IN DEFENSE OF THE RIGHT AGAINST THE ARMENIAN REVOLUTIONARIES: THE EXAMPLE OF MUHAMMAD A.R. WEBB

Abstract

The United States of America has been one of the external factors in the emergence of Armenian uprisings in Anatolia. Since the beginning of the nineteen century, the US had tried to utilize two instruments for constituting its interest in the Ottoman territories: trade and missionary activities. Missionaries used the Armenian uprisings of the late 19th century as a propaganda machine to gather funding in the US and created an anti-Ottoman public opinion. All kinds of the chaos actions that were made by Armenian Committees were supported by all of the missionaries in the Ottoman Empire. This article argues that Muhammad Alexander Russell Webb (1846-1916) who was born in Hudson, New York, a white Muslim convert who challenged the prevailing anti-Islamic sentiments of his time and wrote two booklets about the Armenian and Turkish conflicts from a Muslim point of view in 1895. Therefore, he appointed the Honorary Turkish Consul in New York by Sultan Abdul Hamid II. The pro-Turkish booklets A Few Facts about Turkey under the Reign of Abdul Hamid II and The Armenian Troubles and Where the Responsibility Lies were published anonymously.

Keywords: The Armenian Troubles, Armenian Revolutionaries, the Sassoun Rebellion, American Missionaries, Mavroyeni Bey, Muhammad Webb.
ERMENI DEVRIMCİLERİNE KARŞI HAKLINİN SAVUNULMASI: MUHAMMED A.R. WEBB ÖRNEĞİ

Öz


Anahtar kelimeler: Ermeni Sorunu, Ermeni Devrimciler, Sasun İsyanı, Amerikalı Misyoneler, Mavroyeni Bey, Muhammed Webb.

Introduction

The so-called “Armenian Issue and Troubles” is generally thought of as having begun in the second half of the nineteenth century. One can easily point to the Russo-Turkish war (1877-78) and the Congress of Berlin (1878) which concluded the war as marking the emergence of this question as a problem in Europe. In fact, however, one must really go back to Russian activities in the East starting in the 1820’s to uncover its origins. Czarist Russia at the time was beginning a major new imperial expansion across Central Asia, in the process overrunning major Turkish Khanates in its push toward the borders of China and the Pacific Ocean. At the same time, Russian imperial ambitions turned southward as the Czars sought to gain control of Ottoman territory to extend their landlocked empire to the Mediterranean and the open seas. As an essential element of this ambition, Russia sought to undermine Ottoman strength from within by stirring the national ambitions of the Sultan’s subject Christian peoples, in particular those with whom it shared a common Orthodox religious heritage, the Greeks and the Slavs in the Balkans and the Armenians. At the same time that Russian agents fanned the fires of the Greek Revolution and stirred the beginnings of Pan-Slavism in Serbia and Bulgaria, others moved into the Caucasus and worked to secure Russian influence over the Catholicos of the Armenian Gregorian Church of Echmiadzin, to which most Ottoman Gregorians had strong emotional attachments. The Russians used the Catholicos’ jealousy of the Istanbul Patriarch to gain his support to such an extent that Catholicos Nerses Aratarakes himself led a force of 60,000 Armenians in support of the Russian army that fought Iran in the Caucasus in 1827-1828, in the process capturing most of Iran’s Caucasian possessions, including those areas where the Armenians lived. This new Russian presence along the borders of eastern Anatolia, combined with the support of
the Catholicos, enabled them to extend their influence among Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. Russian pressure in Istanbul finally got the Patriarch to add the Catholicos’ name to his daily prayers starting in 1844, furthering the latter’s ability to influence Ottoman Armenians in Russia’s favor in the years that followed. Most Ottoman Armenians were still too content with their lot in the Ottoman lands to be seriously influenced by this Russian propaganda, but those who immigrated to Russian Caucasus to join the Russian effort against Ottoman stability and power. The lands that they abandoned were turned over to Muslim refugees flooding into the Empire from persecution in Russia and Eastern Europe. This led to serious land disputes when many of the Armenian emigrants, or their descendants, unhappy with life in Russia, sought to return to the Ottoman Empire in the 1880’s and 1890’s.  

It had become clear to Armenians that the traditional leadership for Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, the Armenian Apostolic clergy, was not effective in dealing on their behalf with the Porte or wealthy Armenians in Istanbul. Social and economic conditions for provincial Armenians had, after all, worsened under the guidance of the church. Many Armenians, particularly those middle class and educated, living abroad in Russia and Europe, saw the need for something other than what stood for them in the capital and whose inability to effectively petition the Ottoman government on their behalf demanded a change in ideology, objectives, and tactics. More effective means of getting the attention not just of the Ottoman government, but of the Great Powers, was necessary and so their members believed secular revolutionary movements were required. The call to revolutionary methods was indicative of the political change of the day in Europe and Russia; secular ideologies were replacing religion in political expression and the impetus in thought behind the French Revolution, “liberte, egalite, fraternite,” had taken hold among populations within the Ottoman Empire.  

Armenian Revolutionaries and Churches  

It is necessary to examine specifically why Armenian revolutionaries (particularly Hunchaks) were established, what they hoped to accomplish and by what means they hoped to accomplish it, and who comprised these groups. What follows is a brief survey of the most important political groups of the Armenian revolutionary movement. Included are the circumstances surrounding their establishment, their goals and the means by which they hoped to achieve them, and a review of their activity. Of specific importance here is the manner in which the strategic objective shifted from one of self-protection of a local population which would probably entail violence, to a broader aim of Armenian independence, to advocacy in some instances of outright terrorism. Having discussed most of the social conditions that promoted the rise of revolutionaries, it is now necessary to proceed to the cultural and political circumstances surrounding their formation.  

It is important to note the different ways in which both the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Armenian Catholic Church influenced two groups: the Ottoman Armenian peasantry and the Armenian revolutionaries. Regarding the former, the Armenian Apostolic Church had historically incorporated lay and clergy alike in its direction. It also served a critical function as the primary Armenian political organization until the nineteenth century and served as a unify-

The revolutionaries, however, maintained an icy relationship with religious organizations, the Armenian Apostolic Church in particular, into the twentieth century. This hostility culminated in what Papazian calls the “Open, Close” dispute in which the Dashnaks attempted on several occasions to use churches to conduct political meetings which church leaders fervently opposed. When the church began to lose its authority during the Tanzimat, other sources of inspiration were sought. One area that provided such stimulus was the rapidly growing body of Armenian patriotic literature and its prolific authors. The earliest to write with revolutionary fervor was Khatchatur Abovian. Abovian drew his inspiration from his witness of war, his western education, and his political frustration. Having witnessed the decay of his Persian hometown as it was conquered by the Russians during the Russo-Persian War of 1826-1828, Abovian wrote about tyrannical abuse suffered by Armenians in the Erivan region. Having spent a significant amount of time studying in Eastern Europe, he returned to Tiflis where he met stiff resistance to the western concepts he attempted to spread. Frustrated to the point of depression, he disappeared under mysterious conditions having left a legacy that would serve to inspire those to revolutionary ways in his wake:

“He inspired and influenced Russian Armenian writers, glorified the revolutionists, and tried to incite his downtrodden countrymen to act. His patriotic dedication set the groundwork and became the inspiration of the political parties of the nineteenth century. The new spirit of the age, as exemplified in Khatchatur Abovian in Russian Armenia, was to become evident in Turkish Armenia by the mid-century.”

**The Hunchakian Revolutionary Party (The Hunchaks)**

The Hunchaks were a socialist party founded by Marxists who were Russian Armenians and who never actually lived within the borders of the Ottoman Empire. Formed in Geneva Switzerland in 1887, they were young persons, in their twenties, and were from well-to-do bourgeois families who were financially supporting them.

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5 Scholars don’t agree concerning the year of Abonian’s birth. There are various methods of calculating the date and these results in the following conjectures: 1804-1805, between 1806 and 1810.


8 In 1890 the organization was officially named the Hunchakian Revolutionary Party. The name was changed in 1905 to Hunchakian Social Democrat Party and then in 1909 to Social Democrat Hunchakian Party, the name it bears to the present day. Hunchakian has been rendered in various spellings: Hunchag, Hentchak, Hentchag, Hintchak, Hinchag.

They also had been influenced by Portugalian and his journal Armenia as well as a European education, and their commitment to the grave situation in Ottoman Armenia and the need to do something about it was strong.\textsuperscript{10} When it became clear that Portugalian was not going to take immediate action, the students in Geneva saw the need to establish their own party separate from the Armenakans. They were thus instrumental in forming the Hunchakian Revolutionary Party. The organization of the party in Istanbul consisted of the Board of Directors which was responsible for the direction of all party activity in Ottoman territory.\textsuperscript{11} While they had bases in the Ottoman Empire, they took their direction from general headquarters in Geneva.

There was significant Hunchak opposition among the Armenian population, specifically the Armenian bourgeoisie in Russia who contested the Hunchak program on anti-socialist grounds, as well as the Ottoman Armenian elite whose self preservation was in opposition to the Hunchak program.\textsuperscript{12} According to Louise Nalbandian, the Hunchak program stated that: “Agitation and terror were needed to “elevate the spirit” of the people. The people were also to be incited against their enemies and were to “profit” from retaliatory actions of these same enemies. Terror was to be used as a method of protecting the people and winning their confidence in the Hunchak program. The party aimed at terrorizing the Ottoman government, thus contributing toward lowering the prestige of that regime and working toward its complete disintegration. The government itself was not to be the only focus of terrorist tactics. The Hunchaks wanted to annihilate the most dangerous of the Armenian and Turkish individuals who were then working for the government as well as to destroy all spies and informers. To assist them in carrying out all of these terroristic acts, the party was to organize an exclusive branch specifically devoted to performing acts of terrorism. The most opportune time to institute the general rebellion for carrying out immediate objectives was when Turkey was engaged in war.”\textsuperscript{13}

The Hunchaks did gain the support of educated Armenians in Istanbul; however, they were mainly persons who held positions in foreign consulates and maritime companies. The Hunchaks opposed Russian territorial aims and insisted on a completely independent Armenia. They would reject any European proposals that were contrary to that supreme objective, and declared themselves ready to shed their “last drop of blood” for the cause. Opposition to Hunchak efforts was based on suspicions that Armenian blood was being traded for a dubious political goal.\textsuperscript{14} The near term goal was independence via revolutionary methods of the Ottoman Armenians; the long term goal was the establishment of a socialist state in its place. Hunchaks also listed injustices in the provinces that included unfair taxes, inequitable and insecure land rights, and a lack of effective political representation. A legislative body was to be popularly elected and no one would be prohibited from contesting an office. Further, it called for several other ‘modern’ rights: “Complete freedom of press, speech, conscience, assembly, organiza-

\textsuperscript{10} Ruben Khan-Azat, “Memories of an Armenian Revolutionary”, \textit{Hairenik Ansagir}, V, June 1927, 69.
\textsuperscript{11} Gegham Vardian, “The Demonstration of Bab Ali”, \textit{Hisnameak}, 133; and Heverhili Karon, “The Demonstration of Bab Ali”, \textit{Hunchak Taregirk}, 36-38.
\textsuperscript{12} Sahakian, “On the Existence of the S.D. Hunchakian Party in the Past and in the Present”, \textit{Eritassard Hayastan (Young Armenia)}, 1944.
\textsuperscript{13} Nalbandian, \textit{The Armenian Revolutionary Movement}, 110-111.
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Hunchak}, September 7, 1890.
tions, and electoral agitation” as well as “The person and home of every individual was to be inviolable.”

It is important to clarify what exactly the revolutionary parties adopted as their ideology. Though their origins were in the ideological leakage from Russia concerning populism and Marxism, both the Hunchaks and the Dashnaks related a socialist ideological basis in their programs. But as they further developed politically, nationalism became the dominant foundation for their activity. Bloxham points out that nationalism was not unique to the Armenians but that other ethnicities had similar aspirations and that nationalism, while addressing the injustices of a people, was not the only means available to address them. What basing revolutionary activity on nationalism did accomplish, as opposed to Russian revolutionaries who had based their movements on populism and Marxism, was to further heighten Ottoman fears that more of the state would be lost: “From the view of the palace, the significant characteristic of the parties was the agenda they shared with the previously successful Bulgarian revolutionaries, and the geographical location of the community it sought to ‘liberate’.” As distress of further territorial loss stiffened the resolve of the state, so too did the smaller revolutionary movement gain strength among Armenians.

The Sassoun Rebellion

Hunchaks were a major proponent in antagonizing the Kurds in and around Sassoun in response to the practice among Armenians of paying hafir, a rent for Kurdish protection. Kurdish attacks against the Armenian population when they eventually refused to pay and the corresponding Armenian armed response led to the decision by the Porte to send in Ottoman troops. The ensuing rebellion saw the Armenians hold Ottoman forces at bay for several weeks before finally succumbing to defeat and extensive Ottoman retaliation for Armenian insubordination. A Commission of Inquiry sponsored by Great Britain, France and Russia found that “the misery to which the Armenians were reduced could not be justified.” This resulted in the Great Powers urging Abdul Hamid II to implement dire changes in the social conditions in the provinces. The Hamidian government, however, saw it as an opportunity to do nothing about the conditions of Armenians in the provinces.

The Hunchaks considered the Sassoun Rebellion a great victory for their party as well as for the Armenian cause. They believed that because of their revolutionary activities, particularly in Sassoun, the European Powers at last had recognized the crying need for reforms in Armenia. On May 11, 1895, indeed, Great Britain, France, and Russia sent a memorandum to Sultan Abdul Hamid II urging reforms in the six Turkish Armenian provinces.

15 Nalbandian, The Armenian Revolutionary Movement, 109-112; and Hunchak, October-November 1888.
17 Bloxham, The Great Game of Genocide, 50.
18 Nalbandian, Armenian Revolutionary Movement, 121
19 Great Britain, Turkey No.1, 1895, Part I. Inclosure in No. 252. Report of the Consular Delegates attached to the Commission appointed to inquire into the Events at Sassoun, 173.
Mavroyeni Bey,21 Ottoman ambassador to Washington D.C., closely observed the Armenians’ organizational activities, and their publications in the United States, throughout his tenure at the embassy, and called officials in the US Department of State to take measures against the activities that were hostile to his country. For instance, he corresponded on preparations of a demonstration organized by the Armenians in the early 1893: “The newspapers22 published in New York in the Armenian language, by Armenians and for Armenians, most of whom were naturalized citizens of the United States, were always containing articles inciting the Armenians who live in Turkey to insurrection.”23 According to Mavroyeni Bey’s investigations, particularly Haik, published by the Hunchak organization was famous with its inciting the Ottoman Armenians to rise against the Ottoman state, and publishing articles provocating the Armenians against the Turks in the United States. Following is an excerpt from news that published in this magazine: “It is impossible to keep up military spirit by means of words and articles. We must begin by disciplining. The best way to arose [sic] a military spirit among young Armenians in foreign countries is to give them the military training which is the only means of preparing men for the field of battle. (....) We must lose, if necessary, one half of the nation for the sake of saving the other half.”24

Number of the Armenian associations that was realizing remarkable activities in order to gain supporter and sympathy was increasing day by day in those days. The association of The United Friends of Armenia was very active in propaganda. This association, like other ones, was easily ensuring sympathizers and supporters from churches, and making declarations provoking the Armenians to rise against the Ottoman State. According to a report published in Boston Daily Advertiser in March 22, 1894, a missioner called Dr. Blackwell was arguing in an address that struggle by word was not enough to ensure independence of Armenia; independence should be ensured through armed activities.25 Although it was reported that many in that meeting was not in favor of armed struggle, this report was interesting to demonstrate extents of the Armenian activities.

In those years, the Armenians, exploiting religious feelings, was calling Christians for help for those Armenians living in the Eastern regions of Turkey, and thereby they were trying to raise moral and material support for their organizations. Thanks to religious solidarity, number of the American Armenians’ associations and their activities against Turkey was increasing day by day. In every day, a new association was founding against Turkey. One of these associa-

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22 The Haik, Armenian, magazine that was publishing in New York in 15-days periods was among the leading of them.
23 National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), T-815/Roll 7: From Mavroyeni, Imperial Legation of Turkey to Mr. Gresham, the Secretary of State. Washington, October 26th, 1893; Kemal Çiçek, “The Turkish-Armenian Conflict in the United States and the Murder of Harry the Turk,” Review of Armenian Studies, 4/11-12, 2007, 83-106.
24 Haik, October 1st, 1893, No: 18, 280 et seq.
tions was Phil-Armenic Association that was established in Washington D.C. One of the leading features of this association was that all of its founders were leaders of churches. According to Mavroyeni Bey’s citation from Daily Star newspaper, founders of the association were including Rev. S.M. Newman, Rev. J.S. Hamlin, Rev. J.C. Easton, Rev. J.S. Childs, Rev. A.J. Graham, Justice Strong, Dr. Sheldon Jackson. Although it is declared that objective of the association is “to try to ensure security of life and property, and human dignity in Armenia,” it is a matter of fact that these associations played an important role to encourage sympathizers for anti-Turkish Armenian activities.26 Additionally, there were declarations supporting Armenians, released by the American churches in various times.27 Mavroyeni Bey recorded these declarations one by one; informed the officials in the US Department of State with these declarations and asked the US opinion.28 Activities of associations and organizations – together with leaders of churches – that were sympathizers of the Armenians were not limited with releasing declarations, they campaigned to collect fund for the Armenians as well.29

Cyrus Hamlin, director of Massachusetts Home Missionary Society, after a meeting with Nishan Garabedian (known as Rupen Hanazad) who was among the founders of the Hunchak Committee and living in Worcester, released a document warning Protestant missionaries and Armenians that the Hunchak members were propagating to raise supporter and sympathizer among the American Armenians and endangering survival of missionaries.30 Editor of Boston Daily Advertiser newspaper reacted to the Hunchak Party’s charging Cyrus Hamlin and missionaries of being indifferent to the Armenian cause, and warned the Armenians on dangers of armed struggle in one of his editorials.31 However, his statement of “the American missionaries are the most sincere friends of the Armenians” drove attention of Mavroyeni Bey, who complained on this issue to the US State Department.32

The Armenian terrorist groups continued to attack, assassinate and murder in 1890’s. But each event of such a nature was presented to world public opinion as one-sided “extermination”, the propagated figures running into thousands. For instance, the Armenian author H. Pastermadjian writes that 3,500 Armenians were killed in the Sassoun rebellion of 1894.33 The Rev. A. W. William, in association with an Armenian writer, quotes a larger figure-6000.34 The Protestant missionary Edwin Bliss states that the Armenian losses were “at least 6,000”.35 However, the first combined report of the foreign consuls establishes a much lower figure, i.e., 265–

26 NARA T-815 Roll 7. General No: 7531. Special No: 5: From Mavroyeni, the Imperial Legation of Turkey to the Secretary of State. February 1, 1895.
27 For a review of Mavroyeni’s responses to these declarations see, Şimşir, “Mavroyeni Bey”, 49-54.
28 NARA T-815 Roll 7: From Mavroyeni, the Imperial Legation of Turkey to the Secretary of State. October 15, 1895.
29 NARA, T-815/Roll 7: From Mavroyeni, Imperial Legation of Turkey to R. Olney, the Secretary of State. Washington, November 30, 1895; Çiçek., “The Turkish-Armenian Conflict in the United States,” 90-91.
30 The Congregationalist, December 23, 1894. He stand up for similar views in his article titled “A Dangerous Movement among the Armenians” which was published in the same magazine dated December 28, 1893. For text see Şimşir, “Mavroyeni Bey,” 50.
31 Boston Daily Advertiser, April 13, 1894.
34 A.W. William and M.S. Gabrielian, Bleeding Armenia, New York, 1896, 331.
with no mention of the Turkish losses. The Ottoman authorities tried both Armenians and Turks for defying the law. Frequently, the Sultan pardoned the convicted Armenians. This was the case even when a group of Armenians planned to assassinate him on 21 July 1905.

During the course of the nineteenth century Protestant missionaries had established stations in a large number of Anatolian towns. The most active group was sponsored by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), which by the beginning of the twentieth century had placed nearly 145 missionaries and 800 native workers managing numerous churches, hospitals, and schools. Other American Protestant denominations sponsoring missions were the Presbyterian Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, and the American Baptist Missionary Union.

In a publication sponsored by the Assembly of Turkish American Associations, Justin and Carolyn McCarthy have called the American missionaries prejudiced and biased. “Missionary accounts of the troubles of the 1890s or of World War I,” they write, “did not mention the part of the Armenian revolutionaries or the massacres of Muslims…. From their accounts one would think that all was well for the Muslims and only the Armenians had troubles.” This appraisal has some merit but is also somewhat overdrawn. The reports of the missionaries did not ignore the suffering of the Muslim population. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the strong commitment of the missionaries to the Armenian cause made many of their writings less than objective and often led them to include half-truths. In their zeal to help the Armenians they many times reported as facts events that they could not possibly have observed in person. Mary L. Graffam, principal of the girls’ high school at Sivas, was one of the few missionaries who truthfully insisted that she had written “only what I have seen and know to be true.” Hence, for example, when speaking of the fate of Armenian men who had been taken from a convoy she was accompanying, she acknowledged that the situation was unclear and constituted “a profound mystery. I have talked with many Turks, and I cannot make up my mind what to believe.”

Supporting Muhammad Webb’s Mission by Ottoman Empire

Muhammad Webb set about establishing his mission in Manhattan and immediately attracting front-page headlines in the New York Times and other American newspapers. Webb’s movement lasted from 1893 until early 1896. He worked diligently, speaking extensively at private parlor gatherings—his preferred means of discourse—and delivering public lectures in a

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Webb’s reception in America was generally positive. Subscriptions and letters of support came from all parts of the country. Webb’s chief obstacle, however, was inadequate financial patronage. Webb was probably overconfident in his assessment that his mission could be financially self-sufficient in five years, and his Indian supporters were unable to maintain their commitments for more than a few months. It became clear to Webb toward the end of 1893 that he could not depend upon his Indian patrons. He turned to the Ottoman embassy in Washington to keep the mission alive. He visited the Ottoman ambassador, Mavroyeni Bey, in Washington, forged a lasting friendship with him, and earnestly implored him for Ottoman support to keep the mission alive. Mavroyeni Bey’s correspondence with Istanbul reflects the esteem he felt for Webb and the urgency of the aid he requested. Turkish aid did finally come.42 He asserted that if they would only extend adequate financial support, he would continue to devote himself to the mission full time. Mavroyeni interpreted Webb’s complaint as implying that the sultan, as “the protector of Islam,” should come to Webb’s aid, and Mavroyeni urged the Sultan to do so.43 Webb has gotten by Ottoman help for his publications in 1894, and it is likely that they helped finance the Moslem World and Voice of Islam either wholly or in part. The Ottoman connection is borne out by the paper’s enthusiasm for Turkish concerns. In contrast to the Moslem World, there are several acclamations of Sultan Abdul Hamid II and defense of the Turks on the Armenian question.

The Turkish pamphlets exemplify Webb’s Victorian faith in the printed word and its potential to shift public perceptions. The same confidence is reflected in the American Islamic Propaganda as a whole, from its official name to the content it produced. Webb clearly believed that his newspapers and books had the potential to sway public opinion about Islam. As we have seen, though, he never lost sight of the effectiveness of direct personal relations in shifting perceptions, especially in the form of parlor talks and public lectures.

Muhammad Webb constantly has emphasized in his newspaper on Armenian troubles and Church-Christian missionaries, “No lover of truth and fair-play, who has even a faint suspicion of the wicked misrepresentations of Turkey and her sovereign that have been circulated for years by Armenian conspirators and bigoted, intolerant Church-Christian missionaries, can read the book without wondering how the Sublime Porte could have been so grossly maligned by American newspapers and Church-Christians without a single protest from honest men and women… The broad tolerance and liberality displayed by His Imperial Majesty toward the Church-Christians who invade the country and, not infrequently, are insolent, presumptuous and insulting to those who do not follow their religion, shows what a noble spirit of forbearance he must possess. The book also deals fully and fairly with the Armenian agitation and justly arraigns fanatical Church-Christian missionaries for their active efforts to create trouble in the Turkish domain. “Let American missionaries and their Board,” writes the author, “realize that it is not their duty and mission to help in securing the freedom and independence of any nationality in Turkey or to countenance secret societies, or to accuse the Turkish government of massa-

At the same time, Webb was hardly an unwilling participant. He seems clearly to have believed in what he was doing by editing the pamphlets, and probably never regretted having done so. He never disavowed the Turks and proudly accepted the honors Sultan Abdul Hamid II bestowed upon him in 1901. Webb’s movement had never been totally apolitical and often went on record in support of Muslim interests abroad against the colonial aspirations of Western powers. It is valid, however, to question the extent to which the politicization of Webb’s movement under the aegis of Sultan Abdul Hamid II and the Ottoman cause might have ultimately have caused Webb to abandon his Islamic mission. Webb apparently terminated his American Moslem Brotherhood work immediately after the second pamphlet’s appearance, which may not have been merely a matter of coincidence. Webb and his family endured financial hardship for at least the last two years of the mission, and it seems unlikely that continued financial deprivation alone can account for Webb’s abrupt termination of his movement early in 1896, when his journal continued to speak of his enthusiasm for his mission. The political turn that the American Moslem Brotherhood had taken in support of Ottoman policy, however, was not consistent with Webb’s original vision. It is plausible that Webb ultimately became as disillusioned with his Turkish patrons has he had been, years before, with his Indian sponsors. In that light, the movement ceased to merit in Webb’s eyes or those of his family the immense sacrifices they had been willing to make until that time. 

In 1893 the blame for minimal Muslim participation in the parliament was pinned on the Sultan Abdul Hamid II. His great interest in the exposition contrasted sharply with his reaction to the parliament. Barrows wrote, “It was with little surprise that the Chairman [Charles Bonney] learned how decided was the opposition of the Sultan of Turkey to the proposed Conference, an opposition very embarrassing to the leaders of the Greek and Armenian Churches in the Turkish Empire.” Richard Seager suggests that Abdul Hamid’s antagonism toward the Parliament may explain the absence of scholarly, world-class Muslim delegates like Ameer Ali. The exact nature of the sultan’s opposition to the Parliament is unclear. The Armenian question and official Turkish convictions that American missionaries were behind the trouble were undoubtedly major factors. It is doubtful that he opposed the parliament out of purely ex-

44 The Moslem World and Voice of Islam, May 1895, 3-4; and Abd-Allah, A Muslim in Victorian America, 206.
45 Abd-Allah, A Muslim in Victorian America, 205.
clusivest concerns. His nation’s robust participation in the Chicago World’s Fair demonstrated his concern that Islam be represented there in the best of lights. Moreover, there were at the exposition’s secondary committees and even the parliament a number of European women and Ottoman Christians of Armenian and other backgrounds who unequivocally presented pro-Ottoman and pro-Islamic points of view.48

Herant Mesrob Kiretchijian, a young Ottoman delegate of Armenian Christian stock, proudly began his address to the parliament by comparing Chicago to his native Constantinople (Istanbul) and making a positive allusion to Webb’s mission: “Again, it is a great honor to stand before any religious body in the world and represent the greatest religious city of the world—Constantinople. We have had there a religious parliament for four hundred years, and we have survived it. (Laughter) You are certainly like Constantinople today, when you have a minaret in the Midway Plaisance and actually the gospel of Mohammed has begun to be preached to you. (Laughter) I wish to assure you that it is not going to stop, and I believe you will be especially interested in the young men of the Orient because you may look upon them as the outcome after four hundred years, such as you, very likely, will become in the future. (Laughter and applause)”49

Herant Kiretchijian spoke the evening following Webb’s presentation. He was a graduate of Robert College, where Washburn was the president. Kiretchijian was “engaged in journalism and mercantile work” and served as the treasurer for Turkey’s Protestant National Council. With an Ottoman fez and tassel, clean-shaven cheeks, a full Oriental moustache turned up at the ends, and a Western-cut suit and tie, Kiretchijian looked the part of the new reform-minded generation of Young Ottomans, whom he was proud to represent.50 Humorous, upbeat, and filled with favorable references to Islam, his address, “A Voice from the Young Men of the Orient,” invoked applause and laughter. The upcoming generation of Ottomans, he asserted, took abiding interest in the parliament and hoped it would provide the foundation for a true “brotherhood of man.”51

A Few Facts about Turkey under the Reign of Abdul Hamid II

The pro-Turkish booklets A Few Facts about Turkey under the Reign of Abdul Hamid II and The Armenian Troubles and Where the Responsibility Lies were published anonymously. Although they were Webb’s handiwork, neither publication was an original composition by Webb; rather, both were editorial compilations of materials Webb selected from various sources.52 Webb gives a striking picture of the changes wrought in the Turkish Empire as ruled by its present sovereign. He shows that considerable advance and improvement have been made in material things, but a careful reading of the pamphlet does not reveal any change of heart or improvement in moral character among the Turks. Despite the outward gloss of prosperity, there

48 Abd-Allah, A Muslim in Victorian America, 221.
52 A Few Facts is sixty-seven pages in length, making it comparable in size to Islam in America. The Armenian Troubles is thirty-five pages long. A Few Facts was ascribed to an “American Observer,” and The Armenian Troubles was attributed to a “Correspondent.”
seems to be no sign of better government. He who would obtain a friendly view of the actual situation in the Turkish Empire should read this very strong plea of one who is an apologist for the Turks. The last eleven pages are taken up with a discussion of the Armenian outrages, the author seeking vainly to break the force of the accumulating testimony, which tends so strongly to condemn the government of the Sultan. To our mind the pamphlet contains no convincing argument to prove that the Turks really desire to govern justly.  

They were unquestioning in their support of the Turks and relentless in their condemnation of the Armenians, especially American missionaries and naturalized Armenian Americans whom Webb portrayed as principal fomenters of the trouble. Anonymity was obviously aimed at concealing Webb’s direct involvement in the works. It gave the books greater credibility and served to conceal Webb’s Ottoman support (a matter the Ottoman embassy preferred to keep clandestine) since the pamphlets clearly served Turkish interests. Webb liked the Turks and was always inclined toward them. In return, he enjoyed their favor, and the pro-Turkish pamphlets undoubtedly increased his official good standing with the Ottoman government and were probably a major reason for his appointment as Honorary Turkish Consul-General to New York in 1901 and official trip to Turkey, where he was decorated and given the honorary title Bey.  

A Few Facts about Turkey was published in early 1895, since Webb first advertised it in the May issue of the Moslem World and Voice of Islam. Like its companion piece, The Armenian Troubles appeared in early 1896 and addressed the mounting Armenian crisis in the Ottoman Empire. Allegations of Turkish massacres, some of which Webb acknowledged in the second pamphlet, had become the burning issue of the day, similar in magnitude to the Arab-Israeli crisis now. Nothing Webb did under the auspices of the American Islamic Propaganda raises thornier questions than the Armenian pamphlets, given the enormity of the Armenian question and the allegations of genocide later associated with it. Webb’s overtly partisan endorsement of the official Turkish line and his equally strong prejudice against the Armenians, including the dissemination of anti-Armenian racist slurs, are immeasurably graver than the racist epithets in his diary.  

Webb gave A Few Facts about Turkey good marks, pronouncing it “probably the most important and interesting work on Turkish affairs, given to English readers in the present century.” Given the fact that it is a later pamphlet and new information had come to light, the language of the second pamphlet differed somewhat from A Few Facts about Turkey, which hesitated to acknowledge that strife had broken out: “Evidently there have been troubles at Sassoun, which will be investigated, the firm wish of the Sultan being to treat all his subjects with justice, and to punish, according to law, all guilty parties. But it is, we think, interesting to know, first, what actually happened out there; and, second, who were the real aggressors.”

54 Abd-Allah, *A Muslim in Victorian America*, 203.

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The Armenian Troubles and Where the Responsibility Lies

The Armenian Troubles and Where the Responsibility Lies is the title of a booklet by A Correspondent (Muhammad Webb) of a New York newspaper, who apparently reproduced in 1895 in pamphlet form the five letters he had written in and sent from Istanbul, where impartial and correct information was accessible. Muhammad Webb, in republishing these letters, together further evidence, has only one wish in view, and that is to impart to his readers a true and thorough knowledge of the present Armenian troubles. He believes that the whole atmosphere on this subject has been polluted with falsehoods and exaggerations, and trusts that the present short and condensed pamphlet helps in bringing some light on a question so often misrepresented. Webb announced publication of The Armenian Troubles in January 1896 and contended that “in a rank and evidently thoughtful manner, it lays bare the plots of the Armenian revolutionists and shows the animus of the agitation against Turkey.”

He promised to deliver it free of charge, postage included, to anyone who desired a copy, a clear indication, given Webb’s poverty at the time, that much if not all of his budget was coming from the Turks. The Open Court gave a brief positive comment, “Persons desirous of studying the Armenian question from a Turkish standpoint will find the same ably represented by a pamphlet called The Armenian Troubles and Where the Responsibility Lies, by Muhammad Alexander Russell Webb, Ulster Park, Ulster County, New York, Mr. Webb is an American proselyte to Mohammadanism.” Webb’s work for Abdul Hamid II won him honors from the Ottoman Empire, but it also resulted in editorials that either downplayed the importance of his work or called it lies and propaganda.

The Armenian Troubles focused on the severest period of the 1890s crisis, when certain allegations of Turkish atrocities were admitted to be fact. The pamphlet portrayed the crisis as purely political, directing the brunt of its argument against the Armenian revolutionary committees, but also playing on contemporary racial bias by ranking the Turks over the Armenians. The pamphlet began with the frank admission that “troubles” existed: “The Turkish Government has never denied that serious disturbances have taken place at the district of Sassoun. What it has denied is the accusation that there was a premeditated massacre; and yet this is the absurd basis upon which is built the whole Armenian agitation, both in America and Europe… Turkey does not make any religious distinctions between her subjects is shown by the fact that

63 Muhammed al-Ahari, The Armenian Troubles and the Ottoman Empire, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011, 7-8. For praise of the Sultan, see The Moslem World and Voice of Islam, May 1895: 2; June 1895: 3; December 1895: 1, 4; February 1896: 1. The Armenian question did appear in the Moslem World (see “A Tribute to Islam,” The Moslem World, November 1893, 7) but was conspicuous throughout The Moslem World and Voice of Islam. See The Moslem World and Voice of Islam, February 1895, 3; March 1895, 2; April 1895, 1; December 1895, 2; and January 1896, 1.
64 Abd-Allah, A Muslim in Victorian America, 208.
Armenians, who, as a race, are certainly much inferior to the Turks, occupy very high positions in Turkey.\textsuperscript{65}

The Armenian Troubles contended that the pro-Armenian positions being fostered in the United States were, in reality, “erroneous and even anti-American,”\textsuperscript{66} because they bolstered the colonial interests of other states, most notably Great Britain. It faulted the American press for its “lack of attention to proper proof for accusations,” compounded by the “boldness and fanaticism of not a few American clergymen, who try to impart a religious and fanatical tendency to a question that is, and ought to remain, a political one.\textsuperscript{67}

On the other hand, Webb believed that the whole atmosphere on the Sassoun events of 1894 has been “polluted with falsehoods and exaggerations.” He states that the disturbances were “brought about by the Armenian revolutionary committees.” He quotes the Rev. Cyrus Hamlin’s article in the Congregationalist of 23 December 1893: “An Armenian revolutionary party is causing great evil and suffering to the missionary work and to the whole Christian population of certain parts of the Turkish Empire. It is a secret organization, and is managed with a skill in deceit which is known only in the East… These Hunchaguist bands, organized all over the empire, will watch their opportunities to kill Turks and Kurds, set fire to their villages, and then make their escape into the mountains. The enraged Moslems will then rise and fall upon the defenseless Armenians and slaughter them with such barbarities that Russia will enter, in the name of humanity and Christian civilization, and take possession… This Hunchaguist revolutionary party is of Russian origin; Russian gold and craft govern it.”\textsuperscript{68}

Webb quotes the Associated Press correspondent who says that the Armenian conspirators murdered the Rev. Edward Riggs and two other American missionaries and fastened the blame on the Turks. As to the story that “which has been thrilling the world for some time past, of the wife of the Armenian leader Grego, who, leather than suffer dishonor at the hands of her Turkish persecutors, threw herself, with her child in her arms, into an abyss, and was followed by other women until the ravine was filled with corpses, has been exploded, as many persons predicted it would be, at the time it was sprung upon the public. It has been discovered that the horrible narrative is a reproduction, with additions and embellishments to suit the occasion, of an old tale told in poetry by Mrs. Hemans years ago, under the title of ‘The Suliote Mother.’”\textsuperscript{69}

Also he claimed that Armenians can’t establish a country in Turkish territory, “In the present day, Armenians are scattered about all over Asiatic Turkey, and they constitute in any Turkish province the minority of the population, which fact alone makes the use of the word ‘Armenia’ simply preposterous. There may be an Armenia out of Turkey, but surely there is no Armenia in Turkey. There are Armenians there, and that is enough…. To state, therefore, that there is an Armenia in Turkey is to make an erroneous statement. But erroneous statements on this Armenian question are so many that to contradict them all would be almost impossibility.

\textsuperscript{65} Webb, \textit{The Armenian Troubles}, 5. Sassoun (Sasun) is in the Kurdish region of Turkey’s Eastern Taurus Mountains not far from Lake Van. It had a large Armenian population and was at the center of the ethnic troubles of 1895–1896.

\textsuperscript{66} Webb, \textit{The Armenian Troubles}, 10.

\textsuperscript{67} Webb, \textit{The Armenian Troubles}, 5; Abd-Allah, \textit{A Muslim in Victorian America}, 208.

\textsuperscript{68} Cyrus Hamlin, \textit{The Congregationalist}, December 23, 1893.

\textsuperscript{69} Webb, \textit{The Armenian Troubles}, 10.
All these false statements originate from the Armenians themselves, whose veracity is an unknown quantity.”

Similarly, in A Few Facts about Turkey, Webb argued that American missionaries should devote all their energies and good intentions on American Indians or on American negroes, “According to a French saying-, we are only betrayed by our friends. Let American missionaries and their Board realize that it is not their duty and mission to help in ‘securing the freedom and independence’ of any nationality in Turkey, or to countenance secret societies, or to accuse before the world the Turkish Government of massacres that have not and cannot have any existence in reality. Their duty is simple enough. It consists in confining their policy and utterances to the strict observance of the laws of the country that gives them hospitality. While, therefore, it is to be wondered why American missionaries, instead of devoting all their energies and good intentions on American Indians or on American negroes, choose to go to Turkey to educate in a certain fashion, and to convert, if possible, Christian Armenians to Protestantism… The United States would certainly not allow such a guilty manifestation on the part of any foreign missionaries that might come here to educate and convert our Indians, for example, especially if the latter were implicated, as Armenians acknowledge themselves to be, in revolutionary schemes. What is right for the United States, why should it not be right for Turkey? The Armenian agitation, based on falsehoods and exaggerations, and also on a pre-arranged plan, as described by Rev. Cyrus Hamlin himself, has been supported and intensified by many people for the only reason that the Armenians are Christians, which fact tends to prove that mere fanaticism animates Turkey’s detractors. If this were not the case, the irresponsible and wild allegations of revolutionary Armenians would never have been believed and commented upon by people who call themselves impartial, without corresponding and convincing proofs. Turkey, therefore, sees now that she cannot implicitly rely on impartiality and on justice.”

Finally, the pamphlet impugned the American record on minorities, which made its position on Armenian rights appear bigoted. Webb cited “a remarkable letter published by Mrs. S.L. Baldwin, in the New York Tribune,” which called to mind the massacre of Chinese immigrants within the United States working for the Union Pacific Railroad in 1885: “Let us be correct and fair in our records. There is cause for us Americans not to be too free with our exhortations, epithets, and threats. The Chinese are not sinners above all others…. I had the triple official documents—Chinese, United States, and Union Pacific Railroad—from which to make my painful, reliable record. In that massacre, which does distinguish 1885 in our history, more Chinese were killed, shot down, burned alive, in one awful hour, that day in September at Rock Spring, Wyoming, and than were English and Americans killed in China in twenty-five years. For the Ku-Chengou outrage men will be arrested and executed, officers will be removed and degraded, and all destroyed property will be made good. For the Rock Springs massacre of fifty perfectly innocent people—so all authorities, our own Messrs. Cleveland and Bayard among them, declared—up to this date of August 6, 1895. No one had been arrested or punished in Wyoming for the massacre of the Chinese.”

There is great similarity between A Few Facts about Turkey and the somewhat later Armenian Troubles pamphlet. Both works focused on the alleged role of recently naturalized Armenian Americans in the crisis, and the latter booklet repeated extensive portions of the former. The Moslem World and Voice of Islam became an outlet for the expression of similar sentiment by others. In December 1895 and in February 1896, Webb published in his paper two lengthy poems by Cora Wilburn of Marchfield Hills, Massachusetts — “In Defence of the Right” and “To His Imperial Majesty, Sultan Abdul Hamid II”—that were written especially for the journal and replete with references to matters mentioned in the pamphlets, such as Abdul Hamid II’s protection of Jews in the face of Europe’s indifference toward them. He observed that American missionaries would never accept foreign involvement “to educate and convert our Indians, for example,” although they regarded it as their right to intervene in Turkey.

The statement was made above that American missionaries side, on the whole, with Armenian revolutionists against Turkey. This statement is based on the written declarations made lately by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, who, instead of advising the Armenians to be law-abiding subjects of the Sultan, and to preserve a dignified silence until the result of the investigation about the Sassoun troubles is made known, considered more to the point to affirm the existence of cold-blooded massacres, when that Board ought to have known that no cold-blooded massacres of any kind are countenanced by the Turkish government.

Turkish influence is unmistakable in the workings of Muhammad Webb during 1895 and 1896. There is no doubt that the pro-Ottoman pamphlets reflect the depth that influence had reached and demonstrate the degree to which Webb’s Turkish patrons were willing to exploit him and his movement for political gain, while relegating the religious dimension of his undertaking to a much lower status. The Armenian pamphlets diverted Webb’s American Islamic Propaganda from its original goal and converted the American Propaganda into an exercise in propaganda in the twentieth-century sense of the word.

Conclusion

Armenians constituted one of the oldest and most important Christian minorities in the Ottoman Empire, which, for centuries, ruled all Armenian regions in Anatolia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. During these centuries, the Armenians were well-integrated into the Ottoman Empire, enjoyed extensive liberties, and were generally regarded as Turkey’s most loyal Christian subjects. This state of affairs changed radically in the nineteenth century. In 1828, major Russian victories forced the Ottomans to cede large parts of Eastern Armenia to the Russian Empire. As the Russians, British, French, and Austro-Hungarian Hapsburgs vied for influence in Turkish realms, the substantial Armenian populations that remained within the Ottoman

heartlands were converted into a political fulcrum for direct leverage in internal Turkish affairs. Christian missionaries also became deeply entangled in the controversy. From the Turkish standpoint, the Armenian question was unmistakably political. Sanctimonious Western demands for Armenian self-determination were seen as perilous attempts to destabilize the Ottoman Empire, already known as “the sick man of Europe.” Armenian insurgency movements employed terrorist tactics, took many innocent Muslim lives, and were, to a considerable extent, instigated and backed by foreign interests. From the Turkish standpoint, defeating the Armenian insurgency was a vital matter of national security. The period from 1895 till 1896, covered in the pamphlets, was one of the earliest episodes of the ever evolving crisis, and the Turkish response provoked allegations of repression and massacre. The worst, however, was yet to come, and it is the massacres that allegedly took place in 1915 during World War I that have been called the first genocide of the modern age. 

What became of the Turkish Armenians in the two decades between 1895 and 1915 and the role of Turkish authorities in the matter remain as hotly contested today as ever. Historians, prominent people around the world, Armenians, and many Turks now insist that relevant sections of the Ottoman Archives and other historical resources be opened to the public so that the truth can finally be verified. The Armenian issue remains a sensitive topic among Armenians and in Turkey, especially among nationalists, to the extent that prominent Turkish writers and intellectuals who have dared to broach the issue honestly have been imprisoned, turning the Armenian question into a matter of free speech as well as a long-neglected problem of human rights.

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