



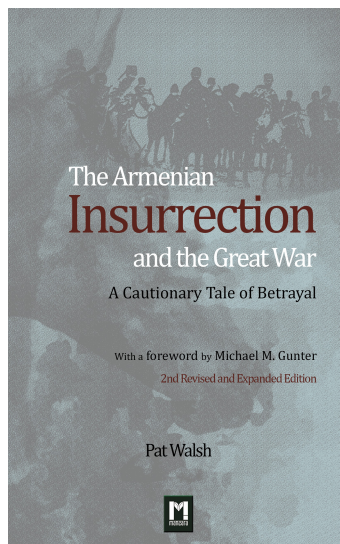
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Reading of:

Pat Walsh

The Armenian Insurrection and the Great War

A Cautionary Tale of Betrayal



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could take or leave their tales. Britain knew what the purpose of propaganda was – to make others believe, whilst maintaining a safe distance from it oneself, in understanding situations and taking subsequent action.

Now we can see how the Protestant missions in Ottoman territory, Wellington House, Lord Bryce, and the blue book formed complementary activity in relation to the Armenians in Anglosphere propaganda of the Great War. But it was not something that Britain would necessarily act upon in the end, despite all the martyrs it drew to the “righteous cause”.

That was something the Armenians, like others before them or since, failed to understand and it was to cost them very dearly.

James Bryce and the Armenians

James Bryce is a significant figure in the Armenian Insurrection story. His famous blue book, in 1916, detailed the British case against the Ottomans during the Great War regarding the Armenians. But he was, by then, a long-standing promoter of the Armenian nation and anti-Turk, having written an important and popular book about the Armenians back in 1877.

Bryce was a well known British Liberal of Ulster Presbyterian background, who later became Chief Secretary of Ireland, a Viscount, and British ambassador to Washington. He was born in Belfast, where his father was Headmaster of the Royal Academy.

Bryce wrote *Transcaucasia and Ararat* in 1877, a book that went to at least four editions. The book, which was ostensibly a traveller’s guide, had 126 pages of political reflections within, and was hugely pro-Armenian and anti-Ottoman. It was just one of a flood of books written on the Armenians from the late 1870s at the time of the “Bulgarian Horrors” and the Russian/Ottoman War. However, it had a special standing given the high academic reputation of the author. The Armenian question was discovered by Liberal England and Christian America in these publications. There was another spurt of publishing on the same issue in the mid-1890s when the Armenian question re-emerged with the Dashnak offensive.

In 1877 Bryce had considered the problem of fashioning the communities in the Ottoman Empire into something else that did not involve them being ruled by the Moslems in Istanbul. However, he found “each race... too weak numerically to absorb the rest, and too distinct in religion, language and habits to blend on equal terms with any of the others” (p.414).

The stuff of nations was nowhere to be found, it appears:

“The difficulty of fusing these races, or even of uniting them under a common system of law and administration, lies in the fact that the one force which controls them, the one channel in which most of their life flows, is religion. They have no patriotism, in our sense of the world, for they have neither a historic past (being mostly too ignorant for that conception) nor a country they can call exclusively their own... Religion is everything... and... is not a fusing but a separating, alienating, repellent force” (p. 414-5).

However, while there were no building materials for nations, Ottoman rule, for Bryce, could not be allowed to continue. It was an affront to civilisation and progress. There had to be (Christian) nations rather than Moslems ruling Christians!

According to Bryce the Turks were –

“... not the most intelligent and industrious part of the population. They are one of several nations dwelling on the same soil, but not inter-marrying or otherwise mingling, and have nothing in common but mutual hatred... In the present war (1877) they are quite as much invaders as the Russians, and their expulsion, not their triumph, would be the true ‘liberation’ of the territory” (p.423).

Bryce had a racist conception of the world. Despite his distaste for the social Darwinism he found in England he held many of its basic assumptions. Whilst condemning the Turkish masses for failing to inter-marry he held the opinion that the Ottoman rulers (who often married Armenians) had become degenerate by doing so. According to Bryce, this inter-marriage had changed their physical and facial features and separated them from the peasants of their own race. This miscegenation had made them “incapable of ruling” (pp. 424-5). And so, the “Turkish government is dying. It has been sick for a long time” (p. 428).

Asking whether reform was possible, Bryce answered in the negative. He then concluded that what was needed was the establishment of “a dependent but practically self-governing state. Such a state could only be Armenia, as the Armenians are by far the most industrious and energetic race in the region and in some parts, outnumber the Mohommedans” (p.430).

As evidence of the Armenian talent for government Bryce ironically cited the fact that they “already had a constitution” (given to them by the Ottomans) that “worked well” with a functional system of organising the community through their own assembly (also provided by the Ottomans), (p.430).

However, there was still the demographic problem in constructing this Armenian state. As Bryce recognised, even if all the Armenians in the world flocked to the territorial entity called ‘Armenia’ “their numbers would remain small, while the untamed Kurds and other Mohommedans would constitute an element of difficulty” (p. 431). Bryce noted that the Armenians were indeed “a scattered people, and everywhere, except in a corner of Cilicia and a few districts around the lake of Van, a Christian minority in a Mussulman population” (p.482).

Bryce presented a picture of the Armenians as a Christian people struggling valiantly against oppression and absorption by the Moslem hordes who, despite constant persecution, would not renounce their religious calling despite the great benefits such a move would have entailed for them. Bryce was urging this special people to become a nation even though they “had no sort of political aspiration” (p.466), were “a timid and inoffensive people, who have never meditated insurrection” (p.425) and who “incline toward the less revolutionary... expedient of attempting, even after so many failures, to improve Turkish administration” (p.432).

So, although the Armenians had little sense of nationhood or patriotism, and merely wanted reform of the existing structures, this special people had to destroy the Ottoman state, become nationalists, and construct an Armenian nation in a hostile sea of Moslems, who formed a majority among them.

James Bryce also noted that Russia would “oppose such a state” (p.432). He examined the possibility of Russia taking the Christian communities in hand but concluded that she was not

“thoroughly civilised” enough herself, and was “too uneducated” and “corrupt” for such a civilising mission. Russian rule was better than Ottoman rule but “might prevent something better in the long-term” (p.441).

That “something better” was, of course, Liberal Britain:

“The name of England is still great in these countries. She is regarded with a mixture of admiration and disappointment: admiration as the home of wealth, freedom, and invention; disappointment and surprise as the apparent friend and protector of Turkish oppression. Her interference on behalf of the subject peoples would be welcomed with far greater satisfaction than that of Russia, for it would not be suspected of being a cloak for the aggrandisement of her own Church or Empire... If the fall of the Turkish dominion is only a question of a few years sooner or later, is it not folly to cling to the status quo and make its maintenance the chief aim of our policy? In the moral and political, as in the material world, there is in reality no such thing as a status quo: all is change and motion, if not from worse to better, then from better to worse.

England may save the Sultan from foreign invaders, she may aid him to suppress internal revolts; but she will not thereby arrest that sure and steady process of decay which makes his government more and more powerless for anything but evil. She may delay, but she cannot prevent, the arrival, after another era of silent oppression, varied by insurrections and massacres, of a day when the Turkish Empire will fall to pieces, and its spoils be shared by powerful neighbours or revengeful subjects.

A wise policy, foreseeing the inevitable, would endeavour to prepare for it, and would seek in the elevation of the native races the means of excluding those neighbours whose real or supposed ambition excites so much alarm. Degraded as they are, after ages of slavery and ignorance, the Christian populations nevertheless offer a more hopeful prospect than the Muslims...

Both the power and the ambition of Russia have been grossly exaggerated in this country. Many of us have mistaken her vast area and large population for real strength... But supposing the interests of England to be really imperilled by her advance,