

THE OTTOMAN ARMENIANS

VICTIMS OF
GREAT POWER DIPLOMACY

BY
SALAH RAMSDAN SONYEL

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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NOTE ON THE TURKISH ALPHABET AND NAMES

THROUGHOUT this volume modern Turkish orthography has been used in transcribing Turkish names and place-names except when quoting from non-Turkish sources; for example, Istanbul and not Constantinople, Ankara and not Angora, Kayseri and not Caesarea, and so on.

The pronunciation of the following Turkish letters used in this book should be noted:

c – j as in jam

ç – ch as in chart

ğ – g with an upturned comma as in agha (ağa)

ı – i without the dot as in *sadık* (faithful)

ö – French eu as in *deux* or *seul*, or German ö as in *öffnen*

ş – sh as in shall

ü – French u as in *lumière*, or German ü as in *schützen*.

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INTRODUCTION

A NUMBER of books have been published on the Armenians, particularly on their relationship with the Turks, and on the role of the Great Powers, such as Britain, France, and Russia, in influencing those relations. A selection of the more prominent works is listed in the bibliography; but most of these have been written by Armenians or Armenophiles, and reflect a partisan view. Very few works, published outside Turkey, have taken the trouble to examine the Turkish version of these relations, and other available reliable source material; therefore one of the main objectives of the present work must be to try to rectify this omission. The book also attempts to probe deeper into, and shed more light on, Turco-Armenian relations, to examine, in a broader perspective, the main events affecting those relations, and to try to provide a more authoritative response to a number of searching questions that still remain unanswered, or partially answered.

The book, which is mainly based on primary source material, begins with a description of the Armenians, their original homeland, culture, and migrations; and succinctly traces their history before, during, and after the coming of the Turks. It examines the organization and position of the Armenian *millet* (nation or community) within the Ottoman Empire, and deals with the main events that led to the inception of the 'Eastern Question', which directly contributed to the birth of the 'Armenian Question'. It then traces cursorily the stages of the Turco-Russian war of 1877-8, which resulted in the Treaty of San Stefano, the Cyprus Convention, and the Treaty of Berlin. These international instruments were supposed to procure more privileges to the Ottoman Armenians, with the possibility of ultimately leading to their autonomy, and even independence, but they were actually meant to enable the Great Powers, particularly Britain and Russia, to interfere in the internal affairs of the Ottoman Empire in the hope of snatching a greater share of the spoils when that Empire came to an end.

The book critically examines the various efforts made by British Conservative and Liberal Governments after 1878 for the introduction of reforms in the Ottoman Empire for the benefit of the Christians, particularly of the Armenians, who inhabited mainly the Eastern Provinces of that Empire. One of their earliest unsuccessful efforts was directed towards the establishment of an autonomous Armenian province, which encouraged the Armenian extremists to provoke a rebellion that almost led to armed intervention by the Great Powers. When, in April 1880, the Liberal Party came to power, the new Prime Minister, Gladstone, showed greater zeal than his predecessors, Lords Beaconsfield and Salisbury, in persuading the Great Powers to put joint

pressure on the Ottoman Government in order to force it to succumb to their demands and introduce far-reaching 'Armenian reforms'. This danger to the very existence of the Turkish Empire, and to that of his throne, compelled Sultan Abdülhamit II to concentrate all power in his hands. It also encouraged the Armenian extremists to set up secret societies and prepare for revolt in order to procure an autonomous, or semi-independent, Armenian province in Eastern Anatolia where the Armenians were not more than 15 per cent of the total population as against more than 80 per cent Muslims.

The book also deals with the financial collapse of the Ottoman Empire, and how the 'Armenian Question' became more acute as a result of that collapse. This led to a deterioration in Turco-Armenian and Anglo-Turkish relations, and to the disillusionment of the Armenians with both Britain and Russia, who were vying with each other for Turkish favours in order to cater for their own selfish interests rather than for the interests of the Armenians. Admittedly both Salisbury and Gladstone did their utmost to procure the joint intervention of the Great Powers in the domestic affairs of the Ottoman Empire, ostensibly in order to obtain more privileges for the Armenians, but actually in order to further their own interests. Such efforts, however, were unsuccessful, mainly because those interests conflicted.

The book then traces the bloody history of Armenian terrorism following the establishment, by the Armenian extremists abroad, of secret revolutionary societies such as the Hintchak and the Dashnaktsutiu, which indulged indiscriminately in a campaign of terror, assassinations, sabotage, incendiarism, abductions, and forced levies, inflicted even on Armenians, and this culminated in suppression by the Ottoman authorities who hurriedly set up the Hamidiye regiments to counter Armenian terrorism.

The first full-scale conflict between the Armenians and the Turks took place at Sasun in Eastern Turkey, where the Armenian revolutionaries organized a revolt in the summer of 1895. This was followed by other incidents all over Anatolia where a state of virtual civil war was provoked between the Armenian and Turkish people, resulting in the death of many victims on both sides, and in the destruction of much property. Meanwhile the Armenian Patriarch appealed to the Great Powers for help, and this appeal activated the Liberal Government in London to prepare for armed intervention, and to resort to gunboat diplomacy. But the dissensions among the Powers, particularly between Britain and Russia, made these British efforts, later espoused by Salisbury, ineffective. The Powers were reluctant to intervene and thus risk their favoured position in Istanbul, and Abdülhamit was quick to sense and make full use of these divisions among the Powers to his advantage. He also tried to come to a *modus vivendi* with the Armenian insurgents, and the Young Turk revolutionaries, with some success.

The book also examines critically the efforts made to reconcile the Turks and

the Armenians after the 1894–6 events. From 1896 to 1914, although the ‘Armenian Question’ flared up intermittently with every major crisis or event, such as the Turco-Greek war of 1897, the German Emperor’s visit to Istanbul, the eruption of the Cretan and Macedonian Questions, the attempt by the Armenian terrorists to assassinate Abdülhamit in 1905, and the Balkan wars of 1912–13, nevertheless it simmered on. It was instrumental in bringing about a *rapprochement* between the Armenian revolutionaries and the Young Turks. The resulting Young Turk Revolution of July 1908 contributed immensely to pacification and reconciliation between the Armenians and the Turks whose leaders vowed to do their utmost to bury the hatchet and to strive for ‘liberty, equality and fraternity’, the watchwords of the restored constitutional order.

The ‘Armenian Question’, however, did not come to an end following the Young Turk Revolution. It lingered on after that revolution, culminating, during the First World War, in a terrible conflict between the Turks and the Armenians. This conflict amounted to a civil war, which the Armenians label as ‘massacre’ or ‘genocide’ directed by the Turks against them, whilst the Turks describe it as ‘Armenian atrocities and treachery’ against the Turkish nation. These accusations and counter-accusations still linger on, after almost seventy years, and from time to time give rise to Armenian outrages and Turkish retaliation.