

THE CONSTANTINOPLE MASSACRE (AUGUST 26-27, 1896) AUSTRALIAN COLONIAL REACTIONS

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This article discusses the seizure of the Imperial Ottoman Bank by members of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF or Dashnaksutyun) in August 1896, to draw the attention of the Great European powers to the failure of Sultan Abdul Hamid II to implement administrative reforms in the Eastern Vilayets of the Ottoman Empire. The slaughter of Armenians that followed in Constantinople was discussed in the columns of the Australian Colonial Press. For many readers, the Ottoman Empire would have been considered a remote location far away from Australian shores; the press, however, reduced the tyranny of distance by keeping its readers informed of events unfolding in Constantinople. After all, the Australian Colonies were part of the British Empire, whose power and influence reached every part of the globe.

THE ACTION OF THE ARF IN CONSTANTINOPLE

On August 26, 1896 Dashnaks seized the Imperial Ottoman Bank (a Franco-British establishment) in Constantinople, threatening to blow it up if reforms were not implemented in the Eastern Vilayets of the Ottoman Empire. They were members of the ARF, which was established in Tiflis in 1890 and whose initial aim was "the administrative and economic freedom of Turkish Armenia."¹

The Dashnaks were unhappy with the resignation of Patriarch Matteos Izmirlian, claiming that he was forced to resign, and with the Sultan's appointing *locum tenens* Bartholomeos, whom the ARF considered a stooge of the Court. The selection of a Patriarch was based on a mixed Council composed of lay and clerical members who belonged to the Armenian National Assembly, an election process was recognized by the Porte. It appears that Sultan Abdul Hamid bypassed this Armenian political institution.² The ARF accused the Ottoman Government of having committed a series of unpunished crimes and equally accused the European powers of inaction, which made them accomplices of the Porte. They cited that "In Crete, as in Armenia, they receive the demands of the Christians with the

same disdain of our executioners. But the patience of down-trodden nations has its limits.”³

The aim of the attackers was to draw the attention of the European powers so they would take action on behalf of the suffering Armenian people. Some of their demands included:-

1. The nomination for the Armenian Vilayets a High Commissioner, of European origin and nationality, elected by the six Great Powers.
2. The *Valis*, *Mutessariſs*, and the *Kaimakams* to be appointed by the High Commissioner, and sanctioned by the Sultan.
4. Judicial reforms according to the European system.
5. Absolute freedom of worship, education and the press.
9. The immediate restoration of usurped land and property.
10. The free return of Armenian emigrants.⁴

The European powers entrusted the first dragoman (interpreter) of the Russian Embassy, Maximov, to bargain with the Dashnaks. Eventually, the attackers left Constantinople on a French steamer for Marseilles. After their departure from Constantinople, a horrible massacre was carried out on the Armenian population in that city by mobs of ruffians, police, and soldiers with the connivance of the Ottoman Government.

Baron Calice, the Austro-Hungarian Ambassador in Constantinople, was appalled by the bloodshed and “even warned the Sultan the he would be deposed by the Powers, if he failed to provide Good Government.” Sir Henry Bulwer, the British Vice Consul, Colonel A. Peshkov, the Russian military agent in Constantinople, and German General von der Goltz, who had served as an honorary aide-de-camp to Sultan Abdul Hamid II, stated that there was “no doubt” that the Constantinople massacre had been “pre-arranged” and “had taken place with the Sultan’s knowledge.”⁵ Herbert, an official of the British Embassy, believed that “the intention of the Turkish authorities [was] to exterminate the Armenians wherever found.”⁶

Somakian states that the Turkish Liberal Party (headed by Prince Sabahaddin) maintained that “it is notoriously evident at Constantinople that Abdul Hamid was the main organizer of these crimes.” They also blamed the Russians for “secretly” and “energetically” encouraging the Sultan to take repressive measures against the Armenians.⁷

The seizure of the Ottoman Bank appeared in the columns of Australian Colonial newspapers carrying such headings as “The Riots in Constantinople. The Seizure of the Ottoman Bank” , “Turkey’s Troubles”, “Turkey and Armenia”, “Rioting in Stamboul. Provoked by Armenians” and “Further Particulars. The Porte’s Version. A Well Organised Plot by the Armenians”.⁸

The majority of the news items were brief accounts of what had occurred in Constantinople and originated with Reuter's news agency and the Australian Press Association based in London.⁹

A few Australian newspapers editorialized on the seizure of the Ottoman Bank. On September 5, the *Argus* editorial thought the Armenian action "read like a page out of Deadwood Dick!" and that the entire incident was contrived by Sultan Abdul Hamid. Under pressure from the representatives of the Great Powers, Abdul Hamid arrested 400 Turks and tried to shift the blame for the massacres onto members of the Young Turks Party. The editorial expressed 'indignation' and 'horror' as to the brutal measures that were taken in Constantinople. Moreover, the remainder of the editorial described Abdul Hamid as a most 'hated human being on the surface of the earth', 'will always live in history as one of the great criminals of the human race' and 'oddest bundle of contradictions' and 'perpetually fluttering nerves.' He was an absolute monarch who ruled his Empire with an iron fist, and his ministers and generals dared not question his decisions. Abdul Hamid would have been surprised to see his Armenian subjects taking such direct action against him, asking for the intervention of the major European powers to ameliorate their condition. Despite his domineering position, he always feared assassination, never slept twice in the same place and was a hypochondriac. The *Argus* hoped for the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, which was like "a nightmare on the conscience of the modern world."¹⁰

On the other hand, the *Truth* newspaper (Sydney) commented on the *Argus* editorial by arguing that the Armenian action was a "rash and ill-advised step" that would, overall, harm their cause. It was critical of the Armenians who threw bombs at innocent people and attempted to threaten the Sultan and his government. The actual seizure of the Ottoman Bank was described as a 'senseless' and 'futile act from start to end' and the instigators were responsible for the measures and riot that ensued in Constantinople. Though there may have been a tinge of sympathy for ordinary Armenians, overall the editorial was anti-Armenian.¹¹

Another editorial titled "The Constantinople Riots", published in the *Evening News* (Sydney) on August 29, was pro-Armenian. The Constantinople riot had raised the spectre of a potential major war but the danger had not passed yet. Some two weeks earlier, a thousand Kurdish cavalry entered Constantinople, which "caused much alarm among the Christian population." The idea that the Armenian Committee had seized the opportunity to organize a riot, including the use of violence, seemed implausible to the *Evening News*. But if the 'rioters' had taken over the Ottoman Bank with an "unlawful intent", then the Governor of the Ottoman

Bank, Sir Edgar Vincent, would have been within his rights to call upon Ottoman troops to use force against them. However the “rioters... defended themselves behind walls with revolvers and dynamite bombs against troops advancing from the open.”

Based on past experience, the Armenians would have approached the Imperial Palace as petitioners only to be dispersed by police and troops. They would have feared for their lives and would have “retaliated with revolvers” to protect themselves. The *Evening News* suggested that “very likely the present riot began somewhat in the same way.” It also mentioned that Russia had been friendly towards Abdul Hamid over the last year, which allowed him to deal with the Armenians. Furthermore, if Russia occupied Constantinople that would give her dominance of the Black Sea trade and also control of the Straits.¹²

REACTIONS IN COLONIAL AUSTRALIA: CHURCHES, POLITICIANS, AND PRESS

The Churches in Victoria reacted with horror to the slaughter of Armenians in Constantinople in the aftermath of the Ottoman Bank crisis. On September 15, 1896 the Presbyterian Church at its Federal Assembly held in Melbourne sent a memorandum to Queen Victoria expressing its indignation over the recent massacre that occurred in Constantinople. The Rev. P. J Murdoch (Victoria) told the assembly that he was horrified at the persecution and massacre of Armenians in Constantinople and understood the difficulty of the British government in seeking a diplomatic solution to the Armenian issue. He described Abdul Hamid as an “assassin” who permitted such slaughter of Christians to take place in his empire.

It was important for the Presbyterian churches in the Australian colonies to unite and speak with one voice on this very important matter.

Murdoch advocated that a memorandum be forwarded to Queen Victoria through the office of the Governor of Victoria. The memorandum is reproduced below in full. It stated:-

To Her Most Gracious Majesty the Queen- May it please Your Majesty, The Federal Assembly, whose members represent the Presbyterian Churches of all Australia and Tasmania, desire most respectfully to acquaint your Majesty with the profound horror and indignation they feel in connection with the massacres and unspeakable enormities to which the Christian Armenian people within the Ottoman Empire have been repeatedly subject by their Turkish masters; and to assure your Majesty that the Christian people of this continent have observed with great satisfaction the strong protests made by your Majesty's Government.

In view of the fresh outburst of murder and oppression in Constantinople, the Federal Assembly begs very urgently to represent to your Majesty that your Majesty's Government, standing, as they do, for a great, free and Christian people, should not be content without absolutely securing such changes in the Ottoman Empire as will be a guarantee for the freedom and safety of the subject peoples.

And your petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray.

The motion was approved by the Federal Council and great care was exercised in the choice of words sent to Queen Victoria.¹³

Next day, a delegation led by Dr. D. Paton (Adelaide) and clerk of the Assembly, Rev. James S. Lang, visited Government House to present the memorandum to Governor Brassey for transmission to Queen Victoria in London. The Governor thanked them for the initiative they had taken regarding the plight of the Armenians and the memorandum of the Federal Assembly of Presbyterian Churches of Australia, which would receive the support of the British Liberal party.¹⁴

On a Vice Regal visit to Wimmera, a country region in Western Victoria, Governor Lord Brassey mentioned that on the previous day the Federal Presbyterian Church had presented him with a resolution "demanding that the Imperial Government should do all in its power, and exercise all authority at its command, for the protection of the unfortunate Christians of the Turkish empire."

He sympathized with the position of the Presbyterian Church and believed that the Ottoman Empire was on the verge of dissolution. However the "unfortunate jealousies of the European Powers" had saved it from crumbling. Brassey pointed out the importance of Great Britain and the other European powers in finding a solution regarding the Near East issue and said that the Australian Colonies supported the actions of the Imperial Government in its diplomatic endeavors.¹⁵

Other Christian Churches passed resolutions supporting the Armenians. The Woman's Christian Temperance Union of South Australia held its annual meeting in Adelaide, where a large number of issues were discussed. Rev W. G. Marsh stated that this was the first time he had ever addressed a meeting presided over by women. He pointed out that women "knew nothing of vested interests. They cared only for purity and justice."¹⁶ Women would be the ones to find a solution to the Armenian question. A collection of £4 was raised to aid the Armenians.¹⁷

On the other hand, the General Synod of the Anglican Church and Baptist Union of New South Wales passed resolutions regarding the plight of

the Armenians. The resolution of the former was couched in terms supporting “the ancient Church of Armenia” and would pray that “the Great Head of the Church [Jesus Christ]...would comfort and relieve them” during their present adversity. A committee would prepare a communication to be forwarded to Queen Victoria “through the proper channel.” The Baptist Union expressed “indignation at the fearful atrocities committed against the Armenians in Turkey” and urged the major European powers and the United States to co-operate to stop the Sultan and his government from implementing such outrages. They hoped Turkish power “may no longer be felt in Europe or elsewhere.”¹⁸ Similar resolutions of the Baptist Union were passed in Melbourne, Brisbane and Adelaide, showing the unanimity of the Baptist Church towards the plight of the Armenians.¹⁹

Editorial comments presented here will highlight the various positions of the Colonial press in light of Church resolutions and the personal comments of Governor Brassey. The *Independent* (Footscray, Victoria) adopted an anti-Turkish position by lauding the Presbyterian Union memorandum presented to the Victorian Governor. It believed that the Ottoman Empire had been propped up by the Christian powers of Europe to prevent Russian control of the Black Sea. Nevertheless, the Turk never fulfilled his treaty obligations and proved “untruthful, ...tyrannical [and] insatiable for Christian blood.” The editorial did not “advocate for war” but hoped the combined efforts of the ‘powerful representations of the British statesmen, backed by the moral weight of America, India, Australia and Christian people of [Europe]’ would lead to an “effective settlement” of the Armenian Question.²⁰

Alternatively, *the Telegraph* (Brisbane) editorial title “Turks and Armenians” described the former as the “Unspeakable Turk” for killing Armenians. It highlighted the fact that British Churches and the British press, along with Liberal politicians William E. Gladstone and Lord Rosebery, had demanded the removal of Abdul Hamid, which would have assisted the Armenian cause. However, their words did not translate into action to assist these unfortunate people. Australian “parsons and priests”, newspapers and politicians followed the same path as their British counterparts in failing to adopt measures to halt “these atrocities and limit Ottoman power in Asia Minor.” The paper stated that Australian politicians were more interested in parochial issues than in the “unparalleled persecution” of the Armenians. There was a “great conspiracy of silence” which “manifested its influence upon parsons, politicians, and pressmen alike in Australia.”²¹

The two newspapers *Truth* and *Quiz and the Lantern* (Adelaide) were anti-Armenian. The former editorial titled “The Terrible Turk”, is very deceptive, leaving the reader with the impression that it is anti-Turkish. On

closer reading, it reveals a strong anti-Armenian bias, highlighting the “double-dealing and shiftiness” of the Armenians, who betrayed their master. They achieved high positions such as Ambassadors, Generals and Governors within the Empire and at the same time passed on the secrets of the Porte to the Embassies of the major European powers in Constantinople, including a hostile press overseas. According to the editorial, the Turk had displayed tolerance towards the Armenian and allowed him to practice his Christian faith without interference. However, recent events which resulted in “retribution ...[could not] be construed as revenge.” Furthermore, the Armenians did not deserve “respect and sympathy” for the violent methods adopted by the Armenian movement against the Ottoman State. They were accused of being “secret emissaries” of Russia while professing to be patriots.

Truth was highly critical of the “Wesleyan, Methodists and Presbyterians” stance regarding the Armenians whilst ignoring the plight of “naked niggers” being killed by “Her Majesty’s ships” close to Australian shores and thought this was “the highest apogee of hypocrisy.” Even Britain was singled out for its shedding of Irish blood and the suffering of slaves in America and the West Indies.²²

The *Quiz and the Lantern* was both anti-Turkish and anti-Armenian stating “If the Turks and the Armenians were to play the game of Kilkenny cats, there might be some possibility of peace in South-Eastern Europe. Both are dirty varmints who cumber the earth.” ‘Kilkenny cats’ could be used as a metaphor to describe the Armenians and Turks fighting and killing one another until there was not one of them left alive. This stereotyping is further reinforced with the term ‘varmint’, meaning that the world would be better off without both of them.²³

As can be seen, the actions of the Dashnaks and the massacre that occurred in Constantinople drew the attention and ire of Australian Churches, which sent memorandums to Queen Victoria, basically, asking her to intercede on behalf of the Armenians with Abdul Hamid. On the hand other, Governor Brassey saw it as an Imperial issue that affected Great Britain’s relations with the other major European powers. He was the only Colonial Governor who offered his personal views regarding the Armenian question. The press did its job, publishing news accounts of the seizure of the Ottoman Bank and massacres that ensued in Constantinople. Overall the press tended to be anti-Turkish in its editorials and exhibited sympathy for the Armenians.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Richard G. Hovannisian, *Armenia on the Road to Independence 1918*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1967, pp. 16-7.
- ² *Turkey No. 1 Correspondence Respecting the Disturbance in Constantinople in August 1896 [C 8303]*, HMSO, London, p. 13.
- ³ *Ibid.*; The Cretan issue received wide coverage in the Australian Colonial Press, including *The Queenlander*, August 29, 1896; *The Week* (Brisbane), August 28, 1896 p. 22; *Argus*, September 3, 12, 1896; *The Age*, September 12, 1896, p. 7; *Sydney Morning Herald*, September 1, 4, 1896.
- ⁴ *Turkey No. 1 Correspondence*, p. 15.
- ⁵ M. S. Anderson, *The Eastern Question 1774-1923*, Macmillan, London, 1983, p. 257; Manoug J. Somakian, *Empires in Conflict*, I. B. Tauris, London, 1995, pp. 20-1; JAS Grenville, *Lord Salisbury and Foreign Policy the Close of the Nineteenth Century*, University of London Athlone Press, London, 1964, pp. 74-6; Yvan Troshine, "A Bystander's Notes of Massacre: the Slaughter of Armenians in Constantinople", *Scibners Magazine*, Vol. 21, no. 2, January 1897, p. 57.
- ⁶ *Turkey No. 1 Correspondence*, p. 5; Douglas, p. 127.
- ⁷ Somakian, pp. 22-3; In one Australian newspaper, the Young Turkey Party is identified as the Committee of Union and Progress, see "The aims of the Young Turkey Party. Interview with Ahmed Riza Bey", *The Age*, August 29, 1896, p. 7.
- ⁸ "The Riots in Constantinople. The Seizure of the Ottoman Bank", *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 31, 1896, p. 5; "Seizure of Ottoman Bank at Constantinople", *Clarence and Richmond Examiner* (Grafton, NSW), September 1, 1896, p. 5; "Turkey's Troubles. The Attack on the Ottoman Bank", *South Australian Register*, August 31, 1896, p. 5; "The Riot in Turkey. Extraordinary Motive. Armenians Attempt to Coerce the Powers", *The Age*, August 31, 1896, p. 5; "Riots in Stamboul. Provoked by Armenians", *The Age*, August 28, 1896, p. 5; "Further Particulars. The Porte's Version. A Well Organised Plot by the Armenians", *Daily Telegraph* (Launceston, Tasmania), August 29, 1896, p. 4.
- ⁹ Oliver Boyd-Barrett & Terhi Rantanen, *The Globalization of News*, Sage Publishers, London, 1998, pp. 40-1; Stavros T. Stavridis, *The Greek-Turkish War 1919-23*, Piscataway, NJ, Gorgias Press, 2008, pp. 58-60.
- ¹⁰ *Argus*, September 5, 1896, p. 6.
- ¹¹ *Truth*, September 6, 1896, p. 3.
- ¹² "The Constantinople Riots", *Evening News*, August 29, 1896, p. 4.
- ¹³ "Action by the Presbyterian Federal Assembly. Memorial to the Queen", *Argus*, September 15, 1896, p. 5; "A Memorial from Australia. The Presbyterian Federal Assembly. Indignation Expressed", *Advertiser*, September 15, 1896, p. 5.
- ¹⁴ "The Armenian Massacres. The Presbyterian Memorial. Lord Brassey in Reply...", *Argus*, September 16, 1896, p. 5.
- ¹⁵ "Vice Regal Visit to Wimmera. Speeches at Horsham. British Naval Supremacy", *Argus*, September 17, 1896, p. 6; "Lord Brassey and the Turkish Question",

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- Maitland Weekly Mercury*, September 26, 1896, p. 16; "The Luncheon", *Horsham Times*, September 18, 1896, p. 2.
- ¹⁶ "Woman's Christian Temperance Union. The Eighth Annual Convention", *The Advertiser Adelaide*, September 23, 1896, p. 6.
- ¹⁷ "Woman's Christian Temperance Union. Third Day", *South Australia Register*, September 24, 1896, p. 3.
- ¹⁸ "The Anglican General Synod... The Armenian Question", *South Australian Register*, October 2, 1896, p. 5; "General Anglican Synod. Third Day", *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 2, 1896, p. 3; "Baptist Union of New South Wales", *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 16, 1897, p. 3.
- ¹⁹ "Church Intelligence", *Maitland Weekly Mercury*, September 19, 1896, p. 7; "The Baptist Union", *Argus*, September 24, 1896, p. 5; "Armenian Horrors. Vote from Baptist Union", *South Australian Register*, September 17, 1896, p. 7; "Baptist Association of Queensland. Annual Session", *The Brisbane Courier*, September 23, 1896, p. 6.
- ²⁰ "The Unspeakable Turk", *The Independent*, September 19, 1896, p. 2.
- ²¹ "Turks and Armenians", *The Telegraph*, September 17, 1896, p. 4.
- ²² "The Terrible Turk", *Truth*, September 20, 1896, p. 1.
- ²³ *Quiz and the Lantern*, September 17, 1896, p. 6; "There Were Once Two Cats of Kilkenny" in http://curry.virginia.edu/go/wil/There_once_were_two_cats_of_Kilkenny.pdf (accessed July 27, 2015).

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(26-27 ՕԳՈՍՏՈՍ 1896)
ԱԽՍՏՐԱԼԻԱԿԱՆ ԱՆԴՐԱԴՎՈՂԸ

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Արեւմտահայ ճգնաժամին, համիտեան բռնակալութեան եւ բարենորոգումներու չգործադրուելուն վրայ Եւրոպական մեծ պետութիւններու ուշադրութիւնը բեւեռելու նպատակով խումբ մը դաշնակցականներ 1896 Օգոստոսին կը գրաւեն Պանք Օթոմանը, Կոստանդնուպոլսոյ մէջ:

Օսմանեան մայրաքաղաքի եւրոպական պետութիւններու դեսպանական պաշտօնատարներ կը միջամտեն, կը միջնորդեն եւ գրատղները կը հեռացօին Եւրոպա: Այս արարքին անմիջապէս կը յաջորդէ Պոլսոյ թրքական խուճանին ջարդարարութիւնը ու սկիզբ կ'առնէ համիտեան բռնակալութեան 12ամեայ մութ շրջանը:

Հեռատր Աստրալիոյ մամուլը կ'արձագանգէ Պանք Օթոմանի գրաման եւ անոր տուն տոտղ պատճառներուն: Մամուլը կը տեղեկագրէ նաեւ Աստրալիոյ եկեղեցիներու անդրադարձին՝ Պոլսոյ մէջ հայոց դէմ գործադրուող հալածանքներուն եւ բռնութիւններուն:

Յօդուածը ամփոփումն է Աստրալիոյ մամուլին մէջ տեղ գտած լրատուութեանց եւ մեկնաբանութեանց, որոնք կը վերաբերին թէ՛ Պանք Օթոմանին եւ թէ՛ Աստրալիոյ եկեղեցիներու արձագանգին: