



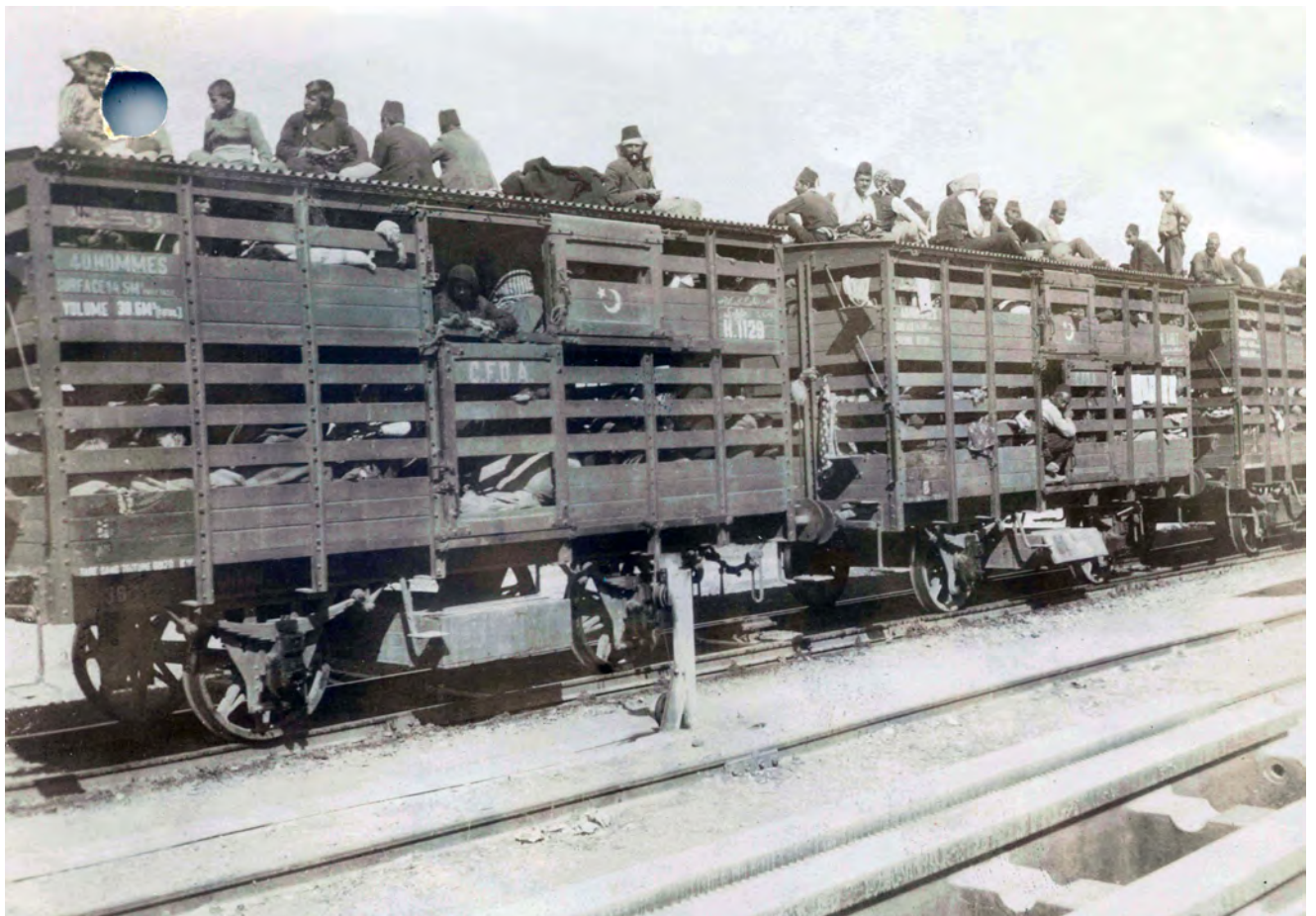
The Baghdad Railway and the Armenians during the First World War

The expulsion and mass murder of the Armenian people living in the Ottoman Empire occurred in the midst of the First World War. Employees and engineers of the Anatolian Railway and the Baghdad Railway, which were under German administration, witnessed these crimes and showed immense personal courage. At least 850 Armenian workers on these railways were saved as a result of their intervention.



On 30 October 1915 – when the First World War had already been raging for more than a year – Franz Günther, the Constantinople-based deputy managing director of the Anatolian Railway Company, sent a small photograph to Berlin. It was intended for his boss, Arthur von Gwinner, who was supervisory board chairman of this railway and, at the same time, Deutsche Bank's Management Board spokesman. Günther accompanied the photo with a few sarcastic comments: "Dear Mr von Gwinner, I enclose a little picture showing the Anatolian Railway as an upholder of cultural values in Turkey. Those are our 'livestock' trucks, in which 880 people are being transported in ten waggons."¹

Arthur von Gwinner (1856-1931)



One of the few photographs documenting the transportation of Armenians is contained in a file held at Deutsche Bank's Orient Office. Franz Günther wrote to Berlin on this subject: "The police transported Armenians from Alayunt to Konya – a total of 369 kilometres – in our 'livestock' trucks; these are ordinary freight waggons divided horizontally in the middle by slats. They crammed 880 people into ten trucks – i.e. 88 individuals per truck."²

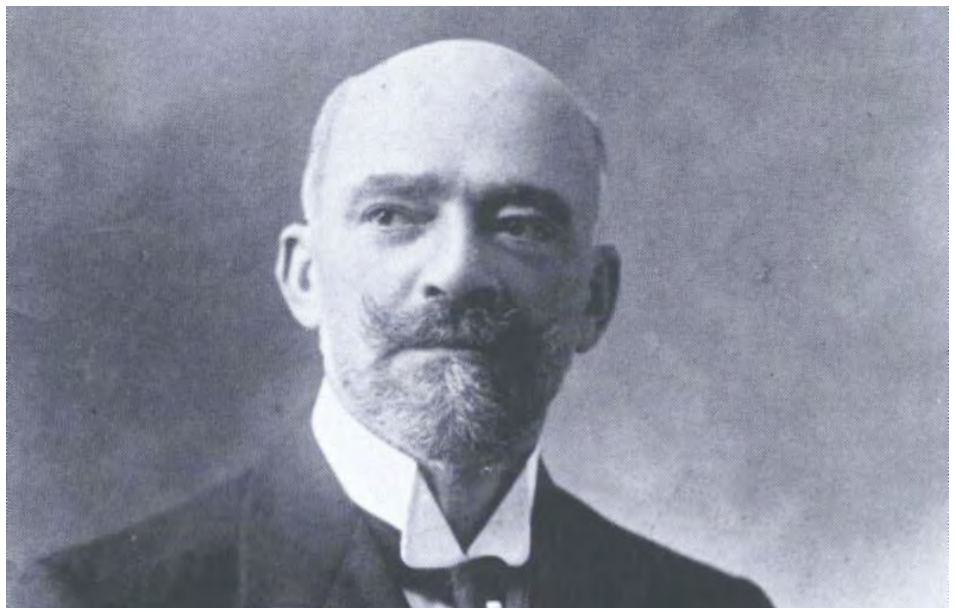
The image shows three small livestock trucks bearing the acronym 'C.F.O.A.' (Chemin de Fer Ottoman d'Anatolie), which clearly identifies them as belonging to the Anatolian Railway. What is striking is that the individuals crammed onto the two floors and the roofs of each truck number far more than the 40 people suggested by the words '40 HOMMES' visible on the side of these trucks. Where and when this picture was taken is unknown, as is the identity of the photographer. Even if Günther knew who had created this image, it is hardly surprising that he passed it on anonymously, because photographing the transportation of Armenians was banned and a punishable offence. Once the Turkish military had discovered that engineers and employees of the Baghdad Railway had taken photographs of Armenians being transported, the military commander in Syria, Djemal Pasha, ordered that these individuals should surrender the negatives and all prints of their photographs to the military commissioner's office within 48 hours. Anyone refusing to surrender such pictures would be punished exactly as if they had taken photographs of war zones.³ The image forwarded by Günther therefore possesses considerable rarity value. The words that he used to comment on the photograph, however, resonate with deep resignation. For months he had been sending distressing reports on the Armenians' fate to Berlin without receiving any discernible response. Although Arthur von Gwinner forwarded these reports to the Foreign Office, the German government was not willing to intervene to admonish its key Turkish ally.

The Ottoman Empire had been familiar territory for Deutsche Bank for decades. As far back as 1888 it had received a concession to build a railway from Constantinople to Ankara, which had already opened by 1892. The Anatolian Railway had been extended as far as Konya by 1896. The contracts for the politically desired extension of this line via Baghdad and on to the Persian Gulf were signed in 1903. Deutsche Bank provided the finance for this 'Baghdad Railway' as well. The construction work involved was difficult and costly. By 1914 the line extension was still 650 kilometres short of Baghdad, with the up to 3,000-metre-high Taurus and Amanus mountain ranges still proving a particularly tough obstacle.

The German engineers and technical experts working locally during the many years of this construction activity were not totally unaware of the ethnic and religious tensions between the major ethnic groups in the Ottoman Empire. In particular the conflicts between Turks and the two Christian minorities – Greeks and Armenians – often burst out into the open. In 1909 there was a pogrom against the Armenian population in Adana and the surrounding province, the horrors of which were only too familiar to Franz Günther in his role as director of the German-Levantine Cotton Company at the time. Estimates of the number of victims vary between 15,000 and 20,000.

However, the persecution of the Armenian population starting in April 1915 – after the Turkish army had suffered heavy defeats fighting the Russians on the Caucasus front – exceeded anything that had gone before. What began with the arrest of the urban Armenian elites and the disarming of Armenian soldiers soon became their systematic deportation and extermination. An unnamed German eyewitness reported the following: "Although I've been in this country for 20 years now and this is the third persecution of Armenians that I have witnessed, I can definitely say that this one is the most thorough ..."⁴ Günther fully shared this assessment, writing to Arthur von Gwinner: "We have to go back a long way in the history of humanity to find anything like this horrific level of cruelty as the extermination of the Armenians in Turkey today. [...] It appears that the government intends to totally eradicate the entire population, as that is the inevitable consequence of its actions – and, if things continue this way, it will surely achieve its objectives."⁵

Although these devastating reports were politely noted in German diplomatic circles, nothing was done about them. In order to take at least some kind of action in the face of such misery, Günther decided to donate money as a form of financial assistance and managed to persuade Arthur von Gwinner to appropriate a further 1,000 Turkish pounds from the Anatolian Railway's reserve fund to provide humanitarian aid. Given the scale of the disaster, it was clear to him that this was merely a drop in the ocean. And he did not even believe that this action would benefit the company's business. On the contrary: he warned that these payments should remain anonymous so that they could not be construed as being directed against the Turkish government.⁶



Franz Günther (1861-1937) was deputy managing director of the Anatolian Railway Company in Constantinople from 1911.

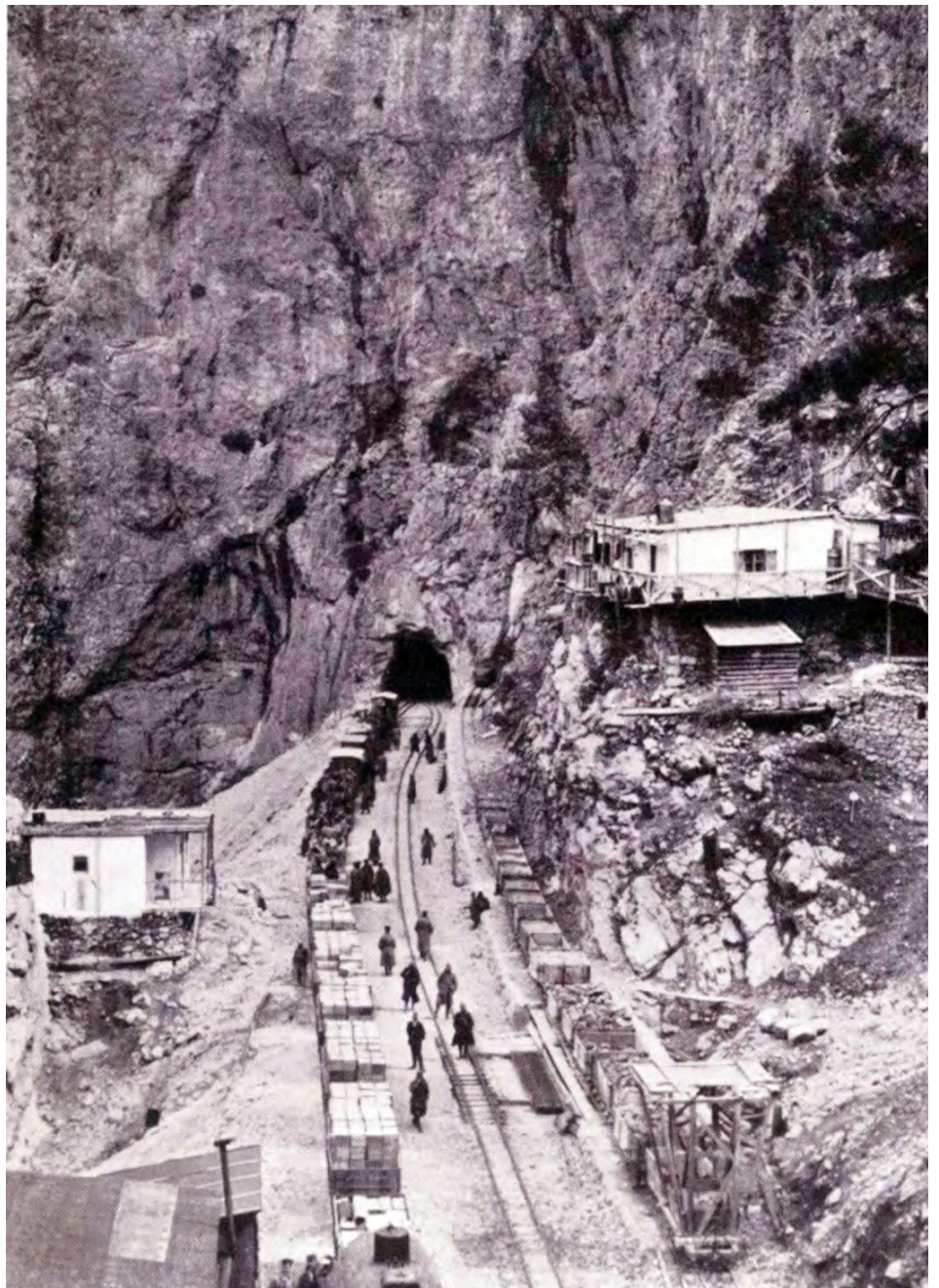
Günther became openly defiant, however, when the Armenian employees of the Anatolian Railway and their families were also threatened with deportation in August 1915. He intervened personally by lobbying war minister Enver Pasha and interior minister Talaat Pasha and managed to achieve the postponement of the measures already approved.⁷ In doing so, Günther threatened that he would have to discontinue operations on all lines of his railway company because such a large number of highly qualified and experienced workers could not be replaced. He claimed that weakening the railway and making it unusable was “a risk of immense proportions that could even affect the outcome of the war”.⁸ Following lengthy and tough negotiations, Günther managed to have the postponement of the deportation effectively commuted to its cancellation. His intervention saved 850 employees and their families. In 1918, after the war had ended, a delegation of Armenian workers and the Armenian patriarch thanked Günther for his intervention.⁹

A railway map of the Ottoman Empire from 1915. The lines of the Anatolian Railway are shown in black, while those of the Baghdad Railway are red. The construction sites in the Taurus and Amanus mountains to the west and east of Adana are indicated by dotted lines.



Compared with the total number of victims, which is estimated to be between 800,000 and one million Armenians, Günther achieved only modest success. Unlike many German military leaders and diplomats, however, he did not accept the argument that any crimes witnessed should be subordinated to the overriding interests of the alliance with the Ottoman Empire. Where the predominant tendency was to ignore or even condone what was happening, Günther demonstrated considerable personal courage in opposing senior military and government officials.

While the implied threat of a breakdown in military supplies had been needed to protect the Armenian employees of the Anatolian Railway in Constantinople and the western parts of the country from deportation, it was much more difficult to intervene to prevent their persecution on the railway's inaccessible building sites in the Taurus and Amanus mountains. The labour shortages prevailing on these building sites attracted many Armenians from northern

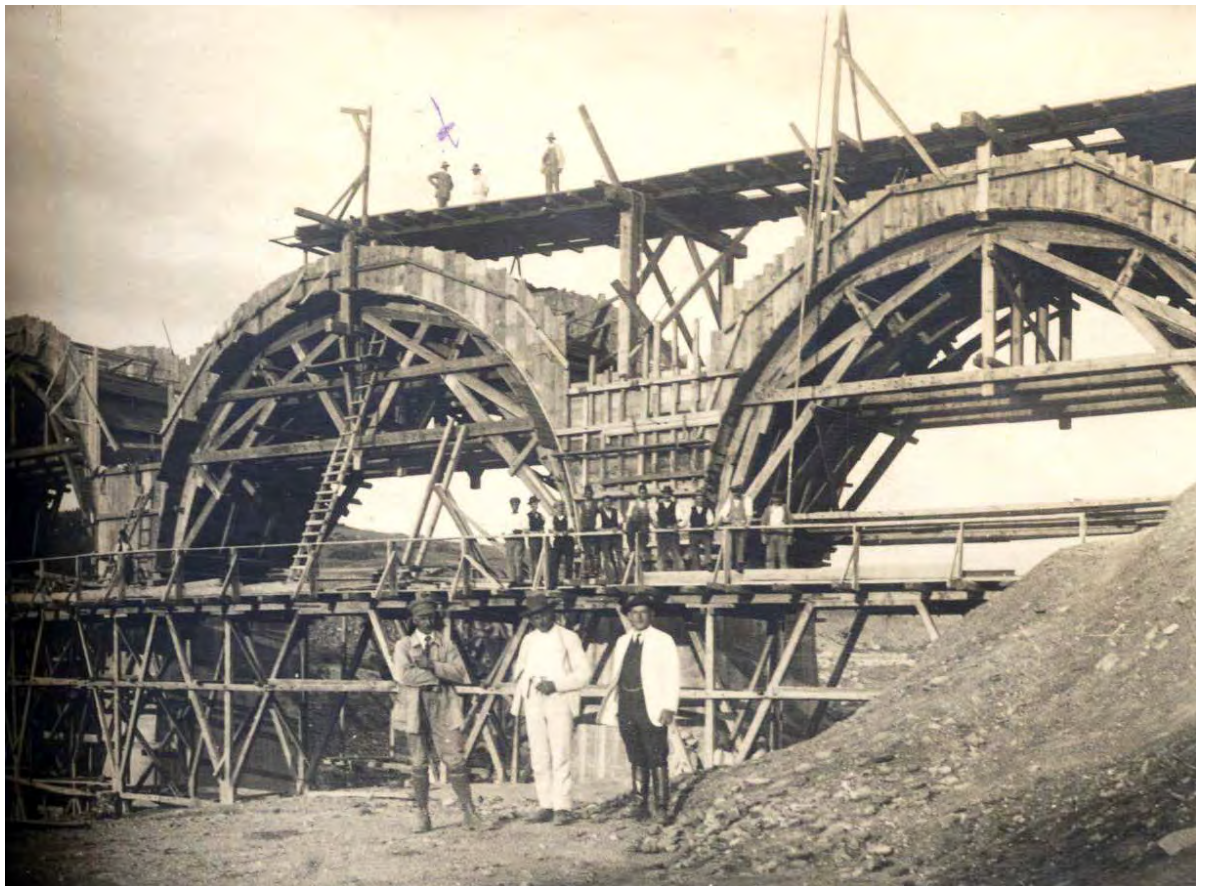


Tunnelling work in the Taurus mountains, 1916/17.

Syria to this mountainous region. Here they found employment – despite being officially banned – and accounted not only for the majority of skilled labourers but also medical doctors and pharmacists. The work was challenging and strategically important. The construction of sophisticated tunnels and bridges was intended to plug the existing gaps on the route between the Anatolian highlands and Adana. The aim was to transport urgently needed supplies more quickly and in larger quantities to the battle fronts near Baghdad and to Sinai.

Building work was carried out by the Company for the Construction of Railways in Turkey. This firm – originally founded in 1909 – was headquartered in Switzerland and its international shareholders were led by Deutsche Bank and Frankfurt-based construction company Philipp Holzmann. Chief engineer Johann Lorenz Winkler headed up the firm in the province of Adana. As early as the autumn of 1915 he was reporting increasing “expulsions of Armenians” and complaining that this was severely hampering the progress of construction because “the Armenians account for virtually all of our skilled labourers”.¹⁰ Winkler used all of the resources at his disposal to advocate on behalf of the Armenian workers when dealing with the local Turkish authorities as well as German diplomatic and military representatives. The Ottoman government refused to recall those who had already been deported, supplying groups of forced labourers instead. In order to protect those Armenians still working on building sites, many were registered under false names and false nationalities. At the same time, official government commissions sought to document the numbers and names of Armenian workers in lists and to classify them into four different categories: young intelligent people with foreign-language skills, young strong workers, middle-aged workers and old people. This paved the way for further deportations.¹¹

These began on 13 June 1916. Without having notified the construction firm in advance, Turkish policemen marshalled Armenian labourers working on a section of the railway line in the Amanus mountains into large groups and marched them from the building sites. Despite the building firm protesting immediately to the governor responsible for the Adana province, the deportations continued throughout the Amanus section of the line. By 17 June 1916, 4,000 workers out of the original total of 8,200 had been deported and a further 1,300 predominantly Turkish workers had fled so that, consequently, only 2,900 remained, which meant that construction work and normal service on the railway line could not be maintained. By 19 June 1916, chief engineer Winkler had written a comprehensive report on the “Armenian expulsions” of the previous days, which was sent to all of the top German military, diplomatic and business leaders involved in the railway. His report described these events in great detail. However, Winkler also stressed that even if all of the original workers were to return, which he thought was unlikely, the railway line through the Amanus mountains could not possibly be completed by the end of 1916. Only when the number of available workers and their abilities could be accurately estimated, he added, might it be possible to predict when construction work would be completed.¹²



Construction of a bridge in the Amanus mountains, 1916/17.

Winkler's protests had an impact to the extent that 1,500 British and Indian prisoners of war arrived in the Amanus mountains on 25 June 1916, having been sent there by the Turkish army's high command. Construction work made sluggish progress and was repeatedly disrupted by further deportations. Hardly had tunnelling work and train services resumed when specialist labourers abandoned the building sites in order to help their families, who had been deported from the town of Marash. Winkler wrote with an air of resignation to a colleague: "They won't rest until, soon, all Armenians are gone; then the same will happen in the Taurus."¹³ And, as it turned out, 505 Armenian workers plus 187 family members were deported from the Amanus section of the railway line in March 1917. The same number was estimated for the Taurus mountains.¹⁴ The Amanus section of the Baghdad Railway was finally completed at the beginning of August 1917 – seven months later than scheduled. Generals Hindenburg and Ludendorff of the German army's high command sent telegrams of congratulation.¹⁵ Significant developments had in the meantime transpired on the battle fronts. Baghdad had been captured by British troops in March 1917 and then, in July 1917, Akaba, a major port on the Red Sea, had also capitulated to the opponents of the Ottoman Empire, whose final collapse thus appeared imminent.

Most deported Armenians did not live to see the end of the war, falling victim to massacres, death marches, food and water shortages, and infectious diseases. The deportations from building sites on the Baghdad Railway formed part of the Ottomans' last great ethnic cleansings. They concluded the genocide of the Armenian people.¹⁶

One hundred years later the German parliament (Bundestag) passed by a large majority a joint resolution of the CDU, CSU, SPD and Green parties, which classified the mass murder of hundreds of thousands of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire as genocide. This resolution also states: “The Bundestag regrets the inglorious role played by the German Empire which, as a principal military ally of the Ottoman Empire, did not attempt to prevent these crimes against humanity despite having received explicit information from German diplomats and missionaries, among others, about the organised expulsion and extermination of Armenians.”¹⁷

The fact that it was possible to at least save individuals can be attributed to the courageous efforts of people such as Franz Günther and Johann Lorenz Winkler, who did not remain silent when they witnessed such horrors.

Martin L. Müller

¹Günther to Gwinner, 30 October 1915, Historical Archive of Deutsche Bank (HADB), Or1704, sheet 50

²Günther to Gwinner, 14 October 1915, HADB, Or1704, sheet 32 et seq.

³Military commissioner to Construction Department III of the Baghdad Railway, 28 August-10 September 1915, in: Wolfgang Gust (ed.), *Der Völkermord an den Armeniern 1915/16. Dokumente aus dem politischen Archiv des deutschen Auswärtigen Amts*, Springe 2005, p. 310 et seq.

⁴Undated anonymous report marked 'strictly confidential' and sent by Günther to the supervisory board of the Anatolian Railway Company in Berlin on 10 August 1915, HADB, Or1704, sheet 4 et seq.

⁵Günther to Gwinner, 17 August 1915, HADB, Or1704, sheet 7

⁶*Ibid.*, sheet 10 et seq.

⁷Günther to Gwinner, 6 August 1915, HADB, Or139

⁸Günther to the supervisory board of the Baghdad Railway Company, 5 November 1918, HADB, Or1704, sheet 78

⁹*Ibid.*, sheet 79 et seq.

¹⁰Winkler to Riese, 16 September 1915, HADB, Or462

¹¹Hilmar Kaiser, *The Baghdad Railway and the Genocide*, in: Richard G. Hovannisian (ed.), *Remember and Denial. The case of the Armenian Genocide*, Detroit 1999, pp. 87-88.

¹²Report by Winkler, 19 June 1916, HADB, Or1704, sheet 70 et seq.

¹³Winkler to Grages, 7 July 1916, HADB, Or464

¹⁴Embassy in Constantinople (Kühlmann) to German Foreign Office, 25 March 1917, HADB, Or464

¹⁵Telegrams of congratulation from Hindenburg and Ludendorff, 3 August 1917, HADB, Or464

¹⁶Hilmar Kaiser, *The Baghdad Railway and the Genocide*, pp. 92-94

¹⁷German Bundestag, printed paper 18/8613, 31 May 2016 (<https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/18/086/1808613.pdf>)