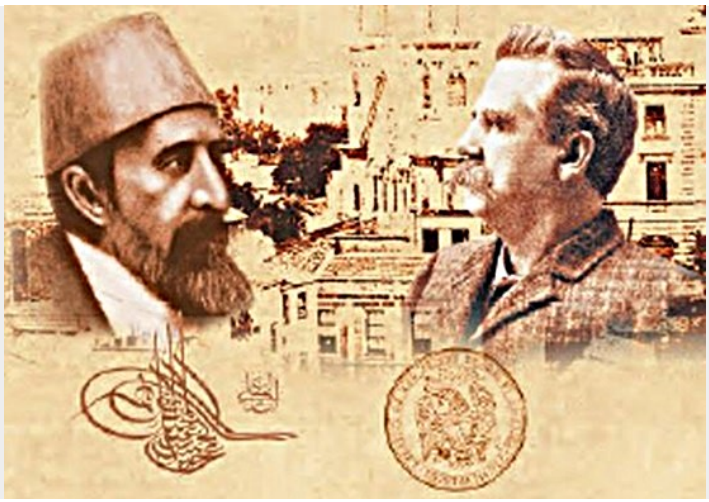
THE FORGOTTEN DIPLOMAT: ALEXANDER TERRELL AND AMERICA'S SILENCE ON THE ARMENIAN QUESTION

Posted on February 9, 2025 by Keghart



Category: Opinions

By Varouj Pogharian, Bogota, 10 February 2025

The passage is extracted from the author's upcoming book: ***The Hurt Never Ends***

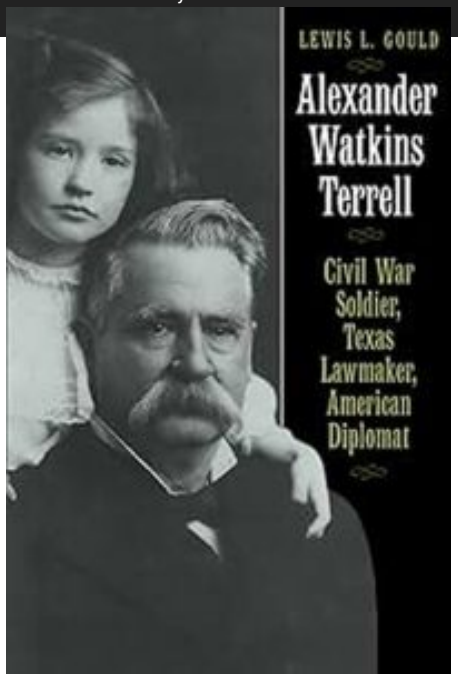
Alexander Terrell, the American minister to the Ottoman Empire, arrived in Constantinople in 1893 on a four-year assignment. His primary duties were to secure business opportunities for American enterprises, protect the safety and legal rights of American citizens, and monitor the fragile survival of Christianity in the region—a subject that resonated deeply in both the American and British press. Unlike the European powers, Washington harboured no territorial ambitions or binding treaties in the Mediterranean, affording it a veneer of neutrality.

The former Confederate officer and Texas politician, before his departure, met with representatives of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, who emphasized the significant value of their properties in the Ottoman Empire. They made it clear that their humanitarian and educational mission sought to distance itself from the incendiary cause of Armenian nationalism.

From the outset, Terrell adopted an attitude of cautious detachment toward the Armenian issue, opting to cultivate cordial relations with Ottoman officials. At lavish receptions and official functions, he avoided the uncomfortable topic of Armenian atrocities. Unlike some of his European counterparts, he refrained from openly blaming the Armenians for the violence, but he also made no effort to challenge the growing tide of anti-Armenian sentiment. The German ambassador in Saint Petersburg had declared the sultan's harsh measures justified as a response to Armenian provocations—an opinion Terrell neither echoed nor condemned.

In preparation for the luncheon with the sultan, Terrell's staff compiled a briefing book. The subject that caught Terrell's attention most was the sultan's strategic manipulation of the Kurdish tribes in the eastern provinces. During the 1877 war against Bulgaria, the Kurds' brutal efficiency left a lasting impression on Abdülhamid. He recognized their martial potential and incorporated them into the empire's military ranks. To ensure their loyalty, he elevated influential Kurdish chieftains to the title of *pasha*, a privilege traditionally reserved for Ottoman elites. Kurdish leaders were also granted pensions, prestigious military posts, and even residences in Constantinople. In return, the Kurds hailed Abdülhamid as *Bave Kurdan*, "Father of the Kurds."

This bond was solidified with the creation of the *Hamidiye*, a Kurdish paramilitary cavalry regiment tasked with maintaining order in the eastern provinces. Ostensibly established to counteract Russian influence, the *Hamidiye* terrorized Armenian villagers, suppressing dissent and seizing land under



the guise of imperial security. Their brutal raids, marked by massacres and systematic displacement, devastated the Armenian Highlands. Terrell, a former military man, understood the strategic brilliance of Abdülhamid's plan. The Kurds' loyalty strengthened the empire's grip on its volatile eastern territories, as it further marginalized the Armenians.

On the day of the luncheon, Terrell was ushered into the opulent halls of Yıldız Palace. The sultan, a striking figure with an arched nose, piercing eyes, and a meticulously groomed beard, welcomed him with measured courtesy. Intelligence reports had briefed Abdülhamid on Terrell's fondness for Ottoman hospitality and his correspondence with a Muslim Indian intellectual who blamed Armenians for the recent violence.

Over a meticulously prepared meal, the conversation was polite and diplomatic. The sultan only broached the Armenian question over coffee.

"Armenians used to be our loyal millet," he began. "When the Greeks rebelled, we allowed them to fill the roles left vacant. They rose to prominence in the Foreign Ministry, the Treasury, and even within our palaces. Armenians oversee the Imperial Powder Factory, the Imperial Mint, and our public lands. They hold key positions in commerce and finance. Yet, despite these privileges, they repay us with plots."

His tone sharpened and his eyes narrowed.

"The recent disturbances are not about religion. They are the work of revolutionaries, supported by wealthy Armenians and Protestant missionaries. These revolutionaries provoke violence, hoping that Russia will intervene in the name of Christian civilization. They forget that such folly only strengthens the resolve of our Muslim citizens. Europe and Russia covet our lands, and the Armenians serve as their pawns."

The sultan paused, then added gravely, "Your newspapers accuse us of persecuting Christians, yet Armenians worship freely in their ancient churches. Their patriarch brings grievances directly to us,

and we address them. Mister Minister, I urge you to convey the truth to your people. The sensationalism in your press does great harm. They exaggerate the number of Armenians killed and portray our defensive actions as unprovoked aggression. Please, publish this conversation in your newspapers."

The sultan rose, signaling the meeting was over. Terrell bowed slightly before being escorted through the palace's grand corridors. As he climbed into his waiting carriage, he leaned back and replayed the sultan's words in his mind. Abdülhamid's remarks confirmed what Terrell had suspected: the sultan had no intention of implementing meaningful reforms to improve the plight of the Armenians. European leaders would watch, paralyzed by their rivalries and unwilling to intervene. Terrell knew the report he would send to Washington would elicit polite interest but little action. America's priorities lay elsewhere, far from the complexities of Ottoman politics.

The domes and minarets of Constantinople glittered in the afternoon sun, masking the turmoil simmering beneath the city's surface. For all its beauty, the capital was a place of shadows, where alliances were forged, truths distorted, and lives quietly extinguished.

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Varouj Pogharian was born and raised in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. His grandparents were from Van, Arapkir and Urfa. His family moved to Canada when he was 18. He retired from the Canadian federal government following a career that included assignments in South America. He is currently working on a historical novel, which is set in Asia Minor during the tumultuous period that spanned the reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II and the rise of the Young Turks. His narrative is poised to explore the complexities of this historical backdrop.

Comments



Antoine Terjanian – 2025-02-10 22:22:10
"The Hurt Never Ends" looks like a very interesting historic novel. Thank you Mr Pogharian for sharing this excerpt. I look forward to your publishing of "The Hurt Never Ends"



Arsen Gülistanyan – 2025-02-10 06:13:58
I congratulate Mr. Pogharian for his very interesting and informative essay.