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Denying the Hamidian Massacres: Ottoman Narratives, Armenian Activism, and the Struggle over the Memory in the United States, 1890s

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DENYING THE HAMIDIAN MASSACRES: OTTOMAN NARRATIVES, ARMENIAN ACTIVISM, AND THE STRUGGLE OVER THE MEMORY IN THE UNITED STATES, 1890s

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the Ottoman Empire's denial of the Hamidian massacres (1894–1896) in the United States, focusing on the efforts of Ottoman Minister Alexander Mavroyeni Bey and his collaborators. Drawing on primary sources and secondary literature, it analyzes how the Ottoman diplomatic mission in Washington sought to reframe reports of anti-Armenian violence as justified responses to what they called "sedition." The article suggests that Ottoman denial in the US was not merely a replication of internal propaganda but a distinct transnational strategy tailored to American audiences. Through analogies with Native Americans, appeals to US sovereignty, and collaboration with American Muslim convert Alexander Russell Webb, Mavroyeni Bey worked to delegitimize American Armenian activism, discredit missionaries, and portray the empire as a victim of Western prejudice. The study contributes to the existing scholarship on the denial of the late Ottoman state and collective violence, concentrating on the Hamidian era. It further highlights the role of American Armenians as key targets of this campaign due to their grassroots activism and influence on public opinion and humanitarian mobilization. By situating denial within broader patterns of imperial propaganda, the article offers a new angle for examining the transnational dimensions of memory and denial of late Ottoman violence.

Keywords: Denial, Hamidian Massacres, American Armenian community, Memory.

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Introduction

An article in the 4 December 1894 *New York Times* discussing the reports of Armenian massacres quoted the statement provided by the Ottoman Legation in Washington, DC, in which Minister[1] Mavroyeni Bey argued that "Far from committing any cruelties, the regular troops succeeded in restoring peace and order." With this declaration, Ottoman officials sought to dismiss growing international concern over reports of mass violence against Armenians in the empire's eastern provinces. They blamed the violence on Armenian "agitators" allegedly funded by the London Armenian Committee and portrayed the Ottoman response as a justified restoration of order, dismissing reports of widespread massacres as propaganda.[2]

This was one of many episodes that revealed the Ottoman Empire's disinformation efforts in the United States during the Hamidian massacres of the 1890s. As European and American newspapers increasingly reported on the violence, American Armenians began to raise their voices in protest. In response, the Ottoman diplomatic mission, led by Minister Mavroyeni Bey, launched a well-organized campaign to deny the atrocities and shape public perception in favor of the empire. Examining the various forms of denial surrounding the Hamidian massacres is essential not only for tracing the link between the violence of the 1890s and the Genocide during World War I, but also for understanding the perspectives of the American Armenian community, whose identity and collective memory were profoundly shaped by these events. Denial, as historian Bedross Der Matossian aptly put it, is not merely the refusal to acknowledge past injustices, but an act of "killing the dead and their memory over and over, inflicting pain on the survivors and their descendants."[3] Situating these early acts of denial within the broader historical continuum of Ottoman violence against Armenians reveals how the state not only concealed past atrocities but also created the conditions for their recurrence.

The study of denial of late Ottoman violence has largely focused on the negation of the 1915 genocide, paying little attention to the earlier wave of massacres during the reign of Sultan Abdul Hamid II.[4] Only a handful of scholars have addressed the denial of the Hamidian

[1] The Ottoman Empire did not establish a permanent diplomatic mission in the United States until 1867. Between that year and the suspension of relations in 1917 during World War I, twelve different missions successively represented the Empire in Washington. Alexander Mavroyeni Bey led one of them. It is important to note that the Ottoman mission retained the status of a legation until its elevation to an embassy in 1908. Accordingly, Mavroyeni Bey, who served in Washington from 1887 to 1896, is properly referred to as *minister* rather than *ambassador*. See Sinan Kuneralp, "Ottoman Diplomatic and Consular Personnel in the United States of America, 1867-1917," in *American Turkish Encounters: Politics and Culture, 1830-1989*, ed. Nur Bilge Criss, Selcuk Esenbel, Tony Greenwood, and Louis Mazzari (Newcastle-upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 100-102.

[2] "Turkish Light on Massacre: Legation at Washington Declares Armenian Reports Are False," *New York Times*, 4 December 1894.

[3] Bedross Der Matossian, "Introduction: Genocide Denial in the Twenty-First Century," in *Denial of Genocides in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Bedross Der Matossian (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2023), 3.

[4] There is a rich scholarship on the denial of the Armenian Genocide. See, for example, Gevorg Vardanyan, «Հայոց ցեղասպանության ժխտման պատմությունից. թուրքական մի վաղ հրատարակության քննական դիտարկում» [From the History of the Armenian Genocide Denial: Critical Review of an Early Turkish Publication], *Tsėghaspanagitakan handes* 2, no. 1(2014): 67-77; Fatma Muge Gocek, *Denial of Violence: Ottoman Past, Turkish Present, and Collective Violence against the Armenians, 1789–2009* (New York: Oxford University

massacres. Among them is Robert Melson, who applied the concept of the "provocation thesis" to describe the official Ottoman stance.[5] This thesis posits that the massacres of the late 19th century were a response to the activities of Armenian revolutionary parties. Its advocates – including Stanford J. Shaw, Ezel Kural Shaw, William L. Langer, and Bernard Lewis – argue that, amid internal dissent and external pressures, the Ottoman state perceived Armenian political mobilization as an existential threat, thus justifying repressive violence as an act of self-defense. Critics of the thesis, however, point out that it inadequately addresses questions of agency, causality, accountability, and victimhood.[6] Even so, the provocation thesis functioned not only as a tool for domestic justification but also as a tool deployed by Ottoman officials in diplomatic arenas to counter American and European criticism.[7]

This article builds on existing scholarship and explores how the Ottoman Empire deployed its state narrative about the Armenian massacres in the United States in 1894–1896.[8] Specifically, it focuses on the activities of the Ottoman Minister Mavroyeni Bey: how he articulated the Ottoman state's position on American soil and responded to the mounting criticism directed at the empire. The article suggests that, beyond reiterating the core tenets of the Ottoman narrative, Mavroyeni Bey and his allies often incorporated additional elements into their denialist rhetoric in the United States to more effectively discredit reports of atrocities and justify Ottoman actions. Specifically, they deployed a strategy of analogy – comparing the Ottoman Empire to the United States and Armenians to Native Americans. This rhetorical tactic aimed to frame Ottoman actions in terms more familiar and resonant to American audiences, deflect criticism, and persuade Americans that their own historical and colonial legacies rendered them unfit to pass moral judgment on the empire. Moreover, it was not their stake to protect the Armenians, as their primary concern lay in preserving diplomatic relations and advancing bilateral interests. By presenting the Armenian Question as an issue of internal sovereignty and

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Press, 2015); Bedross Der Matossian, ed., *Denial of Genocides in the Twenty-First Century* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2023); Hakan Seckinelgin, *The Armenian Genocide and Turkey: Public Memory and Institutionalized Denial* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2024). See also "Select Bibliography on Denial of the Armenian Genocide," Zoryan Institute, 8 August 2014, https://zoryaninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Select-Bibliography-on-Denial-of-the-Armenian-Genocide-2016_08_25-18_41_10-UTC.pdf. For the historiography of the Hamidian massacres, see Narine S. Hakobyan, «1894-96 թթ. արևմտահայերի կոտորածներն արևմտյան անգլալեզու պատմագիտական գործերում (1970-ական - 2010-ական թթ.)» [Western English-language Historiography of the Hamidian Massacres (1970s–2010s)], *Ts'eghaspanagitakan handes* 8, no. 2(2020): 96–120. For the historiography of the Armenian Genocide, see Bedross Der Matossian, "Explaining the Unexplainable: Recent Trends in the Armenian Genocide Historiography," *Journal of Levantine Studies* 5, no. 2(2015): 143–166.

[5] Robert Melson, "A Theoretical Inquiry into the Armenian Massacres of 1894-1896," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 24, no. 3 (1982): 485–486.

[6] Edip Golbasi, "*The Official Conceptualization of the Anti-Armenian Riots of 1895-1897: Official Ottoman Narrative, and Discourses of Revolutionary Provocation*," *Études Arméniennes contemporaines* 10 (2018): 36.

[7] Ibid., 36.

[8] It should be noted though that the denial or justification of violence by the Ottoman state has deep roots. For instance, during the Russo-Turkish war of 1877–1878, the Ottoman side blamed Russians for the atrocities against the Armenians of Bayazet and Alashkert. See Gevorg Vardanyan, «Հայությունը երկու կայսրությունների միջև. 1877–1878 թթ. ռուս-թուրքական պատերազմի Կովկասյան ճակատը օսմանյան պատերազմական քարոզչության մեջ» [Armenians between Two Empires: The Caucasian Front of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 in Ottoman War Propaganda], *Ts'eghaspanagitakan handes* 4, no. 1 (2015): 11–24.

drawing comparisons with America's own treatment of Native peoples, the Ottoman representatives sought not only to deflect external criticism but also to cast the empire's actions as aligned with prevailing global norms – thereby reinforcing its political legitimacy in the eyes of American observers. Finally, American Armenians – who mobilized protests, raised humanitarian concerns, and petitioned US officials – emerged as central targets of this propaganda effort, because their advocacy threatened to expose the very violence the Ottoman state sought to deny.

The Armenian Question and the Hamidian Massacres

The Armenian Question, a complex set of issues regarding the safety and rights of Armenian Christians within the declining Ottoman Empire, emerged as a subject of European diplomatic concern after the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878.[9] The following Treaty of Berlin obligated the Ottoman government to "carry out, without delay, the improvements and reforms" and "to guarantee their security."[10] However, rather than securing meaningful international backing, European involvement in the Armenian Question deepened mistrust between the Ottoman authorities and their Armenian subjects. Instead of introducing reforms, the government's response was marked by escalating hostility toward Armenians.[11] These developments, combined with ongoing attacks by Kurdish tribes, the corruption of the Ottoman administrative system, the failure of constitutional reforms, the limitations of the millet system in addressing Armenian grievances, the influence of Russian revolutionary groups, and the precedent set by successful national uprisings in the Balkans, led to the formation of Armenian revolutionary groups, and, eventually, political parties between 1885 and 1890.[12] These groups sought to bring European attention to the plight of Armenians through political demonstrations advocating for the enforcement of the Berlin Treaty, as well as through armed resistance against state repression and violence.

One such act of resistance, initiated by the Hnchakians, one of these new-formed Armenian political parties in the mountainous region of Sassoun (Sasun), ended in massacres, with estimates of Armenian casualties ranging from 1,700 to 10,000.[13] In response, Great Britain, France, and Russia presented a reform proposal to the Ottoman government on May 11, 1895.

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[9] Vahakn N Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide: Ethnic Conflict from the Balkans to Anatolia to the Caucasus* (Providence and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2003), 43–60.

[10] "Treaty between Great Britain, Germany, Austria, France, Italy, Russia, and Turkey for the Settlement of Affairs in the East: Signed at Berlin, July 13, 1878," *American Journal of International Law* 2, no. S4 (1908): 422.

[11] Karo Sasuni. *K'iwrd azgayin sharzhumnerĕ ev hay-k'rtakan haraberut'iwnnerĕ, 15 Darēn Minchew Mer Ōrerĕ* [Kurdish National Movements and Armenian-Kurdish Relations, 15th century - Present] (Beirut: Hamazkayin Press, 1969), 128–131, 153–169.

[12] Louise Nalbandian, *The Armenian Revolutionary Movement: The Development of Armenian Political Parties through the Nineteenth Centur*y (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963), 83–89. See also Gerard J. Libaridian, *Modern Armenia: People, Nation, State* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2004).

[13] Karo Sasuni, *Patmut'iwn Tarōni ashkharhi* [The History of Taron] (Beirut: The Compatriotic Union of Taron-Turuberan Publ., 1956), 580; Leo [Arakel Babakhanian], *Ants'ialits'* [From the Past] (Tiflis: Soviet Caucasus, 1925), 104.

Sultan Abdul Hamid II, unwilling to implement the proposed changes, faced renewed pressure following a peaceful demonstration organized by the Hnchakians in Constantinople on 18 September 1895.[14] The violent suppression of this protest led to further international outcry, ultimately compelling the Sultan to sign the reform package on 18 October 1895.[15] However, rather than enforcing these measures, the Ottoman government responded with another wave of massacres in various provinces, including Trapizon, Erzerum, Baghes (Bitlis), Van, and Diarbekir. Armenian resistance efforts proved insufficient in preventing large-scale violence. While the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) once again captured European attention with its 1896 seizure of the Ottoman Bank, the Great Powers refrained from taking decisive action, limiting their response to diplomatic condemnations.[16] The violence, known as the Hamidian massacres, resulted in the deaths of an estimated 100,000 to 300,000 Armenians.[17]

American Response

The massacres in Sassoun brought widespread attention to the atrocities committed against Armenians, with reports appearing in numerous American newspapers.[18] Religious periodicals affiliated with American missionary organizations – such as *The Christian Herald*, *The Outlook*, and *Lend a Hand* – were at the forefront of disseminating this information. Since the United States had minimal political and economic involvement in the Ottoman Empire at the time, it was primarily the efforts of American missionaries working in the region that brought these events to public awareness.[19] Missionary activities in the empire had long been closely tied to the Armenian population, given the missionaries' failure to convert the Muslim majority to Protestantism. As a result, concerns over the safety of missionary personnel and institutions in Ottoman territories became intertwined with broader humanitarian motivations and Christian solidarity with the Armenians. Missionary accounts, as well as reports from women's organizations, framed the massacres through religious and humanitarian perspectives, drawing parallels between Armenian and Protestant devotion to Christianity and highlighting the victimization of Armenian women.[20] These narratives were amplified in books authored by former missionaries, including Frederick D. Greene's *The Armenian Crisis in Turkey* (1895) and

[14] Arsēn Kitur, *Patmut'iwn S.D. Hunch'akean Kusakts'ut'ean, 1887–1962* [History of Social Democrat Hnchakian Party] (Beirut: Social Democrat Hnchakian Party Press, 1962), 153–160. For more information on the Social Democrat Hnchakian Party, see Bedross Der Matossian, ed., *The Armenian Social Democrat Hnchakian Party: Politics, Ideology and Transnational History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2023).

[15] «Մեծ յաղթանակ» [Major Victory], *Hnchak*, 20 October, 1895, 145–146.

[16] For more information, see Armen Garo, *Bank Ottoman: Memoirs of Armen Garo* (Detroit, MI: A. Topouzian, 1990).

[17] R. J. Rummel, *Death by Government* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transactions Publishers, 2009[1994]), 210.

[18] For more information, see Arman J. Kirakossian, *The Armenian Massacres, 1894–1896: U.S. Media Testimony* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004).

[19] *The Encyclopedia of Missions, Descriptive, Historical, Biographical, Statistical*, eds. Henry Dwight, Allen Tupper, and Edwin Bliss (New York and London: Funk and Wagnalls, 1904), 31; See also Leland J. Gordon, "Turkish-American Treaty Relations," *The American Political Science Review* 22, no. 3 (1928): 711–721.

[20] Ann Marie Wilson, "In the Name of God, Civilization, and Humanity: The United States and the Armenian Massacres of the 1890s," *Le mouvement social* 227 (2009): 33–35.

Edwin M. Bliss's *Turkey and the Armenian Atrocities* (1896), further heightening public outrage in the United States. Christian sympathy for the Armenian plight, coupled with indignation over Ottoman violence, led various church groups to establish local relief efforts, which eventually consolidated into the National Armenian Relief Committee (NARC), a nationwide organization that coordinated fundraising initiatives across multiple American cities.[21]

By the end of 1895 and the beginning of 1896, the US Congress had received thousands of signatures, not only from various Protestant congregations, women's organizations, and youth groups, but also from American Armenians, urging the government to give serious consideration to the Armenian Question.[22] However, not all petitions or requests were solely focused on the Armenians, as many were concerned with the fate of missionaries and their properties in the Ottoman Empire. In December 1895, Democratic Senator Wilkinson Call of Florida introduced a resolution calling on the US to join other nations to put an end to the suffering of the Armenians.[23] The Congress, however, passed another, more moderate resolution in January 1896, introduced by Republican Shelby Moore Cullom of Illinois. The resolution highlighted the "imperative duty, in the interest of humanity," for the European powers who had signed the Berlin Treaty to ensure its principles were implemented. Specifically, it called on President Grover Cleveland to engage with European governments to secure the "rights belonging to Ottoman Armenians both as men and Christians." One of the most notable outcomes of the resolution was the relief mission led by Clara Barton (1821–1912), the founder of the American Red Cross, to the Ottoman Empire. Barton's mission, which took place from the spring to the fall of 1896, included four expeditions to various regions of the Ottoman Empire. Over several months, the mission spent more than $116,000 to assist survivors and aid in the recovery of Armenian communities in the aftermath of the massacres. As Barton later remarked, without this aid, at least 50,000 people would have likely died from "starvation or perished through accumulated hardship, before the first of May 1897."[24] Despite this significant humanitarian aid, American authorities took no further action beyond the resolution and these relief efforts.

The emergence of awareness in the United States regarding the massacres of Armenians was not driven solely by missionaries, Christian groups, or women's organizations. American Armenians also played a crucial role, both through their own community initiatives and by actively supporting the efforts of these advocacy networks. The violence of the Hamidian massacres traumatized Armenians. Many survivors arrived in the US during or after these events, and even those who had not personally experienced the violence had connections to the victims. Consequently, these events became deeply embedded in the American Armenian collective memory. Mobilizing their developing institutions and social networks, American Armenians organized public gatherings, submitted petitions to Congress, and raised funds to support relief

[21] Merle Curti, *American Philanthropy Abroad: A History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1963), 122–124.
[22] Wilson, "In the Name of God, Civilization, and Humanity," 38–39.
[23] *Congressional Record, 54th Congress, 1st Session, Volume 28, Part 1.* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1895–1896), 854.
[24] American National Red Cross, *Report: America's Relief Expedition to Asia Minor under the Red Cross* (Meriden, CT: Journal Publishing Company, 1896), 44, 50.

efforts. These actions were not only humanitarian but also aimed at influencing American public discourse and foreign policy, with the hope of securing international protection for Armenians in the Ottoman Empire.[25]

Alexander Mavroyeni Bey: A Greek Orthodox Ottoman Bureaucrat and the Armenian Massacres

Born in Arnavutkoy district of Constantinople in 1845, Alexander Mavroyeni Bey received his early education in Constantinople and later obtained a diploma in law in Paris. He spent five years in London working with the Ralli Brothers, but, finding himself unsuited to commerce, he returned to the Ottoman capital and was appointed attaché in the Secretariat of Sultan Abdul Hamid II. Two years later, he entered the diplomatic service, serving for eight years as secretary and then as councilor in the legations at Belgrade and Madrid. From Madrid, he was promoted to Minister in Washington, a position he held from 1887 to 1896. Upon his recall to Constantinople, he was appointed Member of the Civil Section of the Council of State, where he served for four years. In 1902, he was named Prince of Samos and governed the island until his resignation in 1904, after which he resumed his role in the Civil Section of the Council of State. In 1908, he was elevated to the rank of permanent Senator, and in 1911, he was dispatched to Vienna as ambassador, a post he held for one year before returning to his senatorial duties. Unmarried and without children, Mavroyeni Bey remained in Constantinople after the 1923 population exchange and died there in 1929.[26]

Alexander Mavroyeni's prominence as an Ottoman statesman and leading figure within the Rum millet was firmly rooted in the position held by his father, Spyridon Mavroyeni, who was Abdul Hamid's personal physician. Alexander Mavroyeni Bey represented the continuation of a longstanding Phanariotic lineage during a particularly complex and unsettled period at the close of the 19th and dawn of the 20th century within the Ottoman Empire. His personal history was closely intertwined with two traditional centers of powers for orthodox Greek subjects of the empire – the Ottoman imperial court and the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate. The status Mavroyeni Bey held as a Greek Orthodox bureaucrat and prominent community leader was firmly established within the legal and administrative framework created by the reforms of the 19th century. While his Phanariot forebears had long played influential roles within both the Ottoman state apparatus and their religious community, Alexander Mavroyeni Bey, as a representative of the Neophanariot generation, operated within a clearly defined legal context that legitimized his dual role as an official of both the Rum millet and the Ottoman government.[27]

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[25] For more information on the nature of Armenian immigrants' activism, see Gevorg H. Vardanyan and Narine S. Hakobyan "'Thanksgiving for Americans, We Mourn Massacred Armenians': Commemoration, Identity, and the Search for Prevention in the American Armenian Response to the Hamidian Massacres of the 1890s," *Nationalities Papers* (2025), https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2025.30.

[26] Konstantina Andrianopoulou, "Alexander Mavroyeni Bey: From the 19th Century Reform Era to the Young Turk Revolution through the Life and Ideology of a Neophanariot Ottoman Bureaucrat," (Master's thesis, Bogazici University, 2004), 40-41.

[27] Ibid., 49-50.

By the late Ottoman period, Greek orthodox subjects of the Ottoman empire transformed from religious flock into a distinct ethno-religious and political body within the imperial system. Prominent members of this body occupied a dual role: they were simultaneously engaged in the internal governance of their community and held positions within the broader Ottoman administrative structure. Their authority within the millet legitimized their entry into state service, while their bureaucratic status in turn reinforced their influence within the communal hierarchy. Alexander Mavroyeni Bey exemplifies this category of Greek Orthodox elites who ascended through the ranks of the Ottoman bureaucracy and, through that institutional role, also intervened in the affairs of the millet. His participation in community matters – such as involvement in patriarchal elections – always occurred under the aegis of his official state positions, whether as a member of the Council of State, as Prince of Samos, or in other capacities within the Ottoman administration.[28]

This context explains why a Greek Orthodox subject such as Alexander Mavroyeni Bey emerged as a committed defender of the Ottoman government's denial of the Armenian massacres in the United States. His activities must be situated within the broader framework of his efforts to demonstrate unwavering loyalty to Sultan Abdul Hamid II, under whose rule personal allegiance often outweighed merit in determining career advancement. Mavroyeni Bey's vigorous campaign against American Armenian activism and his public denial of the massacres served not only as a display of fidelity to the Sultan but also as a strategic means of reinforcing his political legitimacy and securing his position within the Ottoman bureaucracy, especially given his status as a non-Muslim official operating within Ottoman imperial structure.

Before the Massacres: Mavroeyni Bey's Early Attempts to Shape American Perceptions of Armenians

The deteriorating conditions of the Ottoman Armenians heightened tensions with imperial authorities. On the eve of the Hamidian massacres, several violent incidents targeted Armenians, whom the Ottoman government blamed. In early 1893, wary of American missionaries and Armenian revolutionary activity, Ottoman authorities set fire to a building at Anatolia College in Marsovan. Since most students and faculty were Armenian, they accused the college of burning the building to incite revolt or conceal arms.[29] Two Armenian professors, Garabed H. Thoumaian

[28] His case was not unique. For instance, Alexander Karatheodori, who had been ambassador to Rome, earned international recognition and secured a prominent role within the Ottoman government when he acted as the empire's first plenipotentiary at the 1878 Congress of Berlin. Shortly after the congress, he was appointed head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. See Gevorg Vardanyan, *Հույն բնակչությունն Օսմանյան կայսրությունում և Փոքրասիական աղետը (1914–1923)* [The Greek Population in the Ottoman Empire and the Asia Minor Disaster] (Yerevan: AGMI Press, 2012), 56. For the comparison with Ottoman Armenians, see Gevorg Vardanyan, "The Greek Genocide in the Ottoman Empire: Parallels with the Armenian Genocide," in *Genocide in the Ottoman Empire: Armenians, Assyrians, and Greeks, 1913-1923*, ed. George Shirinian (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), 274–299.

[29] Edwin Munsell Bliss, *Turkey and the Armenian Atrocities: A Reign of Terror from Tartar Huts to Constantinople Palaces* (*Philadelphia: Hubbard Publishing Co.*, 1896), 339.

and Hovhannes T. Kayayan, were imprisoned, along with 200 to 300 Armenians, despite a lack of charges.[30] That summer, officials tried to extract false confessions but found no evidence. According to missionary Edwin M. Bliss, many documents used against the accused were later exposed as forgeries – one American missionary even found his own name forged.[31] The professors were tried but acquitted for lack of evidence. After British protests, they were freed on the condition that they leave the empire. Meanwhile, US pressure secured $2,200 in compensation from Sultan Abdul Hamid II for the damage to Anatolia College.[32]

At that time, some Armenians who had acquired American citizenship returned to the Ottoman Empire to visit their families or for personal matters. When they encountered issues with Ottoman authorities, they claimed the same protections as native-born US citizens. Concerned about the influence of Armenian political parties, the Ottoman authorities viewed these cases as a challenge. This period saw discussions between Armenian and Ottoman authorities regarding US citizens of Armenian origin who visited their homeland while asserting their rights as American nationals. During this time, Ottoman Minister to the United States Alexander Mavroyeni began actively monitoring the activities of the Armenian community in the United States. As one scholar noted, he was "diligent" in this work.[33] Not only did he attempt to confront the Armenians' efforts to champion the Armenian Question, but from the very beginning, he also began to deny any instances of violence committed against Armenians. On 23 August 1893, in a letter to State Secretary Walter Quintin Gresham, Mavroyeni Bey wrote that "the greater part of the Armenians who take refuge in the United States" after obtaining American nationality returned to Turkey for the purpose of "engaging in seditious acts against the public order and tranquility of the Empire."[34] In his interpretation, this situation was "incompatible with that [Monroe] doctrine from the moment that these agitators are authorized to become American citizens and to sojourn in the territory of the United States." Therefore, he argued that the Ottoman government would find it necessary to forbid the return migration of these individuals.[35]

The Ottoman minister not only exaggerated but also distorted facts to strengthen his argument. The majority of Armenian immigrants were not affiliated with revolutionary parties, and the claim that "the greater part of the Armenians who take refuge in the United States" sought to return to Turkey for "seditious acts" was a baseless accusation. As American missionary Edwin Munsell Bliss argued, the revolutionary movement among Armenians was never a national movement but rather represented individual ideas. While some people sympathized with the cause, the majority of Armenians across the empire either opposed or had

[30] Ibid., 340.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Joseph L. Grabill, *Protestant Diplomacy in the Near East: Missionary Influence on American Policy, 1810-1927* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), 41.
[33] Sinan Kuneralp, "Ottoman Diplomatic and Consular Personnel," 102.
[34] US Department of State, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Transmitted to Congress, December 4, 1893* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1894), 709, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1893/pg_709
[35] Ibid.

no involvement in the plans, with very few supporting the extreme actions promoted by the committees.[36] On his letter, Gresham rejected the claim that Armenian immigrants naturalized in the US pose a threat to the Ottoman Empire and asserts that the Monroe Doctrine is irrelevant to this issue, affirming the right of all American citizens of Armenian to peacefully travel to and reside in Turkey under treaties protections, regardless of the "alleged wrongdoing of individuals of their race."[37] After Gresham's letter, Mavroyeni Bey moderated his tone. In his letter dated August 28, he softened his accusations, asserting that the Turkish government "ha[d] no animosity against any of the races which make up the vast Ottoman Empire" and clarified that the issue at hand concerned individual Armenians, not the Armenian community as a whole.[38]

What is striking however, was his parallels between American Armenians and Native Americans. According to Mavroyeni Bey, while the Ottoman Empire had always respected the United States, he argued that an amicable policy should align with Turkey's interests, particularly the need for peace. He also stated that if the US Secretary of State were to familiarize himself with translations of Armenian periodicals published by immigrant communities, he would clearly understand "the plans and desires" of the Armenian immigrants in the US.[39] He concluded his letter with a question, asking what the US government would do if, in a purely hypothetical scenario, a large group of Native Americans sought to establish an independent nation and, with legal support from another country, returned to the US to cause disruption. He then answered on behalf of the US, asserting that, of course, it would have the right to defend itself and take appropriate action.[40]

Mavroyeni's response not only reflected a colonial mindset but also effectively conveyed this perspective to his American colleagues. His rhetorical question assumed the legitimacy of the US government's authority over indigenous lands and implied that any attempt by Native Americans to reclaim sovereignty or self-governance would threaten the government, thereby necessitating what he called "legitimate self-defense."[41] This viewpoint completely overlooked the historical context of colonization, in which Native Americans faced displacement, violence, and the denial of self-determination. Additionally, Mavroyeni's answer echoed justifications traditionally used by colonial powers to suppress indigenous resistance. By framing opposition to state violence as a security threat rather than a legitimate struggle for safety and basic rights – such as the right to life – Mavroyeni reinforced the notion that colonial rule is natural. Similarly, Ottoman authorities practiced internal colonization in the conquered territories, including the Armenian Highlands, where communities were subjected to violence and forced conversion to Islam. In the second half of the 19th century, worsening socioeconomic conditions further increased their vulnerability, leading to the internationalization of the Armenian Question.

[36] Bliss, *Turkey and the Armenian Atrocities*, 342.
[37] "Mr. Gresham to Mavroyeni Bey, 24 August 1893," https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1893/d671, accessed 10.10.2024.
[38] "Mavroyeni Bey to Mr. Gresham, 28 August 1893," https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1893/d672, accessed 10.10.2024.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.

Ottoman Armenians were struggling for the security of their lives and property. Mavroyeni's response reflected the stance of Ottoman authorities, dismissing Armenian rights instead of addressing the grievances they raised.

To support what Mavroyeni referred to as the "plans and desires" of Armenian immigrants, he included short excerpts from two articles from *Haik*, an Armenian-language periodical published in New York from 1891 to 1898. Selectively quoting these articles, he claimed they were "inciting the Armenians who live in Turkey to insurrection."[42] His arguments appeared to have an impact, as evidenced by President Grover Cleveland's speech to Congress on 3 December 1893, in which he echoed the complaints of the Ottoman minister.[43] This understandably triggered a response from Mkrtich Gabrielian, the editor of *Haik*, who wrote a letter to the President asserting that his newspaper was "far from being hostile to the authority of the Sultan" and "has been misrepresented."[44] He argued that "the Armenians [did] not desire to subvert the Sultan's authority in the Armenian provinces of Turkey."[45] Voicing concerns about "ruined villages, burned harvests, captured women, and sacrileged churches" in Ottoman Armenia, Gabrielian raised a rhetorical question: "Can the Turks deny these?"[46] He reminded the President that, according to Article 61 of the Berlin Treaty of 1878, the Ottoman government had promised to implement reforms and protect Armenians from violence. However, instead of fulfilling these commitments, the Ottoman authorities treated reform demands as "proofs of a seditious spirit," accusing Armenians of sedition.[47] At the end of his letter, Gabrielian urged the President to encourage the Ottoman government "to adopt a better and more liberal policy towards its Christian subjects."[48]

Denying the Facts: Ottoman Propaganda in the United States during the Hamidian Massacres

One of the earliest accounts of the Sassoun massacres in the European press appeared in the *London Daily News* on November 12, 1894. The article noted that Turkish officials denied anything beyond the suppression of a small Armenian uprising over the tax issue. It reported that "three thousand [were] killed, including women and children, and twenty-five villages [were] destroyed."[49] This was also one of the earliest news reports that reached the US government. As a result, Secretary of State Walter Q. Gresham, in his letter of 25 November 1894, to Alexander

[42] "Mavroyeni Bey to Mr. Gresham, 26 October 1893," https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1893/d674, accessed 10.10.2024.
[43] "Message of the President," https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1893/message-of-the-president, accessed 10.10.2024.
[44] "Letter from Mgrdich Gabriel to the President, December 12, 1893," in *Grover Cleveland Papers: Series II: General Correspondence, 1846-1910; 1893; December 5–15*, 2.
https://www.loc.gov/resource/mss16188.mss16188-081_0555_0835/?sp=182&st=image&r=-0.682,-0.227,2.363,1.411,0 , accessed 12.10.2024.
[45] "Letter from M. S. Gabriel to the President, 12 December, 1893," 1.
[46] Ibid., 3.
[47] Ibid., 5.
[48] Ibid., 6.
[49] *Daily News*, November 12, 1894.

W. Terrell, US envoy to the Ottoman Empire, asked for further details about the incident, noting that the State Department had no information beyond what was contained in a telegram from Grand Vizier Said Pasha to Mavroyeni Bey, the Turkish minister in Washington.[50] Said Pasha's telegram to Mavroyeni Bey, in turn, deliberately reversed the roles of victim and perpetrator. Armenians were labeled "brigands" who, "furnished with arms from foreign sources," allegedly joined forces with Kurdish insurgents to commit atrocities, including the horrific claim that they "burned a Mussulman alive." The statement presented Ottoman troops not as aggressors but as disciplined forces working to restore "public order" and protect "peaceable inhabitants," especially women and children.[51]

This was the official version of the events in Sassoun, originating in what is known as Zeki Pasha's report. Zeki Pasha was the commander of the Ottoman forces in the area. After the bloodshed in Sassoun in August, Zeki Pasha, the commander of the Ottoman Fourth Army arrived in the area and stopped the violence, when one to two thousand had already been killed.[52] In this report, specifically, Zeki Pasha described the mountainous, Armenian-populated region as a center of rebellion, led by one "Hamparsun" (also known as Murad), a former medical student who allegedly incited unrest and spread false hopes of European intervention. Zeki accused him of deceiving local villagers with promises of support from England and the other Great Powers, turning several villages toward insurrection. Zeki Pasha reported that in mid-August, Armenian villagers abandoned their homes and joined forces with regional bandits, forming a group of over three thousand with plans to attack Mush and expand the rebellion. He accused them of brutal violence against Muslim tribes, including murder, torture, and rape, claiming they committed atrocities while proclaiming loyalty to their leader "Hamparsun." Zeki Pasha claimed that the swift and well-organized military response successfully crushed the rebellion, capturing "Hamparsun – Murad" and his band, and ensuring such unrest would not recur. He admitted that soldiers fired freely into the villages, as women and children had already fled, and reported minimal Ottoman casualties. Declaring the operation a complete success, he emphasized the restoration of order and provision of aid to civilians, while also noting the campaign ended a long period of tax evasion in the region.[53]

The Ottoman Sultan received the report on 18 September 1894, and it quickly became the central narrative for the Ottoman government. In the following year, the report was circulated extensively through both internal and external channels. Many widely distributed Ottoman documents from this time can be directly traced back to this one report.[54] In response to a growing number of publications about the massacres of Armenians, the Ottoman Foreign

[50] "Mr. Gresham to Mr. Terrell, 25 November 1894," https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1894/d719, accessed 14.10.2024.
[51] "Said Pasha to Mavroyeni Bey," https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1894/d720, accessed 14.10.2024.
[52] Owen Miller, "Rethinking the Violence in the Sasun Mountains (1893-1894)," *Études arméniennes contemporaines* 10 (2018), http://journals.openedition.org/eac/1556.
[53] Owen Miller, "Sasun 1894: Mountains, Missionaries and Massacres at the End of the Ottoman Empire" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2015), 159–162.
[54] Miller, "Sasun 1894," 162.

Ministry sent versions of Zeki Pasha's report to its official representatives in Great Britain and the United States. As mentioned, Mavroyeni Bey received the version of Zeki Pasha's report on 16 November 1894, and sent it to the *New York Times*.[55]

Zeki Pasha's 1894 report placed full blame for the Sassoun violence on Armenians and their supposed foreign supporters, framing the events as externally incited and targeting Muslims. This version of events became the dominant narrative within the Ottoman state and was later echoed uncritically in some scholarly accounts. Zeki, born in Aleppo in 1862 to a Circassian family, rose quickly through the ranks due to his military education and close ties to the Palace, with his sister rumored to be a favored consort of Sultan Abdul Hamid II. He was also instrumental in creating the Hamidiye cavalry, a force often accused of violence against Armenians. Crucially, his report relied heavily on Ibrahim Kamil Pasha, a notoriously corrupt official previously dismissed from Bayazet following his failure to investigate a major massacre there in 1877 and his role in various abuses.[56] Despite this questionable source, the report claimed no civilians were harmed by Ottoman forces and became the official account promoted by the state. Zeki Pasha's account lacked specific details, offering almost no names of Muslim victims aside from a single mention of one Omer's nephew, Haji, whose death likely stemmed from a local tribal conflict. Outside of Zeki's report, there is no evidence that any Muslim village was attacked during the summer of 1894.[57]

After the news of the Sassoun massacres reached the US, American Armenians organized demonstrations, public meetings, and commemorative events in numerous cities. Their response encompassed both independent initiatives and active participation in broader pro-Armenian campaigns led by Christian groups, women's organizations, and liberal intellectuals. Consequently, their actions took various forms – mobilizing resistance through awareness campaigns, organizing mass meetings, addressing petitions to the US Congress, and engaging in fundraising activities.[58] They sought to influence American public opinion and authorities, hoping the US would collaborate with European powers to ensure the safety of Ottoman Armenians. This surge in American Armenians activism intensified Mavroyeni Bey's anti-Armenian propaganda in the US, which had begun even before the massacres but escalated in response to the activism.

On 8 December 1894, Mavroyeni Bey wrote a new letter to Gresham containing a short and edited version of Zeki Pasha's report:

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[55] Zeki Pasha's report was published in the *New York Times*, under the title "The Turkish View of the Massacres." This is a longer version of the report that Mavroyeni sent to Gresham. See "The Turkish View of the Massacres," *New York Times*, 12 December 1894.

[56] For more details on violence in Bayazet and Alashkert, see Gevorg Vardanyan, «Հայությունը երկու կայսրությունների միջև. 1877–1878 թթ. ռուս-թուրքական պատերազմի Կովկասյան ճակատը օսմանյան պատերազմական քարոզչության մեջ» [Armenians between Two Empires: The Caucasian Front of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 in Ottoman War Propaganda], *Tsėghaspanagitakan handes* 4, no. 1 (2015): 11–24.

[57] Miller, "Sasun 1894," 162–168.

[58] Gevorg Vardanyan, "Remembering Medz Yeghern: Armenian Genocide and Armenian Americans, 1890s–1965" (PhD diss., North Carolina State University, Raleigh, 2023), 103–107.

> Toward the end of July last, and at the instigation of an Armenian, Hampartzoun by name, the men of ten villages near Moush, organized into bands and, armed with guns, pistols, axes, and other implements, attacked the tribe of Delikan, killed several of this tribe, and then made an onslaught on the tribes of Bekiran and Badikan. These bands burned the nephew of Emmer Agha, one of the chiefs of the Bekiran tribe Hadji, alive, and not only outraged the Moslem women of the Kulli-guzat village, but also put them to an atrocious death. Men were also tortured in an even more ferocious way. Not content with these criminal and illegal acts, the same bands also burned several villages inhabitated by Mussulmans. Thanks, however, to measures taken by the constituted authorities, the bands in question were scattered and their leader, Hampartzoun, as also the priest Mighirditch, of Kizil Killisse, and other guilty persons, were arrested and brought to justice.
>
> The assertion often published by the European press that the regular troops shot harmless women and children is absolutely false. No person without arms was killed. Twenty insurgents who had surrendered to the authorities received considerate treatment, and were released after their depositions before the courts of Moush were taken. The place where Hampartzoun and his confederates were found was made known by these 20 insurgents. These facts prove that only 20 among the insurgents surrendered to the authorities, and that, with the exception of the brigands who had revolted, no other person was maltreated.[59]

A close reading of this document reveals several important points regarding how the Ottoman State denied violence against Armenians. First, the document frames Armenians as aggressors, claiming they were organized into armed bands that carried out brutal attacks, including arson and sexual violence. Second, it employs sensationalist and inflammatory rhetoric, alleging that Armenians burned a tribal leader's nephew alive and committed sexual violence and murder against Muslim women. Third, and perhaps most importantly, it denied state involvement in the violence by flatly rejecting European media's allegations that the Ottoman army killed unarmed Armenian civilians, insisting that "no person without arms was killed." Fourth, the document portrays the state's response as lawful and restrained, contrasting it with the alleged criminality of Armenians and praising the Ottoman authorities for their "measures" to restore order. Finally, it minimizes and delegitimizes Armenian victims, failing to mention any massacres against them and portraying them as rebels while neglecting their suffering and claims to victimhood.[60] Overall, this was a deliberate strategy to shift blame onto Armenians, justify military repression, and undermine international criticism.

The denialist narrative in this document was not limited to the Ottoman Armenians. Mavroyeni included a brief introduction about American Armenians, advancing a defense that combined denial, victim-blaming, and an appeal to international legitimacy. The document

[59] "Mavroyeni Bey to Mr. Gresham, December 8, 1894,"
https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1894/d726, accessed 20.10.2024.
[60] Ibid.

portrayed American Armenians not as advocates for their compatriots' safety but as subversive agitators, accusing them of spreading "boldfaced slanders" and engaging in political "intrigues" aimed at discrediting the Ottoman government. This narrative sought to delegitimize the growing American Armenian campaign for awareness. The text expressed open resentment toward American sympathy for Armenians, dismissing such support as a product of religious prejudice rather than genuine persecution, which it derided as "imaginary." In a further attempt to undermine the credibility of American Armenians, the author alleged that they cynically acquired US citizenship only to return and propagate "revolutionary theories," even citing US Minister Alexander Terrell to support this claim. Positioning the Ottoman Empire as a sovereign power fending off external and internal threats, Mavroyeni justified its repression as "legitimate self-defense" against allegedly foreign-instigated rebellion. Ultimately, the letter appealed to the US government to withdraw its support for Armenians, presenting the Ottoman case as grounded in justice and equity while portraying American religious and moral concern as naïve, biased, and politically destabilizing.[61]

Mavroyeni arranged for an expanded version of Zeki Pasha's report to be circulated in the American press, and it was soon published in the *New York Times* on December 12 under the title "The Turkish View of the Massacres," as well as in the *New York Herald*.[62] To bolster his position, he referred to a statement made by Dr. Cyrus Hamlin, a respected American missionary, before the Sassoun massacres, in which Hamlin claimed that the Hnchaks were plotting violence as part of their goal to establish an Armenian state within the Ottoman Empire. Mavroyeni emphasized that if even Hamlin – widely seen as sympathetic to Armenians – portrayed the Hnchaks as dangerous radicals, it must reflect the reality. However, the very next day, Hamlin publicly denounced Mavroyeni's interpretation, accusing him of distorting his remarks. Hamlin insisted that the revolutionaries posed little real threat and were merely a handful of impulsive young activists. He expressed deep frustration that the Ottoman representative would use his earlier comments in an attempt to justify atrocities that had provoked global outrage among Christian communities.[63]

Expanding Anti-Armenian Propaganda: Mavroyeni Bey, Alexander Russell Webb, Islamic Solidarity, and the Price of Ottoman Patronage

Alexander Russell Webb (1846–1916) was an American writer, editor, and diplomat, recognized as one of the earliest American converts to Islam and a prominent advocate for the religion in the United States during the late nineteenth century. Born in Hudson, New York, Webb pursued a career in journalism before serving as the US consul in the Philippines from 1887 to 1892.

[61] Ibid.
[62] *New York Times*, 12 December 1894. For the New *York Herald* version, see An American Observer [Alexander Russell Webb], *A Few Facts about Turkey under the Reign of Abdul Hamid II* (New York: J.J. Little & co., 1895), 57–58.
[63] *New York Herald*, November 19, 20, 1894. Cited in Robert Mirak, *Torn Between Two Lands: Armenians in America, 1890 to World War I* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 215.

During his time there, he developed a deep interest in Eastern philosophies and ultimately embraced Islam in the early 1890s. His conversion was influenced by extensive reading, particularly of Islamic literature, and correspondence with Muslims in India. After converting, he adopted the name Mohammad Alexander Russell Webb and envisioned himself as a cultural intermediary between Islam and the Anglo-American world.[64] After resigning from his diplomatic position in 1892, Webb toured India and returned to the United States in 1893, where he began working intensively to advance Islam in America. He established what he called the "American Islamic Propaganda" movement (also known as the "American Mission").[65] His mission lasted until 1896, during which he built a long-lasting relationship with the Ottoman state. In 1901, Sultan Abdul Hamid II appointed him as Honorary Consul General to New York. Webb even traveled to Turkey, where he received the honorific title of "Bey" [Sir] and two Ottoman orders of merit. One of his key initiatives was the establishment of *Moslem World*, America's first Islamic publication, as well as *The Voice of Islam* and the consolidated *Moslem World and Voice of Islam*. Through these platforms, Webb promoted Islamic teachings, corrected Western misrepresentations of Islam, and sought to construct a distinctly American Islamic identity.[66] His activities culminated in his participation in the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, where he was the representative of Islam and presented a lecture aimed at elevating Islam's moral and spiritual superiority.[67]

After attending the Parliament of the World's Religions, Alexander Russell Webb returned to New York and inaugurated the new headquarters of his Islamic mission on Twentieth Street in Manhattan on October 6, 1893. However, it soon became evident that the financial support pledged by his Indian benefactors was neither sufficient nor sustainable. As a result, Webb was forced to shut down the Manhattan office in 1894. Confronted by growing financial difficulties, he sought aid from the Ottoman diplomatic mission in Washington. He approached Ottoman Minister Mavroyeni Bey, seeking assistance. Webb explained that his Indian funding had collapsed and emphasized the financial needs of his publishing endeavors: *The Moslem World* required a monthly budget of $837, while *The Voice of Islam* needed only $35. In response, Mavroyeni submitted a formal appeal on Webb's behalf to the Ottoman Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 21 December 1893. In his petition, Mavroyeni argued that supporting Webb's initiatives aligned with Ottoman interests, especially since Webb had consistently portrayed the Turks in a positive light. He also recommended that the financial support remain confidential to avoid diplomatic complications. Mavroyeni proposed that Webb receive a monthly subsidy of 25,000 Ottoman kurush, approximately equivalent to $1,100 at the time. The proposal reached Sultan Abdul Hamid II on 15 January 1894. It remains uncertain how much Webb ultimately

[64] For more details, see Umar Faruq Abd-Allah, *A Muslim in Victorian America: The Life of Alexander Russell Webb* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 47–79. For more info, see Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb, *Islam in America* (New York: Oriental Publishing Company, 1893).
[65] Abd-Allah, *A Muslim in Victorian America*, 159–160.
[66] Brent D. Singleton, "The Moslem World: A History of America's Earliest Islamic Newspaper and Its Successors," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affair*s 27, no. 2 (2007): 297–307.
[67] See Walter R. Houghton, *Neely's History of the Parliament of Religions and Religious Congresses at the World's Columbian Exposition* (Chicago: F. Tennyson Neely, 1894), 459–464.

received, but by the end of March 1894, he appeared to have been granted a sum of $500, possibly funneled discreetly through a figure named Mukhtar Pasha.[68]

Mavroyeni's collaboration with Webb soon extended beyond religious advocacy, as Webb became involved in Ottoman political propaganda and image building in the US. Together, they launched a well-funded campaign to represent the Ottomans as the true bearers of Islamic civilization and to counter Western Orientalist narratives. The Armenian Question became a major axis around which the Ottoman-Webb alliance functioned in the American context. Following the Sassoun massacres, Webb took an overtly anti-Armenian stance, aligning himself fully with the Ottoman official narrative that framed Armenians as violent insurrectionists rather than victims. In public writings and pamphlets, Webb accused American missionaries and newspapers of spreading falsehoods about Ottoman atrocities and argued that Armenians had manipulated Western sentiment to provoke anti-Muslim and anti-Turkish hostility. This line of argumentation was deeply embedded in his desire to shield Islam and the Ottoman Empire from Western critique and to maintain the integrity of his sponsors' legitimacy.

Webb's anti-Armenian stance found its most explicit expression in two pamphlets he authored. The first, titled *A Few Facts about Turkey under the Sultan Abdul Hamid II*, was published in 1895 under the pseudonym "American Observer." This anonymity was a deliberate strategy to obscure Webb's authorship and lend the work greater credibility. It also concealed his support from the Ottoman Empire – a connection the Ottoman embassy sought to keep confidential – especially since the publication advanced Ottoman political interests. Among all of Webb's activities conducted under the banner of *American Islamic Propaganda*, none presented more ethically and politically complex challenges than his involvement with the anti-Armenian pamphlets. In this work, Webb adopted a markedly partisan stance in support of the official Ottoman position while simultaneously exhibiting pronounced hostility toward Armenians, including the circulation of racially charged and derogatory rhetoric. The content and tone of the pro-Ottoman pamphlet reveal the extent to which Webb had come under Turkish sway and illustrate how his Ottoman sponsors were prepared to instrumentalize both him and his broader mission for their own political objectives. In doing so, they effectively subordinated the religious ambitions of the movement. The Armenian-focused publications marked a significant shift in the character of Webb's efforts, transforming what had initially been conceived as a religious outreach initiative into a vehicle for political propaganda.

This pamphlet presents the Ottoman Empire's modernizing achievements – such as advancements in railroads, maritime infrastructure, agriculture, commerce, education, and finance – with the aim of projecting an image of economic vitality and national strength. Equally important was the glorification of the Ottoman military and navy, depicted as powerful instruments capable of defending the empire against external threats.[69] This celebratory portrayal served two intertwined purposes: first, to present the Ottoman Empire as a progressive and industrious state to Victorian American readers; and second, to discourage foreign intervention

[68] Abd-Allah, *A Muslim in Victorian America*, 245–246.
[69] An American Observer, *A Few Facts about Turkey*, 35–41.

by emphasizing the empire's stability and self-sufficiency. A close reading of the pamphlet reveals that the emphasis on economic and military strength is closely linked to the Ottoman response to the American Armenian engagements with the Armenian Question. In this context, the work directly opposed the efforts of Armenian immigrants in the aftermath of the Sassoun massacres, whose appeals to Western governments aimed to expose Ottoman violence and to advocate for intervention to prevent further atrocities.[70] It is therefore telling that the most extensive section of the pamphlet devoted to the empire's accomplishments was purely anti-Armenian propaganda.

In the final and largest chapter dedicated to Armenians, the pamphlet assembled a collection of materials designed to promote denial and propaganda, aiming to delegitimize both the sufferings of Ottoman Armenians and the involvement of American actors. It reproduced the Zeki Pasha report and denied the Sassoun Massacres, reducing the Ottoman Armenian population to just 900,000 – a significant and intentional undercount – while portraying the Ottoman Empire as a model of religious tolerance.[71] One particularly revealing passage claimed that Armenians sought American citizenship not out of genuine loyalty, but to exploit US diplomatic protection against the Ottoman state.[72] One of the most striking aspects of the pamphlet is its parallel between Native Americans and Ottoman Armenians. Far from being incidental, this comparison is used to justify Ottoman suspicion of American missionaries, who were depicted as hypocrites for condemning abuses abroad while ignoring the plight of Native Americans and African Americans at home. By invoking the United States' treatment of Indigenous peoples, the pamphlet reframed Armenian suffering as a question of state security rather than humanitarian concern, thereby deflecting criticism by exposing perceived double standards.[73] In doing so, it used the abuses of other empires to justify or normalize its own, implying that all empires were equally violent and that, therefore, external criticism was invalid or hypocritical.

The second pamphlet, *The Armenian Troubles and Where the Responsibility Lies*, appeared between late 1895 and early 1896 and further promoted the denial of the Hamidian massacres. Like the first pamphlet, it was published anonymously but under a different pseudonym, "Correspondent." Rather than presenting original analysis, it compiled materials that Webb collected from various sources, possibly and likely with assistance from Mavroyeni Bay. Whereas 18 of the 67 pages of *A Few Facts about Turkey* addressed the Armenian Question, all 35 pages of *The Armenian Troubles* were devoted to it, further advancing a distorted portrayal of the massacres. This second pamphlet was released after a significant wave of atrocities in the fall of 1895, during which a large number of Armenians were massacred in various Ottoman Armenian settlements. Consequently, there was a stronger international response and greater awareness at this time. This likely explains why, while the first pamphlet completely denied the

[70] For more information on the nature of Armenian immigrant's activism, see Vardanyan and Hakobyan "'Thanksgiving for Americans."
[71] An American Observer, *A Few Facts about Turkey*, 56–61.
[72] Ibid., 65.
[73] Ibid., 66–67.

existence of the Sassoun massacres, the second pamphlet began by stating that the Turkish government "ha[d] never denied that serious disturbances have taken place at the district of Sassoun." It then asserted that "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."[74] Reading between the lines, the opening sentence suggests an evolution in denialistic discourse. First, instead of entirely denying the Sassoun massacres, the second pamphlet denied that there was a "premeditated massacre." Second, by the time the second pamphlet was published, the new wave of violence in various Ottoman settlements, due to its scale and intensity, overshadowed the Sassoun massacres. By mentioning or focusing solely on Sassoun, the pamphlet aimed to divert attention from the ongoing large-scale violence to a local incident that occurred more than a year ago.

A notable aspect of *The Armenian Troubles* is its use of derogatory and racist language in describing Armenians, often resorting to ethnic slurs. For instance, while praising the Ottoman Empire for its tolerance, Webb remarked, "Armenians, who, as a race, are certainly much inferior to the Turks, occupy very high positions in Turkey."[75] In another instance, while discussing British public opinion, he claimed:

> No real esteem for the Armenians themselves exists in England. Besides, everybody admits in Europe that Armenians are, as a race, much inferior to the Turks. Armenians, even in olden times, showed no greatness. Their influence in the world has been absolutely nil. In science, in art, in literature, in warlike achievements, they have left no trace.[76]

Promoting the denial of violence and placing all blame on the "criminal efforts of Armenian revolutionary committees" (p. 6), *The Armenian Troubles* aimed to shape American public opinion and targeted three main groups: American Armenians, American missionaries, and British politics. Webb claims that the pamphlet "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 argued that "the whole atmosphere on this subject has been polluted with falsehoods and exaggeration."[77] Consequently, he focused on those responsible for spreading information about the Armenian massacres. A substantial portion of the text scrutinized missionary accounts. For example, he criticized Rev. Frederick Davis Greene's *The Armenian Crisis in Turkey* (1895), accusing Greene of extensively using refugee testimonies, which he described as "a second-hand testimony, or, rather, solely an Armenian testimony."[78] To support his claims, he cited Cyrus Hamlin's statement published in the *Congregationalist* on 23 December 1893. As mentioned earlier in this

[74] A Correspondent [Alexander Russell Webb], *The Armenian Troubles and Where the Responsibility Lies* (New York: J. J. Little, 1895), 5.
[75] Webb, *The Armenian Troubles*, 5.
[76] Ibid., 9.
[77] Ibid., 3.
[78] Ibid., 17–18.

article, Hamlin expressed concern in this article about the activities of the Hnchakian party, which he accused of undermining Protestant missionary work and endangering Christian Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. He warned missionaries and Protestant Armenians not to associate with or support them.[79] Remarkably, Cyrus Hamlin's letter was also extensively exploited by Ottoman minister Mavroyeni. In December 1895, Mavroyeni sent a letter to Secretary of State Olney, enclosing Hamlin's letter to reinforce his misrepresentation of Armenian political parties. By citing Hamlin, Mavroyeni attempted to validate the Ottoman position with an American voice and discredit the Armenian cause as extremist, thereby challenging US moral condemnation and shaping international perceptions of the crisis.[80] Ironically, in a public letter published in the *New York Herald* on December 20, 1894, American missionary and educator Cyrus Hamlin rejected Mavroyeni's appropriation of his earlier remarks to downplay the Armenian massacres. Clarifying his original intentions, Hamlin emphasized that he sought to highlight the weakness and futility of Armenian revolutionary efforts, not to justify violence against Armenians. He described the Armenians as a noble but scattered and unarmed population, incapable of mounting any meaningful rebellion. Hamlin condemned the massacres as atrocities that had shocked the Christian world and argued that they could not be excused by citing isolated revolutionary activity, which had only served to inflame Muslim fanaticism. He warned that Turkey, by overreacting to minor threats, had once again fallen into a geopolitical trap laid by Russia, which he believed aimed to exploit the situation to extend its influence under the guise of protecting Christian minorities.[81]

In his anti-Armenian brochure, Webb attributed British public support for Armenians not to genuine sympathy or respect, but to a combination of religious bias and political opportunism. He argued that English public opinion favored Armenians primarily because they were Christians, and secondarily as a means of punishing the Ottoman Empire for resisting British interference in Egypt, which Webb claimed rightfully belonged to the Sultan. Drawing an inflammatory analogy, he compares Britain's occupation of Egypt and its condemnation of Ottoman treatment of Armenians to a hypothetical scenario in which England seizes a US state while simultaneously denouncing American treatment of Native Americans. On this basis, Webb warned that American support for Armenians risked aligning the United States with British imperial interests and European power politics, urging instead that American public opinion remain detached and skeptical toward both Armenian claims and character.[82]

In his anti-Armenian tract, Webb interpreted the post-Sassoun events as confirmation of what he characterized as revolutionary and subversive intent. He argued that Western support for Armenians, particularly in England and the United States, stemmed not from an objective evaluation of the situation or any genuine merits of the Armenian people – whom he disparaged as entirely lacking in virtue – but from religious solidarity and political bias. While he concedes

[79] Ibid., 6.
[80] "Mavroyeni Bey to Mr. Gresham, 8 December 1894,"
https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1894/d726, accessed 20.10.2024.
[81] *New York Herald*, 20 December 1894.
[82] Webb, *The Armenian Troubles*, 9-10.

that Armenian activism in the United States was not politically motivated, he criticized American support as naively rooted in shared Christianity. Webb attributed much of this misplaced sympathy to Protestant missionary organizations, accusing them of manipulating humanitarian efforts to advance religious conversions. He highlighted the exclusive distribution of aid to Armenians during periods of famine as evidence of sectarian favoritism, suggesting that such actions destabilized American impartiality and contributed to the threat of armed rebellion within the Ottoman Empire.[83]

Conclusion

This article examined the Ottoman Empire's campaign of denial and propaganda in the United States during the Hamidian massacres of 1894–1896, focusing on the actions of Minister Mavroyeni Bey and his collaborators. It demonstrated how Ottoman officials sought to reframe the massacres as legitimate acts of self-defense against Armenian "provocation," disseminating a narrative that portrayed Armenians as aggressors and the empire as a victim of foreign interference.

This study advances our understanding of the denial of late Ottoman collective and state violence against Armenians. Focusing on the activities of the Ottoman diplomatic representative in the United States, it demonstrates that denialist strategies went beyond the mere reproduction of Zeki Pasha's report, which underpinned the official state narrative. On American soil, these efforts took on new forms, including attempts to discredit and undermine American Armenians. As our previous research has shown, American Armenians responded to the massacres by organizing protests, submitting petitions to Congress, and collaborating with missionary and humanitarian networks. Their activism played a crucial role in raising awareness, mobilizing relief, and prompting American institutions – including the press, religious organizations, and the federal government – to engage with the Armenian Question in hopes of preventing further atrocities. Consequently, they emerged as central figures in the publicization of Ottoman violence and thus became key targets of denialist campaigns.

The article has also shown how figures like Alexander Russell Webb became instrumental in amplifying these narratives. Webb's conversion to Islam and alignment with Ottoman interests enabled him to disseminate anti-Armenian rhetoric under the guise of religious outreach and cultural mediation. His pamphlets not only denied Ottoman responsibility for the massacres but also attacked the credibility of missionaries, journalists, and American Armenians who sought to expose the violence. In both diplomatic and public arenas, the Ottoman campaign systematically downplayed atrocities, manipulated facts, and co-opted Western voices to legitimize its actions.

[83] Ibid., 21.

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