

ATTITUDES OF THE GREAT POWERS TOWARDS THE OTTOMAN ARMENIANS UP TO THE OUTBREAK OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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Abstract:

This article examines the reasons behind the Great Powers' involvement in the affairs of the Ottoman Armenians. It searches how their involvement affected Ottoman-Armenian relations. The paper argues that Armenian-Ottoman relations were to remain good until the second half of the 19th century. From this time onwards, however, these relations began to decline because of the Great Power's direct involvement in the Ottoman internal matters. The paper also deals with the responses of the Ottoman Government to the foreign intervention and how it affected the Ottoman relations with the Great Powers.

Keywords:

The Ottoman Empire, Great Powers, The Ottoman-Russian War of 1877, Sultan Abdülhamit II, The Eastern Question, Anglo-Russian Rivalry, Tsar Alexander II, The Young Turks, Armenian Revolts

INTRODUCTION

This study scrutinizes Turco-Armenian relations in the context of the Great Power politics. It also examines the reasons behind the Great Power's interests in the affairs of the Ottoman Armenians. As a background, the paper first deals with the beginning of close relations between the two communities in course of time. Throughout the history, it is well known that the Armenian population, after they had been deported and persecuted in many times by the Persian and Byzantine Empires, found the Turkish justice and Islamic tolerance as a great relief to themselves. The paper shows that the Armenian population had received such a great deal of freedom and tolerance from the Ottoman administration that this established a strong bond and trust between the two communities, and that is why the Armenians were called as the trustworthy subjects, 'Millet-i Sadıka' by the Ottomans.

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These cordial relations between the Ottomans and Armenians however began to weaken during the second half of the 19th century at a time when the Ottoman Empire started to descent from the power. This situation provided a good opportunity for the Great Powers, which had long waited for the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. These powers also gave promises to Armenian leaders for setting up an independent or an autonomous Armenia in return for their cooperation with them. Their real aim, however, was to use the Armenian question as a pretext to interfere in the domestic affairs of the Ottoman Empire and whereby seizing the opportunity to destroy the Empire from inside. Afterwards the Armenian groups under foreign instigations began to arm themselves and revolt against the state.

This study is based on first hand, and second hand materials available both in Turkish and English. It examines the topic in two parts: first part provides background information for the topic, and deals with the foreign involvement in the affairs of the Ottoman Armenians until the outbreak of the Ottoman-Russian War of 1877-78. The second part starts with the examination of the results of the Ottoman-Russian War with which the Armenian question turned into an international issue for the first time. The study, then, analyzes the policies of the Great Powers of the time towards the Ottoman Armenians up to the eruption of the Great War in 1914.

Historical Background: Great Powers and Turco-Armenian Relations Up to the Outbreak of the Ottoman-Russian War of 1877

It was historically known that the Armenian population who had settled in the Southern Caucasus region had been badly treated by the ruling powers of the time such as the Roman, Persian and Byzantine Empires before the Seljuk's Empire established its domination in the region. The arrival of Seljuks in the region hence brought peace and tolerance to the Armenians. In 1071 the Armenians came under the rule of the Seljuks when the Sultan, Alp Arslan, terribly defeated the Byzantine Empire. Unlike the Byzantine Empire, the Seljuks provided a great deal of freedom and rights for the Armenian Church. The famous Armenian historian Mateos described the Seljuk Turks in the following sense: *'Sultan Melikşah conquered Byzantine territories. He treated well the Christians... He brought peace and welfare to the Armenian population'*.¹

After the Seljuks, the Mongols captured the Armenian lands and this caused them to scatter to eastern Anatolia, Cilicia, and other places around the Caucasus. When the Ottoman State was established in 1299, its founder, Osman, gave permission to the Armenians to organize themselves in Anatolia as a separate community, and they built their church in Kütahya. The Ottoman-Armenian relations further improved after the conquest of İstanbul by Sultan Mehmet II, who rendered further rights and liberties to Armenian community. Afterwards, Ottoman-Armenian relations were steadily developed, and in time the Armenians became one of the most trustworthy subjects of the Ottoman State called as Millet-i Sadıka. Later on, following further Ottoman conquests, all the areas inhabited by the Armenians were added to the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire during the reign of Selim in 1514.²

Not long before, the communities under the rule of the Ottoman Empire were reorganized in accordance with their religion, each under its own religious head who had some powers of civil jurisdiction and administration, called as 'Millet' system. The Armenian community was also integrated into the Millet system whereby they obtained further religious rights and liberties. The Armenian community was recognized as 'Gregorian Millet' under the Millet system. The Ottoman administration acknowledged the Patriarch of İstanbul as the religious head of the Armenian community.³

The Millet system was an important factor for the development of Armenian nationhood. The religious community identity eventually led the creation of the Armenian National Assembly in 1862 after the Regulations for the Armenian Nation was promulgated in 1860. According to the regulations, the Armenians would be under an elected council of 140 representatives, mixed clerical and lay, the Patriarch being as the official president. The Ottoman Government accepted this plan on 29 March 1863. This act, hence, became the first crucial step for the formation of Armenian national aspirations. Though this was the case, the

¹ Erol Kürkçüoğlu, 'Tarihi Süreçte Selçuklu-Ermeni İlişkileri' *Ermeni Araştırmaları*, No. 8, Winter 2003, pp. 335-341.

² Foreign Office Handbook, May 1919, FO 373/5, p. 16; Salahi Ramadan Sonyel, *The Ottoman Armenians: Victims of Great Power Diplomacy*, (London: Rustem & Brother, 1987), pp. 10-11

³ Erdal İter, *Ermeni Kilisesi ve Terör*, (Ankara, 1999), p.22; Sonyel, *The Ottoman...*, pp. 10-11.

Armenian community was still loyal to the Ottoman Government and it was still regarded as trustworthy community by the latter.⁴

Since the early 17th century, the Armenian community began to attract economic interests of the Great Powers because of their success in trade and commerce. They engaged in trade with India and received in 1688 privileges from the Company of London Merchants to the East Indies. The Armenians hence began to earn fame in international trade. A century later, when the Ottoman Empire began to decline, the European Powers approached the Armenian population from political aspects. These powers began to think the use of the Armenian community for the purpose of weakening the Ottoman State from inside. This European interest thus established a ground for spreading separatist ideas among the Ottoman Armenian community.⁵

France was the first European state which showed political interest in the affairs of the Ottoman Armenians. There were also religious and economic reasons behind its interest. In 1535, France obtained the rights of capitulations from the Ottoman Sultan and this led her to send its missionaries into the Ottoman territories in order to spread Catholic Faith among the Armenian community. The Armenians who engaged in trade were attracted to choose Catholicism as a result of the economic privileges given to France.⁶

France, which longed to extent its economic and political interests to Anatolia and Mediterranean, planned to use the Armenian population to realize these objectives. The French administration hoped that the Armenian inhabitants in the Ottoman Empire would see France as savior to rescue them from the Ottoman rule. The French thought that the Armenians, who occupied higher posts in the governmental offices in the Empire would be useful to realize French political aims. During the reign of Sultan Murat IV, (1623-1640), it was reported that the Gregorian Armenians in the Empire began to be converted into Catholicism and this, under the French propaganda, eventually led the spread of separatist ideas among the Armenian community. To influence the Armenians more, the French authorities opened a new

⁴ Foreign Office Handbook, May 1919, FO 373/5, p. 16.

⁵ Foreign Office Handbook, May 1919, FO 373/5, p. 17; Salim Cöğce, 'Osmanlı Ermeni Toplumunda Siyasallaşma Çabaları' *Ermeni Araştırmaları*, No. 8, pp. 51-53.

⁶ Cöğce, 'Osmanlı...', pp. 51-53.

department of Armenian Language in the School of Eastern Languages. Eventually, Sultan Mahmut II, because of growing French pressures, recognized the Catholic Armenians as a separate religious community under Millet System. France, thereafter, declared itself as the protector of Catholic minorities within the Ottoman Empire.⁷

In the meantime, Russia was another power which began to show political, economic and military interests towards the Armenians. Russia had long commercial ties with Armenians since 11th century. The latter's importance to Russia was at first of an industrial and commercial, later on of a military character. As Russia turned into a powerful Empire towards the end of 17th century, its Tsarist policy had always been to reach an outlet into the warm waters of the Mediterranean with the ultimate goal of seizing the city of Istanbul and the Turkish Straits. To fulfill this objective, Russia began to consider weakening the Ottoman strength from within itself by inciting national desires of Ottoman Christian population, especially those with whom it shared a common Orthodox religious heritage such as the Greeks, the Slavs and the Armenians.⁸

A century later, Peter the Great of Russia encouraged the Armenians to settle in his country in order to prosecute and to teach the manufacture of silk. The Russian-Armenian contacts also encouraged some of the Armenian leaders in the Ottoman Empire to turn their faces to Russia for salvation. Peter the Great, saw the Armenians as valuable allies against the Ottomans when he commenced his military campaign towards Caucasus, Persia and Central Asia from 1722 onwards. However, this Russian campaign against the Turks was not much successful, and hence Peter the Great who promised help, abandoned the Armenians on their own fate. Some decades later, when the Russians attacked the Ottoman Empire in 1768, their Empress, Catherine II, gave long expectations to Armenians for setting up an Armenian Kingdom under Russian Protection, but with no result.⁹

In 1802, Alexander I added Georgia, which had been under Russian influence since 1783, to the territories of the Russian

⁷ Yusuf Sarıncay, 'Fransa'nın Ermenilere Yönelik Politikasının Temelleri', *Ermeni Araştırmaları*, No. 7, pp. 55-65.

⁸ Report on the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles by Foreign Office Research Department, 6 January 1947, FO 371/96550; Foreign Office Handbook, May 1919, FO 373/5, p. 18.

⁹ Foreign Office Handbook, May 1919, FO 373/5, p.18; Sonyel, *The Ottoman...*, pp. 11-12.

Empire. In 1828, by arrangement with Persia, Russia obtained Erivan together with the ecclesiastical capital (Echmiadzin) of Armenia. By the treaty of Adrianople (Edirne) in 1829 Russia acquired much of the Caucasus region, along with some recognition as protector of Christians under the Ottoman rule. During the war between Russia and the Ottoman Empire in 1828, the Armenians began to demand Russian protection against the Muslim rule. Throughout the war, the Armenians in Erzurum and Kars collaborated with Russia, and at the end of the war, fearing from Turkish retaliation, many of the Armenian inhabitants of the two cities fled to Russia. Simultaneously, in accordance with the agreement reached between the two countries, around 40 thousand Armenian people migrated from the Ottoman territories to Russia.¹⁰

During the period 1811-1841, when Mohammad Ali, under Ottoman suzerainty, made the Sultan's position uncertain both in Egypt and İstanbul, the Ottoman Empire began to rely on Russia for its survival. The Sublime Porte for a time recognized the Russian influence when she upheld the privileges of the Christians. However, this influence was ruined during the Crimean War with the serious defeat of Russia by other European Powers in coalition with the Turks in 1856. Though Russia began to degrade from her role of sole protector over the Armenian population in the Ottoman Empire, Tsar Alexander II continued to carry out his plan in setting up an independent Armenia under Russian protectorate until 1881 at a time when he was assassinated.¹¹

In the period from the Crimean War to the war of 1877-78, the European Powers, other than Russia, did not much interested politically in the affairs of the Ottoman Armenians and the latter kept themselves aloof from the provocative activities of their brethren in the Caucasus. Moscow in line with Pan-Slavism policy was busy to provoke a Slav rebellion in the Balkans, and an Armenian rebellion in the eastern Anatolia. However, the Porte still continued to maintain its confidence on the Armenian fidelity. Nevertheless, at this time, some Armenian papers began to openly defend the idea of an independent Armenian state.¹²

¹⁰ Foreign Office Handbook, May 1919, FO 373/5, pp.18; Davut Kılıç, 'Rusya'nın Doğu Anadolu Siyasetinde Eçmiyazın Kilisesi'nin Rolü (1828-1915)' *Ermeni Araştırmaları*, No. 2, pp. 52-53.

¹¹ Foreign Office Handbook, May 1919, FO 373/5, p.19.

¹² Esat Uras, *Tarihte Ermeniler ve Ermeni Meselesi*, (İstanbul: Belge Yayınları, 1987), pp. 181-198; Sonyel, *The Ottoman...*, pp. 15, 23-28, 42.

Great Powers' Involvement in the Armenian Affairs after the Ottoman-Russian War

The Ottoman-Russian War was eventually commenced on 24 April 1877 by the Russian attack with a pretext claiming that the Christians were badly treated by the latter. The real aim behind the Russian move was, in fact, to realize its Pan-Slavist aims that were the destruction of the Ottoman Empire. The war ended with a serious defeat faced by the Ottoman Empire on 31 January 1878. During the war, before the Russian Armies occupied Erzurum, some Armenians betraying the Ottomans had joined the invaders.¹³

Moreover, this war created an opportunity for some of the Armenian separatist groups who were after an independent state. Armenian nationalists appealed to British Ambassador asking him to secure British assistance for the establishment of an Armenian State. In his report to the Foreign Office, the British Ambassador stated that these kinds of activities by some of the Armenian groups were indeed supported by the Russian agents and the Armenian educated people and intellectuals were in general opposed to collaboration with Moscow against Istanbul.¹⁴ Furthermore, the Armenian Patriarch Nerses, in his letter to the British Foreign Office in 1878, asked for the British intervention towards the establishment of an independent state in Eastern Anatolia.¹⁵

At the end of the war, to begin with, the treaty of San Stefano (Yeşilköy) was concluded by Russia and the Ottoman Empire in February 1878. However, the European Powers did not recognize the treaty because it contained harsh terms for the Ottoman Empire in which it threatened the interests of the Great Powers. As a result of the Great Power's intervention, the Treaty of Berlin was signed in July 1878. Article 61 of the treaty obliged the Porte to carry out a reform program for the Armenians. Therefore the Great Powers put the Eastern Question, that was the plan to divide the Ottoman Empire, on practice. This plan began to be realized in accordance with the terms of Berlin Treaty as Serbia, Montenegro and Romania were detached from the Ottoman territories, Bulgaria

¹³ Sonyel, *The Ottoman...*, p. 45.

¹⁴ For the British Report see, Sonyel, *The Ottoman...*, pp. 40-41; Uras, *Tarihçe...*, pp. 199-226.

¹⁵ İtler, *Ermeni...*, pp. 37-38.

became autonomous; and under the guise of reform package for the Armenians, the European Powers were given a free hand to interfere into the domestic affairs of the Ottoman Empire.

This treaty also initiated a new age for the Armenian minority as well as for the Ottoman-Armenian relations. The issue of the Armenian Question, for the first time, was included in an international treaty. The treaty, in time, became an instrument for the foreign powers to encourage rebellions among the Christian

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Minorities against the Ottoman authority. This hence led the Armenians to plan their rebellious activities with the ultimate objective of setting up of an independent or autonomous state in the

eastern Anatolia where they lived as a small minority group. As a result, Ottoman-Armenian relations began to worsen from this time onwards.

On Ottoman-Armenian relations, Sultan Abdülhamit II made the following remarks in his memoirs:

*'How absurd is to accuse us (the Turks) of persecuting the Armenian people. If one looks at the Ottoman History, he can easily see that the Armenians have always lived in comfort and benefited greatly from the economic resources of our country. If one is familiar with this, he knows that the Armenian subjects are far richer than the Muslim ones are. In all times, the Armenians have occupied high offices including the post of Grand Vizier in the state. The number Armenian officials constitute the rate of one in three from the all officials in the state. Furthermore, the Armenians, as it was the case for the other minorities, are not conscripted but they pay only a small amount of tax instead. They are the ones who control the tax system. When Reşit Paşa wanted to end the old tax (iltizam) system in 1839 the Armenians had first shown their opposition to it...'*¹⁶

The new Sultan, Abdülhamit II, was an expert on the nature of Great Power politics and hence well recognized their objectives. He wanted to carry out the reform program for the Armenians on his own terms, but not on the conditions that were imposed by the foreigners. Therefore, when the Armenians realized that the Sultan was not to be a toy in the hands of the Great Powers they began to

¹⁶ Sultan Abdülhamit: *Siyasi Hatıratım* prepared by Ali Vehbi Bey (İstanbul: Dergah Yayınları, 1987), pp. 72-73.

adopt subversive and rebellious tactics through guerilla warfare and armed revolt. To realize their objectives, some Armenian groups set up revolutionary organizations such as Hunchak and Dashnak outside the Ottoman borders in late 1880's. With the foreign support behind them, these groups carried out long campaign against the state authority and civilian population by applying terrorist methods and causing escalation of bloodshed in Anatolia.¹⁷

After 1877-78 Ottoman-Russian War, England, which wanted to diminish Russian influence in the Middle East, emerged as a principal power closely interested in the affairs of the Ottoman Armenians. With the Cyprus Convention signed between London and İstanbul on 4 June 1878, Britain was recognized as a principal observer to control the realization of the reform package for the Armenians.¹⁸ Simultaneously, a radical change occurred in the perceptions of Ottoman and British governments towards each other.

These points were expressed by Sultan Abdülhamit II in his memoirs in the following sense:

*'...the issue of reform program for the Armenians was included to the treaty by the European Powers (Britain was chief of them) because they wanted to use it as pretext to interfere in the affairs of the Ottoman Empire. This led Armenians to rebel... Britain, through using the issue of reform package for the Armenians, threatened the Porte by saying that it could use the Armenian question against the Ottoman State.'*¹⁹

After the Treaty of Berlin, Britain asked for temporary possession of Cyprus Island in order to send military assistance to the Ottoman Empire in case of any further Russian attack to its territories. Eventually, the Sultan accepted the British occupation of the island on condition that London should return it after the Russian threat had passed. However, the British Government, in addition to its possession of the Cyprus, occupied Egypt in 1882. This British move signaled a change, opposite to its traditional approach to the Porte, in its policy towards the Ottoman Empire.

¹⁷ See for more information: *Documents On Ottoman Armenians*, Volumes I, II, (Ankara, Prime Ministry Directorate General of Press and Information, no date); Bilal Şimşir, *British Documents On Ottoman Armenians*, Volumes I, II, III, IV, (Ankara: TTK, 1989); *Documents on Massacre Perpetrated by the Armenians* prepared by Turkish Historical Association, (Ankara: TTK, 2001).

¹⁸ Sonyel, *The Ottoman...*, pp. 40, 53.

¹⁹ *Sultan Abdülhamit...*, pp. 80-81.

British statesman came to think that the protection of the Empire against Russia would not provide for the security of her interests in India, Africa and Mediterranean areas and hence it began to adopt a different policy. From the Ottoman point of view, the occupation of Cyprus and Egypt made a profound negative impact on the mind of Sultan Abdülhamit-II and his administration. They lost their confidence in Britain's role as the only European power anxious to ensure the survival of the Ottoman Empire. This idea forced the Ottomans to search for alternative policies. The Sultan hence approached Germany, which itself, was looking for an opportunity to enter the Middle East market, and thus, was ready for collaboration.²⁰

British-Armenian relations date back to the Crusades. During the wars between Christians and Muslims, King Henry asked for Armenian assistance when its army arrived at Cilicia and this request was met by the Armenian King. Though Armenian-British contacts continued on a small scale in the later periods no serious Armenian existence was recorded in Britain until the 17th century. In this century, Armenian traders came to contact with British merchants and the former were given special privileges from London in 1688. In fact, the Armenian merchants had, long before the British ones, begun to trade with India and they at the same time established their contacts with Britain. In the course of time, the Armenians in India became crucial to Britain as the latter planned to colonize the country. This was because the Armenians showed their readiness to help the British against the Indians. Therefore, the Armenian settlement in Britain began to occur.²¹

During 1840s, Britain began to sent its missionaries to spread Protestant Faith among the Christian minorities, chief of them were the Armenians, in the Ottoman Empire. Britain first built a temple for the Protestants in 1842 in Jerusalem, and then, in 1846, it established an organization for some parts of the Armenian Community, which was recognized as 'Armenian Protestant Millet' four years later.²²

²⁰ Osman Okyar, 'Turco-British Relations in the Inter-War Period: Fethi Okyar's Mission to London' in *Four Centuries of Turco-British Relations* Hale and Bağış (eds.), (North Humberside: The Eothen Press, 1984), p. 65.

²¹ Foreign Office Handbook, May 1919, FO 373/5, p. 16; Sedat Laçiner, 'Armenian Diaspora in Britain and the Armenian Question', *Ermeni Araştırmaları*, No. 3, pp. 239-241.

²² Erdal İlter, *Ermeni Meselesi'nin Doğuşunda ve Gelişmesinde İngiltere'nin Rolü*, (Ankara: Ankara Üniversitesi Basımevi, 1995), p. 160.

British-Armenian relations continued on trade in the following decades. In early 19th century, additional Armenian merchants went to Britain for doing trade. The Armenian merchants exported silk, natural fibers, textile products to the Ottoman Empire while they imported tobacco, and food to Britain. However, the number of Armenian settlers was still very small in Britain, for instance, there were only 60 Armenians in Manchester in the year 1860. Afterwards, the Armenian migration to Britain, mostly from the Ottoman territories, began to increase. They were traders and some rebels, and their immigration there began to affect the Anglo-Ottoman relations. The Armenian refugees embarked a campaign to arouse British public opinion against the Ottoman State.²³

These campaigns brought their results at a time when the liberal government under William Ewart Gladstone came to power in 1880. He paid attention to the Armenian allegations and adopted a hostile attitude towards the Porte under the guise of protecting the rights of Christians. Therefore, under these circumstances, England took the place of Russia to involve in the affairs of the Ottoman Armenians in the following three decades. In August 1878, the British Ambassador in İstanbul had already given a note to the Porte asking for the immediate commencement of the reform program for the Armenians.

The Ottoman Government, however, interpreted this act as British interference in the Ottoman domestic affairs and strongly reacted to it. Nevertheless, upon the constant pressures by the government in London, Sultan Abdülhamit gave his response stating that he could materialize the reform package on the condition that HMG (His or Her Majesty's Government) should provide the necessary credit to do the job. HMG, however, indicated that it could not provide enough credit, except a small amount, taking the Ottoman financial position into account that it was unable to repay its debt. The Ottoman finance, indeed, was under severe conditions at the time.²⁴

In 1879, the governments in London and Moscow made a joint approach to the Porte forcing the latter to establish two

²³ Laçiner, 'Armenian..', pp. 240-241.

²⁴ Elie Kedourie, *England and the Middle East: The Destruction of the Ottoman Empire 1914-1921*, (USA: Westview Press, 1987), pp. 20-22; George Lenczowski, *The Middle East in World Affairs*, (USA: Cornell University Press, 1980); Halil İnalcık and Donald Quataert (eds.), *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire*, Vol. II, (Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 764; Sonyel, *The Ottoman...*, pp. 57-58.

commissions to examine the conditions of the Armenians where they lived. The Ottoman Government, however, was not in a position to carry out the reforms and repeatedly asked from Britain for financial assistance. When London turned into a deaf ear to İstanbul's requests, then Anglo-Ottoman relations began to strain increasingly.²⁵

In the meantime, some Armenian groups under Russian intrigues began to make plans for rebellion in places where they constituted a minor community. They thought that their community should be granted independence as in the cases that Serbia, Montenegro and Romania were given their independence. The Armenian Patriarch in İstanbul was also involved in these activities. Patriarch Nerses declared that it was the Church's ultimate objective to get either autonomous or independent Armenian State. In 1877, the first step was taken towards this end by inciting an uprising in Zeitun area (near the province of Maraş). Together with the British mediation, the mutiny ended in February 1879.²⁶

The fervent British involvement in the affairs of the Ottoman Armenians had a close connection with Anglo-Russian rivalry. As Russia, with the Treaty of Berlin, became a dominant power in Caucasus and the Balkans and, began to expand southwards, this Russian position constituted a serious threat to British supremacy in the Gulf and the route to India. Britain began to see the Armenian inhabitant areas as a buffer zone to block the Russian advance. For this reason, Britain, though was reluctant to provide any financial assistance, continued to pressure on the Sublime Porte for carrying out the reform scheme. Furthermore, it applied to Germany and Russia to make a joint approach for this purpose in 1883. However, neither Germany nor Russia showed any sympathy to the British request. This eventually led İstanbul to come closer with Berlin.²⁷

Russia itself began to reverse its traditional Armenian policy from 1883 onwards. This was because Moscow was uncomfortable with the British intervention in modifying the San Stefano Treaty

²⁵ Sonyel, *The Ottoman...*, pp. 57-66.

²⁶ Uras, *Tarihte...*, pp. 185-198, 210; Abdullah Yaman, *Ermeni Meselesi ve Türkiye*, (İstanbul: Otağ Yayını, 1973), p. 80.

²⁷ Foreign Office Handbook, May 1919, FO 373/5, p. 22; Şener Aksu (ed.), *Ermeni Sorunu Rehberi*, (Kocaeli: Kocaeli Üniversitesi Yayını, 2001), p. 38; Okyar, 'Turco...', p. 65; Lenczowski, *The Middle...*, pp. 42-43.

and of its becoming a new protector of the Ottoman Armenian Community. The assassination of the Tsar Alexander II, who had some project of an autonomous Armenia in 1881, was another reason for the change of Russian policy. His successors thought that the growth of revolutionary ideas claiming independence in Eastern Anatolia was detrimental to the Russian interests. The successor governments in Moscow feared that these ideas might spread into the Russian borders and might initiate a revolutionary movement among its own Armenian subjects. Russia followed this policy until the Young Turks came to power in 1908.²⁸

Contemporaneously, the Armenian revolutionary organizations began to be set up. The Armenagan Party in Van was founded in 1885, and this was followed by Hintchak Party in 1887, and Dashnaktsutiun in 1890. Because of the reform program for the Armenians was not realized by the Porte for economic reasons, and the cession of Russian support for the Armenian Community, these parties took the matter in their hands by organizing rebellions and by adopting the methods of terror in different parts of Anatolia. By applying these methods, these organizations aimed at getting European intervention by propagating that the process of extermination of Armenian Community in Anatolia was commenced by the Ottomans. Thus, the years between 1890 and 1897, about 40 Armenian uprisings occurred.²⁹

As explained before, Russia, in the periods between 1883 and 1900, did not much involved in the affairs of the Ottoman Armenians. In the early 1900s, however, Moscow began to show some interest in the Armenian issue by asking the Porte for the initiation of the reform package. Not long before, Moscow, however, began to take a hostile attitude towards the Armenian population in Caucasus. Russia provoked the Tartars of Transcaucasia to attack the Armenian population there. Afterwards, the Tzarist Government made serious attempts to Russianize the Armenians and this resulted in great disappointment to the latter. The Armenian communities in Caucasus thereafter began to look for the Patriarchate in Istanbul with a view to realize their ultimate goal of the establishment of an independent state. Concurrently, the advent to power of the Young

²⁸ Foreign Office Handbook, May 1919, FO 373/5, p. 19.

²⁹ Azmi Süslü and others, *Türk Tarihinde Ermeniler*, (Ankara, 1995), pp. 125-187.

Turks with the Party of the Committee of Union and Progress, (CUP), in İstanbul further increased their hope of obtaining at least an autonomous Armenian State.

The members of the CUP were a group of reformers, who inspired their ideas from Britain and France. They wanted to take radical measures for reforming the whole system of the Ottoman Empire. They were against the regime of Sultan Abdülhamit II, and worked for bringing a constitutional regime to the Ottoman Empire. After series of meetings, the members of the CUP came together with other dissented groups such as Hintchak, Dashnak, and Jews etc. in November 1907 in Paris. All the groups agreed on the overthrow of the present regime at the time, but they had their differences on the role of the state authority. While the members of the CUP favored a strong central authority, the Armenian parties, in particular, defended to set up a decentralized system.³⁰

Consequently, the CUP came to power in 1908 as a result of revolution and forced the Sultan to promulgate the Constitution for a second time. A year later, the Young Turks removed Abdülhamit II from power. With the promulgation of the Constitution, the Armenian parties and the CUP came closer each other. Their flirt however did not last long. Though the Armenian groups were given additional rights, such as permitting them to carry arm, and freeing many Armenian prisoners, by the new government they misused these liberties, and soon under foreign intrigues, they began to arm themselves and organized new uprisings. Not long before, an Armenian revolt took place in Adana in April 1909. This mutiny did not fall from the Russian notice and made it to realize once more about the value of the Armenian alliance to its objectives.³¹

This new change occurred in Russian foreign policy towards the Armenians had a close connection with the developments taking place on international politics. In this period Germany began to enter the Middle East and the Near Eastern markets through the construction of Baghdad Railway, which was the greatest regional project at the time, frightened other powers such as Russia, France

³⁰ Semih Yalçın, 'Mustafa Kemal Paşa'nın İttihatçılığı' in Hasan Celal Güzel, et.al, (eds.), *Türkler*, (Ankara: Yeni Türkiye Yayınları, 2002), pp. 245-262; Hasan Ünal, 'İttihat Terakki ve Dış Politika, (1906-1909) in Hasan Celal Güzel, et.al, (eds.), *Türkler*, (Ankara: Yeni Türkiye Yayınları, 2002), pp. 212-227; Ahmet Eyicil, 'Osmanlı İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti', in Hasan Celal Güzel, et.al, (eds.), *Türkler*, (Ankara: Yeni Türkiye Yayınları, 2002), pp. 228-244.

³¹ Foreign Office Handbook, May 1919, FO 373/5, p. 23; Sonyel, *The Ottoman...*, pp. 280-281.

and Britain whom they all had deep economic and political interests in those regions.³² Therefore, the latter powers began to come closer and on 31 August 1907 Britain and Russia, leaving their rivalries aside, reached agreement on all issues related to these regions.³³ After having reached an agreement with Britain, Russia felt itself free to use the Armenian card against the Ottoman State.

After the Adana Revolt, Ottoman-Armenian relations began to get worse. In February 1911, the British Vice Consul in Van reported the following observations: *'It is impossible to overlook the fact that, in all places where there are no Armenian political organizations, or where such organizations are imperfectly developed, Armenians live in comparative harmony with the Turks and Kurds... because Turkish officials are not excited against the Armenians by intrigues, imaginary or otherwise...'*³⁴ In another British report, in March 1913, it was indicated that the Armenian revolutionary committees were active in Adana, Dörtüol and in other places to organize armed bands and public uprisings.³⁵ Confirming the British reports, Ottoman documents provide detailed information about the activities of the Armenian organizations. In these documents, it was reported that the branches of Hintchak and Dashnak Parties were busy to provide arms for the rebels in Anatolia whereby to prepare a ground for a widespread mutiny against the Ottoman authority.³⁶

Russia began to show a keen interest in the affairs of the Ottoman Armenians as the Great War was becoming ever closer. During the discussions between the foreign ministers of Russia and Britain, in May 1913, Sazanof, the Russian Foreign Minister, stated that Russia attributed a great importance to the reform question for the Armenians and he made a request that the three Ambassadors of the Triple Alliance should meet to discuss the reform scheme for the Armenians. The ambassadors of the Great

³² Mustafa Sıtkı Bilgin, 'Türk-Irak İlişkilerinin Tarihsel Boyutu, 1534-2002'in Ümit Özdağ, et.al, (eds.), *Irak Krizi (2002-2003)*, (Ankara: ASAM, 2003), p. 215.

³³ Nicolson to Grey, (Russia: Annual Report for 1907), 8 February 1908, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print* (Hereafter shortened as BDFP), Part 1, Vol. 5, Kenneth Bourne, D. Cameron Watt (eds.), (University Publications of America, 1983), pp. 75-81.

³⁴ Quoted from Sonyel, *The Ottoman...*, p. 282.

³⁵ Sonyel, *The Ottoman...*, p. 283.

³⁶ *Ermeni Komitelerinin Amal ve Harekat-ı İhtilaliyyesi* prepared by H. Erdoğan Cengiz, (Ankara: Başbakanlık Basımevi, 1983), pp. 118-142.

Powers eventually met in İstanbul in the summer of the same year. While the Russians, which became the champion of the Armenian cause was supported by Britain and France, Germany and Austrian Empire favored the Ottoman side.³⁷

Nevertheless, there existed some sort of disagreement between Moscow and London about the adoption of tactics for the Armenian reform program to be pursued towards the Porte. While Russia insisted on dictating their terms on the Porte without even consulting the CUP Government, Britain maintained that the Ottoman Government should be called to join the discussions. Russia, however, objected to the British tactic by stating that the Russian Government did pay a great attention to Armenian demands, which strongly objected to any idea of consultation with the Porte on the reform issue.³⁸ Though, later, Great Powers reached an agreement on the issue, the outbreak of the Great War prevented this agreement to be put on practice.

Just prior to the outbreak of the Great War, Russia draw the lines of its policy towards the Ottoman Armenians. Sazanof, in his speech to Duma on 23 May 1914, pointed out that:

'...Contiguity of the Eastern provinces of Anatolia with Russia including many Armenians among their inhabitants, could not leave the Imperial Government indifferent to the position of affairs near our frontier...'.³⁹ The Turkish documents provide the following information for the Russian activities concerning the Armenians that:

'According to reliable information from the Armenians in the Caucasus the Russians have provoked Armenians living in our country, by promises that they will be granted independence in territories to be annexed from Ottoman land, and that they have brought many of own men disguised as Turkish peasants to the Armenian villages in our country, that they have stored arms and ammunition in many places to be distributed to Armenians, and moreover, the of Russian General Loris Melikov went to the Van region for the same purpose. In this context, Armenian leaders in our country, have decided to pursue the following policy:

To (sic) They (will) preserve their loyalty in tranquility pending the declaration of war. If war is to be declared, Armenian soldiers in

³⁷ Buchanan to Grey (Russia: Annual Report, 1913), 4 March 1914, *BDFA*, Part 1, Vol. 6, pp. 365-368.

³⁸ Buchanan to Grey (Russia: Annual Report, 1913), 4 March 1914, *BDFA*, Part 1, Vol. 6, pp. 365-368.

³⁹ Buchanan to Grey, 24 May 1914, *British Documents On the Origins of the War, 1898-1914: The Testing of the Entente, 1904-1906*, Vol. 3, G. P. Gooch and Harold Temperley (eds.), (London, 1928), p. 796.

*the Ottoman Army will join the enemy with their arms. If the Ottoman Army advances (they will) preserve (their) loyalty and tranquility; should the Ottoman Army retreat (they will) form armed guerilla bands to fight against us.*⁴⁰

Therefore, it can easily be seen that, on the eve of the Great War, Russians accelerated their activities to provoke the Armenian community in Anatolia against the Ottoman authority. The government in Moscow had long planned to use its own Armenian subjects against the Ottoman Army. It became also clear that the Armenian groups both in Anatolia and Caucasus were ready to collaborate with the Ottomans' enemies. After Germany declared war on 1 August 1914, the Ottoman Government began to make preparations for the coming war. When these preparations became known, the Patriarch in Echmiadzin took an immediate action. In his letter to the Russian Governor in Caucasus, the Patriarch stated that if the Armenians were given independence all the Armenian communities would join the Russian forces against the Ottomans. In response to the Patriarch, the governor indicated that he would respond to the Armenian demands on the condition that the Armenian community should obey his orders. The Tsar also repeated the same promises to Patriarch when he met him later.⁴¹

Soon after these events, the Ottoman military authorities began to receive detailed information about the Armenian-Russian collaboration against the Ottoman State. On 7 October 1914, in a communication from the Ottoman intelligence officer to the third Army Command, the following was reported:

*'...Armenians in Russia are registering as volunteers to join the war, arms and bread is to be supplied by Russia and horses and clothing by themselves. Leaders for drafting volunteers are Aramalis from Papsin of Bitlis in Sarıkamış and an Armenian named Antranik in Kars. Antranik had proceeded to Tiflis to conscript volunteers from among the Christians there, after conscripting a number of volunteers from Kars. All Armenians in Russia will join the volunteers. Russia promised to allocate some of the lands to be captured from the Ottomans to them. Arshak, friend of informant was taken by force to Kars by the volunteers to join them.'*⁴²

⁴⁰ From Third Army to Various Units, 19 July 1914, *Documents* (Ankara: Prime Ministry Directorate General of Press and Information, no date) Document No. 1, Vol. 1, pp. 1-2.

⁴¹ Kamuran Gürün, *Ermeni Dosyası* (Ankara: TTK 1985), p. 197; Uras, *Tarihçe...*, pp. 580-585.

⁴² From Intelligence Officer, Ahmet, to the Third Army Commander, 7 October 1914, *Documents On Ottoman Armenians* (Ankara: Prime Ministry Directorate General of Press and Information, no date), Document No. 1895, Vol. 2, pp. 7-8.

In another document it was reported that:

*'According to information received, the Russians have established guerillas by arming Russian and Turkish Armenians in the Caucasus and Greeks, and anticipate expanding these guerilla organizations by sending them into Turkish land. These reports are gradually being confirmed and realised, and Armenian deserters from military units are increasing...'*⁴³

In the meantime, a revolt, which took place in Zeitun district in August 1914, was an indication for the future behaviors of the Armenian organizations. At this time, the Armenian population in this district refused to obey the orders from the government and later they began to revolt by attacking soldiers and civilians. Afterwards, the Ottoman administration sent orders to various governors to take necessary measures against any armed bands.⁴⁴ Under these circumstances, the Ottoman Empire went to war on the side of the Central Powers on 4 November 1914.

CONCLUSION

In broad sense, it can be concluded that Turco-Armenian relations, since the 11th century, had been well developed until the eruption of the Ottoman-Russian War in 1877. During this period, however, these relations were not free from anxiety. Starting from 16th century, the European Powers began to show some economic and religious interests in the affairs of the Ottoman Armenians. These were the commercial and missionary activities conducted by the Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant priests and merchants. These missionary works were also supported by the states of France, Russia, Britain and the United States. These activities, hence, established a ground for the Great Powers to pursue their political objectives, which caused the spread of separatist ideas among the Armenians against the Ottoman authority. Though this was the case, the Ottoman-Armenian relations were not much affected by the foreign influences until the outbreak of the Ottoman-Russian War in 1877.

In the early period, France was the first European state, which showed political interest in the affairs of the Ottoman Armenians

⁴³ Report by Third Army Command, 1 October 1914, *Documents*, Document No. 7, p. 18. For the similar reports based on British Documents see, Sonyel, *The Ottoman...*, p. 288.

⁴⁴ Sonyel, *The Ottoman...*, pp. 288-289.

in the 16th century. A century later, however, Russia became the most zealous power interested in the affairs of the Ottoman Armenians as it embarked an expansionist policy towards the Balkans and further south, and saw the Armenian minority as a valuable ally towards realizing its objectives against the Ottoman Empire. This Russian interest and supremacy over the Ottoman Armenians was to continue until 1883 at a time when Moscow modified its policy.

The Ottoman-Russian War of 1877-78 was a watershed in Ottoman-Armenian relations. As the Armenian question was internationalized at the end of the war, (with the Treaty of Berlin), it opened a formal gate to the foreign powers to interfere in the domestic affairs of the Ottoman State. This situation, hence, encouraged the Armenian groups in Anatolia to revolt against the Ottoman authority under foreign influence, which promised an independent or autonomous Armenia. The Great Powers, however, only wanted to use the Armenian groups for their own purposes leaving them in a state of war with their rulers, the Ottoman administrators.

After the Treaty of Berlin, Britain became a major power to deal with the Armenian Question. This was because, the treaty attributed Britain the chief responsibility to observe the realization of the reform package for the Ottoman Armenians. The other reason was the change of the British attitude towards the Porte. Expecting that the Ottoman Empire would die sooner or later, Britain came to think that the protection of the Ottoman Empire against Russia would not serve to its political and economic interests. Instead, Britain planned to stop Russian expansion southwards through the buffer state of Armenia under its control. In the meantime, in contrast to Britain, Russia began to disinterest in the Armenian issue, especially, after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881, and remained to do so until 1907.

From this time onwards, however, Russia re-oriented its policy. As Anglo-Russian alliance was restored in 1907, and a year later the new CUP Government came to power in Istanbul, these events created new opportunities for Russia to take up the Armenian issue into its hands once again. Thereafter, Russia became increasingly involved in the Armenian question until the outbreak of the Great War in 1914.