

UK MEDIA COVERAGE OF ARMENIAN MASSACRES I

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Part 1: Official Response

Katia Minas Peltekian, Beirut, 18 November 2014

While most contemporary scholars focus on the American, political and public, response to the massacre of the Armenians at the hands of the Turks in the early 20th century, the British reaction has not been given due attention. This five-part series demonstrates Britain's official and public interest in Armenia and the Armenians during WWI as well as the following few years until the signing of the Lausanne Treaty.



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This article will cover a portion of the official and un-official British response to the on-going massacres as well as the "Armenian Question" between 1914 and 1923. The first 4 parts will

demonstrate the interest that a number of Lords and Members of Parliament showed during those years in and out of the House of Lords and House of Commons. Part 5 will cover the interest the British public showed to help the Armenian refugees and orphans. In this article, no effort will be made to analyze these events and facts; the purpose of this report is to exhibit to the reader what was recorded in Britain during the period Armenians were being massacred at the hands of the Turks.

In a nutshell, the Parliament in both the House of Lords and the House of Commons discussed or debated the Armenian issue – massacres, refugees, repatriation, question and homeland – over 70 times during 1914-1923. It is to be noted that prior to this period, the British Parliament had some 180 debates and discussions on Armenia during the 35 years before the Great War.

By reading the un-official proceedings of the Parliament printed in the British newspapers of the time, one will discover that there seems to have been an Armenian lobby in both Houses, and these  members of the Parliament, despite the heavy toll of the Great War on Britain and the British Empire, did actually put the Armenian issue up for discussion or questioned the British Government on information or action it would take.

Before the Great War began, i.e. before the time we term as the "genocide" years, the British parliament was working on implementing the Armenian Reforms which the Young Turk Government had agreed upon with Europe. During one such debate in July 1914, right before the Great War broke out, Mr. Aneurin Williams, a Welsh Liberal MP, spoke of the position in Armenia during one discussion on the Reforms that had not yet been implemented in the Armenian provinces. He said:

"The Balkan War arose because there was a large area of European Turkey which was misgoverned, and Turkey had not the wisdom or the power to introduce reforms. There is a similar area and a similar problem calling out to be dealt with in Asiatic Turkey. There is no security for life or property in Armenia, and massacres in recent years had been deliberately organised from Constantinople."

By August of that year, the War broke out and in November Britain declared war on the Ottoman Empire. And although the British Empire was heavily engaged in the War on several fronts, the Parliament still made time to discuss the situation of the Armenian population in Turkey. In April, 1915, before the infamous date of April 24, just a few months after the war had broken out, MP Aneurin Williams again raised the issue of Armenia in the House of Commons.

He asked whether the Government would endeavour, at the end of the war, to secure for the Armenian people in Asiatic Turkey some measure of autonomy similar to that which the Russian Government had promised to Poland.

Mr. Neil Primrose (Minister) replied that the hon. member might rest assured that his Majesty's Government would consider the interests of the Armenian people in Asiatic Turkey; but it was not possible at this juncture to determine what the future arrangement would be.

When the terrible news about the massacres and deportation of the Armenians began to arrive to London and were confirmed by official sources, the British Government, in common with the governments of France and Russia made the following public declaration on May 24, 1915 :

For about the last month the Kurds and the Turkish population of Armenia have been engaged in massacring Armenians, with the connivance and often the help of the Ottoman authorities. Such massacres took place about the middle of April at Erzeroum, Dertchan, Egin, Bitlis, Sassoun, Moush, Zeitun, and in all Cilicia. The inhabitants of about 100 villages near Van were all assassinated, and in the town itself the Armenian quarter is besieged by Kurds. At the same time the Ottoman Government at Constantinople is raging against the inoffensive Armenian population.

In the face of these fresh crimes, committed by Turkey, the Allied Governments announce publicly to the Sublime Porte that they will hold all the members of the Ottoman Government, as well as such of their agents as are implicated, personally responsible for such massacres.

In July 1915, it was the turn of the House of Lords to discuss the massacres during a long session; the following is an excerpt of the discussion:

Viscount Bryce asked the Lord President of the Council whether his Majesty's Government had any information regarding the massacres of the Christian inhabitants which were reported to have been committed by the Turks in the districts of Zeitun, Mush, Diarbekir, Bitlis, and elsewhere in the region inhabited by the Armenians; and regarding a reported wholesale deportation of the inhabitants of some districts into Central Asia Minor and the desert parts of Mesopotamia; and whether, if these reports were well-founded, there was in the opinion of the Government any step that could be taken to save what remained of the Christian population of Armenia.

The Earl of Cromer said there was, unfortunately, no doubt of the truth of the reports...

The Marquess of Crewe said he was grieved to say that the information in the possession of the Foreign Office... was in accord with what the noble lord had given.... Since the crimes had increased in number, and, if possible, in atrocity. Wholesale massacre and deportation had been carried out under the guise of necessity for evacuation of certain districts... He finally asserted that Those who were found to be responsible, either directly for the commission of crimes or for crimes due to their inspiration ... should receive punishment accordingly. (Hear, hear.)

During these months, the headlines in the British Press would describe the ongoing massacres in detail, with sources being both British & foreign consuls as well as correspondents from the war front or in the region where refugees were able to escape. Some of the recurring headlines in 1915 were

- Destroying a Nation: The Armenian Massacres
- Wholesale Murder in Armenia: Exterminating a Race

- Wiping out the Armenians
- The Armenian Massacres: Exterminating a Race

And as these reports were printed in the British Press, the same line of discussion came up again in the House of Lords in October 1915:

The Earl of Cromer rose to ask (1) Whether his Majesty's Government had received any information confirmatory of the statements made in the Press to the effect that renewed massacres of Armenians had taken place on a larger scale; (2) whether the statements made that German Consular officials had been privy to these massacres rested on any substantial evidence; and (3) whether any further communications had recently been addressed to the Porte in connexion with this subject...

Lord Crewe replied that the Foreign Office had received further details from His Majesty's Consul at Batum ... who described the appalling horrors which had taken place at Sassoun, where the population were absolutely exterminated, only a few being able to escape. The whole country was completely ravaged. According to the Consul, certain number of well-known inhabitants succeeded in escaping to the mountains, but the slaughter of those who could not escape was universal... The Consul stated that about 160,000 of these had passed through Igdir and Etchmiadzin. He also gave a most horrible description of their condition, ravaged by disease, many of them starving. They have been dying at the rate of at least 100 a day. Nothing could be said in too high praise of the efforts which have been made locally to cope with this hideous condition of things, but very much larger supplies of medical comforts and of foodstuffs are needed if the condition of the refugees is to be materially relieved...

VISCOUNT BRYCE also gave further details - **Such information as has reached me from many quarters goes to show that that which the noble earl thought incredible, that 800,000 people had been destroyed since May last, is unfortunately quite a possible number.** Bryce confirmed that **The massacres were the result of a policy which, so far as can be ascertained, had been absolutely premeditated for a considerable time by the gang who were in possession of the Government of the Turkish Empire. They hesitated to put it into practice until the moment came, and the favourable moment seems to have come about the month of May...** Bryce then proceeded with the description of the systematic process that the Turks followed to "clear out whole populations of towns. **The procedure was exceedingly systematic. The whole population of a town was cleared out. Men were thrown into prison, the rest of the men, and the women and children were marched out of the town. When they had got some little distance, they were separated, the men being taken to places where the soldiers dispatched them by shooting or bayoneting. The women and children and older men were sent off under convoy of the lower kind of soldiers to their distant destinations, which was sometimes one of the unhealthy districts, but more frequently the large district which extends to the east of Aleppo, in the direction of the Euphrates. They were driven by the soldiers day after day; many fell by the way and many died of hunger...**

During those same months of horror, Lord Arthur Balfour made this declaration

In the midst of all the horrors of this war nothing, I think, is more horrible than the treatment meted out to the wretched Armenians by the Turkish Government who claim to represent Progress and Reform. It is a crime which surpasses the worst deeds of their predecessors.

As the year 1915 drew to a close, and as the war raged further taking the lives of many British soldiers, officers and citizens, a couple of Members of Parliament still insisted on discussing the Armenian case in November 1915:

Mr. Aneurin Williams called attention to the massacres of Armenians and Mr. T. P. O'CONNOR (an Irish Nationalist) appealed to the Government to do all they could to bring the agony in Armenia to an end and to alleviate the sufferings of the survivors.

LORD ROBERT CECIL (Undersecretary of State for Foreign Affairs) said the story of the Armenian massacres was a terrible one... this was not a religious movement. It was a deliberate policy to wipe out of existence the Armenians in Turkey... He asserted that the British would use every resource of the Army and Navy and the Consular service to save the Armenians, because, after all, the greatest possible protection to the Armenians was victory in this war (hear, hear)...

Note: All citations are taken from "The Times of the Armenian Genocide: Reports in the British Press," edited by Katia Minas Peltekian. The book in two volumes compiles over one thousand articles from the British Press during 1914-1923.

