TRUTHS AND LIES

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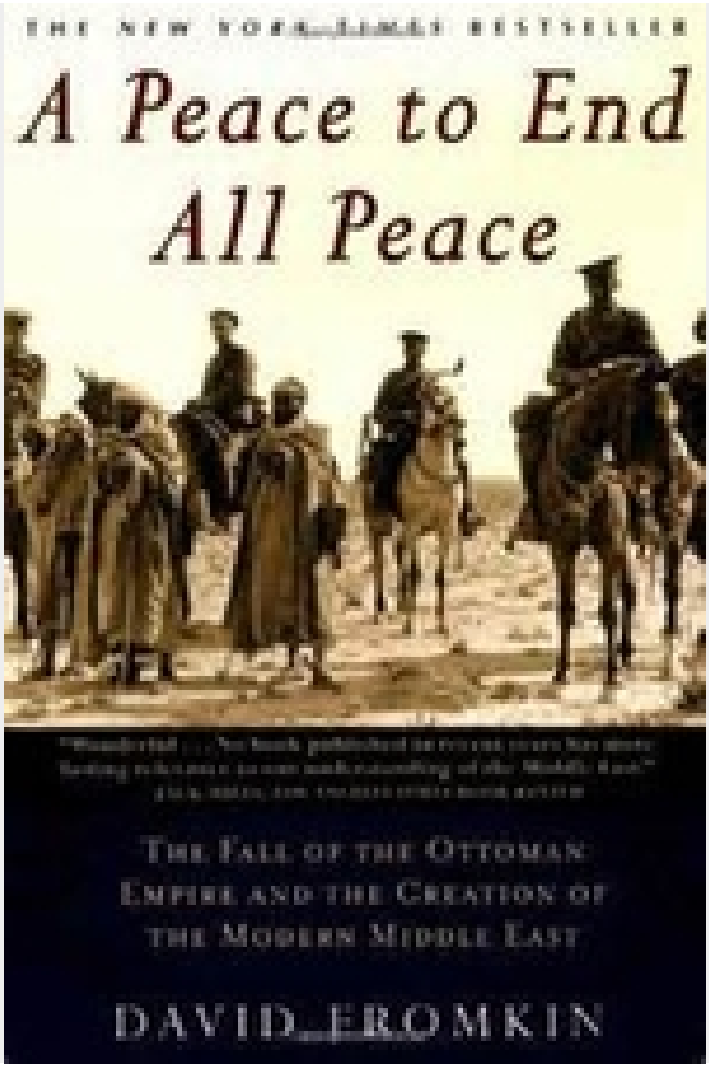

Category: Opinions

David Fromkin, "A Peace to End All Peace", 2009

> *This is an excerpt from historian Fromkin's "A Peace to End All Peace" (A Holt Paperback, 2009) about the First World War.—Editor*

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Turkish Armenia was the starting area for Enver's initial attack on the Caucasus plateau, and it was the initial objective of Russian armies when, in turn, beginning in 1915, they streamed down from the Caucasus to invade Turkey. As Christians, the Armenians were inclined to prefer the Russian to the Turkish cause. Nothing in the history of Ottoman rule predisposed them to remain loyal to Constantinople. The Turkish massacres of Armenians in 1894, 1895, 1896, and 1909 were still fresh in their minds. Then, too, Enver had sent their blood enemies, the Kurds, into Armenia in Ottoman military units, rekindling ancient feuds and giving rise to the new ones.

In early 1915, Enver as Minister of War, and Talaat, Minister of the Interior, claimed that the Armenians were openly supporting Russia, and had taken to mob violence. In reprisal they ordered the deportation of the entire Armenian population from the northeastern provinces to locations outside of Anatolia. The Turkish government representatives even today insist that "At the instigation and with the support of Czarist Russia, Armenian insurgents sought to establish an Armenian state in an area that was predominantly Turkish" and that, prior to the deportations, "Armenian forces had already massacred the Moslem population of the city of Van and engaged in hit-and-run actions against the flanks of the Turkish army."

The deportations, organized by Talaat as Minister of the Interior, are still remembered as the Armenian Massacres of 1915. Rape and beating were commonplace. Those who were not killed at once were driven through mountains and deserts without food, drink, or shelter. Hundreds of thousands of Armenians eventually succumbed or were killed; Armenian sources have put the

figure as high as 1,500,000, and though the figures are still the subject of bitter dispute, there can be no disputing the result: Turkish Armenia was destroyed, and about half its people perished.

There are historians today who continue to support the claim of Enver and Talaat that the Ottoman rulers acted only after Armenia had risen against them. But observers at the time who were by no means anti-Turk reported that such was not the case. German officers stationed there agreed that the area was quiet until the deportations began.

At the German and Austrian embassies, the first reports of the deportations were ignored: officials clearly believed that massacres of Christians were about to take place, but did not want to know about them. They accepted Talaat's reassurances eagerly.

By May 1915 massacre reports were too persuasive to be ignored any longer. The Austrian ambassador told his government that he thought he ought to "alert the Turkish statesmen in a friendly manner" to the possible adverse repercussions of their proceedings. He later reported that he had in fact spoken with Talaat, had urged that the matter be handled carefully, and had suggested avoiding "persecution of women and children" because it would play into the hands of Allied propagandists. On 24 May the Allied governments denounced the Porte's police of "mass murder"; to which the Porte replied that responsibility rested on the Allies for having organized the insurrection in Armenia.

Reports poured in from German officials in the field with gruesome details of atrocities; von Wangenheim, the German ambassador, found it increasingly difficult to overlook what was going on. By the middle of June, he cabled Berlin that Talaat had admitted that the mass deportations were not being carried out because of "military consideration alone." Though they received no guidance from their home governments, von Wangenheim and his Austrian counterpart, Pallavicini, communicated to the Porte their feelings that the indiscriminate mass deportations, especially when accompanied by pillaging and massacres, created a very bad impression abroad, especially in the United States, and that this adversely affected the interests that German and Turkey had in common.

In July, von Wangenheim reported to the German Chancellor that there no longer was any doubt that the Porte was trying to "exterminate the Armenian race in the Turkish empire." He and Pallavicini both concluded that attempting to interfere did no good. His recommendation to his government was to build a record showing that Germany was not responsible for what was happening. Other German officials disagreed, and tried to interfere, as did the German Pastor Johannus Lepsius, but the Wilhelmstrasse accepted von Wangenheim's advice. In October it asked the Porte to issue a public statement clearing Germany of complicity and stating that German representatives in the Ottoman Empire had tried to save the Armenians. When the Porte refused, the Wilhelmstrasse threatened to issue such a statement on its own, but then backed down for fear of damaging the Turkish alliance.

Jemal's Failed Plot and the Allied Powers

The Allies did have one-clear opportunity to subvert the Ottoman Empire, but they deliberately passed it up. It was offered to them by Jemal Pasha.

Alone among the Young Turk triumvirs, Jemal took steps to distance himself from the Armenian Massacres. His apparent aim was to keep open his avenues to the Allied Powers. Since his defeat at the Suez Canal in early 1915, Jemal had settled in Damascus and had come to rule Greater Syria –the southwestern provinces that today comprise Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel—almost as his private fiefdom. At the end of 1915, while the Armenian Massacres were taking place, he proposed, with Allied help, to seize the Ottoman throne for himself.

Making use of the representatives of the dominant Armenian political society, the Dashnaktsutiun (Armenian Revolutionary Federation), to convey his proposals, Jemal appears to have acted on the mistaken assumption that saving the Armenians—as distinct from merely exploiting their plight for propaganda purposes—was an important Allied objective. In December 1915 Dr. Zavriev , a Dashnak emissary to the Allies, informed the Russian government that Jemal was prepared to overthrow the Ottoman government. This was the month that the Allied evacuation from Gallipoli began; in the wake of that disastrous expedition it could have been expected that the Allies would be willing to pay a price to bring hostilities with Turkey to an end.

Jemal's terms, as outlined by Sazanov, the Russian Foreign Minister envisaged a free and independent Asiatic Turkey (consisting of Syria, Mesopotamia, a Christian Armenia, Cilicia, and Kurdistan as autonomous provinces) whose supreme ruler would be Jemal as Sultan. Jemal agreed in advance to the inevitable Russian demand to be given Constantinople and the Dardanelles. He also offered to take immediate steps to save the surviving Armenians. He proposed, with Allied help, to march to Constantinople to depose the Sultan and his government; and in return he asked financial aid to help reconstruct his country after the war.

The Russians proposed to accept Jemal's proposal, and Sazanov seemed confident that his allies would agree to do so. But, in March 1916, France rejected the proposal and insisted on having Cilicia and Greater Syria for itself.

Sir Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary, also showed himself to be unwilling to encourage revolt behind enemy lines if doing so meant foregoing the territorial gains in Asiatic Turkey that Britain had promised to her allies. In their passion for booty, the Allied governments lost sight of the condition upon which future gains were predicated: winning the war. Blinded by the prize, they did not see that there was a contest.

Jemal's offer afforded the Allies their one great opportunity to subvert the Ottoman Empire from within; and they let it go. Enver and Talaat never discovered Jemal's secret correspondence with the enemy, and Jemal continued the fight against the Allies at their side.