Lepsius travelled to Constantinople and carried out a lengthy investigation, gathering the materials that would form his celebrated report entitled *Bericht über die Lage des armenischen Volkes in der Türkei* (Report on the situation of the Armenian people in Turkey), published in secret because of military censorship. This was followed by a second edition in which he included his interview with Enver Pasha in 1915, entitled *Der Todesgang des armenischen Volkes* (The death march of the Armenian people).

#### *Lepsius versus the Turkish–German political and military alliance*

On his return to Germany in February 1916, Lepsius gave talks in Berlin and Halle on the massacres of the Armenians, following which a ten-member delegation of churchmen was chosen to present the Christian church's concerns about the Armenian massacres to the Kaiser. Wilhelm II listened attentively and promised to intervene in support of the Armenians by writing to the sultan and to Enver Pasha, minister of war and one of the Young Turk triumvirate running the Ottoman Empire. Sadly, this initiative proved fruitless. In 1915, however, under pressure from Wilhelm II, Enver Pasha agreed to meet Lepsius in Constantinople. At this meeting, Lepsius deployed every possible argument to try to persuade Enver Pasha to halt the issuing of decrees aimed at the wholesale annihilation of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. Enver Pasha's only response was a detailed exposition of his bloodthirsty ambitions and the nationalist ideology he had developed during his years as a student in Paris. An account of this interview is given by the Jewish writer Franz Werfel in his celebrated novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, first published in 1933, which centres on the epic resistance of a group of Armenians on Musa Dagh, the 'Mountain of Moses', and their eventual rescue by the French navy. Appalled by this interview, Lepsius returned to Germany, determined to alert public opinion to the atrocities being perpetrated against the Armenian Christians. Instead, however, he was accused of jeopardizing the wartime alliance between Germany and the Ottoman Empire. The German political classes, who were either enthusiastic supporters of this armed alliance (the liberals) or worried about disturbing the political truce that then held sway (the

social democrats, with the exception of Karl Liebknecht, who opposed the war and who later founded the German Communist Party with Rosa Luxemburg), paid no heed to his warnings. His only support came from Matthias Erzberger, a politician of the Catholic Centre Party, who travelled to Turkey on his own initiative to hold talks with the Young Turk leaders. Later to be the German signatory to the Armistice signed with Marshal Foch at R  thondes on 11 November 1918, Erzberger was the only German politician to take a stand against his government's policy and to attempt to intervene in support of the Armenians, Greeks and Aramaeans. Eventually, the imposition of military censorship forced Lepsius to continue his activities outside Germany.

It was at the risk of his liberty and his life that Lepsius continued his work on his report on the situation of the Armenians in Turkey. After laying out the facts, he examined the question of who was responsible and discussed the economic repercussions and the issue of forced conversions to Islam. The report was a powerful indictment, systematically demolishing the Turkish claims one after another. It was censored by the German government, however, which forbade its publication. Nonetheless, Lepsius managed to send some 20,000 copies to ministers, missionaries and politicians throughout Germany before the censorship came into force and the original text was seized during a search of his home. In his preface to the report, Lepsius wrote:

The most ancient people in Christendom is in danger of being annihilated, insofar as this is within the power of the Turks. Six-sevenths of the Armenian population have been stripped of their possessions, forced from their homes and—unless they convert to Islam—killed or deported into the desert. Just one-seventh have escaped deportation.

In 1919, Lepsius published one of his most important works, *Germany and Armenia 1914–1918: A Collection of Diplomatic Documents*. These documents by the German diplomatic staff and consuls in post in the Ottoman Empire formed a compendium of irrefutable evidence of the criminal intentions of the Young Turks, containing phrases such as: 'The manner in which the deportation is being carried out demonstrates that the government is actually

pursuing the objective of exterminating the Armenian race in the Ottoman Empire.'

Lepsius's fame rests above all on this compendium of diplomatic reports, which—even if published under the constraints of censorship—forms a unique body of evidence demonstrating the Young Turk government's responsibility for the Armenian genocide of 1915–16.

*Final testimony: the Talaat trial*

In 1921, Lepsius appeared as an expert witness in the famous trial in Berlin of the young Armenian Soghomon Tehlirian, who had shot and killed Talaat Pasha, former minister of the interior and principal architect of the Armenian genocide, in a Berlin street. Using official documents, Lepsius was able to expose Talaat's intentions: only 10 per cent of the deportees were to survive the marches; the other 90 per cent were to be massacred along the way, except for the most attractive women, who would be carried off by Turks or Kurds. Lepsius based his evidence on documents he had consulted in the archives of the German embassy in Constantinople and the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Tehlirian was acquitted.

From 1908 to 1925, Lepsius lived and worked in the house that would become known as the Lepsiushaus in Potsdam, south-west of Berlin. Since 2011, the building has housed the Lepsius-Archiv, founded by the theologian Hermann Goltz. In addition to its library, the archive also hosts international meetings and research projects. The Deutsch-Armenische Akademie, planned by Lepsius in 1923, is now based there.

Lepsius died in 1926, aged sixty-eight, in the Italian spa resort of Merano, where he had gone for the sake of his health. He is buried in the Evangelical Cemetery there.

*Sources and further reading*

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