
“Crimes against Humanity”: Human Rights, the British Empire, and the Origins of the Response to the Armenian Genocide

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IN EARLY 1919, BRITISH SOLICITOR GENERAL Sir Ernest Pollock faced the monumental question of how to prosecute those responsible for “crimes against humanity” committed against minority Christians in the Ottoman Empire during World War I. “I think that a British Empire war tribunal should do it,” he argued to fellow Allied jurists.¹ Although the notion of international justice was not new, initiating war crimes tribunals for perpetrators of wartime civilian massacres as a prosecutable offense had no precedent.

Attempts to bring Turkish war criminals to justice for what would come to be known as the Armenian Genocide had their roots in imperial politics and humanitarian intervention. Starting in the second half of the nineteenth century, Britain considered it an imperial responsibility to enforce what we now understand as a universal standard of human rights. The response to the massacres of Ottoman Christian minorities in the late nineteenth century and the 1915 genocide in Armenia can be situated in the infrastructure and ideological commitments of the British Empire. Contemporary reactions to, and the subsequent politicization of, the Armenian question were part of an imperial framework that eventually undermined attempts to document, prosecute, and memorialize the genocide. The script that still shapes contemporary understanding of the first large-scale genocide of the twentieth century relied on Britain’s positioning of itself as a global empire and an arbiter of international justice. At the same time, Britain looked to manage imperial concerns as a Christian power that ruled diverse Islamic peoples. This positioning became increasingly problematic after World War I, during the attempt to prosecute Ottoman Turkey for “crimes against humanity” in a period of rising nationalism and

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¹ Sir Ernest Pollock to A. J. Balfour, February 8, 1919, Bodleian Special Collections, Oxford, Hanworth Papers, 1802–1938 [hereafter HP], MS. Eng. Hist. c. 943.

growing unrest in the British Empire at the dawn of new media. To understand why the so-called forgotten genocide emerged as an early test case of human rights justice, we must go back to this imperial story.

The approach of the one-hundredth anniversary of the Armenian Genocide has drawn historians back to the moment when geopolitics and human rights first converged around the Armenian issue.² In the face of an influential denialist contingent, early scholarship was focused on marshaling evidence to prove that the massacres that killed more than one million Armenian civilians during World War I constituted genocide.³ More recently, scholars have moved away from the question of culpability and denial in order to better understand the Armenian Genocide as an event, a project that Ronald Grigor Suny has described as addressing the “important issues of interpretation and explanation.”⁴ Here the well-studied American response and the reactions of other European imperial powers, most notably Russia, Germany, and France, have demonstrated the extent of global engagement with the issue of war crimes in general and the Armenian case in particular.⁵ Another body of work has used the Armenian case to study genocide and war crimes as a particular problem of the twentieth century. Using the massacres of Armenian civilians in the Ottoman Empire during World War I as a starting point for genocide studies has offered historians and policymakers a broader frame within which to consider the rise of the practice of state-sanctioned mass murder.⁶ Together this scholarship has created a space to study the response to the Armenian Genocide beyond the familiar story of

² See Raymond Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History* (London, 2011); Ronald Grigor Suny, Fatma Müge Göçek, and Norman M. Naimark, eds., *A Question of Genocide: Armenians and Turks at the end of the Ottoman Empire* (New York, 2011).

³ Vahakn N. Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide: Ethnic Conflict from the Balkans to Anatolia to the Caucasus*, 6th revised ed. (New York, 2008); Akaby Nassibian, *Britain and the Armenian Question, 1915–1923* (London, 1984); Richard G. Hovannisian, ed., *The Armenian Genocide: History, Politics, Ethics* (New York, 1992).

⁴ Suny sees scholarship on the Armenian Genocide as belatedly following the evolution of the study of the Holocaust, which had to put aside denialist claims in order to come to a clearer understanding of motivation and response. This move has opened up scholarly debate beyond narrowly constructed lines in both cases that initially sought to amass evidence and create consensus among historians. Ronald Grigor Suny, “Writing Genocide: The Fate of the Ottoman Armenians,” in Suny, Göçek, and Naimark, *A Question of Genocide*, 15–41, here 21–24, quote from 24. See also Taner Akçam, *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility*, trans. Paul Bessemer (New York, 2006); Margaret Lavinia Anderson, “‘Down in Turkey, far away’: Human Rights, the Armenian Massacres, and Orientalism in Wilhelmine Germany,” *Journal of Modern History* 79, no. 1 (2007): 80–111; Donald Bloxham, *The Great Game of Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism, and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians* (Oxford, 2005).

⁵ On the American story, see Peter Balakian, *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America’s Response* (New York, 2003); Jay Winter, ed., *America and the Armenian Genocide of 1915* (Cambridge, 2003); Merrill D. Peterson, “Starving Armenians”: *America and the Armenian Genocide, 1915–1930 and After* (Charlottesville, Va., 2004). On the Russian Empire, see Peter Holquist, “The Politics and Practice of the Russian Occupation of Armenia, 1915–February 1917,” in Suny, Göçek, and Naimark, *A Question of Genocide*, 151–174. I thank Peter Holquist for sharing the manuscript of an unpublished essay, “‘Crimes against Humanity’: Genealogy of a Concept, 1815–1945,” with me. On Germany, see Eric D. Weitz, “Germany and the Young Turks: Revolutionaries into Statesmen,” in Suny, Göçek, and Naimark, *A Question of Genocide*, 175–198; Anderson, “‘Down in Turkey, far away’”; Bloxham, *The Great Game of Genocide*, chap. 3. On France, see Maud S. Mandel, *In the Aftermath of Genocide: Armenians and Jews in Twentieth-Century France* (Durham, N.C., 2003). For archival documents on the role of Austria-Hungary, see Vahakn N. Dadrian and Taner Akçam, *Judgment at Istanbul: The Armenian Genocide Trials* (New York, 2011), 344.

⁶ Gary Jonathan Bass, *Stay the Hand of Vengeance: The Politics of War Crimes Tribunals* (Princeton, N.J., 2000); Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* (New York, 2007).

Turkish nationalism and the failure of Great Power diplomacy and U.S. intervention, enabling us to consider how the ideologies and institutions of the British Empire contributed to the evolution of human rights justice.

The reading of genocide as an issue of human rights has found its clearest articulation in the case of the Holocaust. The vast literature on genocide has focused primarily on the well-documented Jewish experience, with writers such as Primo Levi first casting genocide as the ultimate manifestation of man’s inhumanity to man.⁷ According to Donald Bloxham, the centrality of the Holocaust in the field of genocide studies arose out of concerns that treating the event as one chapter in a larger history of genocide would diminish its central importance.⁸ Rather than reduce its significance, however, broadening the field to include considerations of global human rights questions that extend back to the nineteenth century has opened up new possibilities for studying both the history of the Holocaust and genocide more generally. Taking a long view of the Armenian Genocide as an event embedded in powerfully contingent cultural and political processes, not unlike the Holocaust, historicizes genocide as more than a perennial problem of modernity, world war, and ethnic conflict. Such considerations have made comparative and individual studies of genocide, from the Armenian case to Bosnia to Rwanda, part of the history of modern human rights.⁹

To include the Armenian Genocide in this narrative requires a shift in our thinking about origins. In order to understand the response to the Armenian massacres as rooted in nineteenth-century imperial politics, we must consider the multiple sites of origin of the human rights story, broadening the focus beyond debates over human rights as belonging to either the Enlightenment, as Lynn Hunt claims, or the political activism of the 1970s, as Sam Moyn contends.¹⁰ There is room in this discussion to

⁷ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (London, 1989). Holocaust scholars remain in the vanguard when it comes to understanding genocide as a problem of human rights. Carole Fink’s analysis of international human rights diplomacy before World War II offers a diplomatic lens through which to understand the status of Jews and other minorities; Fink, *Defending the Rights of Others: The Great Powers, the Jews, and International Minority Protection, 1878–1938* (Cambridge, 2004). The collection *Genocide and Human Rights: A Philosophical Guide* (Houndmills, 2005), edited by John K. Roth, uses the philosopher’s lens to understand the Holocaust and genocide as a global problem. Though not focused on the question of genocide directly, Tom Crook, Rebecca Gill, and Bertrand Taithe, eds., *Evil, Barbarism and Empire: Britain and Abroad, c.1830–2000* (Houndmills, 2011), takes an interdisciplinary approach to the problem of atrocity. The selection of authors included in Paul R. Bartrop and Steven Leonard Jacobs, *Fifty Thinkers on the Holocaust and Genocide* (London, 2011), indicates how broad this frame of study has become. Alongside the contributions of Hannah Arendt, Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, and Raphael Lemkin is work by other genocide scholars, including the Armenian historians Vahakn Dadrian and Peter Balakian, Latin Americanist Alex Alvarez, Soviet historian Robert Conquest, sociologist of India Helen Fein, Africanist Mahmood Mamdani, and Cambodian scholar Ben Kiernan.

⁸ Donald Bloxham, “Introduction,” in Bloxham, *The Final Solution: A Genocide* (Oxford, 2009), 1–14.

⁹ Scholars from a range of disciplines who have put genocidal events in a single comparative frame include Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan, eds., *The Specter of Genocide: Mass Murder in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, 2003); Robert Skloot, ed., *The Theatre of Genocide: Four Plays about Mass Murder in Rwanda, Bosnia, Cambodia, and Armenia* (Madison, Wis., 2008); William A. Schabas, *The UN International Criminal Tribunals: The Former Yugoslavia, Rwanda and Sierra Leone* (Cambridge, 2006); Robert F. Melson, *Revolution and Genocide: On the Origins of the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust* (Chicago, 1992); and Alan S. Rosenbaum, ed., *Is the Holocaust Unique? Perspectives on Comparative Genocide* (Boulder, Colo., 1996).

¹⁰ Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York, 2008); Sam Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010).

consider the role of nineteenth-century humanitarianism in the making of modern human rights regimes. Humanitarianism and human rights should not be considered separate, unrelated subjects of study. In the case of the Armenian Genocide, this means reading “crimes against humanity” as an early category of human rights justice with its basis in humanitarian ideals and imperial institutions that defined premeditated massacres against civilians as a morally reprehensible and prosecutable offense. Such an approach moves the historian’s gaze away from the easy-to-embrace secular rights-based movements of the eighteenth and twentieth centuries to the influence on human rights of nineteenth-century humanitarianism, rooted, as it often was, in strident evangelicalism and a moralizing liberalism. An imperial reading of human rights also requires that we reevaluate the British Empire, an institution more associated with the violation of human rights than with their advocacy. Possibly for these reasons, historians of nineteenth-century Britain, with some notable exceptions, have stood on the sidelines in these debates, ceding the history of human rights and humanitarian intervention to others.¹¹ The increasingly urgent need to understand the response to genocide has called historians to more fully participate in the current conversation about human rights by exploring its roots in nineteenth-century humanitarianism and its translation to twentieth-century modes of representation.¹²

The nineteenth century in Europe is understood as the great period of the nation-state, but it is hard to deny that the age of empire still reigned. The Russian, Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, and British Empires controlled vast territories and huge numbers of subjects, making empire the primary geopolitical unit under which most people lived. The British Empire was a global, seaborne empire in a way that other land-based empires were not; more importantly, it understood its role as such. In the Near East, this meant shoring up political and financial interests by exercising informal imperial influence over the Ottoman Empire through a network of consular and diplomatic outposts.¹³ These relationships secured predominance in a region that was not part of Britain’s formal empire, a position that, as Susan Pedersen has

¹¹ Kevin Grant, *A Civilised Savagery: Britain and the New Slaveries in Africa, 1884–1926* (New York, 2004). Adam Hochschild’s treatment of the British response to atrocities in Africa elides the religious motivations of those seeking the end of King Leopold II’s reign in the Congo, emphasizing instead the individual drive of the men who led campaigns against the new slaveries; Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (New York, 1999). Gary Bass takes a similar tack in his study of humanitarianism and the Eastern Question in *Freedom’s Battle: The Origins of Humanitarian Intervention* (New York, 2008). Davide Rodogno offers a long view of British humanitarianism and considers it in the context of Great Power politics, particularly in relation to the French; Rodogno, *Against Massacre: Humanitarian Interventions in the Ottoman Empire, 1815–1914* (Princeton, N.J., 2012). Legal scholar Jenny S. Martinez sees the British abolition of the slave trade in 1807 as important to international human rights law; Martinez, *The Slave Trade and the Origins of International Human Rights Law* (New York, 2012).

¹² See Kenneth Cmiel, “The Recent History of Human Rights,” *American Historical Review* 109, no. 1 (February 2004): 117–135; John M. Headley, *The Europeanization of the World: On the Origins of Human Rights and Democracy* (Princeton, N.J., 2007); Micheline R. Ishay, *The History of Human Rights: From Ancient Times to the Globalization Era* (Berkeley, Calif., 2004); Jack Donnelly, *Universal Human Rights in Theory and Practice*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca, N.Y., 2003); Lynda S. Bell, Andrew J. Nathan, and Ilan Peleg, eds., *Negotiating Culture and Human Rights* (New York, 2001); Richard A. Bauman, *Human Rights in Ancient Rome* (New York, 2000).

¹³ In addition to the ambassador’s residence in Constantinople, a network of sixty-two consular outposts in the 1860s in the Ottoman Empire employed around 350 consuls, vice consuls, and consuls general. By 1900, a well-established network of official consular posts extended from Belgrade to Basra. John Dickie, *The British Consul: Heir to a Great Tradition* (London, 2007), 61–63.

shown, Britain exploited for its own ends in the Middle East after World War I under the guise of internationalism.¹⁴ It was by casting empire as an instrument for protecting civilians during the war, according to Nicoletta Gullace, that the British Empire first legitimated its internationalist claims.¹⁵ Britain positioned itself as the enforcer of what can be considered the precursor to international law and treaties that bound Europe to a common set of humanitarian principles, a move that Mark Mazower demonstrates played a crucial role in determining the post–World War I international order.¹⁶ Simply put, in an era before international organizations such as the League of Nations and later the United Nations, the British Empire assumed that institutional role for itself.

The sheer scope and scale of the empire’s global footprint enabled these claims, but how Britain framed and legitimated its mission is also important. In a nation that did not want to be seen as bent only on advancing its own interests, maintaining authority over a massive overseas empire was cast as a moral responsibility. Britain’s imperial vision of itself as a civilizing force, particularly vis-à-vis its main rival in the region, the Russian Empire, gave weight to its humanitarian claims on behalf of Ottoman Christians.¹⁷ Pundits and politicians cast Russia as a “barbarous” other, much as they would Germany during World War I, allowing the British to paint what one historian called an “idealized picture of their own rule over subject peoples.”¹⁸ Religion served as a primary marker of British identity, shaping and legitimizing the humanitarian and imperial mission.¹⁹ The British Empire was a Protestant empire embracing, in the worldview of nineteenth-century liberalism, diverse regions and peoples. A tension between the belief in its role as a defender of oppressed Christian peoples and a tolerant global empire made up of many faiths, including Islam, came under pressure during World War I and influenced thinking about international

¹⁴ Susan Pedersen, “Getting Out of Iraq—in 1932: The League of Nations and the Road to Normative Statehood,” *American Historical Review* 115, no. 4 (October 2010): 975–1000, here 978.

¹⁵ Gullace’s analysis of Britain’s manipulation of the 1899 Hague Convention in making the case for the protection of civilians during World War I, though not analyzed in the context of empire, demonstrates how Britain appropriated conceptions of internationalism and humanitarianism to forward its war aims. Nicoletta F. Gullace, “Sexual Violence and Family Honor: British Propaganda and International Law during the First World War,” *American Historical Review* 102, no. 3 (June 1997): 714–747, here 747.

¹⁶ Britain used its imperial status to shape the politics and principles of the United Nations. Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton, N.J., 2009), 14. On the internationalism and imperial positioning of the League of Nations, see Susan Pedersen, “Back to the League of Nations,” *American Historical Review* 112, no. 4 (October 2007): 1091–1117; and Grant, *A Civilised Savagery*, 135–166.

¹⁷ The Russian Empire, on the other hand, claimed that it was the true protector of Ottoman Christians due to a shared Eastern Orthodox faith.

¹⁸ Jon Lawrence, “Forging a Peaceable Kingdom: War, Violence, and Fear of Brutalization in Post–First World War Britain,” *Journal of Modern History* 75, no. 3 (2003): 557–589, here 572. The notion of Russia as a “barbarous” other became particularly widespread in the second half of the nineteenth century, in the wake of the Crimean and Russo-Turkish Wars, among diplomats and critics such as Lord Strangford, Austen Henry Layard, and Arminius Vambéry. See, for example, Vambéry, “To the Memory of Lord Strangford,” in Lady Strangford, ed., *Original Letters and Papers of the Late Viscount Strangford upon Philological and Kindred Subjects* (London, 1878), xiii–xviii, here xvi.

¹⁹ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837*, revised ed. (New Haven, Conn., 2009), 43–50. Religion and humanitarian intervention became inextricably linked in the early modern period. As Andrew Thompson argues, concerns over protecting the interests of co-religionists served as a prime motivator for British politicians to intervene on behalf of oppressed peoples. Thompson, “The Protestant Interest and the History of Humanitarian Intervention, c. 1685–c. 1756,” in Brendan Simms and D. J. B. Trim, *Humanitarian Intervention: A History* (Cambridge, 2011), 67–88.

justice at the moment when the world's attention first turned to the Armenian massacres.

Outrage over the treatment of Armenians, constrained as it was at various moments by the pragmatic concerns of empire, remained necessarily contingent on a universalist humanitarian vision that relied on British imperial institutions for enforcement. The ultimate failure to prosecute Ottoman officials for crimes against humanity revealed the widening gulf between the language of moral obligation to Ottoman Christian minorities, which dated back to the nineteenth century, and twentieth-century imperial priorities. In addition, visual modes of representation emerged as a new tool of conscience. New media enabled the public to experience atrocity on film for the first time, revealing how humanitarianism had become part of artistic and popular culture after the war. The onscreen portrayal of mass murder and rape as a crime planned and executed by a Muslim majority against a Christian minority problematized Britain's postwar imperial humanitarian mandate, which had grown up around a belief in minority protection and religious toleration.

STARTING IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, Britain asserted its right as a defender of minority rights in the Ottoman Empire.²⁰ The nations joined in the Concert of Europe understood humanitarianism as an integral part of European politics.²¹ Humanitarianism loomed large as an imperial responsibility, particularly after the Russo-Turkish War (1877–1878) ended with the signing of the Treaty of Berlin in 1878, which gave Britain explicit charge to defend the rights of Christian minorities, including Armenians. The massacre of more than 200,000 Armenians in the mid-1890s was an important moment in crystallizing the meaning of what the *London Times* called a “humanitarian crusade” on behalf of Armenians.²² In September 1896, former prime minister W. E. Gladstone gave voice to this crusade when he asserted in a speech in front of thousands of supporters that Britain and its empire had an obligation in the face of the failed response by the European powers to impose “our just demands” in the wake of the massacres. Gladstone balanced the British Empire's obligation to its diverse subjects with humanitarian commitments, calling Armenians “our fellow Christians” while at the same time asserting that this was “no crusade against” Muslims. It would not represent any “altered policy of sentiment as regards our . . . fellow” Muslim “subjects in India.”²³

This humanitarian crusade marked the culmination of a decades-long campaign that universalized the Armenian cause as an imperial duty realized through British

²⁰ Although this responsibility was most often cast as one to Christian minorities during this period, the British did not necessarily exclude other oppressed minorities in this vision. Aamir R. Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture* (Princeton, N.J., 2007). For British intervention on behalf of Jewish communities, see Abigail Green, “Intervening in the Jewish Question, 1840–1878,” in Simms and Trim, *Humanitarian Intervention*, 139–158.

²¹ Rodogno's comparative study, *Against Massacre*, understands nineteenth-century humanitarianism as shaped primarily by Great Power politics. He rejects Gary Bass's notion that a popular mandate pushed humanitarianism forward during this period. On the connection between humanitarian activism and geopolitics during this period, see Michelle Tusan, *Smyrna's Ashes: Humanitarianism, Genocide, and the Birth of the Middle East* (Berkeley, Calif., 2012).

²² “Mr. Gladstone on the Armenian Question,” *Times*, September 25, 1896.

²³ *Ibid.*

diplomacy. The vision found its clearest expression in the person of Gladstone himself, described by one contemporary as a “humane man” with a “keen sense of the religious bearing of political questions.”²⁴ He admired the Eastern Orthodox Church as a unifying national and religious institution and was inspired by the Greek Wars of Independence of the 1820s.²⁵ Gladstone later witnessed the failure of the first set of Ottoman Tanzimat reforms of 1839, which created the impetus to support the principle of protection for Christian minorities.²⁶ The role of humanitarian policeman did not come immediately or easily for the British Empire. Though some, like Gladstone, supported the idea of minority protection codified in the 1856 Treaty of Paris that ended the Crimean War, many followed the prime minister, Lord Palmerston, in trying to encourage internal Ottoman reforms to improve the status of minorities from a safe distance.²⁷

An overwhelming outcry over the “Bulgarian Atrocities” on the eve of the Russo-Turkish War brought a new sense of urgency to the cause and shaped how Britain understood its obligation to Ottoman Christians. In May 1876, Ottoman soldiers massacred thousands of Bulgarian Christian civilians. Gladstone denounced the killings and led the call for a more activist role for the British Empire as arbiter of justice.²⁸ As he would later do with the Armenian case, he appealed to “the language of humanity, of justice, and of wisdom” in his widely read 1876 pamphlet *Bulgarian Horrors*.²⁹ Scholars interrogating the connection between liberalism and empire have revealed the uncomfortable connection between notions of liberty and the belief in a *pax Britannica*.³⁰ While Gladstone considered empire “part of our patrimony: born with our birth, dying only with our death,” and maintained that “the dominant passion of England is extended empire,” he thought its mission had gotten off track under Benjamin Disraeli’s leadership. In the wake of the Bulgarian Atrocity agitation, Gladstone swept the Liberal Party into office with a new rubric for empire that, according to Colin Matthew, would restore “right conduct and right princi-

²⁴ George W. E. Russell, *William Ewart Gladstone* (1891; repr., Chalford, 2007), 169, 183.

²⁵ During a visit to Greece in the 1850s, Gladstone admired “the fusion of the Church with the people.” H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone, 1809–1874* (Oxford, 1996), 167.

²⁶ Diplomats pressured the Ottoman Empire to institute reform for minorities as part of the peace negotiations that concluded the Crimean War in 1856. Arman J. Kirakossian, *British Diplomacy and the Armenian Question, from the 1830s to 1914* (Princeton, N.J., 1999), 26–29.

²⁷ This policy bordered on avoidance under the leadership of Lord Derby, who, according to Geoffrey Hicks, tried to minimize concerns over Ottoman minority issues by endeavoring to “keep matters quiet and avoid any re-opening of the eastern question.” Hicks, “The Struggle for Stability: The Fourteenth Earl and Europe, 1852–1868,” in Hicks, ed., *Conservatism and British Foreign Policy, 1820–1920: The Derbys and Their World* (London, 2011), 95–97, quote from 95.

²⁸ On Gladstone and the Bulgarian Atrocities, see R. W. Seton-Watson, *Disraeli, Gladstone, and the Eastern Question: A Study in Diplomacy and Party Politics* (1935; repr., New York, 1972); David Harris, *Britain and the Bulgarian Horrors of 1876* (Chicago, 1939); Richard Shannon, *Gladstone and the Bulgarian Agitation, 1876* (London, 1963); Richard Millman, *Britain and the Eastern Question, 1875–1878* (Oxford, 1979); and Ann Pottinger Saab, *Reluctant Icon: Gladstone, Bulgaria, and the Working Classes, 1856–1878* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991).

²⁹ W. E. Gladstone, *Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East* (London, 1876), 17. The pamphlet sold 200,000 copies in the first month and was reprinted in newspapers and other media. More than 10,000 people showed up to hear Gladstone speak at Blackheath on the topic several days after the initial publication of the pamphlet. Matthew, *Gladstone*, 283–284.

³⁰ Liberalism and empire made strange bedfellows in the nineteenth century. Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton, N.J., 2006); Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge, 1997). This proved at times “highly problematic” for a “Liberal Prime Minister of an imperial power.” Matthew, *Gladstone*, 375–376.

ples.”³¹ Against the unbridled geographic expansion advocated by the Tories, Gladstone proposed that one aspect of “the great work assigned to the Imperial State of the United Kingdom” was “the noble duty of defending, as occasion offers, the cause of public right, and of rational freedom, over the broad expanse of Christendom.”³² Empire would serve a higher cause in this “mighty mission.” “Our own misdeeds, if they exist, are distant,” he asserted, “and on the whole we are admirably placed for upholding, by voice and influence, the interests . . . of sheer justice and humanity.”³³

Religious, secular, and parliamentary advocacy organizations came to share this vision. They found inspiration in Gladstone’s crusade on behalf of Eastern Orthodox Christians, whom many saw as belonging to a religion that shared a common origin with Anglicanism.³⁴ Anglicans and Nonconformists alike embraced the cause, raising money and performing relief work in the Ottoman Empire.³⁵ Such activism cast humanitarian intervention as a simultaneously moral, religious, and imperial duty that Gladstone maintained would “serve civilization.”³⁶ (See Figure 1.) In 1876, advocates founded the Eastern Question Association as an umbrella organization to advocate for Ottoman minorities that included Armenian, Assyrian, and Greek Orthodox Christians.³⁷ Other organizations included the Anglo-Armenian Association, the Friends of Armenia, and the Church of England Assyrian Mission sponsored by the Archbishop of Canterbury.³⁸

This activism made the once-reluctant British Empire a steward of minority rights in the Ottoman Empire. The end of the Russo-Turkish War and the signing of the Treaty of Berlin in July 1878 released a wave of sentiment in favor of humanitarian intervention on behalf of persecuted Christian minorities. Article 61 of the Berlin

³¹ W. E. Gladstone, “England’s Mission,” *Nineteenth Century*, September 1878, 569–570; Matthew, *Gladstone*, 374.

³² Gladstone, “England’s Mission,” 578, 584. He echoed this sentiment in his Midlothian campaign speech, claiming that the British Empire would serve just principles “inspired by the love of freedom” that first would “foster the strength of the Empire” and “preserve . . . the blessings of peace,” which he singled out in particular “for the Christian nations.” Gladstone, West Calder speech, November 27, 1879, quoted in Seton-Watson, *Disraeli, Gladstone, and the Eastern Question*, 545–546.

³³ Gladstone, “England’s Mission,” 570.

³⁴ The protection of minorities in general was important to liberal notions of empire. Eastern Orthodox Christians were singled out by high churchmen such as Gladstone as connected to an authentic early Christianity, which inspired his efforts on their behalf. Matthew, *Gladstone*, 629, 635; J. F. Coakley, *The Church of the East and the Church of England: A History of the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Assyrian Mission* (Oxford, 1992). On liberal imperial views on Jewish minorities, see Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony*, 37–56. Religious and relief workers who supported intervention on behalf of Armenians cited Armenia’s early adoption of Christianity as a national religion and its highly developed ancient culture as reasons for this particular connection. Michelle Tusan, “The Business of Relief Work: A Victorian Quaker in Constantinople and Her Circle,” *Victorian Studies* 51, no. 4 (2009): 633–661.

³⁵ Some of Gladstone’s most strident supporters during the Bulgarian Atrocities agitation came from the North of England, where religious Nonconformity was strong.

³⁶ As Gladstone posited in a phrase widely quoted by activists, “To serve Armenia is to serve civilization.”

³⁷ Eastern Question Association, *Papers on the Eastern Question* (London, 1877). Papers published by this organization included works by the clergy, MPs, feminists, philanthropists, and Gladstone himself.

³⁸ Humanitarian advocacy groups were founded by missionary, feminist, philanthropic, and regional and national political organizations and included the Eastern Question Association; the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Assyrian Mission; the Anglo-Armenian Association; the British Armenia Committee; the Armenian Red Cross; the Friends of Armenia, with branches in Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England; the Armenian Bureau of Information, the Lord Mayors Fund of Manchester; the Armenian Orphans Fund (Manchester); the Religious Society of Friends, Armenian Mission; the Armenian Refugees Relief Fund, run by the Armenian United Association of London; and the Armenian Ladies Guild of London. Tusan, *Smyrna’s Ashes*, 30–35.



FIGURE 1: Gladstone (shown here as a Christian crusader) and Britannia defending civilians from massacre. From *Punch*, September 26, 1896, 151.

Treaty codified Britain's leadership role regarding minority protection, though it offered little in the way of enforcement.³⁹ Despite its failure as a diplomatic tool, however, this international agreement formalized British responsibility for Ottoman Christians. By the mid-1890s, a growing pamphlet literature declared Armenia Britain's special "responsibility" and implored readers to support "our treaty obligations."⁴⁰ Article 61 inspired and gave legal foundation to calls for the British Empire, rather than its Russian rival, to enforce minority protections for Christians.⁴¹ The campaign launched on behalf of Armenians appealed to humanitarian sentiments to accept "responsibility" for stopping what one commentator called "the hugest and foulest crimes that have ever stained the pages of human history."⁴² This question of responsibility would again be tested during the 1909 massacres at Adana and later during the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913, when influential members of the House of Commons started the British Armenia Committee to lobby for the enforcement of Ottoman minority protections.⁴³ By the time world war broke out on the Eastern Front, the British Empire was widely recognized as the legitimate and primary protector of minority interests in the Ottoman Empire. Wartime massacres of Armenian civilians would inspire renewed calls by those who believed in Gladstone's crusade to honor this commitment.

VISCOUNT JAMES BRYCE (1838–1922) RESPONDED to this call. Disturbed by reports of widespread massacres against Ottoman Armenians and the arrests on unnamed charges of more than two hundred Armenian intellectuals and religious leaders following the Allied invasion at Gallipoli on April 25, 1915, Bryce launched an investigation.⁴⁴ His report, *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, 1915–16*, chronicled the unfolding humanitarian crisis and helped transform what one commentator cast as the British Empire's "war against German militarism" into "a war of liberation" for "small nationalities" throughout Europe and Asia.⁴⁵

³⁹ In the end, the attempt to protect minority interests by adjusting the territories of the western Ottoman Empire to offer more autonomy to Bulgarians and others had only limited success. Kirakossian, *British Diplomacy and the Armenian Question*, 70–79.

⁴⁰ The most notable were those published by the Friends of Armenia through its "Information Bureau," which printed articles and pamphlets and raised money for Armenian causes at meetings in provincial and urban venues. Meeting places included Dundee, Hampstead, Hanley, Ipswich, London, Maidstone, Norwich, Rishton, Wigan, and York. Hundreds of pamphlets published in the nineteenth century on behalf of Armenian causes survive in archival collections in Britain and the U.S. *Armenia*, Friends of Armenia Information Bureau pamphlet, n.d., Bodleian Special Collections, Oxford, Viscount James Bryce Papers [hereafter BC], MS 210; "Occasional Paper, no. 3," International Association of the Friends of Armenia, April 28, 1897, London School of Economics Special Collections [hereafter LSES], Misc Collection 0019.

⁴¹ This period of sustained sectarian violence, known as the Abdul Hamid massacres, resulted in the killing of an estimated 200,000 Armenian civilians. Anderson, "Down in Turkey, far away," 82.

⁴² E. J. Dillon, "Armenia: An Appeal," *Contemporary Review*, January 1896, 19. See also "The Armenian Atrocities Agitation: Speech by Mr. Gladstone," *Daily Free Press*, August 7, 1895; "The Massacres in Turkey," *Nineteenth Century*, October 1896.

⁴³ "British Armenian Committee Minutes," Rhodes House Library Archives [hereafter RHL], Oxford.

⁴⁴ A figure of 250 is cited in Grigoris Balakian, *Armenian Golgotha: A Memoir of the Armenian Genocide, 1915–1918*, trans. Peter Balakian (New York, 2009), xiii. Dadrian claims that this number increased to 2,345 in the weeks that followed; *The History of the Armenian Genocide*, 221. For a full account of the events of April 24, see Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 251–254.

⁴⁵ J. Ellis Barker, "Menace in the Near East," *Fortnightly Review*, December 1914, 994–1014; W. Williams, "Armenians and the Partition of Asia Minor," *Fortnightly Review*, November 1915, 968–977.

The report set the tone and established the terms by which the international community understood the Armenian Genocide. Issued as a Parliamentary Blue Book in October 1916, the 733-page volume contained evidence from more than one hundred sources. It remains today the most complete set of testimonies in English regarding the massacre of Armenian civilians that started in the spring of 1915. Bryce, a well-regarded Liberal statesman known for his advocacy of Armenian causes, cabled the *New York Times* immediately after it published lengthy excerpts from his report: “All civilized nations able to assist the Armenians today should know that the need is still extremely urgent . . . this requires worldwide assistance for feeding, clothing, housing and repatriation.”⁴⁶

Part history, part documentary, the Blue Book offered compelling evidence of concurrent massacres throughout Anatolia, a pattern that Bryce blamed on a premeditated government policy of eliminating Armenians and other Christian minorities from the Ottoman Empire. Organized along regional lines with a map of “Affected Districts,” the volume was divided into twenty sections, each of which contained multiple eyewitness and secondhand reports, dispatches, news articles, and letters. The appendix refuted Ottoman claims that Armenian disloyalty to the empire justified the killing of civilians.⁴⁷ In total there were 149 documents and 15 appendixes, which together made the case for the “exceedingly systematic” plan behind the massacres. This official report, commissioned by the government, brought together the documents and arguments that would shape how advocates and institutions later defined the crime of genocide.⁴⁸

Debates in Parliament and the Blue Book itself revealed the importance of establishing the facts while not alienating the British Empire’s Muslim subjects.⁴⁹ On October 6, 1915, the Earl of Cromer rose in the House of Lords to register his shock at “accounts of Armenian massacres” and to ask His Majesty’s Government “whether they have any reliable information and can tell us what has actually occurred.”⁵⁰ While being careful not to offend “Mahomedan [*sic*] fellow-subjects,” Cromer argued that “the facts should be made public . . . to let the people of this country know for what we are fighting.”⁵¹ The last word was reserved for Bryce.

⁴⁶ “Lord Bryce’s Report on Turkish Atrocities,” *Current History Magazine*, *New York Times*, November 1916, 320–334.

⁴⁷ The disloyalty argument was later outlined and refuted by American ambassador Henry Morgenthau in his memoirs published in 1918. Suny, “Writing Genocide,” 19–20.

⁴⁸ Raphael Lemkin would later use the Armenian massacres as a case study in his attempts to understand what he would first label as the crime of genocide in *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress* (Washington, D.C., 1944). The language of intent to eliminate particular populations through systematic and premeditated killing was codified after the Holocaust in the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (December 1948); Human Rights Web, <http://www.hrweb.org/legal/genocide.html>.

⁴⁹ Viscount Bryce, *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, 1915–16* (London, 1916), xvi.

⁵⁰ Cromer referred to the large scale of this particular event in comparison to previous massacres that “horrified the whole civilized world,” citing a newspaper report that new violence had claimed 800,000 victims. Hansards Online, HL Deb 06 October 1915 vol. 19 cc994-1004, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1915/oct/06/the-armenian-massacres>.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* Upon hearing these words, “several noble lords” responded “Hear, hear,” encouraging Lord Cromer to continue, “Only they ought to have information laid before them on which to form an opinion, and when they have that information I do not doubt that they will see that it would be almost tantamount to an insult to the Mahomedan religion and to the feelings of all right-thinking Mahomedans if they in any way identified the cause of Islam with the cause of the existing Government at Constantinople. Also I think it would be very advisable to enlighten Egyptian opinion. The generation of Egyptians which

Having already begun to gather information for what would become the Blue Book, he argued that “publicity” given to these events would stop the “premeditated and systematic” massacres ordered by “the Government of the Turkish Empire.”⁵² Citing examples of “pious and humane” officials and “Moslems who tried to save their Christian neighbors,” Bryce argued alongside Cromer that “there is nothing in the precepts of Islam which justifies this slaughter.” The British people had a “moral bond” with Armenians, and thus they had the responsibility to gather evidence and save “the unfortunate remnants of this ancient Christian nation.”⁵³

Bryce’s leadership in this campaign was important. He was a respected former ambassador to the United States and a viscount with a seat in the House of Lords whose advocacy work would earn him a prominent position on the International Court of the Hague. Before the Armenian Blue Book, he led the campaign against German atrocities in Belgium. His report on German soldiers’ treatment of Belgian civilians was translated into twenty-seven languages and served as a rallying point for the war effort on the Western Front.⁵⁴ Bryce’s casting of German atrocities as an indefensible crime against civilians during war in the context of the 1899 Hague Convention made the case for the primary place held by the British in defending humanitarian values.⁵⁵ This earlier activism on behalf of Belgian civilians and the defense of international law gave him a strong platform from which to argue on behalf of Britain’s longstanding responsibility to enforce the Treaty of Berlin and take up the mantle of Gladstone’s mission to defend Christian minorities.⁵⁶

Bryce’s sense of obligation to Armenians, his status as a Liberal statesman, and his sensitivity to Muslim opinion boosted the Blue Book to prominence and lent further weight to its findings. Others who witnessed the atrocities firsthand, including U.S. ambassador Henry Morgenthau, whose work has received a good deal of scholarly attention, published compelling and verified accounts that also had a wide audience.⁵⁷ Yet Bryce’s less-studied government report stood apart as the first official record of this event “corroborated by reports received from Americans, Danes,

suffered from Turkish rule is now dying out, and I think it would be advisable to remind the present generation of what Turkish rule means.”

⁵² Interest in such a report spread to the House of Commons. On August 23, 1916, Lord Robert Cecil received a request from Mr. Bird in the House to see the report that he had heard was in process. HC Deb 23 August 1916 vol. 85 c2650, Mr. Bird to Lord Robert Cecil, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1916/aug/23/armenia>.

⁵³ Ibid.; Bryce, *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire*, 594.

⁵⁴ Nicoletta F. Gullace, “*The Blood of Our Sons*”: *Men, Women, and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship during the Great War* (London, 2004), 17–34; H. A. L. Fisher, *James Bryce*, 2 vols. (New York, 1927), 2: 132–136; John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven, Conn., 2001), 237.

⁵⁵ This was done through a reinterpretation of the 1899 Hague Convention. Gullace, “Sexual Violence and Family Honor,” 741.

⁵⁶ J. S. Malcolm made this comparison in Fisher, *James Bryce*, 1: 293. Bryce’s interest in Armenia drew inspiration from Gladstone’s advocacy work. In 1890 he founded the Anglo-Armenian Association, explicitly to secure “the execution of the 61st Article of the Treaty of Berlin.” He continued to work tirelessly as an advocate, philanthropist, and diplomat on behalf of Armenian causes. “Anglo-Armenian Association: Letter of Appeal,” January 31, 1893; obituary, “Viscount James Bryce,” *Times*, January 31, 1922.

⁵⁷ Ronald Suny has written the most recent study of Morgenthau and understands his role as central to shaping the discourse of genocide. Though the ambassador reportedly was encouraged at the time by President Wilson to publish his findings, his report on the massacres came out only in 1919 and did not have the official status of Bryce’s Blue Book. See also Balakian, *The Burning Tigris*, 167–168, 219–224.

Swiss, Germans, Italians and other foreigners,” emerging as the centerpiece of an international humanitarian campaign.⁵⁸ His casting of the genocide as motivated by politics rather than religious hatred mitigated worries expressed by Cromer and others at the Foreign Office that taking on the Armenian cause would alienate Muslims in the empire. As Bryce put it in the preface, “In such an enquiry, no racial or religious sympathies, no prejudices, not even the natural horror raised by crimes, ought to distract the mind of the enquirer from the duty of trying to ascertain the real facts.”⁵⁹

The Blue Book’s universalism resonated in the international community thanks in part to Bryce’s ability to manage its production and use. He secured the assistance of British and American lawyers and historians to review the documents and gave the task of editing to historian Arnold Toynbee.⁶⁰ When Charles Masterman at the War Office got involved to assess the propaganda potential of the volume, Bryce and Toynbee ignored pressure to shorten it and publish it quickly, insisting that all documents be unabridged and verified by independent sources before publication.⁶¹ The painstaking effort to maintain the integrity of the sources made the Blue Book a trusted source for the humanitarian argument. At the same time, it encouraged President Woodrow Wilson, who reportedly kept a portrait of Gladstone on his desk, to view the war as a just cause and buoyed his support of self-determination for Ottoman minorities, later codified in the “14 Points.”⁶²

British imperial diplomatic and military resources made the Blue Book possible. Information about Anatolia and Armenians came from records kept by the empire’s network of consular and diplomatic outposts. The volume’s regional organization familiarized readers with Armenia and Armenians. The two maps included in the report plotted the places described in the testimonies and eyewitness accounts. (See Figures 2 and 3.) Bryce had tried a similar tactic after the massacres of the mid-1890s and produced a general map that outlined areas affected by the violence using

⁵⁸ “Letter from Mr. H.A.L. Fisher,” in Bryce, *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire*, xxix–xxx, here xxix. See Nassibian, *Britain and the Armenian Question*; Tusan, *Smyrna’s Ashes*, 123–124.

⁵⁹ “Preface by Viscount Bryce,” in Bryce, *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire*, xxi–xxviii, here xxi.

⁶⁰ In addition to the Blue Book, Toynbee penned two pamphlets, *Armenian Atrocities: The Murder of a Nation* (London, 1915) and *The Murderous Tyranny of the Turks* (London, 1917), published in both Britain and the U.S. *Armenian Atrocities* argued that the “exceedingly systematic” nature of the massacres in 1915 set them apart from nineteenth-century antecedents. Citing evidence taken from fifty different places, Toynbee established a pattern of premeditated mass violence in a chapter titled “The Plan of the Massacres.” Other chapters chronicled deportations and the death toll. The final chapter, “The Attitude of Germany,” implicated Germany as an accomplice to the massacres (117). Blaming Germany for the massacres became a familiar trope that continued beyond the war. Suny, “Writing Genocide,” 18–20; Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2005), 263–290.

⁶¹ Correspondence between Bryce, Masterman, and Toynbee indicates that Bryce had a great deal of control over the final appearance of the volume. BC, Charles Masterman to Lord Bryce, June 14, 1916, MS 202; Arnold Toynbee to Lord Bryce, July 22, 1916, MS 203. Further correspondence relating to the publication of the Blue Book is found in The National Archives, Kew, UK [hereafter TNA], FO 96/207.

⁶² Nassibian argues that the Blue Book had a positive effect on American public opinion as propaganda for the war cause and played an important role in influencing Wilson’s pro-Armenia stance; *Britain and the Armenian Question*, 78–80. Gary Bass traces Wilson’s admiration for Gladstone back to his teenage years, understanding him as almost a father figure to Wilson; *Freedom’s Battle*, 315. Wilson explicitly took up the cause of autonomy for Ottoman minorities in point 12 of the “14 Points,” which asserted that “nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development.”



FIGURE 2: General map of the western Ottoman Empire published at the beginning of the Blue Book, indicating international frontiers, Ottoman administrative boundaries, capitals, villayets, sandjaks, and railroads. From Viscount Bryce, *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, 1915–16* (London, 1916).

sketches made by a British consul stationed in the region.⁶³ In 1915, more thorough regional surveys, coupled with the support of a Foreign Office that fully realized the propaganda potential of the Blue Book, gave Bryce the resources necessary to assemble and disseminate a detailed atrocity map that charted even the smallest vilages around the main sites of the massacres. Readers could locate the sites described in the documents and trace the route of the Anatolian Railway, along which tens of thousands were deported by train and on foot through the desert.⁶⁴

Evidence-gathering relied on imperial networks, but it was secular and religious humanitarian organizations that raised money and awareness in the international community.⁶⁵ Church and missionary organizations across Britain and the United

⁶³ “Map of the District in Which the Armenian Massacres Took Place in the Autumn of 1894,” British Library Map Collection, 48320 (1). The note indicates that “This map is in MS and is the ONLY copy. It is requested that GREAT CARE may be exercised in using it, and that it may NOT BE SENT FROM THE OFFICE without reference to Section F.” Consul William Everett, who was stationed in Eastern Anatolia, produced the original map.

⁶⁴ “Anatolian Railway,” 409–464. See especially Document 104, “The Anatolian Railway: Narrative of a Journey during the Deportation of the Armenians by a Physician of Foreign Nationality Who Had Been a Resident in Turkey for Ten Years,” in Bryce, *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire*, 409–413.

⁶⁵ These groups, based largely in the United States and Britain, put moral pressure on individuals, organizations, and governments that Bryce had advocated as a solution to the crisis. With roots in the Victorian period, British organizations grew up around W. E. Gladstone’s untiring support of humanitarian causes, later taken up by his son. In the United States, Near East Relief played the most important role, raising over its lifetime more than \$1 billion for the Armenian cause. Although British organizations

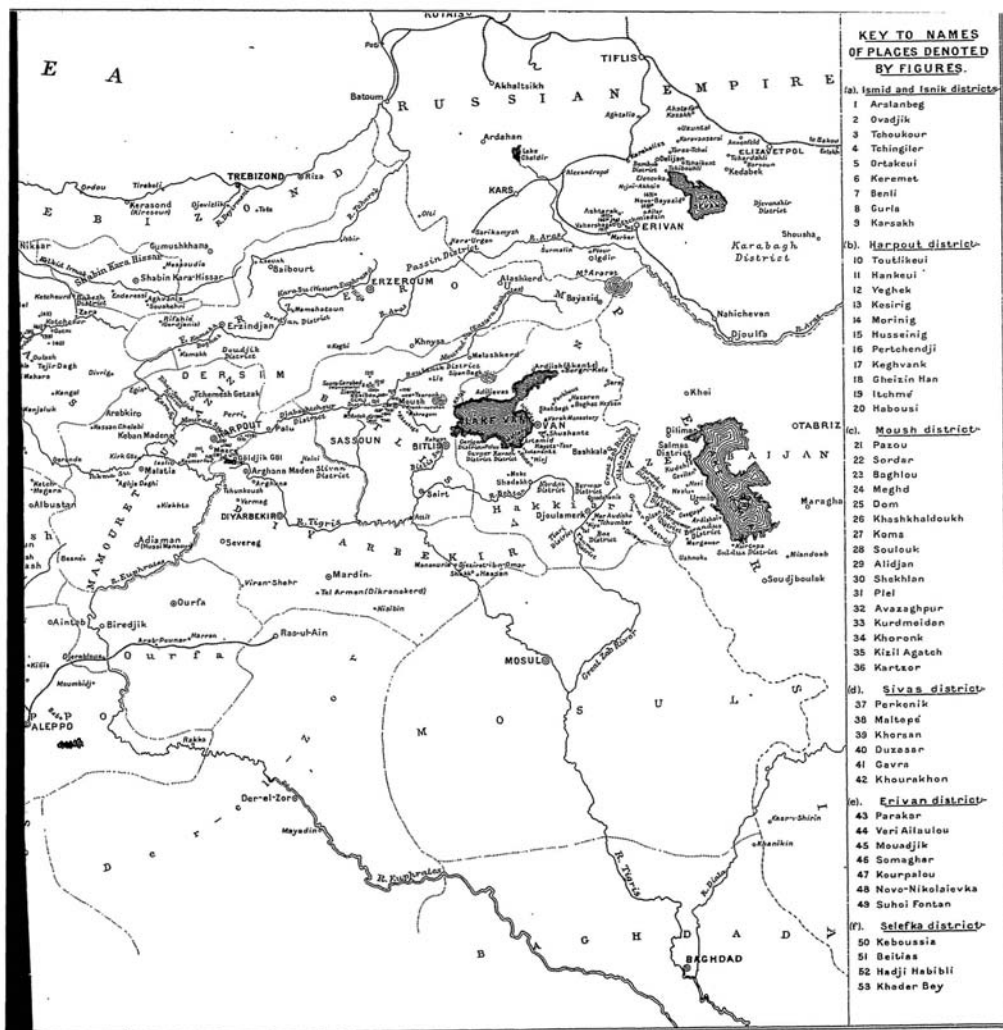


FIGURE 3: This detailed regional map, published next to the general map, shows the places in the Ottoman Empire that are referenced in the Blue Book documents, enabling readers to pinpoint the exact locations where massacres of Armenian civilians occurred during World War I. From Bryce, *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire*.

States accepted Bryce’s representation of the massacres as an “exceedingly systematic,” politically motivated crime. The Anglican Church, under the leadership of an archbishop with strong ties to Orthodox Christians, held a series of Remembrance Sundays during which parishioners heard about Ottoman atrocities against Armenian, Assyrian, and Greek minorities.⁶⁶ Immediately after the war, the Archbishop

did not raise as much money as their U.S. counterparts, their role as pressure groups remained important. Membership included key secular and religious leaders such as MPs Aneurin Williams, T. P. O’Connor, Noel Buxton, and the Archbishop of Canterbury. British organizations raised hundreds of thousands of pounds for relief work and thousands more for political advocacy and education programs. Nassibian, *Britain and the Armenian Question*, 253.

⁶⁶ The role of the Archbishop of Canterbury in advocacy for Christian minorities during the war is

of Canterbury used the Blue Book in an address to the House of Lords to make the case for genocide: “The appalling stories of wholesale massacre . . . are set before us in incident after incident . . . No one reading it carefully but must be convinced, not, I will say, of the Turkish Government’s complicity in these matters, but of its authorship, the actual authorship of these unspeakable outrages.” He concluded by calling for action in this “matter of vital import to the honour of humanity and the good faith and wellbeing of the world,” which constituted “an outrage on civilisation without historical parallel in the world.”⁶⁷

This campaign found voice in international channels that recognized the massacres as what today would be called state-sponsored terror. A joint European declaration issued on May 24, 1915, accused Turkey of crimes “against humanity and civilization,” marking the first use of the phrase in relation to war crimes.⁶⁸ Inserted by the Russian foreign minister, Sergey Sazonov, the declaration raised the stakes for Britain. Mindful of the empire’s leadership role in minority protection and its competition with Orthodox Russia for the loyalty of Ottoman Christians, officials and activists began using evidence in the Blue Book to make the case that the massacres of Armenian civilians constituted a crime against humanity.⁶⁹ According to the Blue Book, “the Young Turkish Ministers and their associates at Constantinople are directly and personally responsible, from beginning to end, for the gigantic crime that devastated the Near East in 1915.”⁷⁰ At the end of World War I, the British Empire, with its significant military and humanitarian presence on the ground, had the means and motivation to make this case.

THE BRITISH EMPIRE TOOK THE LEAD in war crimes prosecutions after the war.⁷¹ The Ottoman Empire had sided with Germany and was made aware during peace ne-

chronicled in the Lambeth Palace Archives, London, Davidson Papers. Other churches also raised awareness and funds from the pulpit, including the Roman Catholic Church, which held a Sunday of remembrance on February 6, 1916. Friends of Armenia helped push forward plans for a “special Armenian Day” to be proclaimed “all over the country” in January 1917 by “sending literature to all the Clergy, both of the established and the free churches.” Letter from (?) to Arnold Toynbee, January 3, 1917, TNA, FO 96/207.

⁶⁷ HL Deb 17 December 1919 vol. 38 cc279-300, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1919/dec/17/turkish-rule-in-armenia>.

⁶⁸ “Joint Declaration to Sublime Porte,” May 24, 1915. The concept itself has a longer history, but it was the declaration that gave “crimes against humanity” meaning as an act related to genocide. Rooted in Enlightenment thinking and early humanitarian ideology, the notion of a crime committed against a broadly conceived humanity first emerged in relation to slavery. Martinez locates the term “crime against humanity” in a treatise by an American legal scholar, Henry Wheaton, regarding public sentiment in relation to slavery in 1842; *The Slave Trade and the Origins of International Human Rights Law*, 115–116.

⁶⁹ British consular officials starting in the nineteenth century warned of the threat posed by Russia and its attempts to win the hearts and minds of Orthodox Christians living in border towns such as Erzeroom. On the Russian view, see Robert L. Nichols and Theofanis George Stavrou, eds., *Russian Orthodoxy under the Old Regime* (Minneapolis, 1978); Paul W. Werth, *At the Margins of Orthodoxy: Mission, Governance, and Confessional Politics in Russia’s Volga-Kama Region, 1827–1905* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2001); Thomas A. Meininger, *Ignatiev and the Establishment of the Bulgarian Exarchate: A Study in Personal Diplomacy* (Madison, Wis., 1970).

⁷⁰ Bryce, *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire*, 653.

⁷¹ The most comprehensive study of the war crimes trials is Dadrian and Akçam, *Judgment at Istanbul*. See also Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 699–798; Vahakn N. Dadrian, “The Turkish Mil-

gotiations that it would be held responsible for the crimes committed against minorities during wartime. Britain’s moral and practical claim as protector of Ottoman Armenians over Russia, now embroiled in a bloody civil war, as well as other European powers was strengthened by the authoritative account of the massacres found in the Blue Book.⁷² The failed British-led invasion of Gallipoli implicated the Allies alongside the Ottoman government in the killings that happened in its immediate wake. “The Armenian race in Asia Minor has been virtually destroyed,” charged one critic, who blamed the massacres in part on “the ill-success of the Dardanelles expedition.”⁷³ This moral responsibility, coupled with the more than one million troops still stationed in the Ottoman Empire at the war’s end, poised the British government to take the lead in Allied peace efforts on the Eastern Front, which included the arbitration of the Armenian case.

David Lloyd George cast World War I as a fight for international justice led by the British Empire. This included in its initial stages the prosecution of the German Kaiser and those responsible for the Armenian massacres. Early on, the prime minister called upon Britain to support the cause of freedom and humanity in a series of wartime speeches published as *The Great Crusade*, much as his Liberal predecessor W. E. Gladstone might have done.⁷⁴ “With all its faults,” he declared, “the British Empire, here and across the seas, stands for freer, better, ampler, nobler conditions of life for man.”⁷⁵ In a later speech he spoke of the importance of imperial unity and singled out India’s contribution of more than one million men to the war effort. To explain this show of support, he praised “the beneficence of the British Empire,” calling it “the most potent factor to-day in the struggle for human liberty.”⁷⁶ In anticipation of an Allied victory, the prime minister furthered this claim: “There must be reparations done for violations of international law,” which would honor those who had suffered for the “common cause of freedom.”⁷⁷ In a response to the Ottoman delegation at the Peace Conference, Lloyd George made clear the kinds of “violations” he had in mind. The case against the Ottoman Empire regarding the treatment of civilian populations during wartime centered on that government’s own failure to defend minorities: “There is a great deal of proof that it took upon itself to organize and lead attacks of the most savage kind on a population that it ought to have protected.”⁷⁸

itary Tribunal’s Prosecution of the Authors of the Armenian Genocide: Four Major Court-Martial Series,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 11, no. 1 (1997): 28–59.

⁷² The civil war effectively ended Russia’s ability to maintain its claim that it, not Britain, was the rightful protector of Ottoman Christians. This, alongside the sensation caused by the Blue Book, allowed Britain to strengthen its already strong claims to protect Ottoman minorities. Though little has been written about the impact of the civil war on Ottoman Christians, the story of the war is chronicled in David S. Foglesong, *America’s Secret War against Bolshevism: U.S. Intervention in the Russian Civil War, 1917–1920* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2001).

⁷³ Lewis Einstein, “The Armenian Massacres,” *Contemporary Review* 111 (1917): 486–494, here 494.

⁷⁴ According to Lloyd George, “Young men from every quarter of this country flocked to the standard of international right as to a great crusade.” David Lloyd George, “Winning This War,” in George, *The Great Crusade: Extracts from Speeches Delivered during the War* (New York, 1918), 21–37, here 23.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁷⁶ David Lloyd George, “The War and the Empire,” *ibid.*, 135–139, here 136.

⁷⁷ David Lloyd George, “The War Aims of the Allies,” *ibid.*, 251–266, here 263.

⁷⁸ Lloyd George response to the Ottoman delegation, July 16, 1920, quoted in Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 769.

The decision to pursue the prosecution of war criminals tested the limits of Lloyd George's crusade. The war crimes tribunal was a new tool used by the Allies in the case of the Ottomans and Germans.⁷⁹ The British had shown enthusiasm for trying the German Kaiser for war crimes immediately after the war. The Leipzig Trials were the result, and in the end amounted to a short-lived set of legal proceedings that led to the prosecution of several minor German officials in a German court, who received short prison sentences for war crimes.⁸⁰ The decision to try Ottoman officials for a new category of crime committed during wartime against their own people would fare little better.

In October 1918, the British negotiated an armistice with the Ottoman Empire, which was signed on the 30th of the month at Mudros on the Greek island of Lemnos. The framing of this document offered the first opportunity to put into practice what the 1915 joint declaration had posited as a universal commitment to human rights, and what the Bryce Report had poised Britain to defend. Admiral Somerset Gough-Calthorpe was the man charged with making the peace. Serving as both the commander in chief of British Mediterranean Naval Forces and the high commissioner at Constantinople, he had strict instructions from the Foreign Office that this was to be a wholly British affair.⁸¹ French demands to have a hand in the negotiations were rebuffed on the grounds that they amounted to little more than "butting in," in the words of one observer.⁸² The Armenian question found its way into several provisions of the armistice that Calthorpe negotiated on his own, sanctioning involvement in the subsequent pursuit of war criminals. These included amnesty for Armenian prisoners, giving Britain charge of Turkish prisoners of war, and securing the right to occupy Armenian villages to prevent further massacres. The French and other Allies accepted Calthorpe's document, agreeing to substitute the word "Alied" for "British" in the final version.⁸³

After the armistice was signed, the London *Times* confidently declared that the prosecution of "those responsible for the massacres would come as a matter of course," because the Ottomans feared that harsher measures would be "imposed by the Allies."⁸⁴ In the following months, news of continued massacres and pressure from humanitarian organizations made this a reality.⁸⁵ The Ottoman War Crimes Trials, a series of courts-martial set up to prosecute Turkish officials for the Armenian massacres, would try those responsible as a condition of the peace.⁸⁶ By the

⁷⁹ A complete account of Leipzig is found in Bass, *Stay the Hand of Vengeance*, chap. 3.

⁸⁰ For contemporary accounts of the Leipzig Trials, see Claud Mullins, *The Leipzig Trials: An Account of the War Criminals' Trials and a Study of German Mentality* (London, 1921); "German War Trials: Report of Proceedings before the Supreme Court in Leipzig," parliamentary report (London, 1921), HP, MS. Eng. Hist. c. 943, CMD, 1450.

⁸¹ Paul G. Halpern, *A Naval History of World War I* (Annapolis, Md., 1994), 401; Halpern, ed., *The Mediterranean Fleet, 1919–1929* (London, 2011), 4.

⁸² M. P. A. Hankey Diary entry, October 29, 1918, Churchill College Archives, Cambridge University, Archives of Lord Hankey of the Chart (Maurice Hankey), 1877–1963, 1/6. Hankey served as the secretary to the Committee of Imperial Defense from 1912 to 1938 and as the British secretary to the Paris Peace Conference, recording his personal observations of the conference in his diary.

⁸³ J. C. Hurewitz, ed., *The Middle East and North Africa in World Politics: A Documentary Record*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (New Haven, Conn., 1979), 2: 128–130.

⁸⁴ "Turks Talk of Reform: Punishment for Armenian Massacres," *Times*, November 30, 1918.

⁸⁵ "More Armenian Massacres," *Times*, January 4, 1919.

⁸⁶ Dadrian, "The Turkish Military Tribunal's Prosecution of the Authors of the Armenian Genocide," 28–59.

spring of 1919, the Ottoman government, under British pressure, had arrested more than one hundred high-profile suspects, including government ministers, governors, and military officers.⁸⁷ The trials took place between 1919 and 1922 and resulted in the execution of three minor officials for “crimes against humanity,” a term that Calthorpe deployed in reference to the proceedings.⁸⁸

The failure to fully prosecute the key figures responsible for the genocide was due in part to the difficulty of executing human rights justice under the banner of the British Empire. After the signing of the armistice, the British Empire alone had the authority, the military infrastructure, and the political will to launch an inquiry into the massacres. The idea of a “High Court” to prosecute war crimes was first discussed in February 1919 at the Preliminary Peace Conference, where Allied jurists met as part of the Committee on the Responsibility of Authors of the War to discuss violations of “human rights.”⁸⁹ It was while serving on this committee that Sir Ernest Pollock wrote to the prime minister about his frustration with what he saw as the inevitable “delay” in setting up such an “International Commission.”⁹⁰ Pollock further expressed skepticism that such an international body would work, because of the complexity of the cases and the variation in the juridical standards and procedures across Allied countries. This ultimately led him to suggest that the British Empire take this role, citing its global stature and the superiority of English law and its “single-judge system.”⁹¹ Confident that “The British Empire is far in advance of other nations who sit at the Commission in their proposals as to (a) how the Tribunal should be constituted, and (b) the evidence in cases to be brought before it,” he wrote a letter to Foreign Secretary A. J. Balfour in which he raised the possibility of setting up the British Empire Tribunal, which he claimed had “support from the Naval and Military representatives” on the committee.⁹²

Though questions regarding jurisdiction ultimately led the Allies to reject the proposed British Empire Tribunal, Britain continued to put pressure on war crimes prosecutions, producing dozens of dossiers on suspected war criminals.⁹³ This leadership role had to do with a combination of factors, including the weakened position of Russia as a defender of Christian Orthodoxy at the proceedings and the successful marginalization of the French in the Mediterranean after the war. The United States’ active disinterest in the creation of an international body to try war crimes contributed as well.⁹⁴ When Allied leaders met in April to discuss the findings of the Committee on Responsibility, the British prime minister echoed Pollock’s concern about a proposal for the newly formed League of Nations to set up its own court of justice. While supporting the idea that such a court should be “created by the League of Nations,” Lloyd George wanted to be sure it would demonstrate “that it is capable

⁸⁷ Vartkes Yeghiayan, *British Foreign Office Dossiers on Turkish War Criminals* (La Verne, Calif., 1991), vii–xxvi.

⁸⁸ Admiral Calthorpe, Constantinople, January 7, 1919, TNA, FO 371/4173.

⁸⁹ Committee session of February 3, 1919, discussed in Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 763–765.

⁹⁰ Sir E. Pollock to Prime Minister Lloyd George, February 7, 1919, HP, MS. Eng. Hist. c. 943.

⁹¹ “Remarks on Projet D’Organisation Des Tribunaux,” *ibid.*

⁹² Sir E. Pollock to Lord Balfour, February 8, 1919, *ibid.*

⁹³ These dossiers are held in the National Archives. Many are published in Yeghiayan, *British Foreign Office Dossiers on Turkish War Criminals*.

⁹⁴ Sir E. Pollock to Lord Balfour, February 26, 1919, HP, MS. Eng. Hist. c. 943.

of punishing crimes,” including “criminal acts” and “general orders in violation of human rights.”⁹⁵

To the question of which body would control the trials was added the difficulty of defining a war crime. The prosecution of Ottoman leaders for the Armenian massacres overlapped with the issue of the ill-treatment of prisoners of war from Britain and its empire.⁹⁶ Ultimately, the category of “war crimes” in the Ottoman case included crimes against both British military and Armenian civilian populations, which further complicated the proceedings.⁹⁷ One of the questions raised by legal experts at the time was whether “war crimes” applied to acts committed by a country against its own subjects. In the case of the Armenians, this proved a particularly important distinction. Whereas the German case revolved around the issue of culpability for the violation of “laws and customs of war affecting members of the British armed forces or other British subjects,” as stipulated by the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, the case against the Ottoman Empire ventured into less certain territory.⁹⁸ The issue of whether Ottoman officials could be tried for crimes against their own subjects during wartime opened up new questions regarding the application of human rights standards in a military conflict. British officials asked “whether the term ‘acts committed in the violation of the laws and customs of war’” covered “offences committed by . . . Turkish Authorities against Turkish subjects of the Armenian race.”⁹⁹

In the end, the War Crimes Tribunal did not fall under the jurisdiction of the British Empire or the League of Nations thanks to successful maneuvering by Ottoman officials, who convinced the British that the current government was not, in the words of Grand Vizier Damad Ferid Pasha, “inclined to diminish the guilt of the authors of this great tragedy.”¹⁰⁰ Instead, Ottoman authorities set up their own regional tribunals to try war criminals.¹⁰¹ If the British Empire was going to follow through with the maze of prosecutions of those accused of massacring civilians and mistreating prisoners of war, it would have to balance its commitment to human rights with concerns about what it could and could not do in the early days of an unstable peace. Officials ultimately relied on the language of imperial responsibility.

⁹⁵ Lloyd George quoted in Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 766. Lloyd George reportedly announced in front of his fellow Allied leaders Woodrow Wilson, Georges Clemenceau, and Vittorio Orlando that this was a good testing ground for the League but that it was not yet able to carry out this mission.

⁹⁶ Ambassador Louis Mallet directly linked these crimes after the armistice: “It will be necessary to provide for the punishment of any Turks who can be proved to have been responsible for the perpetration of instigation of 1) Armenian massacres 2) outrages committed on any other subject races, Greeks, Nestorian Christians etc. 3) ill-treatment of prisoners.” Louis Mallet to Sir R. Graham, “Necessity of Punishing Turks Responsible for Armenian Massacres and Other Outrages,” January 17, 1919, TNA, FO 371/4172.

⁹⁷ Bass, *Stay the Hand of Vengeance*, 106–107; Akçam, *A Shameful Act*, 368–372.

⁹⁸ Plans to inquire into German war crimes against British subjects were underway by late October 1918, when the British attorney general set up a committee authorized by the War Cabinet to investigate. Staff Captain (J. H. Morgan) to Sir E. Pollock, October 29, 1918, HP, MS. Eng. Hist. c. 943; Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 764.

⁹⁹ Telegram from Sir E. Crowe to Sir E. Pollock (Urgent), December 20, 1919. Later this question would be extended to include German atrocities against Poles. HP, MS. Eng. Hist. c. 943.

¹⁰⁰ Ferid quoted in Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 770.

¹⁰¹ Similarly, German war criminals were tried by a German court at Leipzig on the basis of prosecution lists and evidence gathered by the Allies. Mullins, *The Leipzig Trials*, 35–50.

Calthorpe reported having warned the vizier about the commitment that British statesmen had made when they “promised the civilized world that persons concerned [with the massacres] would be held personally responsible and that it was the firm intention of His Majesty’s Government to fulfill this promise.”¹⁰² In an interview with an Ottoman official, Mustafa Reshid Pasha, the high commissioner addressed “the question of the Armenian massacres and the treatment of British Prisoners,” conveying an “inflexible resolve” that “the authors of both would have to be punished with all rigour.” Reshid Pasha responded with assurances that the Ottoman government planned to punish those responsible, and that “he would resign from the cabinet if this were not done.” Calthorpe remained skeptical: “what we looked for was more than good will; it was for actual results.”¹⁰³

Claims that Britain was leading the “civilized world” in the cause of human rights justice had little effect. By the end of January, frustrated that sixty men on the minister of interior’s list of war criminals had not yet been arrested, Calthorpe declared in a telegram to the Foreign Office, “It is of course high time that action should be taken; there has already been too much delay.”¹⁰⁴ Four days later, he received news of the escape of a key suspect. He sent his representative, Andrew Ryan, to visit the vizier and inform him that Calthorpe “took gravest possible view of incident which was direct challenge not only to his Government but to Entente Powers.” Ryan reported that both the vizier and the minister of interior understood the gravity of the matter and would try to recapture the prisoner. Still, Ryan worried that the “present unsatisfactory situation cannot be allowed to continue.”¹⁰⁵ The subsequent release of high-profile prisoners by the Ottoman government forced a response. On May 28, 1919, the British took custody of all the prisoners awaiting trial at Constantinople.

The transfer of accused war criminals to jails in the British colony of Malta, however, failed to move the prosecutions forward. A reluctant sultan who had pledged to support the prosecution efforts worried about a looming nationalist backlash that was being mobilized behind the rising power of Mustafa Kemal. This, coupled with the threat that Turkish nationalists posed to the British Empire’s supremacy in the region, weakened resolve on both sides. Greek forces invaded Smyrna in May 1919 with the assistance of a convoy sanctioned by Lloyd George’s government, resulting in massacres of Muslim civilians. This galvanized anger against the Allies, further limiting the possibility of Ottoman cooperation.¹⁰⁶ The confusion and embarrassment caused by what critics called Lloyd George’s Greek disaster (it would eventually force him out of office) challenged the British Empire’s legitimacy as the

¹⁰² Admiral Calthorpe, “Report,” Constantinople, January 28, 1919, TNA, FO 371/4172.

¹⁰³ As he continued, “I warned him again that the question of the prisoners of war and of the Armenians were most important and that he would do well to devote to them his utmost attention.” “Treatment of British Prisoners of War and Armenians,” Admiral Calthorpe to Lord Balfour, January 7, 1919, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Calthorpe, “Report,” Constantinople, January 24, 1919, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Calthorpe, “Report,” Constantinople, January 28, 1919, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Calthorpe understood the importance of this event and worried about its damaging effects on Anglo-Turkish relations. J. G. Wilson Heathcote to Baron Kinross, Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif., Papers of Patrick Balfour, Baron Kinross, 1922–1976, KIN 6072. See also Vahakn Dadrian, “A Textual Analysis of the Key Indictment of the Turkish Military Tribunal Investigating the Armenian Genocide,” *Armenian Review* 44, no. 1 (1991): 1–36, here 3.

enforcer of human rights justice.¹⁰⁷ Diplomats and officials still pressed on, citing honor and prestige as a factor in this decision.¹⁰⁸

But the British Empire's "inflexible resolve" had begun to weaken. The glacial pace of the Ottoman peace settlement, which was still four years away, and the drawing-down of troops in Anatolia diminished the effectiveness of moral and military posturing regarding the prosecutions. By the summer of 1919, Britain had reduced its force in the region from 1,000,000 to 320,000.¹⁰⁹ The problem of Turkish prisoners at Malta made an untenable situation worse. In the months preceding the signing of the Treaty of Sevres, War Secretary Winston Churchill received a request from a diplomat asking for leniency for a pro-British Turkish prisoner, Rahmy Bey, who was being held at Malta.¹¹⁰ After inquiring into the case in the spring of 1920, the investigation concluded that "behind the friendly exterior," this man was most likely guilty of grave crimes against civilians during the war. The decision to deny his release, however, was based on his having been arrested "on the orders of the Turkish government."¹¹¹ But there was another reason to keep Rahmy Bey and others at Malta that had little to do with war crimes or questions of jurisdiction. In addition to worrying about the precedent that such an action would set, one Foreign Office official maintained, "There may come a time when it might be a good thing to release several Turks."¹¹²

Ideological commitments to take the lead on human rights prosecution met *realpolitik* a year later as the Treaty of Sevres began to unravel. Churchill proposed a prisoner exchange to keep the peace process on track. Although a number of protests were heard from within the government, most came around to the idea that the British Empire would exchange all but the worst offenders held at Malta for a group of twenty-nine British and Punjabi Muslim soldiers recently captured by the Turkish Nationalist Army, which was gaining strength in Anatolia.¹¹³ An "all for all" prisoner exchange eventually took place. The Foreign Office justified this about-face, maintaining that it was more important to save "the lives of these British subjects" than it was "to bind ourselves by the strict letter of the law as regards the Turkish prisoners at Malta."¹¹⁴

Set for the fall of 1921, the exchange led the *Times* to ask why those "accused of the gravest offenses" had not been tried when the evidence was fresh in 1919, and to claim that it was still not too late.¹¹⁵ A letter to the editor argued against a prisoner

¹⁰⁷ At the end of May, Calthorpe found himself prosecuting Greek soldiers for atrocities against Turkish civilians, including courts-martial and penal servitude. According to Calthorpe, the Greek landing had prompted a vicious cycle of reprisals between Christians and Muslims. "Turkey Report," TNA, CAB 24/145, no. 122.

¹⁰⁸ "Situation Report," H. V. Whittall, Lieut., Document received May 17, 1919, TNA, FO 608/79.

¹⁰⁹ Bass, *Stay the Hand of Vengeance*, 127–128.

¹¹⁰ Aubrey Herbert to Winston [Churchill], May 12, 1920, Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge, Chartwell Trust Papers, 1874–1945 [hereafter CP], CHAR 16/47A.

¹¹¹ R. H. Campbell to Sir A. Sinclair, June 11, 1920, *ibid.*

¹¹² Handwritten note at the bottom of prisoner report, MI2b, May 21, 1920, *ibid.*

¹¹³ A list of the names and affiliations of the men is reprinted in Yeghiayan, *British Foreign Office Dossiers on Turkish War Criminals*, 460.

¹¹⁴ War Office letter (Secret), September 16, 1921; Lancelot Oliphant to R. W. Woods, Procurator General, September 21, 1921, TNA, FO 371/6504.

¹¹⁵ "Turks' British Captives: Exchange for War Criminals," *Times*, October 5, 1921; "Turkish War Criminals: Double Negotiations," *Times*, October 17, 1921.

exchange because of the nature of the crimes.¹¹⁶ Others worried that an unconditional release of accused war criminals would diminish the empire’s moral authority: “Throughout the East our assertion of right and not mere force of arms has been our strength. If by such a pitiful surrender we abandon this weapon how shall we cope with the growing dangers?”¹¹⁷ The failure to fully prosecute Ottoman war crimes made visible the tension between nineteenth-century notions of moral responsibility and a universal standard of human rights by exposing a moralizing British Empire as a less than legitimate voice of international justice mired in its own imperial struggles.

THE GULF BETWEEN POSTWAR IMPERIAL priorities and the commitment to human rights justice widened after the war, as reflected in the drama surrounding the Armenian massacres unfolding at home. The story of the reception of the first known atrocity film reveals the ultimate failure of institutionalizing broad universal claims of protection for victims of genocide based on humanitarian ideals. *Auction of Souls*, a silent film recounting “the true narrative of the life of Aurora Mardiganian, a young Armenian girl held in captivity by the Turks,” debuted in Britain in the fall of 1919.¹¹⁸ The book on which it was based went through at least twenty-six printings, and the film found its way into movie theaters from London to Belfast. It had already caused a sensation in the United States, where Hollywood producer W. N. Selig retold the story of Mardiganian’s ordeal as a victim of deportation, rape, and eventual escape in realist detail.¹¹⁹ The film promised “a cinematographic reconstruction of the lives of the Armenians under Turkish rule,” starring Mardiganian in the lead role.¹²⁰ (See Figure 4.)

New media shaped responses in Britain to the Armenian Genocide that shook the moral sense of purpose that had inspired Bryce’s Blue Book and Calthorpe’s pursuit of war criminals. The moral argument for humanitarian intervention on behalf of Ottoman Christians had long relied on the graphic representation of atrocity in the press, the pulpit, pamphlet literature, public lectures, and government reports. Interest in Mardiganian’s story came out of a familiarity with these nineteenth-century narratives. The relatively new medium of film, which had gained both popularity and legitimacy during the war, pushed the boundaries of accepted narrative convention.¹²¹ *Auction of Souls* in this vein promised the viewer “a vivid picture of almost unbelievable barbarism, persecution and inhumanity such as the world has never

¹¹⁶ Muriel Bromley Davenport, “Turkish War Criminals,” Letter to the Editor, *Times*, October 19, 1921.

¹¹⁷ “Turkish War Criminals,” *Times*, October 6, 1921.

¹¹⁸ *Aurora Mardiganian in the Film Founded on the Book “Ravished Armenia” (“Auction of Souls”)*, pamphlet, Bodleian Special Collections, Oxford, Toynbee Box.

¹¹⁹ The sixteen-year-old Mardiganian met screenwriter Harvey Gates during a visit to the United States, where she had come to look for her brother. Gates subsequently facilitated the translation and publication of her story as a memoir called *Ravished Armenia* in 1918; it was made into a film that same year.

¹²⁰ *Aurora Mardiganian in the Film Founded on the Book “Ravished Armenia.”*

¹²¹ Pierre Sorlin describes the new technology of film as a uniquely modern medium, which distinguished it from other narrative forms. Sorlin, “Cinema and the Memory of the Great War,” in Michael Paris, ed., *The First World War and Popular Cinema, 1914 to the Present* (New Brunswick, N.J., 2000), 5–26, here 5.



FIGURE 4: Mardiganian in a crucifixion scene from *Auction of Souls*. Only a fragment of the film exists, which has been restored by the Armenian Film Foundation. Still from *Ravished Armenia*, courtesy of the Armenian Film Foundation, Los Angeles, California.

before known.” Film as a visual modern medium, according to Robert Rosenstone, has “its own rules of representation” when compared to other media.¹²² Humanitarian organizations, most notably Save the Children, would learn how to mobilize film’s visual realism in the 1920s to raise funds and to make the case for intervention.¹²³ However, the shocking content and newness of the atrocity film as a genre in 1919 made it suspect as a tool for promoting humanitarian ideals and action. This was particularly true of the showing of *Auction of Souls* in Britain, where authorities remained concerned about film’s ability to manipulate viewer sentiment and possibly incite violence.¹²⁴ Promoters carefully represented this Hollywood realist drama containing both graphic violence and sexual content as having a “nobility of purpose.” This positioning of *Auction of Souls* played to standards set by the National Council of Public Morals Cinema Commission, which had been founded during the war to regulate film content in Britain. The change of the title of the film and book to *Auction of Souls* for British audiences from the sexually charged U.S. title, *Ravished Armenia*, more clearly conformed to the council’s guidelines, which assigned films

¹²² Robert A. Rosenstone, “Introduction,” in Rosenstone, ed., *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past* (Princeton, N.J., 1995), 3–13, here 3.

¹²³ Humanitarian films are mentioned regularly in the papers of Save the Children. The Save the Children Fund Archive, London, Series One, reel 15 (microfilm).

¹²⁴ As Jon Lawrence has argued, fear of violence in the postwar moment stemmed from concerns that the British public had been “brutalized” by World War I; “Forging a Peaceable Kingdom,” 557.

to one of three categories, depending on whether their purpose was recreation, education, or propaganda.¹²⁵

Worries about the dangers of film in Britain called into question the ability of new media to represent civilian massacres as a problem of modern war during a highly charged political moment. The general release of the film in the U.S. met with little debate and bolstered the humanitarian campaign to raise funds for refugee relief.¹²⁶ In Britain, it made the representation of the brutality of genocide to a mass audience a subject of controversy. Instead of a general release, a series of private screenings in October 1919 introduced *Auction of Souls* to a select audience of activists, philanthropists, politicians, members of the clergy, and the press. It was described for the public in dozens of reviews published by critics who attended a press screening at the London Coliseum. Viewers’ initial reaction reinforced the combination of horror and sympathy for massacre victims expressed during the war. “The film,” according to one reviewer, “created a very painful impression, for the cruelties and massacres were presented with realistic fidelity. But that should not prevent every thinking man and woman from making an effort to see [it] for themselves.” Some blamed the British government for inaction: “What an awful charge lies at the door of the British Government for upholding the Turkish Empire all these years and thereby passively permitting such inhuman actions.”¹²⁷ Others worried that the medium of film cast atrocity stories as entertainment, leading one critic to condemn what he called “cheap sensationalism” and “the screen’s exploitation of atrocities.”¹²⁸

Casting *Auction of Souls* as a commercial film with a purpose, promoters understood that its financial success would depend on its usefulness as a tool of conscience, fending off charges of the exploitation of violence and sexual crimes by highlighting film’s artistic and humanitarian potential. “Published propaganda is often a distasteful thing,” the filmmakers insisted, but “lecturing also has its defects; while both attract attention at the moment of reading or hearing, the impression fades with time.” Film, by contrast, offered audiences a lasting impression by giving them a realistic “reconstruction” of a “life history.” Authenticity particularly mattered in this new medium that backers hoped to legitimate against charges that it constituted little more than “cheap entertainment.”¹²⁹ Subtitles announced the authority that stood behind the production, for although Selig owned all the commercial rights, he credited philanthropic organizations and individuals. “Each scene and incident has been carefully verified by Lord Bryce,” read an opening frame.¹³⁰

¹²⁵ Michael Hammond and Michael Williams, eds., *British Silent Cinema and the Great War* (London, 2011), 6.

¹²⁶ Balakian, *The Burning Tigris*, 316–317.

¹²⁷ Extract from *The Universe*, November 7, 1919; Erin Johnson, YMCA London Bridge, to General Film Renting Company, November 13, 1919, TNA, HO 45/10955/31297/95. In an interview years later, Mardigian recalled the exploitation she experienced at the hands of the producers and claimed that the depiction of atrocities was nowhere near the horrors she had actually experienced. Anthony Slide, *Ravished Armenia and the Story of Aurora Mardigian* (Lanham, Md., 1997), 5–8.

¹²⁸ Slide, *Ravished Armenia and the Story of Aurora Mardigian*, 15.

¹²⁹ According to Michael Paris, the film industry cooperated with the government during World War I, producing propaganda and serious war films to gain legitimacy; Paris, “Introduction,” in Paris, *The First World War and Popular Cinema*, 1–4.

¹³⁰ Though Bryce “saw nothing objectionable in” the film, he claimed to have nothing to do with the production. Bryce to Mr. Shortt, n.d., TNA, HO 45/10955/31297/89. Slide, *Ravished Armenia and the*

For supporters of the Armenian cause, the modern spectacle of familiar nineteenth-century atrocity narratives in *Auction of Souls* presented an important opportunity to reassert a commitment to international justice and human rights. Lord Gladstone, the son of the late prime minister, called it “excellent” and hoped it would “create an army of Crusaders.”¹³¹ In the same spirit, the League of Nations Union (LNU), which had been set up after the war to promote the League’s principles to the public, supported public showings of the film in January 1920.¹³² Sponsoring the film would bolster the LNU’s advocacy on behalf of Armenians after the war.¹³³ The cost of that sponsorship was considerable, representing approximately one-sixth of the organization’s cash on hand.¹³⁴ The LNU resolved that the anti-war and pro-Armenian message justified the expense. Lord Robert Cecil attributed the commitment to showing *Auction of Souls* to its “vivid representation of the horrors of war” and believed that “no one imagined that its production could be twisted into a question as between one religion and another.”¹³⁵

The possibility of reading about the Armenian massacres as politically motivated acts of state terror, however, had diminished. Plans for the film’s general release, sponsored by the LNU and endorsed by prominent public figures, met with resistance. In the wake of the Amritsar Massacre of April 1919, when British troops fired on a large crowd, killing unarmed Indian civilians, a film depicting violence by Muslims against Christians threatened to inflame anti-British sentiment in India. The delayed trial of Brigadier General Reginald Dyer for these crimes kept the controversy in the news and challenged liberal notions of a religiously inclusive and tolerant empire that was not ruled by “fear and force.”¹³⁶ One concerned viewer declared the controversy “an affair of Empire,” claiming that showing the film would help Britain’s enemies by angering Muslim subjects.¹³⁷ The Islamic Information Bureau lobbied the Home Office to stop the film’s general release, protesting it as “a

Story of Aurora Mardigianian, 207. Harvey Gates’s acknowledgment struck a similar note: “For verification of these amazing things, which little Aurora told me . . . I am indebted to Lord Bryce . . . who was commissioned by the British Government to investigate the massacres.” H. L. Gates, *The Auction of Souls: The Story of Aurora Mardigianian, the Christian Girl Who Survived the Great Massacres* (London, 1934), 9.

¹³¹ “Testimonials,” TNA, HO 45/10955/312971/95.

¹³² Helen McCarthy describes the League of Nations Union as a democratic postwar movement that championed internationalism and greater popular engagement with foreign policy. In the words of LNU Executive Committee member Lord Robert Cecil, “For as great a cause as that we seek, not adherents only but Crusaders.” McCarthy, *The British People and the League of Nations: Democracy, Citizenship and Internationalism c. 1918–45* (Manchester, 2011), 79.

¹³³ One LNU resolution sent to the League declared it “of the utmost importance to the future of the League of Nations that it should not lightly refuse any responsibility . . . in connection with the future of the Armenians or of the racial minorities in Turkey.” Minutes of the Meeting of the LNU Executive Committee, March 30, 1920, LSES, LNU 2/2.

¹³⁴ “Financial Statement,” LNU Executive Committee Minutes, March 4, 1920, *ibid*.

¹³⁵ The opportunity to show the film resulted in an “Auction of Souls Resolution,” which required passage before the election of the Executive Committee at the meeting on February 5, 1920. Among the members of the subsequently elected committee were numerous Armenian advocates, including J. H. Harris, Lord Robert Cecil, and Aneurin Williams, MP. LSES, LNU 1/1.

¹³⁶ Lawrence, “Forging a Peaceable Kingdom,” 574. The problem of the brutality of British imperial rule against Muslims in particular during this period is further explored by Priya Satia, *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain’s Covert Empire in the Middle East* (Oxford, 2008).

¹³⁷ Letter from Constance Sutcliffe, (Mrs.) Fitzgerald Marriott, January 26, 1920, TNA, HO 45/10955/312971/102.

work of fiction acted by Americans,” while one Muslim religious leader, to whom “the Foreign Office did attach much importance,” wrote twice to say that he would lobby fellow Indian Muslim leaders to get *Auction of Souls* banned.¹³⁸ The film, another source protested, would needlessly inflame tensions between Christians and Muslims in this “crucial hour.”¹³⁹

While some maintained that film failed to depict the full scope of the massacres, the government began to worry that this new medium made it too real. Imperial unity would come under threat if the public saw depicted onscreen what they had read and heard in reports about the massacres. It was one thing to read a book subtitled *The Story of Aurora Mardiganian, the Christian Girl Who Survived the Great Massacres*, and another to see clearly identifiable Muslim perpetrators on the screen committing atrocities against Christian women and children. The considerable buzz surrounding a film that only a small elite had thus far seen, coupled with plans to release it in more than fifty British theaters, led the government to put pressure on the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC).¹⁴⁰ The Home Office began investigating the film during private screenings in October 1919 and called in Scotland Yard to ensure that it “not be shown in its present form.” According to one official, “Quite apart from the religious objections raised . . . the film contained many objectionable features and the Board decided that before it could be approved heavy excisions must be made.” Another official was more blunt: “This film must be stopped.”¹⁴¹

The primary concern was the film’s negative effect on the empire and public morality. In January 1920, the Criminal Investigation Department of Scotland Yard informed Sidney Arnold, the proprietor of the General Film Renting Company, that *Auction of Souls* constituted an “indecent exhibition.” Arnold protested. Concerned that withholding the BBFC certificate would not curtail “the indiscriminate public exhibition of the film,” officials sent the case to the Foreign Office. Lord Curzon and others readily admitted that the charges of indecency stood second to imperial concerns. According to Foreign Office viewers, “The film is neither vulgar, nor in the strict sense, immoral but of necessity it abounds in horrors and as it stands is calculated to offend the religious feelings of any Moslem . . . Our Indian and Egyptian dominions contain many Moslem subjects (at present far from contented) and it is here that the religious danger, if any, lurks.” Officials had an easy answer: to remove all religious references in the subtitles.¹⁴² This, they argued, would give the film “a political rather than a religious aspect.”¹⁴³ Curzon agreed. He expressed regret that

¹³⁸ Letter from Sadrud Din, January 1, 1920, TNA, HO 45/10955/312971/100.

¹³⁹ Letter from Mr. A. A. Mirza, January 4, 1920, TNA, HO 45/10955/312971/105.

¹⁴⁰ This was a voluntary organization of industry experts set up to police film content. One film critic described it as “a private committee of critics appointed by the trade.” The BBFC was set up in 1912 and financed by fees paid by producers to the film censors. Though technically a private body, it had strong ties to the government, which approved its president. According to Jeffrey Richards, “‘No controversy’ was the rule, and ‘harmless’ was the censors’ favorite term of approval for film projects.” Richards, “British Film Censorship,” in Robert Murphy, ed., *The British Cinema Book* (London, 2009), 167–177, here 167–168.

¹⁴¹ Home Office memo written in response to objection by Islamic Information Bureau to showing of *Auction of Souls*, January 2, 1920, TNA, HO 45/10955/312971/89.

¹⁴² Report of Foreign Office representatives, Mr. Peterson and Major McDonald, on *Auction of Souls*, TNA, HO 45/10955/312971.

¹⁴³ Response to Secretary of State’s Inquiry Regarding Mr. Amir Ali’s Objections to *Auction of Souls*, January 24, 1920, TNA, HO 45/10955/312971/98.

the “press dwells unduly on the religious aspect of the Armenian massacres and is calculated to give offence in India” and demanded “alterations in the film itself . . . in order to prevent on the ground of public morals, the appearance of the film unless the producers are ready to submit to censorship.”¹⁴⁴

Visual representations of persecution on the screen explicitly linked the charge of indecency with religion and empire. One scene particularly bothered authorities: “It appears that among the ‘horrors’ which it is proposed to exhibit indiscriminately to the public on this propaganda film is ‘a long line of crosses displaying the crucified bodies of stark naked young girls.’” (See Figure 5.) Eventually, the Ministry of Health was brought in to address concerns about sexual content. Officials cited the actresses’ state of undress and claimed that although the crucifixions were “true to fact,” it “was none the less distressing to look upon on that account,” particularly because “the originals of this picture were not dead Armenians but live American girls.”¹⁴⁵ This blurring of the lines between suffering “oriental” women as victims and what one reviewer described as “beautiful white-skinned American models” as sex symbols would corrupt the uneducated viewer more interested in naked actresses than in the lesson to be drawn from the scene itself.¹⁴⁶ The crucifixions troubled the Foreign Office for another reason. The image of young women nailed to crosses indicated that the persecution was religiously motivated, which overshadowed the moral and political argument against state-sponsored terror. Though it was not possible to prove that the actresses were truly naked, the mere suggestion of nakedness proved powerful enough to justify censoring the film on the grounds of indecency.¹⁴⁷

As a government tool in the service of imperial policy, the postwar controversy over *Auction of Souls* problematized the notion that the British Empire had a special mandate to prosecute crimes against humanity by making it impossible to frame the genocide as Bryce and others had earlier done as a non-sectarian humanitarian issue. The indecency charge, used to cover up concerns about a fading imperial mandate challenged by the fallout from the massacre at Amritsar, cast a long shadow over the

¹⁴⁴ Letter sent on behalf of Lord Curzon to Under Secretary of State, India Office, January 5, 1920, TNA, HO 45/10955/312971/92.

¹⁴⁵ Mr. Shortt to Mr. Harris (Prosecutions Department), TNA, HO 45/10955/312971/89 (n.d.). The pornographic quality of what Karen Halttunen calls “the spectacle of suffering” was condemned as “popular sensationalism” in the nineteenth century. The shocking visual representation of crucifixion onscreen increased the power of such charges, further undermining the humanitarian argument. Halttunen, “Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture,” *American Historical Review* 100, no. 2 (April 1995): 303–334, here 317.

¹⁴⁶ “The Movies,” *English Review*, May 1920, 472. The 1918 Maud Allen libel trial demonstrated the power of the obscenity argument in the case of women performers. As Judith Walkowitz has shown, worries over obscene spectacle before the war surfaced when new entertainments such as “Living Pictures” and “oriental”-style dance linked obscenity with performance. Walkowitz, “The ‘Vision of Salome’: Cosmopolitanism and Erotic Dancing in Central London, 1908–1918,” *American Historical Review* 108, no. 2 (April 2003): 337–376.

¹⁴⁷ Labeling the film obscene in a climate in which charges of indecency had the power to stop public performances gave the Foreign Office the strongest argument for censorship. Richards, “British Film Censorship,” 167. Lord Gladstone expressed reservations about showing *Auction of Souls* to the general public in a letter to the Home Office after viewing the film in a private showing in October 1919. Gladstone to Mr. Shortt, January 4, 1920, TNA, HO 45/10955/31297/89. The belief that such images could be properly understood and comprehended only by educated viewers constituted what Philippa Levine has called “the politics of looking” and played into the decision to cut the offending scenes and subtitles and limit the showing of the film. Levine, “States of Undress: Nakedness and the Colonial Imagination,” *Victorian Studies* 50 no. 2 (2008): 189–219, here 216.

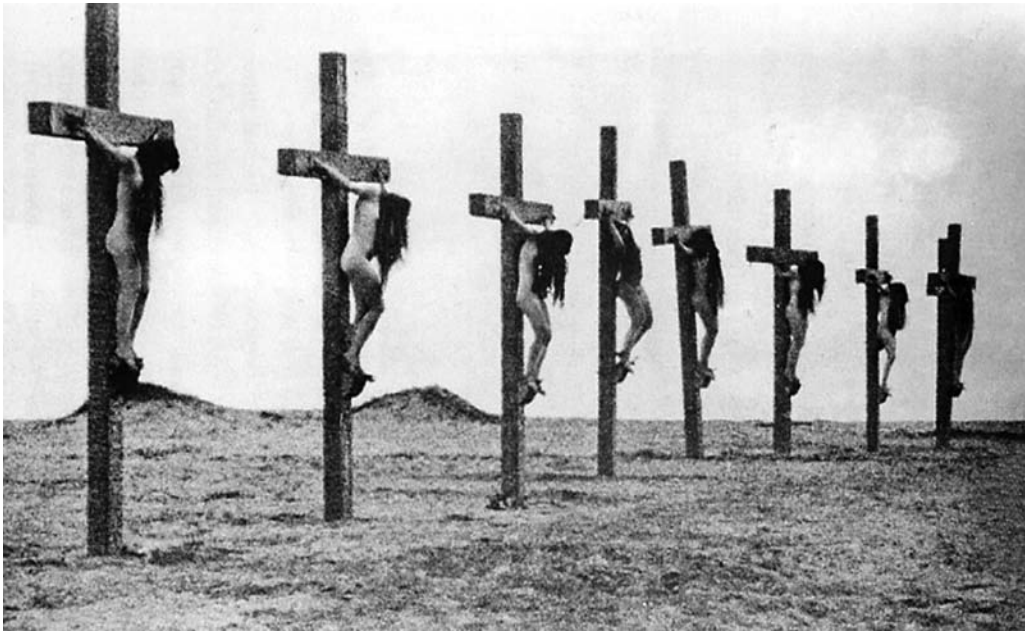


FIGURE 5: Censored scene from *Auction of Souls* of crucified women. Still from *Ravished Armenia*, courtesy of the Armenian Film Foundation, Los Angeles, California.

prosecution of the Ottoman government for the Armenian massacres as a just cause by a fair and tolerant British Empire. Charges of anti-Muslim bias further diminished the moral argument by representing the film as exacerbating religious hatred. In the end, the Foreign Office agreed to let the film, in its edited form, be shown under restricted conditions. In addition to removing the crucifixion scene, officials excised all “Christian” references from the subtitles. This radically altered the film’s ability to visually represent genocide by depicting the massacres as unexplainable mass violence and thus eliminating the need to prosecute perpetrators or seek justice for victims. The original last line of the film, “The lone survivor of a million Christian girls,” was cut in favor of benign humanitarian posturing: “to England the great champion of oppressed peoples she sends from the distant land of misery, and living death this picture and her poignant message. Give them your moral support, help them hope for a new day.”¹⁴⁸

Some blamed this distinctly twentieth-century medium for the inability to make genocide legible to audiences as a crime against humanity. On film, the act of genocide was framed as an inscrutable problem of modernity that failed to evoke the “moral horror” that visualizing another’s suffering was once thought to engender.¹⁴⁹ One critic called the movies a “new form of illusion,” labeling *Auction of Souls* a work of propaganda, merely “a story.” Another considered it part of a group of “political films which failed to convey the lesson intended,” claiming that any lessons from the

¹⁴⁸ The edited subtitles, with the censored parts still visible labeled as “Mr. Hussey’s notes,” are included in a file titled “Objectionable Films 1920” held in TNA, HO 45/10955/31297/98.

¹⁴⁹ Halttunen, “Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture,” 310.

massacres were “reduced to triviality, or passe[d] by unnoticed.”¹⁵⁰ The result was worse than denying that the genocide happened; it unhinged it from its historical context as a tragic event that demanded a humane response. As one reviewer concluded, “in the *Auction of Souls* film the crusading spirit evaporates.”¹⁵¹

WHY DID THE NOTION OF IMPERIAL RESPONSIBILITY ultimately work against efforts to recognize, prosecute, and later memorialize the Armenian Genocide? Three possible explanations emerge. First, the evidence collected in the Blue Book made the case that the systematic, premeditated extermination of a minority population constituted a “crime against humanity” that warranted prosecution. However, as the events of the War Crimes Trials demonstrated, a seemingly universal notion of protecting human rights during wartime came out of an imperial context that had its own internal logic and priorities. Second, the British Empire was the only institution with the resources and sense of purpose capable of launching a response. The trials failed because Britain did not truly represent or could not in the end legitimately stand in as an international body to pressure a fading Ottoman Empire to prosecute its war criminals. Britain’s historical claim to this leadership role could not be sustained as attempts to join imperial and human rights concerns under the umbrella of a diverse, tolerant Christian-led empire came under pressure at the end of the war, particularly after Amritsar. Finally, the sensationalist presentation of evidence onscreen that appeared simultaneously too real to some and not real enough to others created a backlash, leading to questions regarding the historical reliability of the narrative and the humanitarian crusade that it had inspired. The ensuing controversy over the film after the war revealed the difficulty of representing the Armenian massacres as a universal humanitarian cause rather than a sectarian religious conflict. This stalled the momentum of the humanitarian response that had led Britain to speak out against the killings in the first place. The notion of imperial responsibility cut both ways, then, by positing, albeit differently, a responsibility to Christian minorities and the opinion of the British Empire’s Muslim subjects and ultimately the empire itself.

As historians explore the evolution of the idea of human rights, it is worth considering how the experience of empire and the humanitarian ideal shaped the uneven way genocide came to be understood as a crime against humanity. Our contemporary narrative of the origin of human rights omits its rootedness in the ideas and institutions of the British Empire. A moral responsibility to respond to atrocity grew out of an imperial ideology that rendered persecuted Christian Armenians a universal subject worthy of humanitarian consideration. Out of this British imperial framework emerged a new way of representing the premeditated killing of minority civilians during wartime as genocide. The global reach of an empire that had the resources and power to stand up to perpetrators made this response possible. At the same time, the inability of the British Empire to fulfill broad universal claims of protection weakened commitments to prosecute this act as a crime against humanity when the empire found itself caught between humanitarian Christian ideals, on the

¹⁵⁰ “The Movies,” *English Review*, May 1920, 472; Sidney Low, “Propaganda Films and Mixed Morals on the ‘Movies,’” *Fortnightly Review* 107 (1920): 717–728, here 718, 722.

¹⁵¹ Low, “Propaganda Films and Mixed Morals on the Movies,” 721.

one hand, and the *realpolitik* considerations that it believed to be necessary to maintain its hegemony, on the other. From these humanitarian imaginings and imperial realities emerged the beginnings of the modern story of human rights justice.

The Armenian Genocide’s status as the forgotten genocide remains an important legacy of Britain’s failed humanitarian empire. One could easily conclude that the massacres in Armenia fell victim to political expediency and were cast aside as one of the unfortunate casualties of Total War as a necessary amnesia of empire. Of the hundreds of remembrances of the genocide scattered across the globe, Britain has only one public memorial in Wales, the former home of W. E. Gladstone.¹⁵² The inability to effectively pressure the Ottoman government to prosecute its war criminals initiated the cycle of remembrance and forgetting that characterizes how the genocide is treated today in popular culture, by politicians, and by some historians. However, it is also important to understand this process of forgetting as part of the larger story of how a universal notion of human rights relied on the specific context of British imperial politics in its early practice. The unsteady ideological work of empire that tied humanitarianism to imperial exigencies and imperatives still colors how the Armenian Genocide functions in the collective memory of both survivors and nations.

¹⁵² A “Stone of Remembrance” in Cardiff reads: “In Memory of the Victims of the Armenian Genocide” in English, Armenian, and Welsh. It was put up in 2007, desecrated the next year before the Day of Remembrance on April 24, and later repaired. “Memorials to the Armenian Genocide,” Armenian Genocide Memorials Database, Armenian National Institute, http://www.armenian-genocide.org/Memorial.158/current_category.62/memorials_detail.html.

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