

## Great Britain and the Armenian Genocide: A Reluctant Witness.\*

The First World War witnessed the first genocide of the modern era. Utilising the Ottoman state bureaucracy, telegraphic communications, and overwhelming force, the rulers of Ottoman Turkey carried out the systematic destruction of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. While the British Government had a longstanding interest in Armenians, its understanding of the mass murder of Armenians was curtailed by Turkish and German censorship and misinformation campaigns.<sup>†</sup> However, as information filtered out of the Ottoman Empire, there was a delayed understanding of events by the outside world. Furthermore, any British discussion of the Armenian issue had to be sensitive not to alienate Muslims, as the Ottoman Empire was still regarded as the seat of the Caliphate by many British Muslims. This consideration was particularly important as the Ottoman Turks attempted to play the “Muslim card” with a formal declaration of *Jihad* (Holy War) against their enemies. This included sending emissaries to Muslim countries such as Iran and Afghanistan.

Despite these circumstances, information about “Armenian atrocities” were discussed in Parliament. This was mainly due to the efforts of distinguished

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\* 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).

† British official involvement with Armenians developed after the Congress of Berlin (1878). Great Britain, as a signatory to that treaty, guaranteed the introduction of reforms in the Ottoman Empire for the safety of Armenians. The failure of such reforms, as well as two major anti-Armenian massacres in 1895-96 and 1909, heightened British interest in Armenians.

As information about the genocide of Armenians leaked to the outside world in 1915, the Turkish and German governments began denying facts in diplomatic and journalistic circles. As more information about the genocide came to the fore, these authorities began justifying the extra-ordinary measures against Armenians as matters of necessity. Their position was finally standardised in an Ottoman government White Paper which vilified Armenians as a rebellious community. For a frank insider's view of the German involvement with the Ottoman Turks and the Armenian Genocide, see the memoirs of Harry Stuermer, who was the correspondent of *Kölnische Zeitung* in Constantinople between 1915-16. Harry Stuermer, *Two War Years in Constantinople*, (London: Sterndale Classics, 2002).

Members of Parliament who were informed of events by their contacts in the Russian Empire, Switzerland, and the United States, as well as the British Foreign Office in London. Such voices were led by James Bryce, who was a former member of the British Cabinet, ambassador to the United States, a law professor at Oxford University, and a humanitarian activist. He had visited Armenia forty years earlier and authored *Transcaucasus and Ararat*, first published in 1877. Another advocate was Aneurin Williams, a longstanding liberal M.P. who was active on several Parliamentary Committees dealing with the Near East. He had become the Chairman of the British Armenia Committee in 1912. Other supporters included Noel Buxton, former chairman of the Parliamentary Balkan Committee and co-author of *Travels and Politics in Armenia*, and the Irish nationalist Member of Parliament, T. P. O'Connor.

Starting with qualified discussions in July 1915, the Armenian Genocide was first introduced for serious discussion by James Bryce at the House of Lords (October 6<sup>th</sup>, 1915), and then by Aneurin Williams at the House of Commons (November 16<sup>th</sup>, 1915). The definitive statement of an official thesis was the 1916 British Parliamentary report, *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, 1915–16*.<sup>\*</sup> The turning point in these developments came with the mounting evidence, especially following the release of official United States documents in October 1915 (See Appendix II). Such materials undercut the censorship and misinformation campaigns against Armenians and paved the way for the official British thesis on the Armenian Genocide.

Today the British articulation of the Armenian Genocide thesis represents a specific episode in British Parliamentary history between 1915 and 1918. These discussions were remarkably grounded, with participants taking care not to overstate the case against the Ottoman Turks and their German allies. Once the reality of the Genocide became evident, the subject was integrated into wider debates on the eventual settlement of the Great War. The whole Armenian matter, however, was abandoned in the aftermath of WWI, with the ascendancy of the Kemalist Turks, complications brought about by the Bolshevik Revolution,

\* For a critical edition of the 1916 publication see Ara Sarafian (ed.), *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, 1915-16: Documents presented to Viscount Grey of Fallodon by Viscount Bryce [Uncensored Edition]*, Princeton: Gomidas Institute Books, 2000.

and imperial rivalries amongst the remaining Allied Powers.

British parliamentary discussions reflect the intellectual trajectory of London's understanding of the Armenian Genocide between 1915 and 1918. These discussions were framed in formal debates, incidental references during other debates, as well as responses to oral and written questions in the Houses of Parliament. In reproducing these exchanges, we have annotated them with references to the private papers of James Bryce, the main exponent for Armenians, as well as the papers of Lord Cromer, the Under-Secretary of State, and extant foreign office materials at the Public Record Office. We have also included supplemental materials relevant to our subject matter, such as the British text of the Allied declaration of May 23<sup>rd</sup> 1915 regarding the culpability of Ottoman leaders for the treatment of Armenians; the October 4<sup>th</sup> 1915 press release by the Committee on Armenian Atrocities in New York, probably the singlemost important document which informed the British government of the Armenian Genocid, as well so other prime examples of documentary evidence on the Armenian Genocide in British hands.