

UK'S POSITION ON THE GENOCIDE OF ARMENIANS

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The UK Government's Position on the Armenian Genocide

[Armenian Legal Initiative Group](#), UK, April 2013

**Presented at the Commemoration of the Church of Wales'
Recognition of the Armenian Genocide
Temple of Peace, Cardiff
22 April 2013**

This presentation will cover key elements of the British Government's policy on the Armenian Genocide, the destruction of up to 1.5 million people between 1915 and 1923, from the perspective of an Armenian born a British subject resident in the United Kingdom. This is representative of the experience of representative groups that approached the political establishment.

It will show that the United Kingdom started with a strong political and moral position that addresses the core issue that then deteriorates to the present dissatisfying stance that avoids the key question with discredited arguments. The theme is that:

Sadly with successive governments, "what it says on the tin is not what you get".



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With the advent of the First World War, the allies, Britain, France and Russia, issued a joint statement in May 1915:

"In view of those new crimes of Turkey against humanity and civilisation, the Allied Governments announce publicly to the Sublime Porte that they will hold personally responsible for these crimes all the members of the Ottoman Government and those of their agents who are implicated in such massacres".

Note the use of the term "crimes against humanity and civilisation".

The Foreign Office had ample evidence of what was happening through British representatives in various Middle East countries. Material from many sources, both UK and overseas, were collated in the 'Blue Book' prepared by the historian Arnold Toynbee, submitted to the Foreign Secretary then deposited in the House of Commons as an official document (British Governmental Document Miscellaneous No 31).

The definitive tripartite statement and the 'Blue Book' are extensively referred to and quoted from. But research by Dr Nassibian at Oxford University (Britain and the Armenian Question 1915-1923) into the cabinet papers of that time exposes a different underlying picture. The three countries issued the statement to keep the Armenian conscripts and volunteers fighting at the front, and to persuade the United States to join the Allies. Pledges to the Armenians made in the House of Commons by Lloyd George and Balfour were described by the historian AJP Taylor as "weapons of war" rather than "to be fulfilled". Aneurin Williams was moved to write that the "Christian population in Armenian Turkey faced the threat of annihilation". Even the German ambassador to the Sublime Porte stated in a despatch to Berlin, a close ally of Turkey, that the deportations were not based on military considerations. Many Germans were military officers in Turkey who witnessed, first-hand, the effectiveness of the extermination of a race evicted from its ancestral lands, and they later became involved with the Third Reich's "Final Solution".

"Deportations" is the favoured term used by the Turkish state and nationalists in making their case. In-fighting between the Allies for the spoils of war, and the courting of Turkey led to the future of the decimated Armenian population in Turkey dropping from the number one priority in a British Cabinet paper down to 24, then disappearing altogether. Reasons for these changing priorities ranged from the financial cost to the Exchequer to the risk that independence for Armenia may make the Muslims in India restless, an argument not used to prevent the extraction of Palestine and other Arab countries from Ottoman Turkey. Throughout this period, Armenians looked up to Britain - a British military officer serving in the Caucasus described Armenians as holding a "*blind, strange faith in England and anyone English*".

Armenians entered the UK in numbers in the second half of the 20th century and lobbied their MPs, senior government figures and the Foreign Office (now known as the FCO, the Foreign &

Commonwealth Office). The common request was for the UK to publicly recognise the Armenian Genocide, and to intercede with the Turkish authorities to do the same. After Armenia became independent in 1991, this request reflected the new republic's objectives. Meanwhile Turkey closed its border with Armenia in 1993, and these remain closed to this day. A **vestige of the Iron Curtain** exists because of the outstanding genocide recognition issue. The blockade is contrary to international law and should be condemned by the UK.

In 2008, the Armenian Legal Initiative Group commissioned Geoffrey Robertson, a Queen's Counsel and eminent specialist in international law and human rights, to examine the British Government's policy and conduct, and the validity of its arguments. Documents requested under the Freedom of Information Act surfaced in extensively redacted versions after several representations. Robertson concluded that the FCO's objective was predominantly to **appease a "neuralgic" Turkish government** even though the British Government was open to criticism. Officials saw no practical benefits to be gained from the UK recognising the genocide and apparently the current line of evasion was the only feasible option. The QC described the FCO department as an **"ethics-free zone"**.

Let us go through key points repeated over the years in letters to UK Armenians.

"The massacres of 1915-16 were an appalling tragedy which the British Government of the day condemned. We fully endorse that view" (Keith Vaz, Minister of Europe)

This is consistent with Winston Churchill's assessment that " ... ***there is no reasonable doubt that this crime was planned and executed for political purposes***". He also used descriptive terms such as "***administrative holocaust***" and "***clearance of a race***". ("The Aftermath")

Note that the term "holocaust" was used before the extermination of the Jews during the Second World War.

However, subsequent points made **almost negate** this welcome endorsement.

"Neither this government nor previous British governments have judged that this evidence is sufficiently unequivocal to persuade us that the events should be categorised as genocide as defined by the 1948 UN Convention."(Douglas Alexander, Lord Malloch-Brown, Keith Vaz, Baroness Scotland)

The FCO documents prove that the government undertook virtually no research on this matter. It did not consult academic or legal authorities, or called for expert papers. Authoritative United Nation's and the government's own documents were ignored.

"... when over a million ethnic Armenian citizens in the Ottoman Empire were killed – many massacred, some victims of civil strife, starvation and disease which affected the whole population"

of Eastern Anatolia" (Geoff Hoon, April 2007).

Letters from the Turkish ambassador to the FCO reveal satisfaction on the line taken by the UK government in attributing ethnic cleansing to external causes as this diminishes the roles of civil and military authorities. This is precisely the line taken by denialist spokespersons. It is truly regrettable that the FCO adopted this explanation as the small number of photographs of the deportations available to us, plus numerous eye-witness accounts, depict the use of the military summoned by the civil authorities escorting columns of citizens marched to their fate.

"We extend our deep sympathies to the descendants, and the assurance that the massacres will not be forgotten." (Margaret Thatcher in May 1990 after it was pointed out that her state visit to Turkey was on 24 April that year)

Since the original commemoration in 2001, the Armenian Primate or community organisations have rarely been invited to the Holocaust Memorial Day **events**. Indeed, representations for inclusion have normally been ignored in London, Manchester and regrettably Cardiff since 2010. The HMD Trust website does however contain an entry explaining the significance of the 24th April as well as two survivor stories.

"It is not the business of government to review events of 80 years ago with a view to pronouncing on them" (Baroness Ramsay 1990). Joyce Quinn, as Minister of State, extended this in 1998 to ***"according to today's values and attitudes"***.

Genocide as a crime does not change with the passing of time. There have been **many apologies** about the treatment of citizens by governments around the world – including the British – confirming this argument as invalid.

Indeed, 21 sovereign nations formally recognise the Armenian Genocide in addition to 19 international religious, academic and representative organisations.

"There is genuine debate amongst historians" (Baroness Scotland, Denis MacShane, Joyce Quinn). ***"It is for historians to interpret the past and society learns and benefits from their assessments of events"***.

In March 2000, **126 Holocaust scholars** - holders of academic chairs as well as directors of Holocaust research and study centres - issued a statement affirming the Armenian Genocide as incontestable and urged Western democracies to formally recognise it. This has since been re-affirmed regularly by the International Association of Genocide Scholars which includes the most respected experts in this field. They have also written directly to the Turkish Prime Minister disputing the official Turkish narrative, and urging him to face up to the truth. These representations have all been ignored.

Keith Vaz, the then Minister for Europe, did name three dissenting academics - Bernard Lewis, Heath Lowry and Justin McCarthy. All held chairs funded by the Turkish government, and the latter was forced to resign when he was discovered to be preparing letters issued by the Turkish ambassador

Recent fresh analyses of available Ottoman Turkish archives by two Turkish scholars, Taner Akcam and Ugur Ungor, support the genocide thesis. Both work outside Turkey to avoid prosecution under Article 301 for "insulting Turkishness", a legal means for the state to suppress discussion on any topic that does not follow the official Turkish narrative.

To this day, the British Government chooses to ignore the overwhelming views of independent experts in this area. In fact it has gone further than this with the March 2010 debate in the House of Lords when Baroness Kinnock said that **"The Blue Book should be considered alongside other documents relating to the events of 1915-16 in archives round the world."** This undermining of British Government contemporaneous research is something the Turkish parliament has pressured their Westminster counterparts to do for many years. The 'Blue Book' has been translated into Turkish and sent to all Turkish MPs this year by Lord Avebury and the historian Ara Sarafian.

"We must restrict the use of the term 'Genocide' to events which occurred after the adoption of the UN Convention on the Prevention & Punishment of the Crime of Genocide" (FCO Directorate). **"We must not attribute acts of the past to the present Turkish government before establishment of the modern state"** (Francis Maude and Mike O'Brien; dates). **"It is not common practice in law to apply judgements retrospectively"** (FCO Turkey Team).

Geoffrey Robertson (QC) dismissed these points as "fiction". There are **no such precedents, practices or restrictions**. Moreover, the convention's introduction makes clear that genocides *have occurred* through the ages. Raphael Lemkin, the architect of the UN Convention, specifically mentioned that the Armenian's history triggered his work. The FCO appears not to understand the importance of nations acknowledging their past crimes against humanity without exceptions. It even wrote the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust Deed objectives with a start date of the Second World War.

"Genocide is a precise term and is best assessed by a competent court. However, there is no such court with the authority to make such an assessment. Therefore, it is inappropriate for the British Government to apply terms to events on which no legal judgement can be made."

The government has now abandoned its previous discredited arguments and moved further away from developments in international law. Political leaders are now indicted by international prosecutors for trial in courts convened under a wide global remit.

"Truth and reconciliation process conducted as a joint exercise by the parties involved. We would continue to encourage the parties to embark on such a process which must be owned by the people." (Geoff Hoon, Minister for Europe) **".. look to the future in the interests of the region and the wider international community"**(Baroness Ramsey)

"The UK will not make any statement that has the potential to jeopardise this process." (Baroness Kinnock, March 2010)

Turkey scuppered the "truth and reconciliation process" originally proposed in the USA. It will not open diplomatic relations with Armenia nor open its border until Armenia drops its claims for recognition whereas Armenia wishes to negotiate with no pre-conditions whatsoever. It is also a flawed process. If the suggested sub-committee is set up by politicians concludes that genocide did not occur so as to facilitate international relations, what will this mean for decades of research by the most eminent of independent experts over many continents that point unequivocally in the opposite direction?

Let the British Government listen to the opinions expressed by independent Turks. Ragip Zarakolu, a brave publisher of books on subjects such as the Armenian Genocide and Kurdish issues, and as a result hounded through Turkish courts, said:

"Turkish denialism plays to gain time in an Oriental way. Everybody knows what really happened in 1915 to the Armenians, an ancient people rooted in Anatolian geography ... there was not only ethnic cleansing but also of cleansing of writing, maps and books in an unfortunate continuation of the genocide at a different level."

In summary, the British Government started with a contemporaneous forthright First World War statement that it then contradicted with a varying series of inconsistent, morally bankrupt points that are unlikely to lead to tangible positive outcomes.

A letter earlier this month in time for this commemoration from David Lidington, the current Minister of Europe, reiterates the current argument so there is no change of mind. There was one piece of news – that he had gone to the Tsitsernakaberd Genocide Memorial in Yerevan on his visit to Armenia in September 2012. This is welcome but does not satisfy the expectations of the Armenian people and the interest of preventing crimes against humanity.

In the run-up to the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide in 2015, the British Government's stance will be subject to detailed scrutiny worldwide. It is in the UK's interest to progress from its current unsatisfactory policy that will continue to be viewed as unacceptable in comparison to those of other nations. The huge risk is that the UK will be portrayed as denying genocide.

