

WESTMINSTER TURCOPHILIACS

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By Jirair Tutunjian, Toronto, 20 October 2014

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England/Britain-Ottoman Empire/Turkey relations go back to the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1550-1603). England's first ambassador was dispatched to Istanbul in 1578 to obtain the charter of the Levant Company from the Sublime Porte. The charter granted privileges to English merchants trading in the Ottoman Empire. Two years later the two countries signed a treaty of commerce. The Virgin Queen also sent to the sultan a musical clock organ and a ceremonial coach to cement relations. It was of no consequence to the English that the sultan had executed 19 of his brothers and half-brothers to secure the throne.

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Ignoring the threat the Ottomans posed to Europe, Britain sold ammunition, tin and lead (for the manufacturing of cannons) to the Ottoman Empire. Queen Elizabeth even contemplated a joint military operation with Sultan Murad III against Spain in 1585.

In the 17th century diplomatic and trade relations picked up speed and English adventurers travelled through the Ottoman Empire; some of them wrote about their journey ("Descriptions of the Turkish Empire" by George Sandys, "General Historie of the Turkes" by Richard Knolles) to familiarize English politicians, merchants and scholars with the Ottomans. Knolles expounded that Turkish ignorance of classical literature was a boon because it allowed them to focus on the business of government. Many other books followed.

Although in the next two centuries relations between England/Britain and the Ottomans remained reasonably friendly, the image of the Turk began to slowly change from an exotic warrior to one of weak, corrupt, and incompetent Oriental.

Nevertheless, the British helped the Ottomans when Napoleon invaded Egypt and Palestine in the last years of the 18th century. The might of the British Navy dissuaded the French general from continuing his campaign north into other Ottoman occupied lands.

During the Second Turco-Egyptian War (1839-1841), when the Ottoman armies were on the verge of collapse, the British and Austrian fleets cut Egyptian military leader Ibrahim Pasha's communications with Egypt. The British also occupied Acre (Palestine) and Beirut to scotch the Egyptian invasion of Asia Minor. Because of British threats, Egypt abandoned its claims to Syria (Lebanon, today's Syria, Palestine and Jordan) and Ibrahim Pasha (son of Egypt's leader Muhammad Ali) signed a peace treaty.

Throughout the rest of the 19th century Britain continued to nurse the "Sick Man of Europe". The reason it did so was because of British regarded the Ottoman Empire an obstacle to Russian expansion into the Middle East.

During the Crimean War, in the mid-1850s, Britain joined several European nations to defend the

Ottomans against Russian encroachments. Two decades later, at the Congress of Berlin (1878), Britain, along with Germany, reversed the gains Russia had made during the Russo-Turkish War.

But the ungrateful Ottomans joined Germany against Britain and its allies during the First World War. This goes a long way to explain why the British government sided with the Armenians when the latter were being exterminated by the Ottomans. With the war over, London didn't see any benefit in continuing hostilities against the Turks. 10 Downing Street betrayed the Armenians, and returned to its traditional strategy of supporting Turkey.

In the last few months of the Second World War the Soviet Union tried to annul the Kars Treaty and regain Kars and Ardahan. Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov told the Turkish ambassador to Moscow that the territories should be returned to the Soviet Union in the name of the Armenian and Georgian republics. Winston Churchill objected to Moscow's claim while President Harry J. Truman felt that the matter should be settled between Moscow and Ankara. However, Churchill persuaded the newly-elected American president to force the Soviets to drop the idea. Kars and Ardahan remained in Turkey.

British/Turkish relationship was solidified in the late '40s with Turkey's admission to NATO. Turkey has remained in the good books of Westminster despite Ankara's decades of dictatorships, the illegal occupation of northern Cyprus, the atrocities against the Kurds, the persecution of minorities, the drift to Islamic fundamentalism... and the recent Ankara support of the Islamic terrorists in Syria/Iraq.

While many British citizens and media are supportive of Armenians, don't expect 10 Downing Street to recognize the Genocide of Armenians next year.

