Ahmed Riza, an early leader of the Young Turks and a member of the Ottoman parliament during and after the genocide, and Ali Suad Bey, the governor general of Deir-el-Zor found themselves, as Turkish politicians, witnesses to the unfolding genocide as well as being part of a government that was responsible. What could they do to stop the atrocities? What were the risks of taking a stand?

At the outset of the genocide in 1915, the Ottoman parliament introduced two bills: The Temporary Law of Deportation, which authorized the deportation of the bulk of Turkey’s Armenian population, and The Temporary Law of Expropriation and Confiscation, which allowed the government to confiscate Armenian cash and property and resell it for profit.

There was no debate on the Law of Deportation. It was approved by the cabinet. However, the Temporary Law of Expropriation and Confiscation came up for debate during the fall sessions of the Ottoman parliament in 1915. The debate gave Senator Ahmed Riza an opening. He argued that the proposed law violated basic constitutional protections and pleaded for the government to assume responsibility for the people who were being deported.

1915, deported Armenian family—two older couples and two young children—living under a tent in the desert.
Senator Riza pleaded with his government to allow the deportees, “hundreds of thousands of whom, women, children and old people, are helplessly and miserably wandering around the streets and mountains of Anatolia, to return to their original places of residence or to settle wherever they wish before the onset of winter.” He then submitted a draft bill that proposed to postpone the Temporary Law’s application until after the end of the war, arguing that the Temporary Law was, “contrary to...the Ottoman Constitution.... [I]t is also inimical to the principles of law and justice.” Riza’s actions provoked a strong backlash and ultimately no action was taken on Riza’s proposal. Despite the pressure he faced, Riza continued to speak out forcefully. In a later session of parliament, Riza once again took up the issue of confiscated Armenian property. He argued:

It is unlawful to designate the Armenian assets and properties as “abandoned goods” for the Armenians, the proprietors, did not abandon their properties voluntarily; they were forcibly...removed from their domiciles and exiled. Now the government through its officials is selling their goods... Nobody can sell my property if I am unwilling to sell it... If we are a constitutional regime functioning in accordance with constitutional law we can't do this. This is atrocious. Grab my arm, eject me from my village, then sell my goods and properties, such a thing can never be permissible. Neither the conscience of the Ottomans nor the law can allow it.93

In December 1916, Riza continued his resistance when he took on the special organization, which had become primary actors in the genocide. Without raising questions about its actions directly, Riza argued that the law allowing convicts to enroll in the special organization degraded the military. He argued that:

Our nation’s respect for the military, its esteem of and affection for the military corps, is great. Those who are enrolled in it are [expected to] not only protect its rights, but also its honor... Parents, who learn of the presence in the army of murderers and criminals, do not want to send their offspring to it; even if they did, they would do it with [feelings of] loathing and disgust... [The convicts’] immorality and wicked attitudes can, however, be contagious for their companions, and corrupt the sense of morality in the Army.” 94

After the war, Riza's first speech in the new Ottoman Senate publicly exposed the dimensions of the massacres. He declared:

All Ottomans, irrespective of race and creed, shall equally benefit from [the blessings of] justice and freedom during the reign of his Imperial Majesty [the new Sultan, Vahdeddin.] The Sublime Highness, His Imperial Majesty, will not allow that the orphans and widows of those Armenians who were savagely killed off, those Arabs who were hanged and exiled, be overwhelmed by miseries on this earth. There shall be no more people weeping and moaning in places of exile.95
Riza wasn’t the only Ottoman politician to try to make a difference. Many Armenian survivors describe the heroic acts of Turks, some of whom were in positions of power, who tried to save their lives. Several witnesses recorded the efforts of a Turkish governor, Ali Suad Bey, to save the lives of Armenians who had been deported and placed under his supervision in Deir-el-Zor [now part of Syria]. An American eye-witness believed that Ali Suad Bey’s example makes it clear that, “even if one is prepared for a moment to admit a reason of state for the mass-deportation of the Armenians … it was surely not necessary for the Turkish authorities to betray basic humanity.” He recalled:

A few months ago, 30,000 Armenians in various camps outside of the town were … under the protection of the governor, Mutessarif Ali Suad Bey…. I would like to remember this man’s name, who has a heart, and to whom the deportees are grateful, for he tried to lighten their miseries…. The mitigating circumstances, under which the Armenians of Der-el-Zor existed, became the cause for a denunciation at the Central Authorities in Constantinople. The “guilty” Ali Suad Bey was sent to Baghdad and replaced by Zekki Bey who is well known for his cruelty and barbarism. I was told horrible things that happened under the rule of the new governor… Ali Suad Bey, this rare example of a Turkish official, had lodged about 1,000 children in a large house, where they were fed at the cost of the municipality.

CONNECTIONS

❖ What risks did Ahmed Riza and Suad Bey take in order to help victims of the massacres? Would you consider them heroes? How do their actions influence the way you think about the choices made by their peers to remain bystanders?

❖ What kinds of arguments did Ahmed Riza use to try to win support in the Ottoman Parliament? Did they appeal to conscience or law? Which arguments do you find most powerful?

❖ Did Ahmed Riza’s and Suad Bey’s actions change policies? Were they able to save lives? Did their actions make a difference?

❖ Ahmed Riza argued that guilt for the massacres of the Armenians belonged to Turkey alone because the killing was a political crime committed by the Ottoman state. If a crime is committed by a state, who should be responsible for pursuing justice?