

AKABY NASSIBIAN, **BRITAIN AND THE ARMENIAN QUESTION 1915-1923**, London: Croom Helm, 1984 (294 pp.).

ԱԳԱՊԻ ՆԱՍԻԲԻԱՆ, ԱՆԳԼԻԱ ԵՒ ՀԱՅԿԱԿԱՆ ՀԱՐՑԸ 1915-1923, Լոնսոն, 1984 (294 էջ):

The purpose of Dr. Nassibian's study that grew out of her doctoral dissertation at Oxford University is to examine "Britain's attitude both towards the Armenian people after Turkey's entry into the First World War on the opposite side to her, and towards the Republic of Armenia created consequent to the breakup of the Russian Empire". In order to do so, the author in her well-documented work pays close attention to

Cabinet minutes and Foreign Office dispatches as well as to thus far unused document sources of the various pro-Armenian groups of that period. It is a book for the specialist in modern Armenian and in British colonial history, but with the author's help the armchair historian will also find his way through the muddle and confusion of the Turkish Empire and the selfish yet impotent manipulations of the British government. The book does not provide edifying reading; the fault does not rest with the author since it is inherent in the subject matter itself.

Once medieval English crusaders like Richard the Lionhearted enjoyed the friendship and trust of Armenian kings; centuries later, the champions of Queen Victoria's empire on their way to India came to what had been the ancient Armenian kingdom. They were struck by the "strategic importance" of Western Armenia for their own empire as "regards both India and Russia". The friendship and trust of the Christian population did no longer much matter; in fact, they had become an encumbrance as Britain, the "greatest power in the Muslim world", tried to keep her trade and oil interests secure and her Muslim subjects happy. Till 1914, Britain remained committed to the integrity of the Ottoman Empire, but the war changed her interests. Suddenly she discovered the plight of the Armenians. Why this shift in concerns? Why did she not translate even a fraction of her sympathies into concrete political and military actions? These are the main questions Dr. Nassibian is answering as she guides us through the murky and shady atmosphere of political wheeler dealing that preceded WWI and continued to shape the fate of nations in the 1920s.

What emerges from this study is a serious indictment of not only the British Foreign and War Offices but of the British government and public as a whole. And this indictment is not mitigated by the author's assurances that the Armenian problem was not the concern solely of Great Britain nor by her assertion in the concluding remarks that "Britain was somewhat unable to help Armenia effectively either before, or after, the war".

Throughout the history of her involvement in the East, Britain was guided by the consideration of her national interests. The introductory chapter shows that even though Britain's pre-war concerns centered on the geographic location of Armenia as well as her phobia of Russia and her consequent overriding desire to "strengthen and reinvigorate" Turkey at all costs, the Armenian Republic did not matter. Her desiderata over the Persian Gulf region and Palestine were recognized; what furthered British interests now was the suffering of the Armenians which could be, at no great financial cost, be turned into one of the most effective moral weapons to discredit Turkey, but especially Germany into whose camp Turkey had strayed.

Britain emerged from her war efforts as the most influential power in the East, yet she had kept her conscience clean. Since she no longer had

any territorial ambitions in the immediate region, British leaders "could even give notions of idealism and humanity to their war aims". In the chapter "British Dilemmas: From Mudros to Sèvres", the author shows how the War and Foreign Offices, inspired by good humanitarian intentions, did feel that the Armenians should be snatched from the clutches of Turkey, but neither the British humanitarian groups nor their government had any clear and positive plans as to the future of Armenia. Among the general public, Turkophile feelings were growing; still, England, true to her traditional role as champion of the underdog, enjoyed playing the protector of all the little fledgeling nations that had been spawned by the war — however with the conviction that none of them could be trusted.

The Armistice of October 1918, therefore, could be nothing better than a betrayal of the Armenian cause. It brought power and prestige to the British — the Armenians paid the price. Mudros perpetuated the dominance of Turkey over the Armenian provinces in Anatolia, and it provided Turkey with the opportunity to arm herself. And the Turkish emissaries, shrewd and ruthless manipulators of their Western subjugators, knew how to become the true victors of Mudros.

Whose fault was it? Dr. Nassibian seems to find reason for the "lingering suspicion" that the British government had made a deal with Turkey over Armenia for the liberation of the Arab provinces. The future of the Armenians could be left to a peace conference. The British generals were emphatic that they remain in the Caucasus, but the cost would be too exorbitant. America would actually be better equipped to act as protector; the US declined the honor. Then, why not "bribe" France into doing her duty? The haggling went on and eventually led to nothing.

Of course the British government never forgot the promises it had made to the Armenians, but it also realized that it could not keep them. The Treaty of Sèvres of August 1920 helped them gracefully out of the predicament. The Armenians continued to trust their British saviors with blind faith and tried to win British approval for their actions. Their trust led to new defeats by the Turks and alienation from the new government in Russia. Even after the war, Britain remained eager to supply the Republic of Armenia with advice and guidance; her abandonment of Armenia in respect to protection and help was complete.

Again and again the Armenian leaders asked for money to help them hold out against Turk and Russian alike as the Foreign Office had strongly advised them, but "surplus arms were not available in abundance, neither was money". The British government did all it could and proceeded with the withdrawal in June 1920 of the British garrison from Batum as scheduled. It was no longer in anybody's interest to uphold the rights of Armenia as stipulated at Sèvres.

By the mid-1890s, the British public — since it was a generation "im-

bued with moral and humanitarian principles and inspired by Gladstonian Liberalism" — had become "deeply aware" of the identity of the oppressed peoples under Ottoman rule. These positive feelings of the public could draw on an English tradition of great Armenophiles; however, Dr. Nassibian should also have mentioned that there existed in England as well as in the rest of the Western world the image of the "ugly" Armenian, an older and certainly a much more popular tradition than Bryce's Armenians. Thus it is not at all surprising that even though the public initially responded favorably to the plight of the Armenians, the Turkophiles also found a ready ear with the English public. Still, at first the pro-Armenian groups could exert pressure on the Foreign Office.

British humanitarian sentiments found also concrete expression in many short-lived relief organizations — and the author lists several — that collected money, trained and sent relief workers and provided many refugees with tangible help.

In the years after the war, the Armenian refugees had become more numerous and more wretched; only now the champions of the cause of Christianity in the East — idealists and aging clergymen — lacked the vigor to arouse a general public that had grown tired of gory war tales. Everybody knew that the Armenian problem had become an anachronism too costly to support. Virginia Woolf's picture of Clarissa Dalloway could have served perfectly as epigraph for Dr. Nassibian's book. Clarissa pondering life and death and all the injustices that have come in the wake of the war but so insensitive to the sufferings of the Armenians cannot understand her husband's concern for them:

"He was already half-way to the House of Commons, to his Armenians, Albanians, having settled her on the sofa, looking at his roses... She cared much more for her roses than for the Armenians. Hunted out of existence, maimed, frozen, the victims of cruelty and injustice (she had heard Richard say over and over again) — no, she could feel nothing for the Albanians, or was it the Armenians? but she loved her roses (didn't that help the Armenians?)... She muddled Armenians and Turks"¹.

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1. Mrs. Dalloway. 1925 rpt. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1969), pp. 131-133.