

ULUÇ GÜRKAN

UNDERSTANDING  
THE ARMENIAN  
QUESTION

MALTA TRIBUNAL (1919-1921)



UPDATED AND  
EXTENDED EDITION



Uluç Gürkan

Understanding the Armenian Question

Malta Tribunal (1919-1921)

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# UNDERSTANDING THE ARMENIAN QUESTION

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Translated by

Fulden Underwood and Simden Pilon



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## Facing History

The Armenian Question is the name bestowed by European and American historians upon the issue of Armenian nationalism and separatism, and the Ottoman response to this threat to its own unity and sovereignty.<sup>1</sup> This labelling by Western historians is biased and discriminatory. It ignores the armed uprisings of the Armenians and their participation in World War I against the Ottoman Empire, of which they were subjects, while overshadowing the struggle of the Ottoman Empire. These prejudices and double standards have now morphed into the allegations of genocide of Armenians in 1915.

## The Armenian trouble

*‘The Ottomans used to call the Armenian issue the ‘Armenian Trouble’. In other words, Armenian worry, Armenian distress, even Armenian scourge...’*<sup>2</sup> The Armenian Trouble were not limited to the struggle of Ottoman Armenians to gain their independence and establish their own nation state in Eastern Anatolia. It was constructed as an imperialist project, fuelled by racist prejudices based on religion.<sup>3</sup> In this context, the focus was on Turkophobia, and the aim was the destruction of the Turkish presence in Anatolia and the Christianisation of this region. The Armenian Trouble is an issue with historical roots that emerged with the French Revolution of 1789. The French Revolution was a major turning point in world history, where absolute monarchy was overthrown and replaced by a democratic republic based on the separation of powers. The revolution’s principles of nationalism, freedom, equality, secularism, and democracy became universal, and initially influenced Europe and then spread throughout the whole world. The question was, which principle or principles should be put in practice, and where, when, and how to do this.<sup>4</sup> *Like*

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Earle, “American Missions in the Near East”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (April), pp. 403-404.

<sup>2</sup> Özdemir Ince, *Ermeni Gâilesi*, *Cumhuriyet*, 30 April 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Uluç Gürkan, *Ermeni Sorunu’nu Anlamak* (Understanding the Armenian Issue), pp. 38-41.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

*other multinational states of the period*, the Ottoman Empire first had to confront the principle of nationalism (the nation state). In the Ottoman Empire, which had a multi-ethnic structure, nationalist revolts erupted one after the other, dragging the state into a process of disintegration. The first rebellion began in the Balkans at the very beginning of the 19th century. According to some historians, the Serbs were the first to rebel against the Ottoman Empire, while according to others, the Greeks were the first, followed by the Bulgarians and Albanians. With the support of Britain, Russia and France, the rebels gained their independence one by one and were able to establish their own national states. A painful fact that world historians have ignored and that we have been made to forget is that hundreds of thousands of Turks were forced to leave the Balkans and migrate to Anatolia after the region broke away from the Ottoman Empire. The success of the Balkan peoples against the Ottoman Empire encouraged and mobilised the Armenians. They revived their dream of establishing their own nation state in Eastern Anatolia and uniting with Caucasian Armenians to form Greater Armenia. According to Ottoman records, from the mid-19th century until World War I in the 20th century, more than 30 Armenian revolts took place in Eastern Anatolia in line with this dream, and according to Armenian records the revolts numbered more than 40. After the events in the Balkans, these revolts, in which tens of thousands of Christian Armenians and Muslim Turks and Kurds lost their lives, were also supported by Russia and Britain. Support also came from the United States.

The US, whose interest in the Balkan uprisings remained at an intellectual level, not only supported the Armenians in Eastern Anatolia, but also organised and even armed them and incited them to rebel against the Ottoman Empire. The efforts of US missionaries to Protestantize the Ottoman Armenians, who were born to Orthodox parents, soon gained a political aspect and turned into the first overseas operation of the USA in history. With the outbreak of World War I, the US mandate for the Armenian state, which was intended to be established in the Ottoman territories, gained currency. In the process, the intention was that the sectarian ties of Protestantized Armenians with Russia would be severed. Thus, Armenian nationalism would be raised, with the emphasis that they would be an

independent nation, separate from both the Ottoman Empire and Russia, and Armenians would be enabled to establish their own independent state, which would be placed under an American mandate. For this purpose, Hunchak and Dashnak militias were organised through the involvement of the US consulates in Sivas, Erzurum and Elazığ. The militants who fought against the Ottoman Empire in some 40 revolts leading up to World War I were trained in the churches and schools that had been founded by US missionaries. The concept of an Armenian state under US mandate was also supported by Britain and France. These two great powers of the period considered it to be in their best interests for the USA, instead of Russia, to become dominant in Eastern Anatolia. On the other hand, they determined that their share from the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire would be the oil-rich Middle East. With the Sykes-Picot Agreement that was signed during World War I, the Great Powers divided the lands of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East amongst themselves. This agreement was also approved by Tsarist Russia. Following the events in the Balkans, the goal was to expel the Turkish people from Anatolia and the Middle East and to Christianise Anatolia by establishing Armenian states in the east, Greek states in the west and Pontic states in the north. A de facto division of labour, so to speak, was established between the USA, Britain, and France for the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire and the expulsion of Turks from Anatolia and the Middle East. Accordingly, the United States took responsibility for the Armenians in Anatolia, while France took over the protection of the Maronites in Lebanon and the British the protection of the Druze.

### **The Eastern question**

In the 20th century, the goal of Christianising Anatolia began to be defined as the Eastern Question. The Armenian Trouble also became an important element of this goal. The Eastern question was first employed as a political term at the Congress of Vienna in 1815. Here, it was used in the sense of protecting the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire. The Congress of Vienna was convened after the defeat of France in the Napoleonic Wars, and was aimed at re-determining the balance of power within Europe, which had been upended by Napoleon,



and to prevent any single power from dominating the continent. The protection of the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire was put on the agenda for this purpose. It was considered that the strategic and political rivalries of the great powers of Europe regarding the territories of the Ottoman Empire could be suppressed. However, events did not develop as planned. None of the countries gave up on the idea of sharing the lands of the Ottoman Empire, which had lost its superiority over Europe and was declared “the sick man of Europe”. Instead of protecting territorial integrity, the term “the Eastern Question” came to mean the expulsion of the Ottoman Empire from Europe. Accordingly, the Turks would first be expelled from the Balkans, and then they would be driven out of Anatolia to Central Asia. The Armenian state that was to be established in Eastern Anatolia and integrated with the Caucasian Armenians would be the first step to be taken on this path. The Eastern question was imposed on the Ottoman Empire in this form through the Treaty of Sèvres after World War I. It was envisaged that Greek states would be established in Western Anatolia, as well as Pontus in Northern Anatolia and Armenia in Eastern Anatolia. The status of a separate international state was envisaged for İstanbul. The then British Prime Minister Lloyd George blessed these arrangements of Sèvres, saying “*We have fulfilled a debt of humanity by expelling Turks from Anatolia*”. US President Woodrow Wilson's assessment was that “*Turks have stayed in Europe for too long, they must be completely driven out.*”

### Genocide allegations

After the national struggle led by Atatürk, the Turkish nation threw Sèvres into the dustbin of history and deeded Anatolia to the Republic of Turkey with the Treaty of Lausanne. Nevertheless, the dream of Sèvres is still alive in the subconscious minds of Western imperialist powers, especially the USA. In this context, the Armenian genocide allegations are a manifestation of this subconscious dream of Sèvres. The genocide allegations have no historical reality, and this has been documented legally. After World War I, 144 Ottoman officials, both military and civilian, were arrested for the alleged massacre of Armenians, but this allegation was literally thrown into the sea in Malta by the British Attorney General's Office. Malta is



engraved in our memories as a story of exile. But is this true? Does it correspond to historical and legal facts? It is known that the British, who occupied İstanbul after World War I, detained prominent members of the Committee of Union and Progress and sent them to the island of Malta. However, this was not an exile operation. What the British carried out in Malta was a trial. More than a hundred Ottoman officials, the majority of whom were members of the Committee of Union and Progress, were issued arrest warrants for the alleged “*massacre of Armenians*” and sent to Malta to be “*tried and punished*”. They were not exiled.

### His Majesty’s Attorney General

A tribunal was established to prosecute the Committee of Union and Progress members who had been detained in Malta for over two years for “*perpetrating mass killings of Armenians*”. The tribunal was conducted by the Attorney General in London, rather than by a military prosecutor in the chain of command who would ordinarily be assigned to this duty in times of war. The tribunal was premised on the alleged “Armenian Massacre” referred to in Articles 230 and 231 of the Treaty of Sèvres, which the Ottoman state was forced to sign after the end of World War I. In addition to the 1915 relocation and resettlement documents in the Ottoman archives, which were seized and transported to London during the occupation, all related documents that were believed to be in the USA were also scrutinized, as well as those in Egypt, Iraq and the Caucasus, with the goal of uncovering any evidence of the so-called Armenian massacre. Despite these efforts, the office of the attorney general was forced to conclude that the Turks detained in Malta “*are charged with political offences and their detention or release therefore ... is not dependent on legal proceedings...*” Alarmed at this decision, the British Foreign Office appealed to the Attorney General to initiate “political charges” against the Turks if it was not possible to obtain further information that would be acceptable in a court of law: “*From a political point of view, it is highly desirable that proceedings should take place against ... whom there is a reasonable prospect of obtaining a conviction.*” However, the Attorney General was not convinced of the validity of such a political lawsuit. In a communication to the British Foreign Office dated 29 July 1921, it was stated that “*no evidence was found ... that would*