

23 May 1915 Declaration by British Government*

Ara Sarafian

*The following declaration was initiated by the Russian Government in April 1915.[†] Invoking the precedent of an earlier European intervention in Lebanon in 1860, following the massacre of Christians there, the Russians suggested similar joint action against Ottoman Turkish leaders for reported atrocities against Armenians.[‡] The British Government was reluctant to support such a declaration because of a lack of information, and because Great Britain had already threatened action against Ottoman leaders following the use of Allied nationals as human shields at Gallipoli.^{**} It was the opinion of the Foreign Office that too many such threats would undermine their effectiveness.^{††} Nevertheless, the British Government decided to support the Russian initiative as a political necessity to placate the Russian Government and Armenians serving in Russian armies.^{‡‡} Russian-Armenians were particularly aware of the massacres reported in Ottoman Turkey, because many survivors fled to safety behind Russian lines. Although the British Government did not have an active interest in Armenians at this time—the absolute priority was defeating the Germans in Europe and winning the war—the Foreign Office got involved with the Armenian issue because of Russian pressure.*

Some authors have argued that the May declaration signified a critical understanding of the Armenian Genocide by the British Government, and that the term “crimes against humanity,” which was used in the declaration, had a profound legal significance.

* This article has been taken from Ara Sarafian and Eric Avebury, *British Parliamentary Debates on the Armenian Genocide 1915-1918* (Princeton and London: Gomidas Institute, 2003).

† See FO 371/2488/51010. For a copy of the proposed Russian text, see FO371/2488/58387.

‡ FO 371/2488/51010. For the earlier precedent, see Duke of Argyll, *Our Responsibilities for Turkey: Facts and Memories of Forty Years*, (London: John Murray, 1896, pp. 40-42), (London: Sterndale Classics, 2003, pp.22-23).

** See chapter ix in Henry Morgenthau, *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story*, (Princeton and London: Gomidas Institute, 2000), (London: Sterndale Classics, 2003).

†† See FO371/2488/59097.

‡‡ Regarding the proposed diplomatic note of the Russian government, Sir E. Grey commented, “...it seems to me that we do not possess sufficiently trustworthy data on which to base such a message...” Sir E. Grey to Sir F. Bertie (British Embassy, Petrograd), 2 May 1915. FO371/2488/57956. Furthermore, Sir Edward Grey questioned the wisdom of such a note: “It seems to me that such a pronouncement will have no moderating effect whatever on the Turkish authorities and indeed might, on the contrary, instigate it to be still more vindictive towards Christians. We shall, when the occasion arrives, be equally free to take what measures we consider justifiable and necessary against the guilty Turkish authorities, whether we had or had not previously issued a public notification of our intentions....” Sir E. Grey to Sir F. Bertie, 12 May 1915, FO371/2488/58387.

However, the actual evidence suggests that the British Government did not know of the reported atrocities in Armenia at that time, and the British version of the declaration did not actually use the phrase “crimes against humanity.” While the French and Russian Governments used the latter expression, they used it as a matter of word-play on the original Russian draft, which charged Ottoman leaders with “crimes against Christianity and civilization.” British understanding of the Armenian Genocide did not materialise until much later, after the mass deportations and massacres of the summer of 1915, and the dissemination of critical evidence through the United States (See Report of Committee on Armenian Atrocities).

[From Foreign Office press office for publication in Monday morning papers (23 May 1915)]*

H.M. Government, in common with the Governments of France and Russia, make the following public declaration:-

For about the last month Kurds and the Turkish population of Armenia have been engaged in massacring Armenians with connivance and often help of Ottoman Authorities. Such massacres took place about the middle of April, at Erzroum, Dertchan, Egin, Bitlis, Sassoun, Moush, Zeitun, and in all Cilicia.

Inhabitants of about 100 villages near Van were all assassinated. In town itself Armenians' quarter is besieged by Kurds. At the same time Ottoman Government at Constantinople is raging against inoffensive Armenian population.

In face of these fresh crimes committed by Turkey the Allied Governments announce publicly to the Sublime Porte that they will hold all the members of the Ottoman Government, as well as such of their agents as are implicated, personally responsible for Armenian massacres.”†

* PRO, FO371/2488/63095.

† The original draft from the Russians was phrased “...crimes committed by Turkey against Christianity and civilisation...” See FO371/2488/58387. The British and French governments found this wording objectionable due to the possible sensibilities of their Muslim subjects. While the British dropped the phrase “against Christianity and civilisation”, the Russian and French versions replaced it with “...crimes committed by Turkey against humanity and civilisation” See FO371/2488/65759.