
The Road to Death

di Arnold Toynbee

trascrizione e cura di Bruna Bianchi

Il brano che segue è tratto dalla versione originale dell'opera di Arnold Toynbee¹: Armenian Atrocities. The Murder of a Nation², pubblicata a Londra nel 1915 (pp. 39-55). Preceduta dal testo di un discorso tenuto alla Camera dei Lords il 6 ottobre 1915 da James Bryce³, negli anni di guerra apparve anche in traduzione francese e svedese ed ebbe un'ampia circolazione. Toynbee basa la propria indagine su una documentazione vastissima: testimonianze di missionari tedeschi e svizzeri, di cittadini americani e di altri paesi neutrali, rapporti consolari, lettere di testimoni oculari pubblicate dalla stampa e testimonianze raccolte dalla American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief (nel testo abbreviata in ACR)⁴.

Insieme alla versione più ampia pubblicata l'anno successivo⁵, l'opera rappresenta ancora oggi una delle fonti più importanti e dettagliate per la ricostruzione degli avvenimenti e delle responsabilità di quanto avvenne

¹ Arnold Joseph Toynbee (1889-1975), nipote dello storico dell'economia Arnold Toynbee, lavorò per il Ministero degli Esteri britannico sia durante la prima che durante la seconda guerra mondiale e partecipò alla Conferenza di pace di Parigi in qualità di delegato britannico. Docente di Storia delle relazioni internazionali all'Università di Londra, diresse gli studi condotti dal Royal Institute of International Affairs dal 1925 al 1955.

² La versione originale apparve a Londra, New York e Toronto pubblicata da Hodder and Stoughton. recentemente è stata pubblicata la versione francese dell'opera arricchita da appendici *Les massacres des Arméniens: le meurtre d'une nation, 1915-1916*, Payot, Paris 2004.

³ Viscount James Bryce, storico e giurista, formatosi a Heidelberg e a Oxford, fu ambasciatore negli Stati Uniti dal 1907 al 1913 e delegato presso il tribunale internazionale all'Aia. Durante il conflitto fu un ardente sostenitore della Società delle Nazioni. A partire dal 1914 presiedette la Commissione di inchiesta nominata dal governo britannico e composta di giuristi e studiosi con lo scopo di ricostruire le violazioni commesse dall'esercito tedesco in Belgio e compilare un rapporto indipendente che apparve nel maggio del 1915 e fu tradotto in 30 lingue. *The Bryce Report. Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages*. Contrariamente all'indagine di Arnold Toynbee, il Rapporto Bryce fu considerato in alcune sue parti poco attendibile.

⁴ La Commissione, fondata nel 1915, era presieduta da James L. Barton e Cleveland H. Dodge, inviò viveri e fondi all'ambasciata americana a Costantinopoli.

⁵ *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. Documents Presented to Viscount Grey of Fallodon Secretary of State for Foreigner Affairs by Viscount Bryce* (compilato da Arnold Toynbee, British Governmental Documents Miscellaneous n. 3), Causton and Sons, London 1916. L'opera è consultabile in rete all'indirizzo: <http://www.lb.byu.edu/~rdh/wwi/1915/bryce/a00tc.htm>.

nell'Impero Ottomano tra il 1896 e il 1916. Toynbee dimostrò la determinazione e la pianificazione del genocidio ed individuò i responsabili nei membri del partito dell'İttihad. Scriverà più tardi nella sua autobiografia: "quel genocidio fu commesso con il pretesto della legalità da un governo che agiva a sangue freddo"⁶. Il provvedimento sulla deportazione temporanea del 14/27 maggio 1915, mai ufficialmente promulgato dal Parlamento la cui attività fu sospesa dal primo marzo al 28 settembre, fu lo strumento decisivo.

La deportazione, come risulta con evidenza dal terzo capitolo del volume: The Road to Death che qui riproduciamo integralmente, coinvolse in maggioranza donne, bambini e anziani. Gli uomini infatti erano già stati disarmati, imprigionati e messi a morte. "Per le donne e bambini - scrive Toynbee - non si dispose il massacro diretto come per gli uomini. Nello progetto del governo il loro destino non era il massacro ma la schiavitù o la deportazione"⁷.

Nella trascrizione sono state omesse le virgolette nel caso di citazioni in corpo minore nella versione originale.

In this agonizing state of apprehension the bands of Armenian women were driven forth on their road. There was a heroism about their exodus, for there was still a loophole of escape, the same alternative of apostasy that had tempted their husbands and fathers. And in their case, at least, apostasy brought the certainty of life, because the condition laid down was their immediate entrance into the harem of a Turk. Life at the price of honour-most of them seem to have rejected it; and yet, if they had known all that lay before them, they might have judged it the better part. As it was, they clutched at the desperate chance of immunity, and presented themselves for the march - playing too unsuspectingly into their conductors' hands. For the gaol-bred gendarmes had no intention of conducting the caravan intact to its destination.

Some were sold into shame before the march began. "One Moslem reported that a gendarme had offered to sell him two girls for a medjidieh (about three shillings and two pence)". They sold the youngest and most handsome at every village [end page 39] where they passed the night; and these girls have been trafficked in hundreds through the brothels of the Ottoman Empire. Abundant news has come from Constantinople itself of their being sold for a few shillings in the open markets or the capital; and one piece of evidence in Lord Bryce's possession comes from a girl no more than ten years old, who was carried with this object from a town of North Eastern Anatolia to the shores of the Bosphorus. These were Christian women, as civilized and refined as the women of Western Europe, and they were enslaved into degradation. Yet they were more fortunate than their companions who were denied even this release from their terrible journey; and these were old women, mothers of families, mothers actually with child, who were

⁶ Arnold Toynbee, *Experiences*, Oxford University Press, London 1969, p. 341.

⁷ *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire*, cit.

herded on to meet the intolerable hardships which their journey held in store.

Women with little children in their arms, or in the last days of pregnancy, were driven along under the whip like cattle. Three different cases came under my knowledge where the woman was delivered on the road, and because her brutal driver hurried her along she died of haemorrhage. Some women became so completely worn out and helpless that they left their infants beside the road (A.C.R. American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief).

This latter fact is witnessed from several quarters. One piece of evidence tells of a woman throwing her dying child down a well, that [end page 40] she might be spared the sight of its last agony⁸. Another woman, stifled in a crowded cattle-truck on the Anatolian Railway, threw her baby onto the line.

Six agonized mothers, passing through Konieh by this railway to an unknown destination, entrusted their little children to the Armenian families in the city in order to save them alive; but the local authorities tore them away from the Armenians and placed them in Moslem hands.

This last incident comes from the confidential letter to a high Armenian ecclesiastic which has been mentioned above; and testimony from the Armenian Committee's Report only heightens the horror.

An Armenian told me that he had abandoned two children on the way because they could not walk, and that he did not know whether they had died of cold and hunger, whether a charitable soul had taken care of them, or whether they had become the pray of wild beasts. Many children seem to have been thus abandoned. One seems to have been thrown into a well [end page 41].

(This confirms the entirely independent testimony to the same incident from another source, and there is evidence of equal weight for many other incidents of equal horror).

I saw a girl three and a half years old, wearing only a shirt in rags. She had come on foot... She was terribly spare, and was shivering from cold, as were also all the innumerable children I saw on that day (A.C.R.).

Here is a witness who saw one of these caravans on its road.

They went slowly, most of them fainting from want of food. We saw a father walking with a one-day-old baby in his arms, and behind him the mother walking as well as possible, pushed

⁸ The same incident is recorded by a first-hand witness who had come to Constantinople from the interior, and whose general description of the deportations (which tallies exactly with the personal narratives given here) has been resumed by Prof. Hagopian in an article published on September 1st, 1915, by the paper "Armenia" of Marseilles.

by the stick of the Turkish guard. It was not uncommon to see a woman fall down and then rise again under the stick (A.C.R.).

A young woman, whose husband had been imprisoned, was carried away with her fifteen-days-old baby, with one donkey for all her luggage. After one day and a half of travel, a soldier stole her donkey, and she had to go on foot, her baby in her arms (A.C.R.).

But the robbery of their goods was not the worst. These poor, worn-out, perishing women were robbed obscenely of their honour, for any who had not brought a few shillings into the gendarmes' pockets by being sold to richer Moslems were abandoned to the gendarmes' own more brutal lust [end page 42].

At one place the commander of gendarmerie openly told the men to whom he consigned a large company, that they were at liberty to do what they chose with the women and girls. (A.C. R.)

The Armenians deported from a certain town, says another witness who saw them pass, could not be recognized as a result of their twelve days' march... Even in this deplorable state, rapes and violent acts are every day occurrences (A.C.R.).

Age was the only ground of exemption from outrage, and there were women of extreme age in these caravans; for neither age nor sickness gave exemption from slow murder by deportation.

A case worthy of notice was that of F.'s sister. Her husband had worked in our hospital as a soldier-nurse for many months. She contracted typhus and was brought to our hospital... A few days before the deportation, the husband was imprisoned and exiled without examination or fault. When the quarter in which they lived went; the mother got out of bed in the hospital, and was put on an ox-cart to go with her children (A.C.R.).

Indeed, the sick and aged could be trusted to die on the road of their own accord.

The women believed that they were going to worse than death, and many carried poison in their pockets to use if necessary. Some carried picks and shovels to bury those they knew would die by the wayside (A.C.R.)⁹ [end page 43].

Sometimes their misery was ended unexpectedly soon, when their tormentors gave way prematurely to their lust for blood. At one small village the whole tragedy was enacted in one scene.

⁹ The same incident is reported in a document transmitted to Lord Bryce. The names of all the parties concerned are given with exactitude in both accounts.

Forty-five men and women were taken a short distance from the village into the valley. The women were first outraged by the officers of the gendarmerie, and then turned over to the gendarmes to dispose of. According to this witness, a child was killed by having its brains beaten out on a rock. The men were all killed, and not a single person survived out of this group of forty-five (A.C.R.).

The forced exodus of the last part of the Armenian population from a certain district took place on June 1st, 1915. All the villages, as well as three-quarters of the town, had already been evacuated. An escort of fifteen gendarmes followed the third convoy, which included 4,000 to 5,000 persons. The prefect of the city had wished them a pleasant journey. But at a few hours' distance from the town, the caravan was surrounded by bands of a brigand-tribe, and by a mob of Turkish peasants armed with guns, axes and clubs. They first began plundering their victims, searching carefully even the very young children. The gendarmes sold to the Turkish peasants what they could not carry away with them. After they had taken even the food of these unhappy people, the massacre of the males began, including two priests, one of whom was ninety. In six or seven days all males above fifteen years of age had been murdered. It was the beginning of the end. People on horse-back raised [end page p. 44] the veils of the women, and carried off the pretty ones (A.C.R.).

And here is the same story at first hand (A.C.R.), from a lady who actually experienced the horrors of this murderous march.

She tells how the crime began with the hanging of the Bishop and seven other notables, and the wholesale slaughter in a wood of about eighty men, after they had been imprisoned and flogged in prison. "The rest of the population was sent off in three batches; I was among the third batch. My husband died eight years ago, leaving me and my mother and my eight-year-old daughter extensive possessions, so that we were living in comfort Since mobilization, an Ottoman commandant has been living in my house free of rent. He told me not to go, but I felt I must share the fate of my people. I took three horses with me, loaded with provisions. My daughter had some five-lira pieces round her neck, and I carried some twenty liras and four diamond rings on my person. All else that we had was left behind. Our party left on June 1st (old style), fifteen gendarmes going with us.

Then she describes, detail for detail, the surprise attack on the road, the killing of the two priests and of every male over fifteen years of age. Their horses, their valuables, their food-all were taken. "Very many women and girls were carried off to the mountains, among them my sister, whose one-year-old baby they threw away. A Turk picked it up und carried it off, I know not where. My mother [end page 45] walked till she could walk no further, and dropped by the roadside, on a mountain's top. We found on the road many who had been in the previous batches; some women were among the killed, with their husbands and sons. We also come across some old people and their infants, still alive but in a pitiful condition, having shouted their voices away".

And here again the former witness exactly corroborates the narrative.

On the way, says this other testimony, we constantly met murdered men and youths, all covered with blood. There were also women and girls killed near their husbands or sons. On the heights of the mountains and in the depths of the valleys numbers of old men and babies were lying on the ground.

They were on the track of the preceding convoys, and the same picture of death is given by witnesses who followed the route of another caravan a short way from its starting point.

Many persons were obliged to start off on foot without funds and with what they could gather up from their homes and carry on their backs. Such persons naturally soon became so weak that they fell behind and were bayoneted and thrown into the river, and their bodies floated down to the sea, or lodged in the shallow river on rocks, where they remained for ten or twelve days and putrefied.

Yet those were fortunate who found even such a death, for they escaped the increasing torments which the survivors had to suffer [end page 46].

We were not allowed to sleep at night in the villages, says the Armenian lady, "but lay down outside. Under cover of the night indescribable deeds were committed by the gendarmes, brigands and villagers. Many of us died from hunger and strokes of apoplexy. Others were left by the roadside, too feeble to go on". The parallel account confirms her one more in almost identical words, and adds that "the people found themselves in the necessity of eating grass.

Yet even so, many failed to succumb, and the warders had to thin the ranks by still more drastic means.

The worst and most unimaginable horrors, the lady continues, were reserved for us at the bank of the (Western) Euphrates (Kara Su) and the Erzindijan plain. The mutilated bodies of women, girls and little children made everybody shudder. The brigands were doing all sorts of awful deeds to the women and girls that were with us, whose cries went up to heaven. At the Euphrates, the brigands and gendarmes threw into the river all the remaining children under fifteen years old. Those who could swim were shot down as they struggled in the water.

But the narrator was condemned to outlive this spectacle. "On the next stage of the journey, the fields and the hill-sides were dotted with swollen and blackened corpses, which filled and fouled the air with their stench". It was not till the thirty-second day of their march that they reached a temporary halting place, where the narrative comes to an end [end page 47].

What has been this woman's subsequent fate we do not know, for the halting place was less than half way to her final destination, and it is impossible to conceive the suffering already crowded into that first month. The mere physical cruelty of it is appalling—a delicate lady driven thirty-two days' journey on foot through some of the roughest mountain-country in the world. The spiritual torment could perhaps only be fathomed by actual experience. And this is only one narrative out of scores, chosen here because it is delivered with exactitude by the mouth of two witnesses, not because it is in any way unique. On the contrary, the same horrors were being enacted in hundreds of Anatolian towns and villages and over thousands of miles of savage mountain trails, enacted and repeated from the month of April till the present moment. And the narratives are not open to doubt. Those gathered together in the American Committee's Report were all recorded

and endorsed by authoritative auditors. And they are not vague denunciations, or highly coloured generalizations. There are, of course, many general accounts of these atrocities in addition to these individual testimonies; but they, too, are remarkably free from vagueness and exaggeration, and when they are compared with the first-hand evidence, they show agreement with it even in minute details [end page 48]. For instance there is Professor Hagopian's résumé (published in the "Armenia" of Marseilles on September 1st, 1915) of the general impressions gathered by a witness who had recently come from the interior of Anatolia to Constantinople. He describes, soberly and exactly, the gangs of prisoners being driven across the mountains, the blows of the gendarmes, the children born on the road, the mothers and old men dying of exhaustion, even the incident of the woman throwing her baby into the well (see p. 41 above).

The somewhat longer description, given in the letter to a high Armenian ecclesiastic in neutral territory, is so remarkable in its agreement that certain passages deserve to be quoted in illustration.

In four provinces, says this letter, the local authorities gave facilities to those condemned to deportation - five or ten days' grace, permission to execute a partial sale of their property, and the privilege of hiring a cart between several families; but, at the end of several days, the carts left them on the road and returned to town. *The caravans thus formed used to meet on the morrow, or sometimes several days after their start, with bands of brigands, or else with Moslem peasants, who plundered them of everything. The bands fraternized with the gendarmes, and killed the few men or boys included in the caravans. They carried off the women, girls and children, leaving only the [end page 49] old women, who were driven along by the gendarmes with blows of the whip and died of hunger on the road. A first-hand witness tells us how the women deported from a certain province were left, after several days, in the plain of Kharpout, where they all died of starvation (fifty or sixty a day): and the authorities have merely sent a few people to bury them, so as not to endanger the health or the Moslem population... The caravans of women and children are exposed in front of the government buildings in every town or village where they pass, in order that the Moslems may take their choice. The caravan dispatched from [the actual town from which the lady was deported whose narrative we have quoted above] was thinned out in this fashion, and the women and children who remained over were thrown into the Euphrates at the place called Kemalch-Boghazi, just outside Erzindjan.*

This passage is particularly important, because it relates events for which we already have the evidence of two quite independent, first-hand witnesses. Anyone who compares the italicized sentences with the extracts quoted from the Armenian lady and her fellow-victim immediately above, will see that the general report - the story as it circulated through the interior of Anatolia and travelled to Constantinople and Marseilles - is very far from being exaggerated. It is less [end page 50] gruesome, less extreme, in its details, than the original testimony itself; and this evident sobriety of the general rumour, in a case where we can put it to the test, must obviously strengthen our belief in cases where the facts alleged are supported by secondary evidence alone.

This secondary evidence, however, is really superfluous. The first-hand testimonies are abundant enough, and convincing enough, to afford in themselves a thorough exposition of the crime. They are concrete statements, fortified

throughout by the names of well-known individuals who have either witnessed these atrocities or been their victims. For reasons of common prudence these names have to be withheld; but anyone who glances at the American Committee's Report will see by the number of blanks, where names should be, how direct and personal this evidence is.

Moreover, the testimony comes from many independent quarters. From the town where the Armenian lady's journey was broken, we have the narrative of a foreign resident, the citizen of a neutral state. It is a town on the Eastern Euphrates (Murad Su), a meeting-place of routes from north to south, and very many convoys of exiles passed this way.

If, the resident writes, it were simply a matter of being obliged to leave here to go somewhere else, [end page 51] it would not be so bad, but everybody knows it is a case of going to one's death. If there was any doubt about it, it has been removed by the arrival of a number of parties, aggregating several thousand people, from Erzeroum and Erzindjan. I have visited their encampment a number of times and talked with some of the people. They are, almost without exception, ragged, filthy, hungry and ill. That is not surprising, in view of the fact that they have been on the road for nearly two months, with no change of clothing, no chance to wash, no shelter, and little to eat. The Government has been giving them some scanty rations here. I watched them one time when their food was brought. Wild animals could not be worse. They rushed upon the guards who carried the food and the guards beat them back with clubs, hitting hard enough to kill them sometimes. To watch them one could hardly believe that these people were human beings.

As one walks through the camp, mothers offer their children and beg one to take them. In fact, the Turks have been taking their choice of these children and girls for slaves, or worse. In fact, they have even had their doctors there to examine the more likely girls and thus secure the best ones.

There are very few men among them, as most of them have been killed on the road. All tell the same story of having been attacked and robbed by the Kurds. Most of them were attacked over and over again, and a great many of them, especially the men, were killed. Women and children were also killed. Many died, of course, from sickness and exhaustion [end page 52] on the way, and there have been deaths each day that they have been here. Several different parties have arrived and, after remaining a day or two, have been pushed on with no apparent destination. Those who have reached here are only a small portion, however, of those who started. By continuing to drive these people on in this way it will be possible to dispose of all of them in a comparatively short time.

Among those with whom I have talked were three sisters. They had been educated at - and spoke excellent English. They said their family was the richest in - and numbered twenty-five when they left, but there were now only fourteen survivors. The other eleven, including the husband of one of them and their old grandmother, had been butchered before their eyes by the Kurds. The oldest male survivor of the family was eight years of age. When they left -, they had money, horses and personal effects, but they had been robbed of everything, including even their clothing. They said some of them had been left absolutely naked, and others with only a single garment, and when they reached a village their gendarmes obtained clothes for them from some of the native women.

Another girl with whom I talked is the daughter of the Protestant pastor of -. She said every member of her family with her had been killed, and she was left entirely alone. These and some others are a few survivors of the better class of people who have been exiled. They are being detained in an abandoned school-house just outside of the town and no one is allowed

to enter it. They said they [end page 53] practically were in prison, although they were allowed to go to a spring just outside the building. It was there I happened to see them. All the others are camped in a large open field with no protection at all from the sun.

The condition of these people indicates the fate of those who have left and are about to leave from here. I believe nothing has been heard from any of them as yet, and probably very little will be heard. The system that is being followed seems to be to have bands of Kurds awaiting them on the road to kill the men especially and incidentally some of the others. The entire movement seems to be the most thoroughly organized and effective massacre this country has ever seen.

This is the verdict of an eye-witness who saw the Ottoman Government's scheme in full progress. He was witnessing in the twentieth century after Christ the same horrors that had been perpetrated in these regions six and eight centuries before the Christian era. When we read that the Assyrian or Babylonian Government "carried into captivity" such and such a broken people or tribe, we hardly seize the meaning of the statement. Even when we see the process portrayed with grim realism on the conqueror's bas-reliefs, it does not penetrate our imagination to the quick. But now we know. It has happened in our world, and the Assyrian's crime was not so fiendish as the Turk's. "Organized and effective massacre" that is what [end page 54]. Such a deportation means, and that must always have been its implication. But the Assyrian at any rate gave the remnant a chance of life at the end of their journey. They received houses and lands, and often brought a new community to birth in exile. The Turk was more consistent in his cruelty. These people were to be deported to their death, and nothing should relieve them. "I believe nothing has been heard from those who have left from here, and probably very little will be heard", says the witness. Unfortunately, he was in error. Certainly most of those who had been driven over the mountains from the far north must have perished, as he surmised, on their terrible journey. But there were others from Cilicia and Northern Syria who had a shorter road to travel, and these did not succeed in dying by the way. They were reserved for the last and most hideous scene in the drama [end page 55].