

BRITISH RESPONSE TO THE GENOCIDE OF ARMENIANS

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✘ *This is an abridged version of Michelle Tusan's "Crimes against Humanity": Human Rights, the British Empire, and the Origins of the Response to the Armenian Genocide." which appeared in the "[American Historical Review](#)" (Volume 119, Issue 1, February 2014). Ms. Tusan is a professor at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where she teaches modern British history. Her latest book, *Smyrna's Ashes: Humanitarianism, Genocide, and the Birth of the Middle East*, was published by the University of California Press in 2012.—Editor.*

In early 1919, British Solicitor General Sir Ernest Pollock faced the monumental question of how to prosecute those responsible for "crimes against humanity" committed against minority Christians in the Ottoman Empire during World War I. "I think that a British Empire war tribunal should do it," he argued to fellow Allied jurists. Although the notion of international justice was not new, initiating war crimes tribunals for perpetrators of wartime civilian massacres as a prosecutable offense had no precedent.

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In early 1919, British Solicitor General Sir Ernest Pollock faced the monumental question of how to prosecute those responsible for "crimes against humanity" committed against minority Christians in the Ottoman Empire during World War I. "I think that a British Empire war tribunal should do it," he argued to fellow Allied jurists. Although the notion of international justice was not new, initiating war crimes tribunals for perpetrators of wartime civilian massacres as a prosecutable offense had no precedent.

Attempts to bring Turkish war criminals to justice for what would come to be known as the Armenian Genocide had their roots in imperial politics and humanitarian intervention. The response to the massacres of Ottoman Christian minorities in the late nineteenth century and the 1915 genocide in Armenia can be situated in the infrastructure and ideological commitments of the British Empire. Contemporary reactions to, and the subsequent politicization of, the Armenian question were part of an imperial framework that eventually undermined attempts to document, prosecute, and

memorialize the genocide. The script that still shapes contemporary understanding of the first large scale genocide of the twentieth century relied on Britain's positioning of itself as a global empire and an arbiter of international justice. At the same time, Britain looked to manage imperial concerns as a Christian power that ruled diverse Islamic peoples. This positioning became increasingly problematic after World War I, during the attempt to prosecute Ottoman Turkey for "crimes against humanity" in a period of rising nationalism and growing unrest in the British Empire at the dawn of new media. To understand why the so-called forgotten genocide emerged as an early test case of human rights justice, we must go back to this imperial story.

The approach of the one-hundredth anniversary of the Armenian Genocide has drawn historians back to the moment when geopolitics and human rights first converged around the Armenian issue. In the face of an influential denialist contingent, early scholarship was focused on marshaling evidence to prove that the massacres that killed more than one million Armenian civilians during World War I constituted genocide. More recently, scholars have moved away from the question of culpability and denial in order to better understand the Armenian Genocide as an event, a project that Ronald Grigor Suny has described as addressing the "important issues of interpretation and explanation." Here the well-studied American response and the reactions of other European imperial powers, most notably Russia, Germany, and France, have demonstrated the extent of global engagement with the issue of war crimes in general and the Armenian case in particular. Another body of work has used the Armenian case to study genocide and war crimes as a particular problem of the twentieth century. Using the massacres of Armenian civilians in the Ottoman Empire during World War I as a starting point for genocide studies has offered historians and policymakers a broader frame within which to consider the rise of the practice of state-sanctioned mass murder. Together this scholarship has created a space to study the response to the Armenian Genocide beyond the familiar story of Turkish nationalism and the failure of Great Power diplomacy and U.S. intervention, enabling us to consider how the ideologies and institutions of the British Empire contributed to the evolution of human rights justice.

Taking a long view of the Armenian Genocide as an event embedded in powerfully contingent cultural and political processes, not unlike the Holocaust, historicizes genocide as more than a perennial problem of modernity, world war, and ethnic conflict. Such considerations have made comparative and individual studies of genocide, from the Armenian case to Bosnia to Rwanda, part of the history of modern human rights.

To include the Armenian Genocide in this narrative requires a shift in our thinking about origins. In order to understand the response to the Armenian massacres as rooted in nineteenth-century imperial politics, we must consider the multiple sites of origin of the human rights story, broadening the focus beyond debates over human rights as belonging to either the Enlightenment or the political activism of the 1970s. The role of Humanitarianism and human rights should not be considered separate, unrelated subjects of study. In the case of the Armenian Genocide, this means

reading "crimes against humanity" as an early category of human rights justice with its basis in humanitarian ideals and imperial institutions that defined premeditated massacres against civilians as a morally reprehensible and prosecutable offense. An imperial reading of human rights also requires that we reevaluate the British Empire, an institution more associated with the violation of human rights than with their advocacy. Possibly for these reasons, historians of nineteenth-century Britain, with some notable exceptions, have stood on the sidelines in these debates, ceding the history of human rights and humanitarian intervention to others. The increasingly urgent need to understand the response to genocide has called historians to more fully participate in the current conversation about human rights by exploring its roots in nineteenth-century humanitarianism and its translation to twentieth-century modes of representation.

The British Empire was a global, seaborne empire in a way that other land-based empires were not; more importantly, it understood its role as such. In the Near East, this meant shoring up political and financial interests by exercising informal imperial influence over the Ottoman Empire through a network of consular and diplomatic outposts. These relationships secured predominance in a region that was not part of Britain's formal empire, a position that Britain exploited for its own ends in the Middle East after World War I under the guise of internationalism. It was by casting empire as an instrument for protecting civilians during the war, according to Nicoletta Gullace, that the British Empire first legitimated its internationalist claims. Britain positioned itself as the enforcer of what can be considered the precursor to international law and treaties that bound Europe to a common set of humanitarian principles played a crucial role in determining the post-World War I international order. Simply put, in an era before international organizations such as the League of Nations and later the United Nations, the British Empire assumed that institutional role for itself.

Britain's imperial vision of itself as a civilizing force gave weight to its humanitarian claims on behalf of Ottoman Christians. Religion served as a primary marker of British identity, shaping and legitimizing the humanitarian and imperial mission. The British Empire was a Protestant empire embracing, in the worldview of nineteenth-century liberalism, diverse regions and peoples. A tension between the belief in its role as a defender of oppressed Christian peoples and a tolerant global empire made up of many faiths, including Islam, came under pressure during World War I and influenced thinking about international justice at the moment when the world's attention first turned to the Armenian massacres.

Outrage over the treatment of Armenians, constrained as it was at various moments by the pragmatic concerns of empire, remained necessarily contingent on a universalist humanitarian vision that relied on British imperial institutions for enforcement. The ultimate failure to prosecute Ottoman officials for crimes against humanity revealed the widening gulf between the language of moral obligation to Ottoman Christian minorities, which dated back to the nineteenth century, and twentieth-century imperial priorities. In addition, visual modes of representation emerged as a new tool of conscience.

Starting in the nineteenth century, Britain asserted its right as a defender of minority rights in the Ottoman Empire. The nations joined in the Concert of Europe understood humanitarianism as an integral part of European politics. Humanitarianism loomed large as an imperial responsibility, particularly after the Russo-Turkish War (1877–1878) ended with the signing of the Treaty of Berlin in 1878, which gave Britain explicit charge to defend the rights of Christian minorities, including Armenians. The massacre of more than 200,000 Armenians in the mid-1890s was an important moment in crystallizing the meaning of what the London Times called a “humanitarian crusade” on behalf of Armenians. In September 1896, former prime minister W. E. Gladstone gave voice to this crusade when he asserted in a speech in front of thousands of supporters that Britain and its empire had an obligation in the face of the failed response by the European powers to impose “our just demands” in the wake of the massacres. Gladstone balanced the British Empire's obligation to its diverse subjects with humanitarian commitments, calling Armenians “our fellow Christians” while at the same time asserting that this was “no crusade against” Muslims. It would not represent any “altered policy of sentiment as regards our ... fellow” Muslim “subjects in India.”



This humanitarian crusade marked the culmination of a decades-long campaign that universalized the Armenian cause as an imperial duty realized through British diplomacy. The vision found its clearest expression in the person of Gladstone himself. Gladstone later witnessed the failure of the first set of Ottoman Tanzimat reforms of 1839, which created the impetus to support the principle of protection for Christian minorities. The role of humanitarian policeman did not come immediately or easily for the British Empire. Though some, like Gladstone, supported the idea of minority protection codified in the 1856 Treaty of Paris that ended the Crimean War, many followed the prime minister, Lord Palmerston, in trying to encourage internal Ottoman reforms to improve the status of minorities from a safe distance.

An overwhelming outcry over the “Bulgarian Atrocities” on the eve of the Russo-Turkish War brought a new sense of urgency to the cause and shaped how Britain understood its obligation to Ottoman Christians. In May 1876, Ottoman soldiers massacred thousands of Bulgarian Christian civilians. Gladstone denounced the killings and led the call for a more activist role for the British Empire as arbiter of justice. As he would later do with the Armenian case, he appealed to “the language of humanity, of justice, and of wisdom” in his widely read 1876 pamphlet *Bulgarian Horrors*. Against the unbridled geographic expansion advocated by the Tories, Gladstone proposed that one aspect of “the great work assigned to the Imperial State of the United Kingdom” was “the noble duty of defending, as occasion offers, the cause of public right, and of rational freedom, over the broad expanse of Christendom.”

Religious, secular, and parliamentary advocacy organizations came to share this vision. They found inspiration in Gladstone's crusade on behalf of Eastern Orthodox Christians, whom many saw as belonging to a religion that shared a common origin with Anglicanism. Anglicans and

Nonconformists alike embraced the cause, raising money and performing relief work in the Ottoman Empire. Such activism cast humanitarian intervention as a simultaneously moral, religious, and imperial duty that Gladstone maintained would "serve civilization." In 1876, advocates founded the Eastern Question Association as an umbrella organization to advocate for Ottoman minorities that included Armenian, Assyrian, and Greek Orthodox Christians. Other organizations included the Anglo-Armenian Association, the Friends of Armenia, and the Church of England Assyrian Mission sponsored by the Archbishop of Canterbury.

This activism made the once-reluctant British Empire a steward of minority rights in the Ottoman Empire. The end of the Russo-Turkish War and the signing of the Treaty of Berlin in July 1878 released a wave of sentiment in favor of humanitarian intervention on behalf of persecuted Christian minorities. Article 61 of the Berlin Treaty codified Britain's leadership role regarding minority protection, though it offered little in the way of enforcement. Despite its failure as a diplomatic tool, however, this international agreement formalized British responsibility for Ottoman Christians. By the mid-1890s, a growing pamphlet literature declared Armenia Britain's special "responsibility" and implored readers to support "our treaty obligations." The campaign launched on behalf of Armenians appealed to humanitarian sentiments to accept "responsibility" for stopping what one commentator called "the hugest and foulest crimes that have ever stained the pages of human history." This question of responsibility would again be tested during the 1909 massacres at Adana and later during the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913, when influential members of the House of Commons started the British Armenia Committee to lobby for the enforcement of Ottoman minority protections. By the time world war broke out on the Eastern Front, the British Empire was widely recognized as the legitimate and primary protector of minority interests in the Ottoman Empire. Wartime massacres of Armenian civilians would inspire renewed calls by those who believed in Gladstone's crusade to honor this commitment.

Viscount James Bryce (1838–1922) responded to this call. Disturbed by reports of widespread massacres against Ottoman Armenians and the arrests on unnamed charges of more than two hundred Armenian intellectuals and religious leaders following the Allied invasion at Gallipoli on April 25, 1915, Bryce launched an investigation. His report, *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, 1915–16*, chronicled the unfolding humanitarian crisis and helped transform what one commentator cast as the British Empire's "war against German militarism" into "a war of liberation" for "small nationalities" throughout Europe and Asia.



The report set the tone and established the terms by which the international community understood the Armenian Genocide. Issued as a Parliamentary Blue Book in October 1916, the 733-page volume contained evidence from more than one hundred sources. It remains today the most complete set of testimonies in English regarding the massacre of Armenian civilians that started in the spring of 1915.

Part history, part documentary, the Blue Book offered compelling evidence of concurrent massacres throughout Anatolia, a pattern that Bryce blamed on a premeditated government policy of eliminating Armenians and other Christian minorities from the Ottoman Empire. In total there were 149 documents and 15 appendixes, which together made the case for the "exceedingly systematic" plan behind the massacres. This official report, commissioned by the government, brought together the documents and arguments that would shape how advocates and institutions later defined the crime of genocide.

Debates in Parliament and the Blue Book itself revealed the importance of establishing the facts while not alienating the British Empire's Muslim subjects. On October 6, 1915, the Earl of Cromer rose in the House of Lords to register his shock at "accounts of Armenian massacres" and to ask His Majesty's Government "whether they have any reliable information and can tell us what has actually occurred." While being careful not to offend "Mahomedan fellow-subjects," Cromer argued that "the facts should be made public ... to let the people of this country know for what we are fighting." Having already begun to gather information for what would become the Blue Book, Bryce argued that "publicity" given to these events would The British people had a "moral bond" with Armenians, and thus they had the responsibility to gather evidence and save "the unfortunate remnants of this ancient Christian nation."

Bryce's sense of obligation to Armenians, his status as a Liberal statesman, and his sensitivity to Muslim opinion boosted the Blue Book to prominence and lent further weight to its findings. Others who witnessed the atrocities firsthand, including U.S. ambassador Henry Morgenthau, whose work has received a good deal of scholarly attention, published compelling and verified accounts that also had a wide audience. Yet Bryce's less-studied government report stood apart as the first official record of this event "corroborated by reports received from Americans, Danes, Swiss, Germans, Italians and other foreigners," emerging as the centerpiece of an international humanitarian campaign. His casting of the genocide as motivated by politics rather than religious hatred mitigated worries expressed by Cromer and others at the Foreign Office that taking on the Armenian cause would alienate Muslims in the empire. As Bryce put it in the preface, "In such an enquiry, no racial or religious sympathies, no prejudices, not even the natural horror raised by crimes, ought to distract the mind of the enquirer from the duty of trying to ascertain the real facts."

The Blue Book's universalism resonated in the international community thanks in part to Bryce's ability to manage its production and use. He secured the assistance of British and American lawyers and historians to review the documents and gave the task of editing to historian Arnold Toynbee. When Charles Masterman at the War Office got involved to assess the propaganda potential of the volume, Bryce and Toynbee ignored pressure to shorten it and publish it quickly, insisting that all documents be unabridged and verified by independent sources before publication. The painstaking effort to maintain the integrity of the sources made the Blue Book a trusted source for the humanitarian argument. At the same time, it encouraged President Woodrow Wilson, who

reportedly kept a portrait of Gladstone on his desk, to view the war as a just cause and buoyed his support of self-determination for Ottoman minorities, later codified in the "14 Points."

British imperial diplomatic and military resources made the Blue Book possible. Information about Anatolia and Armenians came from records kept by the empire's network of consular and diplomatic outposts. The volume's regional organization familiarized readers with Armenia and Armenians.

Evidence-gathering relied on imperial networks, but it was secular and religious humanitarian organizations that raised money and awareness in the international community. Church and missionary organizations across Britain and the United States accepted Bryce's representation of the massacres as an "exceedingly systematic," politically motivated crime. The Anglican Church, under the leadership of an archbishop with strong ties to Orthodox Christians, held a series of Remembrance Sundays during which parishioners heard about Ottoman atrocities against Armenian, Assyrian, and Greek minorities. Immediately after the war, the Archbishop of Canterbury used the Blue Book in an address to the House of Lords to make the case for genocide.

This campaign found voice in international channels that recognized the massacres as what today would be called state-sponsored terror. A joint European declaration issued on May 24, 1915, accused Turkey of crimes "against humanity and civilization," marking the first use of the phrase in relation to war crimes. Inserted by the Russian foreign minister, Sergey Sazonov, the declaration raised the stakes for Britain. Mindful of the empire's leadership role in minority protection and its competition with Orthodox Russia for the loyalty of Ottoman Christians, officials and activists began using evidence in the Blue Book to make the case that the massacres of Armenian civilians constituted a crime against humanity. According to the Blue Book, "the Young Turkish Ministers and their associates at Constantinople are directly and personally responsible, from beginning to end, for the gigantic crime that devastated the Near East in 1915." At the end of World War I, the British Empire, with its significant military and humanitarian presence on the ground, had the means and motivation to make this case.



The British Empire took the lead in war crimes prosecutions after the war. The Ottoman Empire had sided with Germany and was made aware during peace negotiations that it would be held responsible for the crimes committed against minorities during wartime. "The Armenian race in Asia Minor has been virtually destroyed," charged one critic, who blamed the massacres in part on "the ill-success of the Dardanelles expedition." This moral responsibility, coupled with the more than one million troops still stationed in the Ottoman Empire at the war's end, poised the British government to take the lead in Allied peace efforts on the Eastern Front, which included the arbitration of the Armenian case.

David Lloyd George cast World War I as a fight for international justice led by the British Empire. This included in its initial stages the prosecution of the German Kaiser and those responsible for the

Armenian massacres. Early on, the prime minister called upon Britain to support the cause of freedom and humanity in a series of wartime speeches published as *The Great Crusade*, much as his Liberal predecessor W. E. Gladstone might have done. In a response to the Ottoman delegation at the Peace Conference, Lloyd George made clear the kinds of "violations" he had in mind.

The war crimes tribunal was a new tool used by the Allies in the case of the Ottomans and Germans. The British had shown enthusiasm for trying the German Kaiser for war crimes immediately after the war. The Leipzig Trials were the result, and in the end amounted to a short-lived set of legal proceedings that led to the prosecution of several minor German officials in a German court, who received short prison sentences for war crimes. The decision to try Ottoman officials for a new category of crime committed during wartime against their own people would fare little better.

In October 1918, the British negotiated an armistice with the Ottoman Empire, which was signed on the 30th of the month at Mudros on the Greek island of Lemnos. The framing of this document offered the first opportunity to put into practice what the 1915 joint declaration had posited as a universal commitment to human rights, and what the Bryce Report had poised Britain to defend. Admiral Somerset Gough-Calthorpe was the man charged with making the peace. Serving as both the commander in chief of British Mediterranean Naval Forces and the high commissioner at Constantinople, he had strict instructions from the Foreign Office that this was to be a wholly British affair. French demands to have a hand in the negotiations were rebuffed on the grounds that they amounted to little more than "butting in," in the words of one observer. The Armenian question found its way into several provisions of the armistice that Calthorpe negotiated on his own, sanctioning involvement in the subsequent pursuit of war criminals. These included amnesty for Armenian prisoners, giving Britain charge of Turkish prisoners of war, and securing the right to occupy Armenian villages to prevent further massacres.

By the spring of 1919, the Ottoman government, under British pressure, had arrested more than one hundred high-profile suspects, including government ministers, governors, and military officers. The trials took place between 1919 and 1922 and resulted in the execution of three minor officials for "crimes against humanity," a term that Calthorpe deployed in reference to the proceedings.

The failure to fully prosecute the key figures responsible for the genocide was due in part to the difficulty of executing human rights justice under the banner of the British Empire. After the signing of the armistice, the British Empire alone had the authority, the military infrastructure, and the political will to launch an inquiry into the massacres. The idea of a "High Court" to prosecute war crimes was first discussed in February 1919 at the Preliminary Peace Conference, where Allied jurists met as part of the Committee on the Responsibility of Authors of the War to discuss violations of "human rights."

Though questions regarding jurisdiction ultimately led the Allies to reject the proposed British Empire Tribunal, Britain continued to put pressure on war crimes prosecutions, producing dozens of

dossiers on suspected war criminals. The prosecution of Ottoman leaders for the Armenian massacres overlapped with the issue of the ill-treatment of prisoners of war from Britain and its empire. Ultimately, the category of "war crimes" in the Ottoman case included crimes against both British military and Armenian civilian populations, which further complicated the proceedings. One of the questions raised by legal experts at the time was whether "war crimes" applied to acts committed by a country against its own subjects. In the case of the Armenians, this proved a particularly important distinction. The issue of whether Ottoman officials could be tried for crimes against their own subjects during wartime opened up new questions regarding the application of human rights standards in a military conflict. British officials asked "whether the term 'acts committed in the violation of the laws and customs of war'" covered "offences committed by ... Turkish Authorities against Turkish subjects of the Armenian race."

In the end, the War Crimes Tribunal did not fall under the jurisdiction of the British Empire or the League of Nations thanks to successful maneuvering by Ottoman officials, who convinced the British that the current government was not, in the words of Grand Vizier Damad Ferid Pasha, "inclined to diminish the guilt of the authors of this great tragedy." Instead, Ottoman authorities set up their own regional tribunals to try war criminals. If the British Empire was going to follow through with the maze of prosecutions of those accused of massacring civilians and mistreating prisoners of war, it would have to balance its commitment to human rights with concerns about what it could and could not do in the early days of an unstable peace. Officials ultimately relied on the language of imperial responsibility. Calthorpe reported having warned the vizier about the commitment that British statesmen had made when they "promised the civilized world that persons concerned would be held personally responsible and that it was the firm intention of His Majesty's Government to fulfill this promise." In an interview with an Ottoman official, Mustafa Reshid Pasha, the high commissioner addressed "the question of the Armenian massacres and the treatment of British Prisoners," conveying an "inflexible resolve" that "the authors of both would have to be punished with all rigour." Reshid Pasha responded with assurances that the Ottoman government planned to punish those responsible, and that "he would resign from the cabinet if this were not done." Calthorpe remained skeptical: "what we looked for was more than good will; it was for actual results."

On May 28, 1919, the British took custody of all the prisoners awaiting trial at Constantinople. The transfer of accused war criminals to jails in the British colony of Malta, however, failed to move the prosecutions forward. A reluctant sultan who had pledged to support the prosecution efforts worried about a looming nationalist backlash that was being mobilized behind the rising power of Mustafa Kemal. This coupled with the threat that Turkish nationalists posed to the British Empire's supremacy in the region, weakened resolve on both sides. Greek forces invaded Smyrna in May 1919 with the assistance of a convoy sanctioned by Lloyd George's government, resulting in massacres of Muslim civilians. This galvanized anger against the Allies, further limiting the possibility of Ottoman cooperation. The confusion and embarrassment caused by what critics called Lloyd George's Greek

disaster (it would eventually force him out of office) challenged the British Empire's legitimacy as the enforcer of human rights justice. Diplomats and officials still pressed on, citing honor and prestige as a factor in this decision.

But the British Empire's "inflexible resolve" had begun to weaken. The glacial pace of the Ottoman peace settlement, which was still four years away, and the drawing-down of troops in Anatolia diminished the effectiveness of moral and military posturing regarding the prosecutions. By the summer of 1919, Britain had reduced its force in the region from 1,000,000 to 320,000. The problem of Turkish prisoners at Malta made an untenable situation worse. In the months preceding the signing of the Treaty of Sevres, War Secretary Winston Churchill received a request from a diplomat asking for leniency for a pro-British Turkish prisoner, Rahmy Bey, who was being held at Malta. After inquiring into the case in the spring of 1920, the investigation concluded that "behind the friendly exterior," this man was most likely guilty of grave crimes against civilians during the war. The decision to deny his release, however, was based on his having been arrested "on the orders of the Turkish government." But there was another reason to keep Rahmy Bey and others at Malta that had little to do with war crimes or questions of jurisdiction. In addition to worrying about the precedent that such an action would set, one Foreign Office official maintained, "There may come a time when it might be a good thing to release several Turks."

Ideological commitments to take the lead on human rights prosecution met *realpolitik* a year later as the Treaty of Sevres began to unravel. Churchill proposed a prisoner exchange to keep the peace process on track. Although a number of protests were heard from within the government, most came around to the idea that the British Empire would exchange all but the worst offenders held at Malta for a group of twenty-nine British and Punjabi Muslim soldiers recently captured by the Turkish Nationalist Army, which was gaining strength in Anatolia. An "all for all" prisoner exchange eventually took place. The Foreign Office justified this about-face, maintaining that it was more important to save "the lives of these British subjects" than it was "to bind ourselves by the strict letter of the law as regards the Turkish prisoners at Malta."

Set for the fall of 1921, the exchange led the *Times* to ask why those "accused of the gravest offenses" had not been tried when the evidence was fresh in 1919, and to claim that it was still not too late. A letter to the editor argued against a prisoner exchange because of the nature of the crimes. Others worried that an unconditional release of accused war criminals would diminish the empire's moral authority: "Throughout the East our assertion of right and not mere force of arms has been our strength. If by such a pitiful surrender we abandon this weapon how shall we cope with the growing dangers?" The failure to fully prosecute Ottoman war crimes made visible the tension between nineteenth-century notions of moral responsibility and a universal standard of human rights by exposing a moralizing British Empire as a less than legitimate voice of international justice mired in its own imperial struggles.

Why did the notion of imperial responsibility ultimately work against efforts to recognize, prosecute,

and later memorialize the Armenian Genocide? Three possible explanations emerge. First, the evidence collected in the Blue Book made the case that the systematic, premeditated extermination of a minority population constituted a "crime against humanity" that warranted prosecution. However, as the events of the War Crimes Trials demonstrated, a seemingly universal notion of protecting human rights during wartime came out of an imperial context that had its own internal logic and priorities. Second, the British Empire was the only institution with the resources and sense of purpose capable of launching a response. The trials failed because Britain did not truly represent or could not in the end legitimately stand in as an international body to pressure a fading Ottoman Empire to prosecute its war criminals. Britain's historical claim to this leadership role could not be sustained as attempts to join imperial and human rights concerns under the umbrella of a diverse, tolerant Christian-led empire came under pressure at the end of the war, particularly after Amritsar. Finally, the sensationalist presentation of evidence onscreen that appeared simultaneously too real to some and not real enough to others created a backlash, leading to questions regarding the historical reliability of the narrative and the humanitarian crusade that it had inspired. The ensuing controversy over the film after the war revealed the difficulty of representing the Armenian massacres as a universal humanitarian cause rather than a sectarian religious conflict. This stalled the momentum of the humanitarian response that had led Britain to speak out against the killings in the first place. The notion of imperial responsibility cut both ways, then, by positing, albeit differently, a responsibility to Christian minorities and the opinion of the British Empire's Muslim subjects and ultimately the empire itself.

As historians explore the evolution of the idea of human rights, it is worth considering how the experience of empire and the humanitarian ideal shaped the uneven way genocide came to be understood as a crime against humanity. Our contemporary narrative of the origin of human rights omits its rootedness in the ideas and institutions of the British Empire. A moral responsibility to respond to atrocity grew out of an imperial ideology that rendered persecuted Christian Armenians a universal subject worthy of humanitarian consideration. Out of this British imperial framework emerged a new way of representing the premeditated killing of minority civilians during wartime as genocide. The global reach of an empire that had the resources and power to stand up to perpetrators made this response possible. At the same time, the inability of the British Empire to fulfill broad universal claims of protection weakened commitments to prosecute this act as a crime against humanity when the empire found itself caught between humanitarian Christian ideals, on the one hand, and the realpolitik considerations that it believed to be necessary to maintain its hegemony, on the other. From these humanitarian imaginings and imperial realities emerged the beginnings of the modern story of human rights justice.

The Armenian Genocide's status as the forgotten genocide remains an important legacy of Britain's failed humanitarian empire. One could easily conclude that the massacres in Armenia fell victim to political expediency and were cast aside as one of the unfortunate casualties of Total War as a necessary amnesia of empire. Of the hundreds of remembrances of the genocide scattered across

the globe, Britain has only one public memorial in Wales, the former home of W. E. Gladstone. The inability to effectively pressure the Ottoman government to prosecute its war criminals initiated the cycle of remembrance and forgetting that characterizes how the genocide is treated today in popular culture, by politicians, and by some historians. However, it is also important to understand this process of forgetting as part of the larger story of how a universal notion of human rights relied on the specific context of British imperial politics in its early practice. The unsteady ideological work of empire that tied humanitarianism to imperial exigencies and imperatives still colors how the Armenian Genocide functions in the collective memory of both survivors and nations.

