

Prologue



In certain cemeteries, especially in the German-speaking world, honor graves—*Ehrengräber*—are special burial monuments maintained by public expense. Local, state, or national agencies decide, based on the outstanding achievements of the deceased, who should receive such an honor. They may include persons buried with a state funeral, or other prominent citizens. The honor may be awarded to someone who has excelled in science or the arts, in the economic or political realm, or in public service. In Berlin, for example, honor graves have been bestowed on the brothers Grimm, Felix Mendelssohn, and anti-Nazi pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer.¹ In Vienna, too, numerous great musicians have honor graves, among them Beethoven, Mozart, Schubert, and Brahms, but also Franz Werfel, author of *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, a historical novel about Armenian resistance to the genocide.

The scene was Darmstadt, at the historic Old Cemetery, and concerned the status of an honor grave for a German general buried there. In 2015 local authorities had withdrawn the mark of respect for this decorated officer and six other persons, two of whom were also soldiers, who had been interred in Darmstadt. Fred Kautz, a Canadian historian of German descent who had researched the matter, was eager to have the distinction reinstated on the grounds that the general in question, one Otto Liman von Sanders, deserved gratitude for his humanitarian intervention during World War I, when he saved the lives of thousands of Armenians and Greeks slated for extinction by the Young Turk regime.

The year 2015 was the centenary of the genocide against Armenians and other Christian minorities that had been carried out in the Ottoman Empire. Many people in Germany and elsewhere were learning about the events for the first time, through media reports and international commemorations. In 2016, the Bundestag passed a resolution denouncing the genocide committed by the Ottoman regime, albeit in a cautiously worded text.²



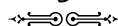
Scholarly debates erupted about the role played by Imperial Germany, which had been Ottoman Turkey's wartime ally. The results of the new studies began appearing regularly in the public realm.

Fred contacted me. Someone had suggested me, as I was currently involved in civil-society efforts with Armenians, Turks, and Germans aimed at working through the history of the genocide. My interest was not only academic but very personal, since all four of my Armenian grandparents had been murdered during the Turkish massacres in 1915, and both my parents, orphans, had been saved by kindhearted Turks. If a German general had also protected Armenians from slaughter, I would be eager to learn more.

In late autumn 2016 my husband and I joined a group of visitors to the Darmstadt cemetery, an old and renowned graveyard. Our guide Fred led us through the hushed grounds, pausing at one grave after another. As we walked, Fred and his colleague, Peter Behr, told us the stories about the lives of the men and women buried there, specifically about why they had—or had not—been rewarded with honor graves, or should, in Fred's view, have been. We stopped in front of the grave of Karl Grein, an anti-Nazi Protestant minister, who had defied the authorities and continued church services for his parishioners; we heard about Konrad Mommsen and his wife Ulla, also anti-Nazis, who, in the postwar period published the anti-monarchical "Political Testament" of his grandfather Theodor Mommsen. There was Georg Fröba, who fought in the Communist resistance, and the naval captain Ludwig Fischer, who sacrificed his own life to save twenty-eight seamen in a shipwreck. All these individuals, Fred said, deserved the honor grave status, but only Fröba's grave displayed the yellow marker and inscribed stone indicating it.³

Then we reached the resting place of General Otto Liman von Sanders (1855–1929), who had received an honor grave in recognition of his military service in World War I. He had been the German commander of the 5th Army, a coalition of three forces (Ottoman Empire, Germany, and Austria-Hungary) in the defense of the Dardanelles. The inscription on his tombstone gave his official military title, "Royal General of the Cavalry, Imperial Ottoman General," followed by "Der Sieger von Gallipoli" — the Victor of Gallipoli.

Then Fred told us how a commission of historians set up by the Darmstadt authorities had reexamined the careers of the individuals buried in honor graves and identified seven names that should be struck from the rolls. Liman was one of them. His yellow marker had been removed, not only because he, like two others, had received special recognition solely because of his status as a war hero but also, in the commission's judgment, because he had been co-responsible for the atrocities perpetrated against the Armenians.⁴



Could that be true? If he had saved Armenians, how could he have been complicit in genocide? I knew the story of how my own parents had escaped the massacres. My mother, an infant, was found in a field of corpses by a Turkish shepherd, and my orphaned father was taken in by a Turkish woman neighbor. Distant relatives were later able to reclaim them. As I later learned, thousands of Armenians who survived owed their lives to the acts of courageous individuals—most of them Turks, but also some Arabs, Kurds, and a handful of Germans.⁵ One such was the general whose gravestone rose up before us.

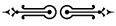
Imperial Germany had a wartime alliance with the Ottoman Empire. And my research would show that, though Liman von Sanders had been a high-ranking military officer in the war, he had repeatedly defied the directives coming from the Turkish Interior Ministry for the deportation and certain death of countless civilians.

Today, more than one hundred years after the fact, few historians of World War I (including Armenians) are aware of Liman's interventions or even know that such interventions took place. Those who do recognize his role usually refer to one intervention, in Smyrna (Izmir) in late 1916, where Liman threatened use of force to prevent a deportation; but they refer *only* to this case.⁶ And, as with the Darmstadt commission, some political and academic figures claim that he was not only complicit in the genocide but was personally responsible for it. This bizarre—if not tragic—paradox troubled me deeply. I saw it as a moral issue, a historical injustice crying out for redress, and it prompted the investigation that has led to this book.

I wanted to find out who this man really was. Where did he come from? Where was he deployed, and what did he do during the war? If he in fact did intervene to prevent the deportations, when and where did it happen? What was his motivation? And, finally, the most important: Why haven't his efforts on behalf of the Armenians and Greeks been acknowledged? Why was he instead accused of complicity with the perpetrators? I was to learn that, after the war, he had been imprisoned on Malta. Why? Who brought the charges against him? Was he guilty? If yes, of what crime?

The more I investigated the story, the more fascinating it became. Filling the World War I archives of the nations that fought each other to the bitter end, as well as those that were neutral, are thousands of documents that shed light on the events of which Liman von Sanders was a part. Once I started digging, I received additional precious assistance from specialists—historians, research assistants, librarians, and so on—across Europe.

The official government papers and diplomatic correspondence lay bare the Kafkaesque intrigues pursued by a variety of political actors, each spurred by partisan motivations, each determined to controvert the historical record and turn a helper into a perpetrator. We know that mach-



inations were carried out by individuals at the highest echelons of power in several governments. We know that not every question has an incontrovertible answer. Some important details remain clouded in mystery, perhaps deliberately so, as several actors had good reason to want their motives to be concealed forever. Due to the paucity of biographical material about Liman von Sanders—some of which may have been destroyed or “lost”—his person remains somewhat enigmatic. But enough factual evidence has come to light to identify the threads of historical truth. I have tried to weave them together to reconstruct the fabric of the drama, and to attempt a portrait, albeit incomplete, of the German officer.

Notes

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945) was a Lutheran pastor in Germany, a founding member of the Confessing Church, who led resistance against the Nazi regime. He was jailed, then hanged in April 1945.
2. The relevant passage in the text of the resolution passed by the Bundestag reads: “By order of the Young Turk regime, the planned expulsion and extermination of over a million ethnic Armenians began in the Ottoman city of Constantinople on 24 April 1915. Their fate exemplifies the history of mass extermination, ethnic cleansing, expulsions, and yes, of genocides, which marked the twentieth century in such a horrific way. We are aware of the uniqueness of the Holocaust, for which Germany bears guilt and responsibility.” Deutscher Bundestag 18. Wahlperiode Antrag der Fraktionen CDU/CSU, SPD und BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN Erinnerung und Gedenken an den Völkermord an den Armeniern und anderen christlichen Minderheiten in den Jahren 1915 und 1916 Drucksache 18/8613 (German Bundestag 18th Legislature, Motion by the CDU/CSU [Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union], SPD [Social Democratic Party], and BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN [The Green Party] Parliamentary factions, “Remembrance and commemoration of the genocide of the Armenians and other Christian minorities in the years 1915 and 1916,” Printed Document 18/8613).
3. Kautz, *Wahre Ehrengräber*, 111–14, 8–10, 19–22, 37–42.
4. Magistrat, *Dokumentation*, 133. On 8 April 2015 the honor status was lifted, and on 22 June 2015 the Darmstadt press reported on the decision.
5. Estimates vary significantly. Künzler, *In the Land of Blood*, 136, wrote in 1928 that there were 80,000 women and children saved by Arabs and Kurds, and thousands more by Turks. Lepsius speaks of 250,000–300,000 Islamized Armenians. Walker, “World War I,” in Hovannisian, *Armenian People*, 272.
6. Trumpener, *Germany and the Ottoman Empire, 1914–1918*, 144; Bloxham, *Great Game of Genocide*, 121; Lisec, *Der Völkermord*, 55–63; Lisec, “General der Kavallerie,” 196–97; and Dinkel, “German Officers,” 87–89, are among the few authors who recognize Liman’s interventions in cases other than Smyrna.