



# SARA CORNING CENTRE FOR GENOCIDE EDUCATION

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## Unit Title

Upstanders during Armenian Genocide

## Lesson Title

Armin T. Wegner: A Social-Justice Activist on Behalf of Armenians and Jews

## Developers

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## Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to

- identify and understand local, national, and global social-justice issues;
- define and understand advocacy;
- critique Armin T. Wegner’s historical advocacy strategies; and
- write and send advocacy letters.

## Materials

- CharityVillage: “Poverty/Social Justice” ([link](#))
- Cheryl Jackson: “The Rise of the Upstanders” (included)
- Armin T. Wegner Society of USA: “Biography” (included)
- Yad Vashem: “Armin T. Wegner” (included)
- Peace News: “Poster #6: Armin T. Wegner, 1915–1916” (included)
- Armin T. Wegner: letter to US president Woodrow Wilson (1919) ([link](#))
- Armin T. Wegner: letter to Chancellor Adolf Hitler (1933) ([link](#))

## Background for Teachers

This lesson focuses on the concepts of social justice, upstanders, and advocacy. It begins with a contemporary discussion, dips into one man’s historical activism, and ends with students writing advocacy letters about issues that interest them. The historical dimension takes the German soldier and medic Armin T. Wegner (1886–1978) as a case study of advocacy. He was a witness to the persecution of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire and of Jews in Nazi Germany. Wegner voiced his concerns in letters to a US president and to Adolf Hitler. During and after his lifetime, he has been celebrated as a heroic and selfless activist.

## Assessment Strategies

- Observation
- Oral question and answer
- Response journal
- Work samples



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## Delivery

### 1. Hook

- Read about the social-justice issues that affect Torontonians, Canadians, and citizens of the world as described by the organizations in [this list](#) compiled by CharityVillage.
- On small pieces of paper, write the names of famous upstanders like Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, and Gandhi and of social justice issues like gender inequality, racism, and minority rights. Have each student take one piece of paper out of a box or bag. Then, ask them to figure out the lesson's major themes through a think-pair-share.

### 2. Upstanders

- Read Cheryl Jackson's article "The Rise of the Upstanders" (attached), which focuses on bullying.
- Using Jackson's questions and responses, lead a discussion about social justice. Help students learn what *advocacy means*, about different forms of advocacy, and what it means to be an upstander locally, nationally, and globally. The most fruitful questions might be these ones:
  - How does being an upstander differ from being a bystander?
  - How does being an upstander differ from being a hero?
  - Why is creating a culture of upstanders important?
  - Can we learn to be upstanders?

### 3. Introducing Armin T. Wegner

- Read the enclosed biographies of Wegner and summarize them to your students.

### 4. Wegner's letters about Armenians (1919) and Jews (1933)

- Distribute Wegner's two letters to your students. Divide them into groups and have them respond to these questions:
  - How does Wegner describe the contributions of Armenians and Jews to the Ottoman and German societies in which they lived? What were their political, social, and financial capabilities?
  - How were the persecutions experienced by Armenians and Jews similar, and how were they different?
  - What were Wegner's aims in writing these letters?
  - If you were writing letters like these, what would you do similarly and what would you do differently?
  - Was Wegner an upstander? a bystander? a hero? How so?

### 5. Culminating task

- Have students highlight the parts of Wegner's letters that they found particularly strong, convincing, or successful. Then, have them draft their own advocacy letters about topics of your or their choosing. (You might return to the organizations mentioned by CharityVillage for ideas, and you might want to draw on issues from within your own classrooms and schools.)



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- Provide feedback on their drafts. Then, have them revise their letters and send them to relevant officials (for example, school-board trustees, city councillors, members of parliament, etc.).
  - You can provide feedback about the letters' structure, tone, vocabulary, argumentation, etc.

# BULLYING EPIDEMIC

Make Every Day Bullying Prevention Day



## The Rise of the Upstanders

Cheryl Jackson 🕒 July 26, 2013



*Cheryl Jackson is an award-winning journalist who has interviewed experts and written on a wide range of topics that affect children and families, including health and development, education and communities. Cheryl has two decades of experience in television and radio production at CBC and TVO. Her awards include Best Edu Parenting Blogger, MindShare Learning; Best Parenting Website, World Media Awards; Canadian Investigative Journalism Award for her three-part documentary on health care and Best Writer by the Saskatchewan Motion Picture Industry Association for a one-hour documentary on family farming. Cheryl is Chair of the York Centre for Education and Community Advisory Council and sits on the Advisory Board of the Third Street Foundation.*

We've all heard about **bullies**, **targets** and **bystanders**. Bullies hurt targets and bystanders let it happen. But there's a fourth group we should consider as we think about our kids and the people around them: the **upstanders**.

**An upstander** is "a person who defends or stands up for a cause or a belief" according to the Collins dictionary. In contrast to a bystander, who is passive and does nothing to help when someone is being bullied, an upstander defends those who are being mistreated.

Samantha Power used the upstander concept to describe those who tried to stop or to document genocide. She's a journalist, executive director of the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at Harvard and the author of *A Problem from Hell: America in the Age of Genocide*. She's also just been nominated to be the US Ambassador to the United Nations.

I hadn't heard the word until a couple of weeks ago when my child's teacher mentioned it. At an information session, she said the school encourages students to be upstanders – to stand up for each other, their community and their environment.

When I was a kid, we called this 'sticking up' for someone and it often meant acting alone. We didn't have the language of targets, bullies, bystanders and upstanders. Today a school or group can foster a culture of empathy and fairness where *everyone* can – and should – be upstanders. Equally, if not more importantly, parents can foster a culture of upstanders within the family. If we do this, children won't have to work alone in bullying situations.

**How does being an upstander differ from being a bystander?** A bystander is unable or unwilling to act. They often feel guilty for this. An upstander takes action and feels empowered.

**How does being an upstander differ from being a hero?** We tend to think of heroes as people who act in big ways, who stand out, who are perhaps physically superior (superheroes) or larger than life. They might seem to have unique qualities that the rest of us could never have. This isn't true. We can teach our kids that all of us have the ability to be heroes by acting in defense of those who are mistreated – by being an upstander.

**Why is creating a culture of upstanders important?** It's very difficult to stand up to a bully alone, much easier and more effective if done as a group. One of the reasons bystanders don't act is because they don't want to rock the boat or go against the norm. We all care about what our group thinks of us, so we tend to follow along. When we're part of a crowd we also think someone else will step in to solve a problem. In a culture of upstanders, everyone in the group will recognize the injustice and will step up, as a group. An upstander in a group of upstanders feels safe and won't have to act alone.

**Can we learn to be upstanders?** Yes, we can. The first step to becoming an upstander is to learn about situations that might require our action. Researchers talk about fostering a "heroic imagination." We can prepare ourselves by visualizing situations that would require our action and then imagining what actions we might take.

**How can schools create a culture of upstanders?** Bullying prevention programs need to talk about the many benefits when *all* kids are treated with respect and kindness. This takes the discussion beyond individuals to the classroom, sports team, drama group, playground, and to the greater good. Teachers need to know and talk about bullying, what it looks and sounds like, and how it affects everyone involved. They should be aware of emerging neuroscience that shows the brains of bullying targets can be permanently changed from the stress of being bullied.

**Children can be given concrete examples and chances to role play** what to do if they encounter a bullying situation – tell an adult (a parent, a teacher, the police), be a friend to the bullied target, and, as a group, tell the bully that "we don't treat people like that." With this information, students and teachers will be more prepared when they have an opportunity to act.

**How can parents create a culture of upstanders?** In my opinion, this is one of the most important lessons parents can give their children – to care about and care for their families, friends, other people in their communities and therefore, people everywhere. We are social creatures. We thrive on healthy connections to one another, and I believe that if our children have a sense of empathy for others, especially those who are vulnerable, they will succeed in every other way. So how can we raise empathic, caring children?

- **Model the behavior yourself.** Children are always watching and learning. We should never forget that. They hear us gossip about the neighbours, ridicule the teacher, grumble about the restaurant service, comment on the way people look or dress. And that's just a start. Think about the badly-chosen things we've all said with our kids within earshot. Show empathy yourself – to your partner, your children, your colleagues at work, your friends and neighbours, to animals, to the environment. Use kind words, be fair and respectful, act on your beliefs, and don't tolerate unfairness in your own home or community. Being kind, empathic and standing up for the rights of others becomes a habit over time and our children will learn how to do it, too. Everyone in the family will benefit from the positive atmosphere.
- **Find opportunities to discuss being an upstander with your kids.** Every day there are stories in the news that can be starting points. Examples are the role of famous upstanders such as Nelson Mandela or the way entire peoples are treated unfairly around the world. Closer to home, or with younger children, you can talk about how to befriend the boy down the street who no one wants to play with, or how your family can volunteer in the community.

- **Have your kids ask “Why?”** Why did Nelson Mandela do what he did? Why does no one want to play with the boy down the street? Why does the bully bully? Why are some people targets? I used to tell my kids that standing up for their friends – being an upstander – helps the bully as much as the target because bullies need to learn how to treat people fairly or they will have no friends themselves. It helps when kids can see the whole picture and understand that they have the power to help both the targets of bullying and the bullies, too.

**Schools and families can create a culture of upstanders** by observing and examining events and situations in their own lives and in the community. Talk about upstanders in our personal relationships, in communities, in politics. Talk about why it’s important to defend those who are mistreated, and how to do it.

**Most importantly, be an upstander yourself.**

**Show your children and students by example.**

**Learn More**

L Blumen, [Bullying: A Pain In The Brain](#), *New Living Magazine*, Nov 2012

Z Franco and P Zimbardo, “[The Banality of Heroism](#),” *Greater Good: The Science Of A Meaningful Life*, UC Berkeley, Fall/Winter, 2006-2007

T Vaillancourt, [How Bullying Changes The Brain](#), *TVO Parents Interview*, TVOParents.org, Oct 29, 2010

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source: <https://bullyingepidemic.com/upstanders/>



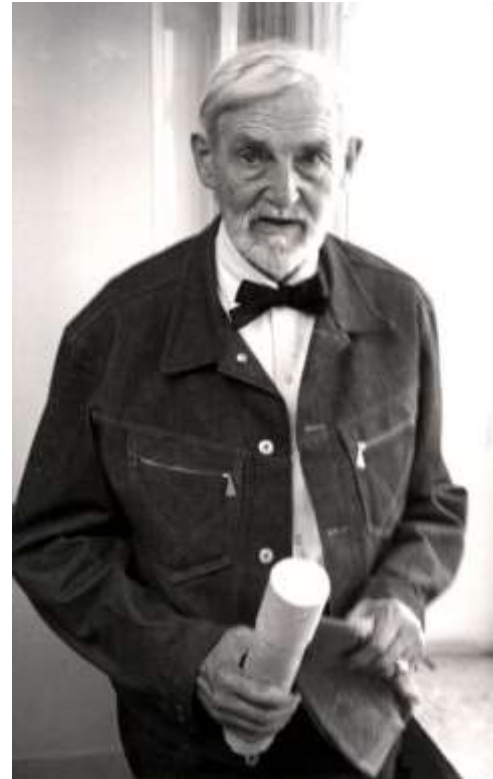
## Biography

### Armin Theophil Wegner

*Intellectual, doctor in law, photographer, writer, poet, civil rights defender and eyewitness to the Armenian Genocide.*

Armin T. Wegner was born on October 16, 1886 in the town of Elberfeld / Rhineland (Wuppertal) in Germany. At the outbreak of World War I, he enrolled as a volunteer nurse in Poland during the winter of 1914-1915, and was decorated with the Iron Cross for assisting the wounded under fire. In April 1915, following the military alliance of Germany and Turkey, he was sent to the Middle East as a member of the German Sanitary Corps. He used his leave to investigate the rumors about the Armenian massacres that had reached him from several sources. Disobeying orders intended to stifle news of the massacres, he gathered information on the Genocide – collected notes, annotations, documents, letters and took hundreds of photographs in the Armenian deportation camps – visible proof of the first systematic genocide of the twentieth century. At the request of the Turkish Command, Wegner was eventually arrested by the Germans and in December of the same year he was recalled to Germany. Hidden in his belt were his photographic emulsions with images of the Armenian Genocide.

In an open letter, which was submitted to American President Woodrow Wilson at the peace conference of 1919, Wegner protested against atrocities perpetrated by the Turkish army against the Armenian people, and appealed for the creation of an independent Armenian state. The tragedy of the Armenian people to which he had been eyewitness in Ottoman Turkey haunted him for the rest of his life. In the 1920s Wegner reached the height of his success as a writer. He became a celebrity with his Russian book, *Five Fingers Over You*, which foresaw the advent of Stalinism.



Wegner was also one of the earliest voices to protest Hitler's treatment of the Jews in Germany. He was the only writer in Nazi Germany ever to publicly protest against the persecution of the Jews. In 1933 he was arrested by Gestapo, a few weeks after he sent an open letter to Hitler protesting the state-organized boycott against the Jews of Germany. He would suffer incarceration in seven Nazi concentration camps and prisons before he could make his escape to Italy.

In 1956 Wegner was awarded the Highest Order of Merit by the Federal German government. The city of Wuppertal, where he was born, decorated him with the prestigious Eduard-Von-der-Heydt prize in 1962.

Armin T. Wegner dedicated a great part of his life to the fight for Armenian and Jewish human rights. In 1967 he was awarded the title "Righteous Among the Nations" by Yad Vashem in Israel, and in 1968 he received an invitation to Armenia from the Catholicos of All Armenians and was awarded with the Order of Saint Gregory the Illuminator. Furthermore, a main street in Yerevan was named after him in his honor.

He died in Rome at the age of 92 on May 17, 1978. In 1996 part of his Ashes were taken to Armenia, where a posthumous state funeral took place near the perpetual flame of the Armenian Genocide Monument.

In 2003 the Armin T. Wegner Award was created by the Arpa Foundation for Film, Music and Art in Hollywood, as a humanitarian honor, awarded to a motion picture that contributes to the fight for social conscience and human rights, a struggle to which Armin T. Wegner devoted his life.

In 2008 the Armin T. Wegner Gesellschaft in Wuppertal, Germany, introduced a literary competition prize carrying Wegner's name.

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source: <http://www.armin-t-wegner.us/biography/>



## Armin T. Wegner

### Germany

Armin T. Wegner, the only writer in Nazi Germany ever to raise his voice in public against the persecution of the Jews, was born on October 16, 1886 in the town of Elberfeld/Rhineland (today part of Wuppertal). He was the scion of an old aristocratic Prussian family, with roots reaching back to the time of the Crusades.

After receiving his doctorate in law, the young Wegner tried his hand successively at being (in his own words) a “farmer, dock-worker, student of drama (with Max Reinhardt), private tutor, editor, public speaker, lover and idler, filled with a deep desire for unraveling the mystery of things.” Already at sixteen, he published his first book of poetry, *I Have Never Been Older than as a Sixteen-year-old*. Between 1909 and 1913, he wrote his cycle of poems, divided into five, *Face of the Cities (Antlitz der Städte)*, which established his reputation as one of the promising pre-expressionist poets. However, the real driving force of his life was a burning moral passion, an unflinching commitment to the causes of justice and humanity, which made him raise his voice whenever he saw these values betrayed or traduced.

The history of the twentieth century provided Wegner with plenty of opportunity to speak out against evil and injustice. On the road to Baghdad in the spring of 1915, serving as an ensign on the staff of German Fieldmarshal von der Goltz, he could observe first hand some of the worst atrocities perpetrated by the Turkish army against the Armenian people. The horrendous scenes of dead and emaciated people that he had witnessed in the Armenian refugee camps - visible proof of the first systematic genocide of the twentieth century - continued to haunt him long after. He protested against them in his *Road of No Return: a Martyrdom in Letters* and in an open letter, which was submitted to American President Woodrow Wilson at the peace conference of 1919.

In the 1920s Wegner reached the height of his success as a writer. He became a celebrity with his Russian book, *Five Fingers Over You*, which foresaw the advent of Stalinism; his travel book, *At the Crossroads of the World*, sold over 200,000 copies.

In April 1933, he sacrificed it all - his German home, his well-being, his liberty - because he could not bear to be party to the complicity of silence that surrounded the persecution of the Jews in the Third Reich. Wegner's open letter (“*Sendschreiben*”) to Hitler was written a few days after April 1, 1933, the date of the general, state-organized boycott against the Jews of Germany. Since no German paper would publish it, Wegner sent the



Armin T. Wegner

“letter” to the “Brown House” (the headquarters of the Nazi party) in Munich, with the request that it be forwarded to Hitler. The six-page letter - originally titled “For Germany” - constituted an eloquent panegyric on the historical greatness of the Jewish people and their immeasurable contribution to human civilization at large and to Germany in particular. It warned that a continuation of the antisemitic campaign was bound to bring disgrace upon the German people.

The receipt of the letter was acknowledged by the head of the chancellery, Martin Bormann, with the remark that it “would be laid before the *Führer* shortly.” Instead of an answer, Wegner was arrested a few days later by Gestapo thugs in Berlin and thrown into the dungeons of the infamous Columbia House, where he was tortured and brutalized until he lost consciousness. He would suffer incarceration in seven Nazi concentration camps and prisons before he could make his escape to Italy. After that, he could never again bear to live in Germany and remained in exile for the rest of his long life. He died in Rome in 1978, virtually forgotten by his own people. His obituary gravestone carries the following Latin lines:

*Amavi iustitiam odi iniquitatem  
Propterea morior in exsilio*

(“I loved justice and hated injustice Therefore I die in exile” - lines attributed to Pope Gregory VII as he lay on his deathbed in 1085 A.D.)

*On May 23, 1967, Yad Vashem decided to recognize Armin Wegner as Righteous Among the Nations.*



Armin T. Wegner plants a tree at Yad Vashem



Tree planted in honor of Armin T. Wegner

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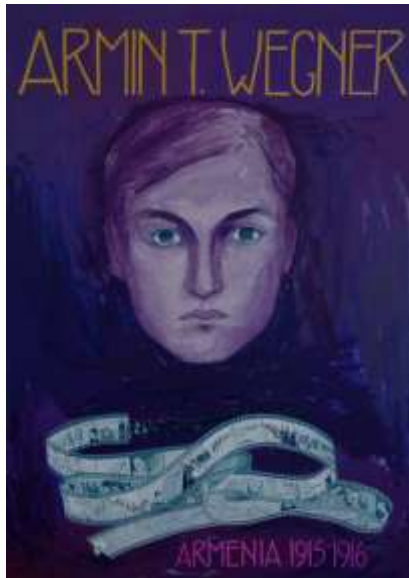
source: <https://www.yadvashem.org/righteous/stories/wegner.html>

# The world is my country

A VISUAL CELEBRATION OF THE PEOPLE AND MOVEMENTS THAT OPPOSED  
THE FIRST WORLD WAR

## Poster #6: Armin T. Wegner, 1915-1916

Peace News



Armin Wegner, Aleppo, 19 October 1916:

*'I have taken numerous photographs during the past few days. I was told that Jemal Pasha, the hangman of Syria, imposed the death penalty on anyone violating the prohibition on photography inside the [Armenian] refugee camps. I carried these images of horror and accusation rolled into a bundle against my stomach. ... I have no doubt that I am committing high treason, but I am conscious that perhaps I have been able to assist these poor people even a little.'* [1]

[Link to Full Size](#)

Along with several other officers [2], he had risked a possible death sentence by taking the pictures in the first place. Now, returning to Germany with the 'images of horror and accusation' rolled into a bundle against his stomach to prevent their detection and destruction by the authorities, he was determined to do whatever he could for the victims. [3]

The year was 1916, and the name of the thirty-year-old soldier was Armin T. Wegner.

Today, these photographs – the result of German soldiers disobeying orders – form 'the core of the witness images' [4] of the single worst atrocity of the First World War: the Armenian genocide – the centrally planned campaign of 'annihilation' [5] by the Ottoman authorities that killed over a million people. [6]

### 'A thousand pleading hands'

The son of an abusive Prussian civil servant and 'the foremost radical suffragist in Breslau' [7], Wegner had opposed the War from its outset [8], but had enlisted as a medical orderly in 1914, presumably to avoid conscription into a combat unit.

Awarded the Iron Cross 'for assisting the wounded under fire' [9] on the Eastern Front, in the Autumn of 1915 he was transferred to Istanbul, where the German medical mission was building a hospital, before he joined the retinue of Field Marshal von der Goltz. [10]

Over a million Armenians were deported from their homes during the genocide [11] and as he followed Goltz across Anatolia en route to Baghdad, Wegner encountered their death marches:

*The roads are lined with the famished and suffering Armenian refugees, like a weeping hedge that begs and screams, and from which rise a thousand pleading hands ... [12]*

### **'A way of no return'**

In the evening Goltz's entourage would often stop near the deportees' makeshift camps, whose 'very existence' the Turks denied, while the Germans 'acted as [if] they did not exist at all'. [13]

Unable to remain a bystander, Wegner defied orders and entered the camps [14]:

*I have just returned, this very moment, from a round of inspection of the camp: hunger, death, disease and desperation on all sides. You could smell the odour of faeces and decay. From a tent came the laments of a dying woman. A mother identifying the dark violet badges of my uniform as those of the Sanitary Corps, came towards me with outstretched hands. Taking me for a doctor, she clung on to me with all her might ... [15]*

Perhaps even more disturbing were the dying children, 'abandoned and reduced to animals, starved, without food or bread, deprived of the most basic human aid, packed tightly one against the other and trembling from the night cold, holding pieces of still smouldering wood to try to get warm.' [16]

'All the mountain valleys, all the river banks are filled with these camps,' he wrote. 'Where are they going? Where? This is a way of no return.' [17]

He took scores of photographs in the camps – a capital crime – 'made notes [and] wrote letters' about the genocide, one of which was published in Germany in 1916 in his mother's feminist magazine *Die Frau der Gegenwart*, and 'carried letters from deported Armenians to Constantinople, where he gave them to [US] Ambassador Morgenthau to send back to the United States'. [18]

He would later recall having seen 'maddened detainees eating their own faeces, women cooking the bodies of their new-born babes, [and] young girls dissecting the bodies, still warm, of their mothers, to search in their intestines [for] the gold hidden from the rapacity of the gendarmes.' [19]

In early 1916, during a brief period of home leave, he contacted a number of dissident politicians, journalists, and opinion makers – including the editor of the Berlin newspaper *Die Welt am Montag*, Hellmut Gerlach – in an unsuccessful attempt to raise awareness about the genocide in Germany, and thereby change German policy towards its Turkish ally. [20]

'Across the world ... newspapers gave immense prominence to the genocide.' [21] But in Germany the topic was verboten. [22]

### **Arrested**

In June 1916, back on Ottoman territory, Wegner was arrested by German soldiers for censorship violations after his 'clandestine mail routes were discovered' and a letter to his mother about the genocide intercepted. [23]

He was put to work in a cholera unit in Baghdad, where the senior hospital doctor was instructed that '[Wegner] must be utilized in such a way so as to do away with any desire ... to wander around Baghdad'. [24]

Travelling back to Istanbul in October 1916, he visited still more camps, and took more photographs – the plates for which he hid ‘rolled into a bundle against [his] stomach’ to avoid detection [25] – as well as testimonies from survivors. [26]

In a ‘completely deserted camp at Rakka’ he found a thirteen-year-old boy, Manuel, who had lost his mother and brothers, and tried to intervene to save the child’s life: ‘For two hours I ... offered [the Arab guards] all the cash I had on me, but they would not release the boy’, he wrote in his diary. [27]

In Istanbul he appears to have been arrested again, and was then held on board a ship until its departure for Berlin. [28]

### **From revolution to exile**

During the German Revolution of 1918/19 Wegner was a member of the Political Council of Intellectual Workers, ‘advocating the formation of a transnational peace movement based on conscientious objection’ [29], and penned an open letter to the Spartacist leader Karl Liebknecht, arguing against revolutionary violence, just days before the latter’s murder. [30]

The following month he published another ‘open letter’, this time to US President Woodrow Wilson, drawing on his experiences of the genocide to plead the case for Armenian independence. This letter, which first appeared in his mother’s magazine, was published in the Berlin daily *Berliner Tageblatt*. [31]

Over the next eight years he published four books on the genocide, and lectured publicly on the topic ‘despite frequent rioting by Turkophile groups during his talks’. [32] Some of these talks featured slides of the images that he had smuggled out of Turkey. [33]

He remained active in the peace movement [34], and in 1933, bravely – if foolishly – wrote yet another open letter, this time to Adolf Hitler, protesting against the Nazis’ anti-semitism. He received a polite note from the Chancellor’s office, acknowledging receipt of his letter, before being arrested, tortured and detained. [35]

Released in the spring of 1934, with the assistance of a British Quaker attorney, he left Germany for England, and spent the overwhelming majority of his remaining 44 years in exile. [36]

### **‘Wilful defiance’**

With his pacifist mother, progressive politics and independent spirit – Wegner had left school to work on a farm for six years, later working as a longshoreman in Marseilles before completing a doctoral dissertation on ‘The Strike in Penal Law’ [37] – Wegner might seem an atypical soldier. However, throughout the 20th century – and the 21st century to date – there have been soldiers who have resisted the wars in which they have become embroiled, often at considerable cost to themselves. [38]

In the First World War, this resistance ranged from the overt and altruistic – the most famous example of which is probably Siegfried Sassoon’s declaration ‘Finished with the war’, which he wrote as ‘an act of wilful defiance of military authority’, in protest ‘against the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed’ [39] – to the covert and rooted-in-self-preservation. [40]

After an encounter with a dead soldier following the Battle of Messines, and a religious epiphany in an Italian Church, the young British soldier Ronald Skirth made a vow that he would ‘never knowingly again help to take a human life’, and thenceforth deliberately mis-targeted his guns so as to miss human targets. [41]

In a similar vein, Harry Patch, the last surviving ‘Tommy’ to have fought in the trenches before his death in 2009, recalled how his friend Bob Haynes deliberately tried to wound rather than kill: ‘If he used that

gun at all, it was about two feet off the ground and he would wound them in the legs. He wouldn't kill them if he could help it.' [42] Attacked by a German soldier wielding a bayonet, Patch himself – a crack shot – chose not to kill his assailant, later writing that 'War is organized murder and nothing else'. [43]

### **'I am not a bandit'**

And it wasn't just soldiers. Turkish civilians also disobeyed orders in resistance to the Armenian genocide – a point that Wegner himself was keen to make. [44]

Thus the governor of Ankara, Mazhar Bey, pretended not to understand the written orders he had been sent regarding the deportations. And, when a government official named Atif Bey was sent to relay the orders directly, he told him:

"No, Atif Bey, I am the governor, I'm not a bandit. I cannot do it. I will get up from t[he governor's] chair and you can come and do it." [45]

In a similar vein Huseyin Nesimi, the senior administrator of Lice County, 'refused to carry out the order to massacre his Armenian residents.' He paid a heavy price for his refusal. Having 'first demanded to receive a written order to this effect ... he was removed from his position, summoned to Diyarbekir, and murdered en route.' [46]

Other provincial and district heads who were murdered for refusing to help carry out the genocide include: 'Basra governor Ferit, Muntefak district governor Bedi Nuri ... Sabit, the acting head official of Besiri County,[and] the journalist Ismail Mestan'. [47]

### **The courage to disobey**

Arguably '[w]ars happen not because as a species we have a tendency towards physical aggression, but because we have a tendency towards obedience to authority. We obey too much and resist too little.' [48]

Indeed, '[e]ven at quite low levels of technology, war is a ritualised, socially-sanctioned, institutionalised group activity, based on taxation/fundraising systems, combatant training, weapons development, (food) supply management and a chain of command'- very little of which involves actual aggression or killing, but almost all of which involves strict obedience to authority. [49]

In the 2008 film *The Examined Life*, philosopher Cornel West notes that 'it takes tremendous courage to think for yourself ... William Butler Yeats used to say it takes more courage to examine the dark corners of your own soul than it does for a soldier to fight on the battlefield. Courage to think critically ... Courage to think, courage to love, courage to hope.' [50]

During these centenary years, there will doubtless be no shortage of voices encouraging us to remember – and celebrate – the 'heroism' of the men who followed orders. [51] With good reason, we choose instead to celebrate those, like Armin Wegner, Ronald Skirth and Huseyin Nesimi, who exercised true moral courage, thought for themselves and chose to disobey.

### **Notes**

[1] Sybil Milton, 'Armin T. Wegner, Polemicist for Armenian and Jewish Human Rights', *Journal of Armenian Studies*, 1992, Vol. IV, p. 168.

[2] *Armin T. Wegner and the Armenians in Anatolia, 1915: Images and Testimonies* [hereafter *Images*], Guerni E Associati, 1996, p.37.



[3] Milton, *op.cit.*, p.168. It is unclear whether or not Wegner's negatives were on glass or some form of acetate, though Milton refers to 'approximately eighty glass positives' in the Wegner papers at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv (Milton, *op.cit.*, p.185, n.80). According to Dr. Zaven Khatchaturian, Chairman of the Armin T. Wegner Society of USA, Wegner 'most likely used the latest model of German folding camera made by [the] ERNEMANN camera factory, introduced in 1911 ... It took 6 cm x 9 cm negatives, which corresponds to the surviving photographs kept at the National Archive for Literature at Marbach, Germany. Interestingly, it took both rollfilm as well as glass negatives.' (email communication, 20 October 2014). We are indebted to Dr Zaven for his help on this point.

[4] Peter Balakian, *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America's Response*, Harper Collins, 2003, pp. 258-59.

[5] 'In a report dated 30 June 1915, German consul general Mordtmann recounts to his superiors a conversation with Ottoman interior minister Talat Pasha ... Regarding the deportation, Talat told him "what we are talking about here ... is the annihilation of the Armenians"' (Taner Akcam, *The Young Turks' Crime Against Humanity: The Armenian Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in the Ottoman Empire*, Princeton University Press, 2013, pp. 201-202).

[6] David Stevenson, *1914 – 1918: The History of the First World War*, Penguin, 2005, p. 116.

[7] *Images*, p.33; Richard J. Evans, *The Feminist Movement in Germany, 1894-1933*, p. 216.

[8] Martin Rooney, 'A forgotten humanist: Armin T. Wegner', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 2000, p. 117.

[9] Milton, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

[10] The 'legal cover for the genocide' – the provisional law of 27 May 1915 which authorised the removal of inhabitants 'individually or en masse from villages or cities and settle them in other areas' 'in case of military necessity, or when spying or treason are suspected' – had been shown to Goltz by the Ottoman commander-in-chief Enver Pasha, though it is 'unlikely [that] he understood its larger significance'. In December 1915, when he learned that 'Armenian deportees who had made it to Mosul were about to be redeported on orders of the supreme commander in Mesopotamia' Goltz intervened immediately, forcing the authorities to postpone the decision, and in mid-January he even threatened to resign if the deportations went ahead. In the end, however, duty trumped revulsion. 'It was unheard of for a military man to resign in wartime,' writes historian Isabel Hull 'and in the end Goltz was too much a soldier to take that final step.' (Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany*, Cornell University Press, 2004, pp. 276-77, 286-87).

[11] Akcam, *op. cit.*, pp. 258

[12] Letter dated 26 November 1915, *Images*, pp. 61

[13] *Images*, p. 51

[14] During 1915 and 1916 Wegner visited camps at [Ras ul-Ain](#), Rakka, Meskene, Aleppo, and [Deir ez-Zor](#): Balakian, *op. cit.*, p. 258.

[15] *Images*, pp. 61-62.

[16] *Images*, p. 62.

[17] *Images*, pp. 62-63.

[18] Balakian, *op. cit.*, pp. 259; Milton, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

[19] *Images*, pp. 140-1.

[20] Milton, *op. cit.*, pp. 168 – 169.

[21] Robert Fisk, *The Great War for Civilisation: The Conquest of the Middle East*, Harper Perennial 2006, p. 401.

[22] Recalling Wegner's visit, newspaper editor Hellmut Gerlach would later write that: 'Official censorship sealed our lips. During a press conference, we were told it was "undesirable" for us to talk about the persecution of the Armenians.' (*Images*, pp. 49 – 50). *Images* has Gerlach referring to an 'October 1915' visit by Wegner, but this would appear to be a mistake. Milton, *op. cit.*, dates this visit to early 1916.

[23] Milton, *op. cit.*, p. 168; *Images*, p. 37.

[24] *Images*, p.37; Johanna Wernicke-Rothmayer, *Armin T. Wegner: Gesellschaftserfahrung und literarisches Werk*, p.33

[25] Milton, *op.cit.*, p. 168. See also note 3. above.

[26] *Images*, pp. 131 – 136.

[27] *Images*, pp. 131 – 132. In a 28 Oct 1916 diary entry Wegner writes that: 'Before leaving Aleppo, I went to the police station to make a request about Manuel to the officer responsible for the camps ... I was forced to leave ... without delivering even a word of my request' (*Images*, pp. 135-136)

[28] Wernicke-Rothmayer, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

[29] Rooney, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

[30] Wernicke-Rothmayer, *op. cit.*, pp. 184 – 185. Wegner was a member of the German Communist Party from February – August 1919, briefly rejoining the party after a 1927-28 visit to the Soviet Union (Milton, *op. cit.*, pp. 169, 172).

[31] Milton, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

[32] Rooney, *op.cit.*, pp. 117 – 118.

[33] Milton, *op.cit.*, p. 171.

[34] From June 1919 until early 1924, Wegner was the director of the anti-militarist group *Bund der Kriegsdienstgegner* (League of Draft Resisters), which he had helped to co-found (Milton, *op.cit.*, p. 167). Around this time he also 'travell[ed] to England, Holland and Scandinavia to promote the pacifist cause' (Rooney, *op. cit.*, p. 118).

[35] *Images*, pp. 41, 166.

[36] Milton, *op.cit.*, pp. 173 – 174, 177, 178.

[37] *Images*, p. 33; Milton, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

[38] For some examples see: 'Memorials for German Deserters', *Peace News*, May 2013, <http://peacenews.info/node/7238/memorials-german-deserters> (WW2); Jonathan Neale, *The American War* (US soldiers in Vietnam); David Gee, *Spectacle, Reality, Resistance* (Forces Watch, 2014) and <http://couragetoresist.org> (21st-century wars in Iraq and Afghanistan wars).

[39] Andy McSmith, 'A History of the First World War in 100 Moments: 'Mad Jack' takes on the War Office', *Independent*, 11 June 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/world-history/history-of-the-first-world-war-in-100-moments/a-history-of-the-first-world-war-in-100-moments-mad-jack-takes-on-the-war-office-9530421.html>. For a copy of the original letter see [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Finished\\_with\\_the\\_War:\\_A\\_Soldier%E2%80%99s\\_Declaration#mediaviewer/File:Sasssoon-againstawar-letter.jpg](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Finished_with_the_War:_A_Soldier%E2%80%99s_Declaration#mediaviewer/File:Sasssoon-againstawar-letter.jpg)

[40] The so-called 'Live and let live' system – 'where enemies stopped fighting by agreement for a period of time' – is an example of the latter. Such truces could be forged through direct communication or indirect signalling, but they 'were illegal at all times for they were neither created nor legitimated by authority but explicitly forbidden' (Tony Ashworth, *Trench Warfare, 1914 – 1918, The Live and Let Live System*, Pan, 1980, p.19). Such truces were far



from being a rare phenomenon eg. Ashworth judges that patrol ritualisation – one of the form of ‘Live and let live’, where soldiers would either deliberately avoid situations where they were likely to encounter the enemy, or avoid hostilities when they did encounter them – ‘occurred in all except elite units for some of the time’ (*ibid.*, p. 106). Some truces lasted for ‘several days, weeks or even months in rare cases where large numbers and areas were involved’ (*ibid.*, p. 20).

[41] Ronald Skirth, *The Reluctant Tommy*, Pan Macmillan 2011, pp. xx, 76, 135, 182. Skirth writes: ‘I knew that what I’d done was too insignificant to warrant swelling up with pride, but it was a personal achievement, and for a humble soldier to find the opportunity to act as an individual, using his own brain and his own pair of hands independent of all authority, was as exceptional as it was satisfying.’ (*ibid.*, p. 183).

[42] [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/last\\_tommy\\_gallery\\_03.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/last_tommy_gallery_03.shtml)

[43] Harry Patch and Richard van Emden, *The Last Fighting Tommy: The Life of Harry Patch, Last Veteran of the Trenches, 1898 – 2009*, Bloomsbury, 2007, pp. 96, 201.

[44] *Images*, p. 153. Some Turkish soldiers and civilians also intervened to save people. For example Robert Fisk recounts a story of a Turkish army corporal named Euomer who prevented Kurdish bandits from abducting a female deportee en route to Ras al-Ain, brought deportees water and protected them from further attacks (Robert Fisk, ‘All the heroes deserve remembrance’, *Independent*, 7 March 2001, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/fisk/robert-fisk-all-the-heroes-deserve-remembrance-695035.html>). Elsewhere, Fisk has written that ‘In almost every interview I conducted with elderly, blind Armenians who survived their people’s genocide, there were stories of individual Turks who, driven by religion or common humanity, disobeyed the quasi-fascist laws of the Young Turk rulers in Constantinople and sheltered Armenians in their homes, treating Armenian Christian orphans as members of their own Muslim families.’ (Fisk, *The Great War for Civilisation: The Conquest of the Middle East*, Harper Perennial 2006, p. 392).

[45] Akcam, *op. cit.*, p. 195. The governors of Kastamonu and Yozgat (Resid Pasha and Cemal Bey) were also dismissed for refusal to follow similar orders (*ibid.*).

[46] *Ibid.*, p.196.

[47] *Ibid.*, p. 196. The senior administrator of Midyat County was also assassinated ‘upon the orders of the governor of Diyarbakir ... for having resisted the order to kill the Christians in his county’ (*ibid.*)

[48] Milan Rai, ‘Deadly Obedience’, *Peace News*, March 2011, <http://peacenews.info/node/3856/deadly-obedience>

[49] *Ibid.*

[50] Astra Taylor (dir), *The Examined Life* (2008). The Yeats quote that West is glossing is probably: ‘Why should we honour those that die upon the field of battle; a man may show as reckless a courage in entering into the abyss of himself’ (Richard A Cardwell, *The Reception of Byron in Europe*, Continuum, 2004, p. 412).

[51] For example, David Cameron has spoken of the ‘extraordinary heroism’ of his great, great uncle, who – following orders – ‘helped lead the way’ into ‘a wall of German machine gun fire’ during the Battle of Kitchener’s wood (‘Scottish Conservative conference: Who was David Cameron’s great, great uncle?’, BBC Scotland, 14 March 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-26576906>). In a similar vein, Hugo Swire has waxed lyrical about the ‘countless’ ‘tales of heroism and sacrifice’ on the part of Commonwealth soldiers during the First World War (‘First World War centenary: Britain owes a debt of gratitude to the Commonwealth’, *Telegraph*, 3 August 2014), while the Department for Culture, Media and Sport’s ‘Guide to Engaging Local Communities’ during the centenary lists ‘Find[ing] your local hero’ as one possible activity: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/first-world-war-centenary-toolkit-for-local-communities>

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source: <http://theworldismycountry.info/posters/poster-6-armin-t-wegner-1915-1916/>