SUPPORT THE SULTAN...AND DAMN THE ARMENIANS

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Jirair Tutunjian, Toronto, 8 May 2014

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British interest in the Ottomans deepened with the books travelers, adventurers, journalists, spies, and diplomats wrote about their sojourn in Ottoman-occupied lands, including Armenia. Some condemned the oppression Ottoman minorities suffered. Unfortunately, there was also the opposite contingent—mostly ur-Tories who covered up the crimes of the authoritarian, theocratic, racist, and corrupt Ottoman regime and depicted the Sick Man of Europe as a reliable ally. With patience and support the Ottomans could become little John Bulls, they piped.

One of the most voluble proponents of a British-Ottoman alliance was adventurer, soldier, author, propagandist and spy Frederick Burnaby. His magnum opus was "On Horseback Through Asia Minor" which he wrote in 1877 after spending five months in Anatolia the previous year. The book's agenda was as clear as an English summer afternoon: how to constrict Russia. Since the Ottomans were the enemies of Russia, the British Empire had to support the sultans. Ergo… the 'annoying' Ottoman minorities should be ignored.

"On Horseback Through Asia Minor" is an encyclopedia of racist attacks on Ottoman minorities, particularly the Armenians. Here is a sample of the Burnaby's anti-Armenian propaganda and attempts to bring Britain and the Ottomans together.

--"'A Christian,' he continued, 'even if he had the medicine, would have let me die like a dog.' It was very clear that the sufferer had not much opinion of the Armenian and Greek Christians… But this was no solitary expressed opinion. Throughout my journey, I found Armenians and Greeks equally despised by the Mohammedans. It is a great pity that the votaries of Christianity in the East should have brought the pure religion into so great disrepute."

--"…during my subsequent travels in Armenia, the impression gradually dawned upon my mind that the Turks were, first of all, very wise not to wish to receive the Armenians in their houses; and, secondly, if they had been good-natured enough to do so, to destroy the mattresses after the departure of their guests. The Armenians in their habits of body are filthy to the last degree. The houses and clothes are infested with vermin. The Turks, on the contrary, are much cleaner, and are most particular about the use of the bath."

--"People in this country who abuse the Turkish nation, and accuse them of every vice under the sun, would do well to leave off writing pamphlets and travel a little in Anatolia…writers who call themselves Christians might well take a lesson from the Turks in Asia Minor."

--"The house belongs to an Armenian. It was filthily dirty. Vermin could be seen crawling in all directions on the rugs."

--"The Armenians, who in other parts of Anatolia make large sums of money by distilling spirits, here neglect this branch of industry."

--"…the Turks themselves remain unchanged. Hospitality—their great virtue—is as rife in 1877 as in the days of Mohammed II. No matter where an Englishman may ask for shelter, he will never find a Mohammedan who will deny him admittance."

--"'An Englishman in Yuzgat…We Turks are not ungrateful,' he continued, with a smile. 'We have not forgotten our old friends of Crimea, and what you did for us then.'"

--"The chief of telegraph in Yuzgat is Armenian. One day he saw a few Turkish boys teazing some Armenian children, and calling them giaours. He beat the Turkish children. Some Turks coming up, took the side of the Mohammedan lads, and struck the telegraph-man. The latter complained to the authorities; the Turks who had beaten him were at once imprisoned."

--"From her earliest childhood a girl is brought up to consider herself a slave of her father's house; until the Armenians abandon these barbarous customs, their so-called Christianity will not do them much good."

--"The Christians being much more intolerant towards the dissenters from their respective creeds than the Turks are to the Christians."

--A Turk in Yuzgat says to Burnaby: "England and Turkey are old allies, and God grant that they may remain so!"

--"Later in the day I walked into an Armenian church. This was a large building, with red carpets... It must sometime have been bitterly cold inside, for there were no stoves in the building. I was informed that the upper classes who came to pray all wore furs. As the lower orders are not able to pay for any such warm garments, they must occasionally be half frozen when listening to their priest's oration."

--"'You English are a wonderful nation,' continued my host

--Quoting his Turkish guide, Burnaby writes: "They are very cunning…Your interests are bound up with our interests. We do not wish to lose Constantinople. It would be our death blow. It would be your death-blow if the Black Sea belongs solely to Russia, for her ships could remain there in perfect safety, and running out at any moment, might attack your commerce in the Mediterranean."

--A Circassian tells Burnaby: "…If England were to help us and could only capture one Russian port in the Black Sea, the Circassians would have confidence, and there would be a rising throughout the length and breadth of our land."

--"Sivas is the key to the Peninsula on the Asiatic side; the Turks ought to fortify this place, particularly when they are threatened in Asia Minor by the Russians. Should the latter succeed in forcing the first line of defence, consisting of Kars, Ardahan, and Bayazid, and afterwards take possession of Erzeroum, there will be no other fortified town between themselves and Scutari."

--"It was clear that the Armenians did not love their Pacha. From what I subsequently heard, their dislike to him originates in the fact that he is not amenable to bribes."

--When he meets a shoe retailer, Burnaby says: "He had a very Jewish type of countenance, and at once commenced driving a hard bargain with Mohammed."

--"He now told me that twenty-five years ago the Turks and Christians got on very well together, but ever since the Crimean war the Russian government had been actively engaged in tampering with the Armenian subjects of the Porte, and has been doing its best to sow the seeds of disaffection amongst the younger Armenians, by promising to make them counts and dukes in the event of their rising in arms against the Porte."

--"On their arrival in Sivas they had taken an abode from some Armenians, but the latter demanded such an exorbitant rent for the house in question that the missionaries determined to build one for themselves."

--"…but when I changed the conversation to Armenians, I found that the company looked upon them as being quite as ignorant as the Turks, and much more deceitful."

--Burnaby makes fun of the four Armenian martyrs of Sivas and a throne belonging to a former king of Armenia.

--An Armenian merrily tells him: "…A general, second in command of the Russian forces, was an

Armenian. The head of our Church helped the Russians, and 25,000 Armenians were levied to aid them in the war against the Shah. The Persian army was annihilated…the Russians took captive the Khan of Persia. He was afterwards tied face to face with a dog, and given the same food as that animal. The Persian soon died of shame or starvation."

--"…most of the Christians were usurers. Any Mohammedan who chanced to require a loan had to pay his Armenian fellow-citizen a very high-rate of interest…and in almost every district which I visited I found that the leading Christians in the community had made their money by usurious dealings. In some instances, old Turkish families had been entirely ruined; their descendants were lying in goal at the suit of Armenian money lenders."

--"I now went to the Armenian church…several pictures in gaudy frames were hung against the wall…" Another church had "tawdry" pictures.

--"One thing seemed to be unanimous opinion of all classes in Erzeroum—with the exception possibly of the Russian Consul …this was, that should the Armenians ever get the upper hand in Anatolia, their government would be much more corrupt than the actual administration."

--"The Armenian newspapers, probably instigated by the Russian agents, had declared that the Turkish troops stationed in Van had first set fire to the bazaar…The commissioner, after the most searching inquiries, was unable to discover that the troops were in any way implicated in the affair. Several Armenians kept petroleum and Lucifer matches in their warehouses…"

--The Armenian clergy had "become very wealthy at the expense of the poor people, whom they cheat and oppress."

"The Armenians are immensely vain of their nationality."

Burnaby's anti-Armenian tirade goes on for 340 pages. In addition to his dubious reporting, what's remarkable is that months later he remembers conversations verbatim, even with a Turk or Armenian whose English isn't exactly that of the Queen's.

Burnaby's logic is impeccable: Russia threatens the Ottomans. Therefore Britain should support the Ottomans. Therefore minorities which claim to be mistreated by the Turks are liars in the pay of Russia. Turks are noble. They want to be our allies.

Truth be damned and full speed ahead with the Union Jack.

Burnaby was killed in battle in Sudan in 1885. He was 43. Armenians—if they knew of his existence--had no reason to mourn the early demise of the lying Ottomanophiliac.