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Toynbee, Turks, and Armenians



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TURKISH commentators claim that the British Blue Book, *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, 1915-6*, which the historian Arnold Toynbee compiled for Lord Bryce during the First World War, cannot be taken seriously as historical evidence because Toynbee later admitted that the British government used it as war propaganda. This implies that truth and propaganda are mutually exclusive. Yet when this question was put to Toynbee in a personal letter, he answered:

It is true that the British Government's motive in asking Lord Bryce to compile the Blue Book was propaganda. But Lord Bryce's motive in undertaking it, and mine in working on it for him, was to make the truth known, and the evidence was good: the witnesses were all American missionaries with no political axe to grind. So the Blue Book, together with Lepsius' book, does give a true account.¹

Toynbee has never reversed himself on this matter. On the contrary, he has repeated in three of his post-war books that the Turkish government planned and carried out genocide against its Armenian subjects.

In *The Western Question in Greece and Turkey*, he makes a number of damning statements regarding the Turkish treatment of

the Armenians. He writes that in the northeastern provinces of Turkey, the massacre of Armenians by Moslems had been endemic since 1895.² In the same book he also sees a parallel between Armenian massacres in the Ottoman Empire and the lynching of blacks in some areas of the United States.³ Elsewhere he reiterates an American eyewitness account of the Turkish atrocities against Armenians in Cilicia in 1909. He quotes his narrator as saying:

grim silence and intentness on the part of the slayer, and the despairing silence of the victims, had been one of the most impressive characteristics of the scene. And next, he said, had been the innate mercilessness and cruelty revealed in the character of those who killed: not in the way of torturing — of that he saw nothing — but in the insatiable desire to kill, and satisfaction in the deed . . .⁴

And finally, he indicts the First World War Ottoman government of genocide by stating:

This is an ugly possibility in all of us; but happily even when the stimuli are present, atrocities are seldom committed spontaneously by large bodies of human beings . . . but the most signal modern instance was the attempt to exterminate the Armenians in 1915. In this case, hundreds of thousands of people were done to death and thousands turned into robbers and murderers by the administration action of a few dozen criminals in control of the Ottoman Empire.⁵

The point to bear in mind about *The Western Question in Greece and Turkey* is that it provides proof that Toynbee stood by the Blue Book in a non-government sponsored book published four years after the end of World War I. Moreover, by 1922, when the book was published, Toynbee had developed close friendships with Turkish intellectuals and was making every effort to be fair to the Turks. The fact that he did not repudiate his war-time conclusions about the Armenian atrocities, despite his personal change of attitude toward the Turkish people in the post-war period, is itself an indication that the evidence against the Turkish government was overwhelming.

After a silence of forty-five years, Toynbee again mentions the Armenian genocide in two autobiographical books, *Acquaintances* in 1967 and *Experiences* in 1969. In the latter, he not only defines twentieth-century genocide but compares the Armenian and Jewish examples in a passage that illuminates his final judgment.

The distinguishing marks of our twentieth-century genocide are that it is committed in cold-blood by the deliberate fiat of holders of despotic political power, and the perpetrators of genocide employ all the resources of present-day technology and organization to make their planned massacres systematic and complete. I am old enough to remember the horror of the massacre of Armenian Ottoman subjects in the Ottoman Empire in 1896 at the instigation of the infamous Sultan Abd-al Hamid II. But this act of genocide was amateur and ineffective compared with the largely successful attempt to exterminate the Ottoman Armenians that was made during the First World War, in 1915, by the post-Hamidian regime of "The Committee of Union and Progress," in which the principal criminals were Talaat and Enver. The Second World War was accompanied by the Nazis' genocide of the Jews both in Germany and in the other European countries that were temporarily overrun and occupied by the German military forces. Since the general level of technological and organizational efficiency in Germany during the dozen years of the Nazi regime was considerably higher than it had been in Turkey during the ten years of the C.U.P. regime, the German genocide of the European Jews was still more effective than the Turkish genocide of the Ottoman Armenians had been.⁶

Since Toynbee remained firm in his conviction until the end of his long life that the Turks were guilty of genocide against the Armenians, why did he abstain from condemning them after the war? The answer seems to be rooted in his bent of personality and philosophy of life.

Until after World War I, Toynbee did not know any Turks on a personal basis. In fact, he had grown up in a family that regarded all Turks as ogres. It was due to his work on the Blue Book that he felt a compulsion to meet and make friends with "fellow-countrymen of the criminals by whom the genocide had been committed."⁷ His motive was to figure out how human beings could do the terrible deeds that had been done to the Armenians. To achieve this goal, he studied the Turkish language, he traveled to Turkey, and he cultivated the friendship of many Turks. In the process, he came to conclude that Turks are "human beings" and could be charming and intelligent companions. This seems to have been a shocking discovery for a young man who had been brought up in an English home where the Gladstonian view of all Turks as unmitigated barbarians prevailed. Halideh Edib, the American-

educated Turkish feminist and her husband, Adnan Adivar, became two of his closest friends. Anyone who has read Halideh Edib's books can appreciate how, with exquisite charm, this ardent Turkish nationalist could have convinced Toynbee that the downtrodden Turkish people had long been abused by evil Western imperialists and needed a chance to prove themselves. He was more easily convinced because of his propensity to feel sympathy for perceived underdogs and his tendency to bend over backwards to be fair to the unpopular point of view even to the point of being unfair to the other party. He divulged these aspects of his personality to his son Philip in *Comparing Notes: A Dialogue Across a Generation*.⁸ Moreover, he must have felt that he had no right to condemn the Turks for behavior that, in his belief, had its roots in universal human nature. According to Toynbee, who believed in original sin, all humans, not just Turks, had a streak of "abominable wickedness."⁹ In fact, in his view, condemnation would be counterproductive. The only way to improve Turkish behavior would be to accept them as human beings. He felt that the Turkish people, no less than other groups, had the capacity to feel shame and would exercise it if not badgered by Westerners.¹⁰

In *Acquaintances*, Toynbee emphasizes the importance of personal relations to him and devotes a whole chapter to describing the warmth and depth of his Turkish friendships.¹¹ Not surprisingly, he does not note a single Armenian friend in this book, which is devoted to the important people in his life. Thus, there was no strong personal relationship with an Armenian to counteract the influence of his Turkish friends.

Of course, history has proved his theory to be wrong. Far from feeling remorse or shame for the action of their government in 1915, Turks today are denying the historical facts and have erected a monument to honor Talaat. When these facts were pointed out to him in my second letter in 1966, he replied:

Most human beings do wrong at times, in greater or lesser degree, I suppose. The only way back is to admit it and to be sorry for it, and nationalism is a hindrance to this, unfortunately.¹²

It is interesting to note that, while he feels that the only way Turks can be morally regenerated is by admitting and repenting their crime, he no longer shows interest in justice for the victims.

In early 1920s, however, he had warned the Ankara government that they could not dissociate themselves effectively from the regime of Talaat and Enver unless they released captive women and children from Turkish households and allowed approximately 300,000 destitute Armenian refugees to return to their homes from the Erevan area.¹³ Yet, by 1926, although he regretted the Armenians were among the unfortunate peoples who received less than their due at the post-World War I peace conference, he was willing to accept the injustice as a by-product of a stable general settlement.¹⁴

Finally, why did Toynbee in 1967 break his self-imposed silence of forty-five years to discuss again the Armenian genocide? Did Halideh Edib's death in 1964 give him the freedom to bring up issues that would have pained his dear friend if she were living? Or did he, at last, realize that it was his moral obligation to defend the truth when the Turks were attempting to distort history? Whatever his motives, he did restate before his death that the Turkish government of 1915 executed the crime of genocide against its Armenian subjects. That was the very least he could have done. Surely, by the fiftieth anniversary of the Armenian genocide, he must have realized that he had been mistaken in his expectation of Turkish remorse for their treatment of the Armenians. ■

¹Letter, Arnold Toynbee to Lillian Etmekjian, March 16, 1966.

²Arnold J. Toynbee, *The Western Question in Greece and Turkey* (London: Constable and Company Ltd., 1922), p. 17.

³*Ibid.*, pp. 261-262.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 265.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶Arnold J. Toynbee, *Experiences* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 241-242.

⁷Arnold J. Toynbee, *Acquaintances* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 240.

⁸Arnold and Philip Toynbee, *Comparing Notes: A Dialogue Across a Generation* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1963), pp. 59-60.

⁹Toynbee, *Acquaintances*, p. 242.

¹⁰Toynbee, *The Western Question in Greece and Turkey*, p. 354.

¹¹Toynbee, *Acquaintances*, pp. 231-251.

¹²Letter, Arnold J Toynbee to Lillian Etmekjian, April 13, 1966.

¹³Toynbee, *The Western Question in Greece and Turkey*, p. 191.

¹⁴Arnold J. Toynbee and Kenneth P. Kirkwood, *Turkey* (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1962), p. 262.

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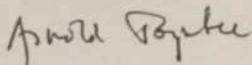
Dear Mrs Etmekjian,

I have had your letter of March 1. It is true that the British Government's motive in asking Lord Bryce to compile the blue book was propaganda. But Lord Bryce's motive in undertaking it, and mine in working on it for him, was to make the truth known, and the evidence was good: the witnesses were all American missionaries with no political axe to grind. So the Blue Book, together with Lepsius's book, does give a true account.

In 1915 the Russians were invading North-eastern Turkey, and it was reasonable for the Turkish Government to fear that the Armenian minority there might be a 'fifth column'. It would have been legitimate to deport them, as the U.S. Government deported the Japanese-Americans from the Pacific coast in World War II. But the deportations of the Armenians in 1915 were used - by the Turkish Government, not by the people - as an opportunity for treating the deportees in ways that were so inhuman that they were bound to cause wholesale mortality, as they did.

I hope this answers your questions.

Yours sincerely,



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13 April, 1966

Dear Miss Etnebjerg,

Your letter of April 4 was very interesting for me. The contrast between past and present Jewish attitudes is sad. The old-fashioned Jewish presence of two generations ago acted according to his natural human feelings, and these are better guides than nationalism or any other ideology.

Most human beings do wrong at times, in greater or lesser degree, I suppose. The only way back is to admit it and to be sorry for it, and nationalism is a hindrance to this, unfortunately.

Yours sincerely,

Arnold Forster

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