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British Travelers and the Armenian Question During the First Half of the 19th Century

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Abstract

Marshaling an array of travelogues from British adventurers who visited the Russian-Ottoman-Persian borderlands during the first half of the 19th century, it is clear that the Armenian Question arose in the British consciousness earlier than previously thought. Influenced by their origins and the political circumstances of the countries through which they journeyed, British travelers highlighted in their narratives the political status of the Armenians and the trends affecting them throughout the borderlands. Ethnoreligious and socioeconomic strife between Armenians and other various groups remained a persistent theme that linked the disparate accounts and authors. Frequently overlooking core religious, cultural, political, and social factors and identities that distinguished the Turks, Persians, and Kurds, British travelers issued essentialized explanations for Armenian struggles that highlighted their status as a religious minority surrounded by ostensibly hostile majorities. Well before the outbreak of the Crimean War, British adventurers contextualized Armenian misery within the British-Russian geopolitical rivalry. Thus, early British adventurers established the cultural and political groundwork for the more famous discussions of the Armenian Question during the last decades of the 1800s.

Keywords: Armenia; Ottoman; Russia; Persia; Britain; empire; travelogue; Orientalism

Introduction

Lord Byron's verdict from 1817 that "it would be difficult, perhaps, to find the annals of a nation less stained with crimes than those of the Armenians, whose virtues have been those of peace, and their vices those of compulsion," suggests that the plight of the stateless Armenians during this era did not escape the attention of British elites (cited in Walker 1997, 33). Indeed, the observations European adventurers made of Armenians living in the Ottoman-Persian-Russian borderlands reveal the complexities of what came to be known as the Armenian Question. This "question"—the socio-politically precarious life of Armenians in the Ottoman empire, and their relationships with neighbors and the government—demands a broad interpretation of its chronological and thematic forms.

Britons of various vocations and ambitions crisscrossed "the East" after the Napoleonic Wars. Influenced by their origins and the political circumstances of the countries through which they journeyed, travelers during the first half of the 19th century highlighted in their narratives the political status of Armenians and the trends affecting them throughout the borderlands. British observers focused primarily on two themes. First, visitors emphasized Western Armenians' strong affinities with Russia and occasionally portrayed Ottoman Armenians as an inherently subversive national element. Second, Britons underscored the socially and politically insecure status of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire and Persia, stressing the abuses endured by various Armenian communities at the hands of authorities and neighbors.

Indeed, ethnoreligious and socioeconomic strife between the Armenians and various other groups remained a persistent theme that linked disparate accounts and authors. Frequently overlooking core religious, cultural, political, and social factors and identities that distinguished the Turks, Persians, and Kurds, British travelers issued essentialized explanations for Armenian struggles that highlighted their status as a religious minority surrounded by ostensibly hostile majorities. With a few notable exceptions, most British travelers hardly accounted for the distinct sociopolitical ramifications of Persian, Ottoman, and Kurdish actions on distant and different Armenian communities.

Decades of scholarship have challenged Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979) by pointing out that generalizing the views of all Westerners toward the East is tantamount to "Occidentalizing" the West (Warraq 2007, Varisco 2007). However, recent research shows that while undeniable nuances and sharp contrasts often distinguished various Westerners' representations of the "Islamic Orient" in the 19th century, certain essential, culturally defined conclusions about the East persisted (Laisram 2014). These views rarely were as rigid, uniform, and permanent as Said suggests, but they set the outlines of most British visitors' expectations and conclusions.

British adventurers' descriptions of Armenian-Kurdish friction illustrate their tendencies to generalize well. The situational, sociopolitical maneuvering of the Kurds on the Ottoman-Persian border was analogous to the conditional aims and acts of Armenians. While the Kurds generally shared the Islamic faith of their Ottoman masters, their aspirations for political and cultural autonomy often produced as many or more conflicts with Turkish authorities as those of the Armenians. Religion was perhaps the key marker of collective identity and political loyalty in the Ottoman-Persian-Russian borderlands, but in the case of the Kurds, as Michael Eppel (2016, 17) has shown, heterogeneity and decentralization were both an advantage and a weakness: "the physical remoteness of Kurdistan and the weak control exerted by the Muslim state helped isolated communities maintain local and pre-Islamic traditions and beliefs, both Zoroastrian and Christian. Heterodox sects developed, some including elements from Shi'ite Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, paganism, and Judaism." By the early 1800s, Kurds strove to capitalize on the feuding between the mainly Sunni Ottomans and the mainly Shi'ite Persians and also prevent the two imperial rivals from sowing intra-communal discord among Kurdish emirs (Eppel 2016, 35). During the Russian-Ottoman War of 1828–1829, "the Kurds fighting on the Russian side were more prominent during that war than in any other Russian-Ottoman war" (Eppel 2016, 47). Thus, the Kurds manifested multiple religious and political allegiances, complicating narratives of Muslim-Christian conflict rooted in religion alone.

The British encounter with the Armenian Question has been documented thoroughly. Usually focused on the political approaches of senior statesmen such as Benjamin Disraeli and William Gladstone, scholars have emphasized London's geopolitical and humanitarian strategies of intervention regarding the sultan's Armenian subjects during the last three decades of the 19th century and the early 20th century. Writing in the 1970s, Robert Zeidner (1976) took at face value the assertion of a contemporary Turkish historian that "the Armenian Question did not exist before the ascension of Abdul Hamid II (1876)." In describing the genesis of Armenian-Ottoman friction, Zeidner points to the Hamidiyen massacres of 1894 as "the first great agony of the Armenian Question" (466). Akaby Nassibian's (1984) *Britain and the Armenian Question, 1915–1923* examines several prominent British Armenophiles, including James Bryce, Noel and Harold Buxton, Emily Robinson, and Aneurin Williams, from the Congress of Berlin to the post-genocide era. Nassibian persuasively indicts British diplomats and statesmen for failing to resolve the Armenian Question, yet her narrative overlooks the travel narratives of British adventurers from the first half of the 19th century. Jeremy Salt (1990, 308–328) sees the importance of travelogues to British discourse on the Armenian Question, making generous use of several adventurers' writings, but like his predecessors limits his analysis to the twilight of the 19th century. Manoug Somakian (1995) addresses conflicting British and Russian policies for

alleviating the difficulties of Ottoman Armenians, starting his narrative with the Hamidiyen massacres of 1894.

More recent examinations of British perceptions of the Armenian Question and Armenians under Ottoman and Persian rule have followed similar chronological patterns, limiting their scopes to the post-Berlin and Bulgaria period. Jo Laycock's (2009) masterful *Imagining Armenia* begins in the 1870s, providing perhaps the most thorough exploration of how the British public viewed Armenians progressively as revolutionaries, as victims of massacres, and finally as victims of genocide. Yet, the British oscillation between activist humanitarianism and apathy toward the obscure nation, so well described by Laycock, arose in the travel writings of British adventurers in the early 1800s, before it gained notoriety in British newspapers and parliamentary debates of the late 19th century. Most recently, Oded Steinberg (2015, 14) points to the ardent Armenophile and statesman James Bryce, who authored a travelogue of Western Armenia in 1876, as someone who "rather uniquely, had already identified the tragic potential of the Armenian Question by the 1870s." This essay suggests that Bryce's predecessors from the first half of the 19th century recognized the plight of the Ottoman and Persian-ruled Armenians in ways later expanded by Bryce and his contemporaries.

The British educated public, through the writings of prominent travelers, encountered the Armenian Question earlier than has often been suggested. In the first decades of the 19th century, British adventurers observed the ethnonational tensions between Armenians, Turks, Persians, and Kurds, and also highlighted the Armenian political proclivity toward Russia. Less detailed or dramatic than the more famous accounts from the latter half of the 19th century, including the writings of the Buxton brothers and H. F. B. Lynch, these works provided some of the first 19th-century assessments of the Armenian experience in the East.

In quantity and impact, the British observations of the Armenian Question from the late 19th century overshadow their predecessors from the earlier decades. It is less often remarked, however, that British intellectuals documented this issue in the late-Georgian and early-Victorian eras. Travelers in the late 1800s expressed more interest in the Armenian Question because the Eastern Question had gained prominence in Western public and political discourse, drawing both concern and resources from the inner chambers of European capitals. From London to Moscow, popular books and government memorandums clamored about Ottoman atrocities against Armenians (MacColl 1896; *Bratskaia pomoshch' postradavshim v Turtsii Armianam* 1897).

More broadly, Armenians arose as common characters in European travelogues in the 17th century (Vartoogian 1974). Enlightenment-era Europeans constructed an image of Armenians as regional merchants and long-distance traders, establishing a stereotype that remained in vogue throughout the 19th century. When Immanuel Kant wrote that "among the Armenians . . . there rules a certain commercial spirit of a peculiar sort; namely, of wandering on foot from the borders of China to the coast of Guinea in order to buy and sell," he reflected Westerners' popular and narrow image of Armenians that British adventurers in the first half of the 19th century more often parroted than refuted (cited in Suny 2015, 37).

Thus, as Laycock indicates, British writers had already "discovered" Armenia by the early 19th century. Yet, the contention that "to the vast majority of the British population, however, Armenians remained obscure and largely irrelevant" in that era applies primarily in the context of London's foreign policy and the public's everyday priorities (Laycock 2009, 1). But the travel writings published in the first decades of the 1800s show that British visitors had already noted the early symptoms of the Armenian Question. Indeed, Lord Byron challenged an apathetic audience when, in 1817, he characterized Armenians as "an oppressed and a noble nation" (cited in Bekaryan 2004, 394). Most British citizens knew and cared little about Armenians in the first half of the 19th century, yet their traveling compatriots publicized some of the earliest 19th-century observations of the Armenian Question. Hence, early British adventurers inadvertently

laid the cultural and political groundwork upon which arose the more intense and more public debates after the Congress of Berlin in 1878.

From the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca in 1774 to the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, Europe's major powers debated the fate of the Ottoman Empire in a perennial dilemma known as the Eastern Question. The fate of the declining Ottoman domain, and the inter-imperial rivalry of the Great Powers who sought to simultaneously capitalize on Ottoman weakness and prevent their foes from enlarging their territories, informed the foreign policies of several continental actors (Macfie 1996). Britain had re-encountered the Islamic world after the Crusades in the mid-16th century, when diplomats, scholars, travelers, clerics, and others began to visit the Ottoman empire and other Muslim polities in large numbers (MacLean and Matar 2011). But with successive and successful excursions against Ottoman lands by Russian and French armies in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, as well as the conflagration of the Greek war of independence in 1821, British interest in and concern for Ottoman domestic affairs grew in the early 1800s (Beaton 2013).

A key element of the Eastern Question, the Armenian Question attracted Anglophone attention in the first half of the 19th century, but gained broad public prominence only in the 1870s (Kirakossian 2003). The sociopolitical conditions of Armenians living under the rule of and adjacent to Turks and Kurds became widely discussed in British society after the Congress of Berlin and the dramatization of the Bulgarian Horrors (Laycock 2009, 82). Divided between the Ottoman (Western) and Persian (Eastern) empires, Armenia lost its political independence in the late 14th century. As George Bournoutian has argued, in the early nineteenth century, Eastern Armenians in Persia generally experienced fewer persecutions and systematic oppressions than their compatriots in the Ottoman empire (Bournoutian 1982). Yet, British travelers tended to overlook or downplay the sociopolitical, economic, and class distinctions of Armenian existence between those two empires, underscoring instead the religious identities of Armenians as minority Christians and their neighbors and masters as majority Muslims. British travelogues from the first half of the 19th century, including those written by individuals not related in any way to ecclesiastical organizations, explained regional interethnic tensions through the prism of faith.

With the Romanovs promoting themselves as the protectors of Orthodox Christians in the sultan's domain since 1774, the rivalry between Britain and Russia for political influence on and within the Ottoman empire intensified as Russia moved closer to Western Armenia in the early 19th century. After abortive attempts in 1804 and 1808, in 1828 the tsar wrested Eastern Armenia and its main city, Yerevan, from the shah. Thus, the Armenian diaspora straddled the Ottoman, Russian, and Persian empires in the first decades of the 19th century, and after 1828 it remained divided between the realms of the sultan and the tsar (Panossian 2006).

After the Russo-Persian War of 1826–1828 and the Russo-Ottoman War of 1828–1829, entire Armenian communities from Persia and Turkey immigrated into the tsar's growing domain in the South Caucasus. Promised security, tax breaks, commercial privileges, and cultural autonomy, the Armenian subjects of the shah and the sultan eagerly sought better lives under the tsar's patronage, becoming the frontiersmen of Russian expansion into the South Caucasus. By some estimates, around 8,000 Persian Armenian families gained tsarist subjecthood in 1828 (Glinka 1990, 92). From the sultan's empire, too, Tsar Nicholas I absorbed about 10,000 Armenian families, settling them in tsarist Georgia and the newly established Armenian province (Riegg 2016, 121). Private British travelers noted these large-scale population transfers and raised concerns about Russian motives well before British statesmen did. Hence, British adventurers in the first half of the 19th century contextualized Armenian-Muslim ethnoreligious strife in the Ottoman Empire and Persia within the British-Russian geopolitical rivalry.

I use a selection of travelogues by authors who commented on the political status of Armenians in the region. Many other British writers, such as W. I. Hamilton, who journeyed from Constantinople to eastern Anatolia in 1836, prioritized the geographical and topographical features of

the encountered countries in their accounts, remaining mute about the sociopolitical conditions of the local communities (Hamilton 1837, 34–61). The lines between diplomats, spies, journalists, scientists, and tourists often merged in the personas of British visitors to the Ottoman Empire, Persia, and the Caucasus in the first half of the 19th century. Some of these individuals had no formal training, but became British diplomats, while others combined leisure and art with science and anthropological observation. Thus, uniform typologies of these travelers create more questions than answers, necessitating broader consideration of their backgrounds and accomplishments.

These and most other 19th-century travelogues tell us more about their authors than about the subjects of their surveys. Produced by Westerners for Western markets, they afford a better view of European societies than of Armenian communities. Every outsider arrived in the Ottoman-Persian-Russian borderlands with preconceptions about the region and its residents, and their experiences more often than not confirmed both what they expected to see and what their audiences expected to hear. Yet, these narratives tell us much about the political, social, cultural, and economic themes that drew—and also escaped—the attention of outsiders.

British Travelers and the Armenian Question

In 1815, adventurer, historian, and future governor of Bombay John Malcolm published a broad survey of Persian history in which he traced Armenian suffering in Persia to the 18th century. In one fell swoop, Malcolm (1815, 627) underscored state-directed oppression and social marginalization produced by religious differentiation:

Armenians became, from their wealth and religion, an object of attack to the rapacious ministers and bigoted priests of [Shah Hussein's] court. They were not only plundered of their property, but their right to the law of retaliation was denied; and more than one decree sanctioned a law, which ordained that a Mahomedan who killed a Christian should not lose his life, but only pay a certain quantity of grain to the family of the deceased.

As one scholar has argued, Malcolm's book "played a major part in literature's great lunge to the East in the decade after the end of the Napoleonic Wars" (Harrington 2010, 94). Pursuing thrills and, informally, intelligence, British travelers rushed to explore that tri-imperial threshold out of personal curiosity and also because many of them viewed it as a potential back door to India for London's imperial rivals. Even during his first visits to the borderlands, well before the publication of his book, Malcolm recognized that "the English have an obvious and great interest in maintaining and improving the strength of Persia as a barrier to India" (cited in Blow 2008, 401). Far from easing British anxiety, Napoleon's defeat in 1815 only piqued Anglophone interest in the region because Russia replaced France as Britain's paramount imperial competitor.

Before Russia's wars with Persia and the Ottoman empire in the late 1820s, British visitors to the region emphasized the local effects of inter-imperial rivalries between the overlapping claims of the tsar, sultan, and shah to territorial and political influence. William Heude (1819), a lieutenant in the East India Company who crossed northern Persia in 1817, stressed that "throughout the great extent of country I travelled over, the like dread of an invasion from Russia seemed equally to prevail. Wherever I went, as far as I could understand, it was the general theme" (202). Concurrently, inside Georgia, annexed by Russia in 1801, British artist Robert Ker Porter lauded the physical and social transformations the tsarist authorities brought to a once-backward territory and people.

Born in Durham, Ker Porter became an accomplished painter of military subjects, attracting particular attention for drawing a detailed, 2,550-square-foot panorama of one battle in just six weeks. Knighted by the Prince Regent in 1813, Ker Porter traveled from St. Petersburg to Persian Esfahan and Ottoman Baghdad by way of the Caucasus throughout 1817 to 1820. His travel experiences and diplomatic skills compelled London to appoint the artist British consul in

Venezuela in 1825, where he gained notoriety not only for helping to design the Venezuelan coat of arms but also for easing Catholic-Protestant tensions.

During his time in the South Caucasus, Ker Porter (1821) praised Russia's moderating effect on the locals: "Within these twenty years [since Russian annexation], the higher ranks of the inhabitants of Tiflis have gradually lost much of their Asiatic manners; and it was a change to be expected, from their constant intercourse with the civil and military officers of the European empire, to which they had become a people" (122). Ker Porter's successors did not laud the perceived progress Russia brought to the Caucasus; instead, they prioritized the ethnic tensions among the region's locals.

T. B. Armstrong visited Armenian communities in eastern Anatolia and northern Persia immediately after the Second Russo-Persian War of 1826–1828 and the Russo-Ottoman War of 1828–1829. His recollections about Armenians revolve primarily around their mistreatment by anonymous Muslims and their desire to immigrate into or to be absorbed by the Russian empire. In April 1829, in northern Persia, Armstrong came upon a caravan of Armenians heading for the relative security of Russian-conquered Yerevan. "They complained of the bad treatment they met with from the Mussulmen wherever they passed," remarked Armstrong (1831, 165–166), "and pointed out a village where the inhabitants, not content with exacting twenty tomans from the poor wretches before allowing them to pass a bridge, had also stolen from them two children."

Across the border in Ottoman territory, Armstrong visited Armenian villages in the vicinity of Van, where recently slaughtered cattle dotted the landscape. Locals told Armstrong that Kurds had killed their livestock when the Armenians had failed to meet the Kurds' demands for corn (179–180). After witnessing more cases of abuse directed at the Armenian minority of eastern Anatolia, Armstrong concluded that "the Armenians long for the approach of the Russians, whom they represent as their deliverers from bondage" (185). In Constantinople, Armstrong witnessed that "the Christians are in a state of great alarm for their safety, and are doubtful whether to leave the city or not; in fact, nothing can be more critical than the situation of the Porte at this moment" (223). With such documented injustice befalling Western Armenians, it is hardly surprising that several British travelers in the early decades of the 19th century noted general Armenian proclivity toward Russian rule. At the same time, wary of Russian expansionism, these travelers condemned the policies and tactics of the tsarist empire.

Robert Mignan (1839), a British captain in the First Bombay European Regiment, crossed the South Caucasus soon after Russia's annexation of Eastern Armenia in 1828. Mignan visited the Caucasus by chance when, on his journey from England to Western India, he met Persian Crown Prince Abbas Mirza's son in St. Petersburg, who was in the Russian capital to apologize for the recent murder of tsarist envoy in Tehran Alexander Griboedov. Well-connected with Russian and Western European aristocrats, Mignan soon met the famed German traveler Alexander Humboldt at the estate of Prince Dmitrii Golitsyn.

Mignan's account, infused with the censure of Russian imperialism then-prevalent in Britain, portrayed the immigration of Persian Armenians into expanded Russian territory as a coerced resettlement. Mignan charged General Ivan Paskevich—the Russian commander who defeated Persia during the war and oversaw the relocation of Armenians—with deceit. The tsarist general, insists Mignan, not only issued false promises to the shah's desperate Armenian subjects, offering them land and homes in Russian territory, but also "forced" them to emigrate (73–74). A few months later, however, deeper in Persian territory, Mignan no longer denied Armenians' preference for Russian rule, rooted in ecumenical kinship. He contradicted his earlier verdict by underscoring that "Armenians are continually claiming the protection of the Russian Government" (72–73). Elsewhere, Mignan confirms that "the Armenians devoutly wished for the annexation of the whole country to Russia, as they would then be thought more of than they ever can be under a Mahomedan government" (144). This observation more accurately matches the sentiments of Persian-subject Armenians, thoroughly recorded by contemporaries and analyzed by historians (Sury 1993, 35–37).

Several British adventurers observed the Armenian exodus from Ottoman and Persian territories into Russian domains. The travelers understood that ethnoreligious conflict, exacerbated by economic conditions and political pressure, pushed thousands of Armenians to abandon their homelands. The visitors' own political allegiances and the British-Russian rivalry influenced their political commentary. From the perspective of British foreign policy in the 1830s, the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Ottoman Empire trumped humanitarian concerns, and London eagerly backed the first phase of the Tanzimat reforms, when the sultan declared all of his subjects "his children" and promised to modernize the governance of his diverse realm (Kirakossian 2003, 8–9). British ambassadors in Constantinople, including John Ponsonby and Stratford Canning, urged the Sublime Porte to reform its nationalities policies to stave off the encroachment of the tsars in the Balkans and Anatolia, where Russia wielded shared ethnicity and religion to rally Slavic and non-Slavic Orthodox minorities in the Ottoman peripheries (9–10).

British officers and civilians continued to condemn Russian imperialism in the 1830s. James Baillie Fraser, a Scottish artist, journeyed through northern Persia and eastern Anatolia in 1834, about five years after Mignan, and similarly denounced "the atrocious conduct of Paskevitch, the Russian general, who carried away many thousands of Armenian families," leaving the region severely depopulated (Fraser 1840, 46–47). Yet Fraser's murky association with the British government, including his employment by the Foreign Office in 1833 to report on Russian influences in Persia, suggests that this Scottish artist's descriptions were no less partial than those of his military compatriots.

In 1835, James Brant (1836), British consul in Erzurum, was disappointed with the vicinity of Kars, the fortress city in eastern Anatolia. He laments that "all the Armenians emigrated with the retreating army of the Russians, leaving many deserted villages, and a great deal of unoccupied land" (199). Elsewhere, he notes that "innumerable Armenian families emigrated from [the area] with the Russian army" (200). In Erzurum, Brant stresses that tens of thousands of "industrious and laborious Armenians" fled for tsarist territory at the conclusion of the war. Brant explains that "the predatory conduct of the Kurds" compelled thousands of Christians to flee (201). John Charles George Savile, member of Parliament, upon inquiring in 1838 about the abandoned "Armenian villages" he encountered in eastern Anatolia, learned that "the original inhabitants had one and all migrated into the Russian territory at the close of the last war, and that a tribe of Kurds had taken possession of the deserted houses" (cited in Pollington 1840, 445).

Remarkably similar themes—conspicuously sidestepping the myriad factors that differentiated not only Persian from Ottoman policies, but also Persian Armenians from Ottoman Armenians—attracted the attention of British adventurers in the shah's empire. In northern Persia, Justin Shiel (1838), an officer of the British Army, recorded the abuses Persian regional authorities and civilians directed at Armenians. The visitor notes that, among the locals, "it is not uncommon to carry off their daughters, and force them to turn Mohammedans" (57). Elsewhere, Shiel, the future British envoy extraordinaire to the shah (1844–1852), witnessed the "oppressions which Armenians living at a distance from large towns endure" (58). Still, the conditions of Armenians in the Ottoman empire elicited more attention from outsiders than that diaspora's existence in other multi-ethnic and multi-confessional states.

Some non-British Westerners, and also travelers more explicitly associated with religion, note similar themes, even while making more nuanced distinctions among Armenians. American missionary Horatio Southgate (1840), reconnoitering eastern Anatolia in 1839 for future proselytizing, highlights what he perceived as contrasts between the lifestyles and circumstances of various Ottoman Armenian communities. To Southgate, Armenians in Erzurum and Van enjoyed more prosperity and security than their compatriots in other parts of the sultan's empire. Armenians in those cities had been "less disturbed by the changes of war and less oppressed by Musulman bigotry," he claims, a condition that led to "more of independence and equal privileges with the Mohammedans than I had before witnessed in any other part of the interior of

Turkey, and, as a natural consequence, they are more intelligent and high-minded” (271). Centuries of marginalization, however, had taken a toll on the social disposition of Armenians and other Ottoman Christians. “Generous and manly feeling has been long since crushed by the iron hand of tyranny,” wrote Southgate, “and they have become churlish and inhospitable” (271). To cope with the “incessant extortions of petty rulers,” Armenians and other Ottoman minorities had “learned both to cringe and to deceive” (271).

In the mid-19th century, the theme of Ottoman Armenian oppression at the hands of state authorities and Kurds grew in prominence in British travelogues. William Francis Ainsworth (1842), a geographer and geologist heading to Mesopotamia in 1840, documented the abuses Ottoman minorities suffered in Muş province. A founding fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, Ainsworth set out to record Nestorian culture and also, in a less-publicized aspect of the mission, document the mineral deposits and resources of the Ottoman empire. Ainsworth stresses that local Armenians had experienced “an authorized vexation and spoliation entailed by Kurdish supremacy,” as well as “frequent incursions of the same predatory tribes; on which occasions they drive away all their cattle, sheep, and goats, and treat the inhabitants according as they submit quietly to be left destitute, or resist this cruel system of plunder” (379–380). Increasingly desperate, Armenians with means sought refuge in tsarist domains, “where they are well received.” Informed that thousands of Armenians had fled to Russia, Ainsworth concludes that the Sublime Porte could “render emigration less necessary, by giving adequate protection to the poor but industrious Christian peasant” (380).

While Ainsworth documented the Ottoman Armenian desire for Russian protection in the 1840s, a fellow British traveler came to an entirely different conclusion in that same period. Robert Curzon, the private secretary to Ambassador Stratford Canning in Constantinople, lived in the Ottoman capital and also in Erzurum from 1843 to 1844. After leaving his studies incomplete at Christ Church, Oxford, Curzon travelled throughout Europe, Egypt, and the Holy Land to collect rare theological and historical manuscripts. Appointed attaché at the British embassy in Constantinople in 1841, Curzon explored the Ottoman-Persian borderlands and helped establish the political boundary between the two empires, receiving awards from the sultan and the shah for his work.

Perhaps influenced by his position as a member of the British diplomatic corps, Curzon praised the conduct of Ottoman authorities toward Armenians and condemned the behavior of Russian soldiers during the Russo-Ottoman War of 1828–1829, when tsarist troops ransacked Armenian churches. During that conflict, Curzon (1854) claimed that Russian forces occupying parts of eastern Anatolia “tried to destroy those temples of their own religion which the Turks had spared, and under whose rule many of the more recent had been rebuilt on their old foundations” (203–204). Indeed, Curzon even asserts that after the war, those Armenians who had relocated from the sultan’s domain to Russia recognized the superiority of Ottoman rule to tsarist dominion, and sought to return to the sultan’s territory. For more than a decade, declares Curzon, many Armenians tried “by every means in their power, to return to the lesser evils of the frying-pan of Turkey, from whence they had leapt into the fire of despotic Russia” (204). No evidence exists to support claims that large numbers of Armenians sought to return from Russia to Turkey or Persia because, as early as the reign of Peter the Great in the 18th century, the tsarist government ensured that recently transplanted Armenians received exclusive economic privileges to affirm their loyalty (Suny 2004, 109–137). Curzon’s account, while an apocryphal politicized narrative that contains little concrete evidence, echoes the cultural observations made by his predecessors, including Southgate’s insistence on the toll that centuries of Ottoman marginalization of Armenians had taken on their character. Employing now-entrenched formulas of downtrodden Western Armenians, Curzon chastises Ottoman Christians collectively: “the Christian is a liar and a cheat; his religion is so overgrown with the rank weeds of superstition that it no longer serves to guide his mind in the right way” (234–235).

By mid-century, such generalized portrayals of Armenians and mono-causal explanations of their distress became standard. Mary Leonora Woulfe Shiel (1856, 67) summarizes the main stereotypes of Armenians writ large as well as their struggles in a couple of sentences:

the Armenian is mean, cringing, timid, always intent on gain, and, unlike a Georgian, in keeping what he gains. The same characteristics mark him in Persia and Turkey, and I am told everywhere else; for, like the gipsy, he is a wanderer on the face of the earth, and is to be found in every part of Asia. He is consequently an abundant and pleasant harvest to all needy pashas, khans, hakims, and minor functionaries of misrule, easily reaped, gathered, and gleaned.

Shiel also did not neglect to mention the Kurdish abuse of Armenians in the Ottoman-Persian borderlands:

The cold is so intense in this part of Turkey and Persia as to prevent the Koords from passing the winter in their tents. Those who cannot migrate disperse in small parties in the Armenian villages, which they not only insist on sharing with the inhabitants, but force these poverty-stricken Armenians to supply them with forage for the sustenance of their numerous flocks and herds. Let the reformers of Turkey ponder on this crying evil, and save the poor Armenians from the oppressions of the wicked Koords.

In the years preceding the Crimean War of 1853–1856, British travelers not only highlighted such abiding themes, but also expressed suspicion of Armenians' proclivity toward Russia. When progress was noted, it proved the rule of a general condition of decline. Archaeologist Austen Henry Layard (1853, 404) visited a few Armenian schools in Van in 1850 and confidently declared: "Such schools, imperfect though they be, are proof of a great and increasing improvement in the Christian communities of Turkey." Well-versed in Arabic and Persian, Layard drew the attention of Ambassador Canning, who hired the energetic Briton to oversee various political and scholarly research projects, at times seeking to outmaneuver French archaeologists in Mosul. Decades later, Layard, a staunch opponent of Russian imperialism and critic of his compatriots' outrage at the Bulgarian Horrors, during which Ottoman forces committed atrocities against the rebelling Bulgarians, became the British ambassador in Constantinople. Such outsiders were hardly impartial observers in the era before and during the clash between London and St. Petersburg in the Crimean War, and the question of Ottoman policies toward their non-Muslim minorities became particularly charged because each side brandished it to justify its actions. With the conflagration of war between Russia and an alliance of Britain, France, and the Ottoman Empire, British travelers in the sultan's realm used their narratives to influence public opinion at home. Tensions among the Western powers, the Ottoman Empire, and Russia had simmered for decades. Access to the Holy Land, Catholic-Orthodox clashes in the Ottoman Empire, Russia's aspirations for Ottoman territory, and the British desire to maintain access to India and the post-Napoleonic European balance of power all coalesced to spark the bloody showdown (Rath 2015).

A mosaic of ethnonational groups, the Ottoman Empire presented myriad political and social complexities for its rulers and subjects. The Sublime Porte's *millet* framework, its method of governance through religious communities, reinforced rigid ethnic hierarchies at the same time as it fortified some minorities' identities (Barkey and Gavrilis 2016, 24–42). Ronald G. Suny (2015) has argued that "along with the discrimination, abuses, and inferiority that Armenians were forced to endure, the *millet* system provided considerable benefits and a degree of cultural and political autonomy" (44). Indeed, the Ottoman imperial system implicitly, and often explicitly, sanctioned and even backed a sense of Armenianness. But to British visitors to Turkey at mid-century, most Ottoman Armenians despised their government, openly and furtively aiding their coreligionist Russians.

Charles Duncan (1855), a correspondent for the newspaper the *Morning Chronicle* and a vociferous advocate of British support for Constantinople against St. Petersburg, used the travelogue he wrote and published at the height of the conflict to portray Ottoman Armenians as tsarist pawns. Duncan emphasized that Armenians and Greeks “pray in the bottom of their hearts for the success of the Czar” (21). Duncan described the Ottoman Armenian desire for Russian protection as divided along class lines, with wealthy elites and “a few enlightened men” seeing little to gain and much to lose from tsarist victory against their imperial overlord (102). In contrast to their more successful compatriots, “the middle and lower ranks of Armenians are Russian to the back bone.” Yet, Duncan predicts that their sympathies would prove futile, because though Ottoman Armenians “are industrious and well-behaved, at the same time they are the most arrant cowards imaginable.” Nevertheless, Duncan places the blame for contentious relations between the Ottoman government and its Armenian subjects not on collective Armenian traits or Ottoman administrative practices, but rather on Russian foreign policy.

Duncan, echoing the collective unease of British citizens who feared Russia’s conquest of Ottoman territory, depicts Armeno-Turkish tensions as constructed by outsiders more than shaped by internal Ottoman politics. Though “Armenians and Turks inwardly detest each other,” the journalist insists, their mutual aversion transcended questions of “religion and creed” (103). Duncan argues that tsarist authorities, as early as the Russo-Ottoman War of 1828–1829, capitalized on shared religion between Russians and Armenians to turn disaffected Ottoman Armenians into tsarist collaborators. He asserts that, well before the Crimean War, it had become “evident to the government of the Czar that by fomenting the hatred of the two races a signal advantage would accrue to Russia” (104). Seeking to resettle “the industrious, intelligent, peaceful, and money-making” Armenians into recently annexed territories in the South Caucasus, Duncan maintains, the Russian empire initiated a policy of helping Ottoman Armenians obtain “*éclatant* revenge” over their imperial masters for their past “barbarous cruelty.” With the start of the Crimean War, Armenian and Greek communities in Turkey “sympathized almost openly with the cause of the Czar,” furtively crossing the Russo-Ottoman frontier to convey intelligence to tsarist forces (Duncan 1855, 269). In line with his political allegiances but contradicting his own earlier observations about past Ottoman “barbarous cruelty” (104), Duncan claims that “the Armenians—and, in fact, all Christians—enjoy great toleration and many privileges. I have not heard of any religious persecution having taken place for many years past; and, with regard to civil rights, the Christians possess them beyond the native Turks” (291–292). Other British visitors, if more circumspect about praising Ottoman “toleration,” similarly accused Ottoman Armenians of colluding with tsarist forces.

Humphry Sandwith, an English army surgeon employed by Ottoman authorities during the Crimean War, pointed to Armenians as the primary allies of the Russian government in the sultan’s domain. Joining one of Layard’s archaeological expeditions in 1849, Sandwith criss-crossed the Ottoman Empire for years before settling in Constantinople to run the city’s British hospital. After a short venture as a correspondent for *The Times* ended due to Sandwith’s partiality toward the sultan’s cause, the Briton became the chief medical officer in Kars. Captured by Russians after the citadel’s fall in 1855, Sandwith was the only British prisoner whom tsarist forces released in gratitude for his medical help to all combatants.

Regarding Armenians, Sandwith (1856) contends that nowhere “throughout the whole of his vast dominions” did the tsar “possess more staunch and zealous partisans than these Ottoman subjects” (127). However, the British physician tempers his condemnation by contextualizing the collective experiences of the Ottoman Armenian population, admitting that “our indignation at their open and industrious partisanship in favor of the enemy was somewhat modified when we heard of the wrongs and oppression which had been abundantly heaped upon them.” Thus, even at the height of the Crimean War, some British observers who clearly supported Constantinople against St. Petersburg, acknowledged the plight of Western Armenians and sought to explain to their readers the reasons for close Armeno-Russian ties.

Conclusion

Nearly a half-century after his visit to the Caucasus, Viscount James Bryce, the recently retired British ambassador to the United States, continued to publicize the national and international nuances of the Ottoman political system. On the eve of World War I, Bryce (1914) insisted that the Eastern Question eluded resolution because “the mutual jealousies of the Great Powers who deemed their respective interests involved . . . prevented a normal development of those natural forces which destroy bad governments” (v). Equally impactful was the fact that, until the last decades of the 19th century, “the statesmen of Western Europe were very ignorant of the real conditions of the East, of the character of the races that inhabited it, and of the sort of government which the Turks gave those races. And the West European peoples were even more ignorant than the statesmen” (v–vi). An accomplished traveler, writer, and politician, Bryce voiced the frustrations of experts and statesmen who understood the ethnoreligious underpinnings of the Eastern Question and Ottoman politics but struggled to spur their colleagues and constituents to move beyond the geopolitical considerations of Great Power rivalries. The fact that the plight of Ottoman Armenians in the sultan’s empire drew wider attention at the turn of the 20th century indicates not the absence of these themes from the political discourse of British intellectuals in the late Georgian and early Victorian eras, but rather the dramatic expansion of those issues in the context of international relations and conflicts.

The Armenian Question demands broader interpretations of its chronological and thematic parameters, taking into consideration the extensive travel literature of diverse outsiders during the first half of the 19th century. These accounts suggest that Armenians’ real and imagined political proclivity toward Russia often shaped British visitors’ perceptions and descriptions of Armenians in the Ottoman-Persian-Russian borderlands. British travelers alerted their readers to large-scale population transfers of Armenians from the Ottoman into the Russian empire and fretted over tsarist motives and methods of imperialism. Well before the outbreak of the Crimean War, British adventurers contextualized Armenian misery within the British-Russian geopolitical rivalry. Thus, early British adventurers established the cultural and political groundwork for the more famous discussions of the Armenian Question in the 19th century’s last decades. By the late 1800s, an imagined landscape of stock Armenian characters—the itinerant merchant and persecuted Christian—populated the British mind. To overlook the British encounters with the Armenian Question in the first half of the 19th century is to miss a core component of a narrative that helped shape modern European history.

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