

## The United States' Various Responses to the Armenian Genocide

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*In 1915 during the First World War, the Turks of the Ottoman Empire killed a significant number of Christian Armenians. The Turkish leaders targeted the Armenian people for allying with Turkey's traditional enemy, Russia. The Turks deported most Armenians to camps and murdered them, but also killed others in their homes and communities where U.S. missionaries and diplomats witnessed it. The Americans then reported these atrocities to the U.S. asking for intervention. These reports brought about awareness of the killings and prompted various responses from the United States. An immediate popular response came from the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief (ACASR). ACASR successfully raised millions of dollars for Armenian relief through its self-directed efforts to hold fundraisers and rallies throughout the country. The government responded informally through the American Committee for the Independence of Armenia (ACIA), designed to help Armenia gain independence. This long-range response failed in gaining independence for Armenia because the committee had to persuade another entity, the federal government, to act in a particular way over which the committee had no control. This paper examines the differences between the American's nongovernmental and governmental response; in particular it maintains that the private committee, the ACASR, was more successful than the quasi-governmental ACIA because ACASR's goals were more immediate and achievable through its own efforts.*

In 1915 during the First World War, the Turks of the Ottoman Empire killed a significant number of Christian Armenians. The Armenia area was located in the Caucasus region of the Ottoman Empire, which made it vulnerable to Turkish attacks. There had also been religious tension between the Christian minorities, including the Armenians, and the Muslim Turks. In 1908, the sultanate of the Ottoman Empire was overthrown during the Young Turk revolution and the extremist faction took over. This faction was led by the dictatorial triumvirate of Talaat Pasha, Enver Pasha, and Jemal Pasha. By 1915, they accused the Armenians of allying with Turkey's traditional enemy, Russia, in the early stages of WWI and the Turks began what many consider genocide against them with a massacre in Constantinople on April 24. Between 1915 and 1918, the Turks killed or deported to camps over 500,000 Armenians.<sup>1</sup>

The United States responded to the massacres in various ways; including the immediate, popular response from the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief (ACASR) in raising relief for the Armenians. In addition, the U.S. government responded informally through the privately-operated American Committee for the Independence of Armenia (ACIA), to help Armenia become an independent state.

There is significant literature on the Armenian genocide itself, but recently new research has focused on America's response to the genocide. The most noted research comes from Peter Balakian, a Professor of Humanities at Colgate University, and it details the failures of the U.S.

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Jones, *Genocide: A Comprehensive Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 105.

government to aid and protect the Armenians.<sup>2</sup> Another scholar of genocide, Mark Malkasian, explores these failures analyzing the disorganization within the government sponsored committees, such as ACIA. Balakian and Malkasian mostly focus on the government's responses.<sup>3</sup> However, analysis of this governmental response should be developed further, along with other responses within the country. In this paper I examine the differences between America's nongovernmental and governmental response; in particular I maintain that the private committee, ACASR, was more successful in providing relief to Armenians than the quasi-governmental ACIA was in gaining independence for an Armenian state because ACASR's goals were more immediate and achievable through its own efforts. ACIA had to persuade another entity, the federal government, to act in a particular way over which the committee had no control.

The key elements in bringing the Armenian massacres to the United States' attention were Christian missionaries and U.S. diplomats. Missionaries from the U.S., mostly Protestants, had been in the Ottoman Empire since the early nineteenth century. They first attempted to convert Turks to Christianity, but then shifted to helping the Christian minorities flourish, including establishing universities "instilling their students with a sense of national identity and pride."<sup>4</sup>

The missionaries witnessed the first stage of the genocide in 1915, when intellectuals at the missionary schools and other Armenian men were imprisoned and murdered. The Turks then rounded up the remaining Armenians and deported them to concentration camps. William Shedd, a Presbyterian missionary, described the Turkish governor, Jevdet Bey, and Turkish soldiers killing "800 villagers."<sup>5</sup> The missionaries began writing home to their families and the State Department. In one instance, missionaries Dr. Clarence and Elizabeth Ussher cared for wounded Armenians in their clinic. They wrote to the State Department that "many Armenian and American lives were in danger."<sup>6</sup> The American missionaries asked for aid, money, and manpower; along with requests for the government to intervene to end the killings.

U.S. diplomats in the Ottoman Empire also responded. The most important of these was Henry Morgenthau. He was appointed U.S. Ambassador in Constantinople by Woodrow Wilson and stationed there during the deportations and killings. He was made aware of the situation by U.S. consuls Leslie Davis in Harput and Jesse Jackson in Aleppo, both central locations of the events occurring to the Armenians. Beginning in April 1915, Morgenthau sent monthly telegrams to Secretary of State Robert Lansing reporting on the unfolding events. On July 10, he indicated that the systematic repression had escalated, stating, "reports indicate a systematic attempt to uproot peaceful Armenian populations and through arbitrary arrests, terrible tortures, wholesale

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Balakian, *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America's Response* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers Inc., 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Mark Malkasian, "The Disintegration of the Armenian Cause in the United States, 1918-1927," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 16, no. 3 (August 1984): 349-365.

<sup>4</sup> Michael B. Oren, *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East, 1776 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007), 13.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 330.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 331.

expulsions and deportations...to bring destruction and destitution on them.”<sup>7</sup> He asked for aid and advice on how to handle the situation. On July 12 and July 13 he sent more telegrams repeating his request for aid from the U.S. government. Lansing responded July 16 stating, “The Department can offer no additional suggestions relative to this most difficult situation other than that you continue to act as in the past.”<sup>8</sup> This evidence reveals that as the Armenian situation escalated, official United States policy was to do nothing. Indeed, until it entered the war in 1917, U.S. foreign policy was to remain neutral. This explains why Lansing did not intervene; doing so would have opposed the Ottoman Empire, one of the Central Powers, and broken neutrality. Morgenthau persisted, though, by constantly sending reports to Lansing. Other American missionaries and state officials informed the U.S. of the mass killings in hopes that they could help the Armenian people.<sup>9</sup>

Such reports prompted various responses from the United States. Newspapers reported many times a month on the worsening condition of the Armenians within the Ottoman Empire. The *New York Times* published a total of 145 articles in 1915 alone.<sup>10</sup> There are not many studies analyzing articles published about the Armenian genocide, but elements of these articles show how reporters responded to the killings. The *Times* used Henry Morgenthau, familiar to Americans because of his Ambassadorship, and specific details reported back from Armenia in titles and within articles. Towards the beginning of 1915, articles often mentioned Ambassador Morgenthau, describing his efforts to negotiate with the Turks on the Armenians’ behalf. Two articles in April 1915 focused mainly on him, “Appeal to Turkey to Stop Massacres”<sup>11</sup> and “Morgenthau Intercedes.”<sup>12</sup> Another aspect of the newspaper articles was the frequent use of numbers in headlines and articles. The *Times* used such numbers in headlines to display the severity of the situation and grab the reader’s attention. One article, entitled “Burn 1,000 Armenians,” states, “1,000 men, women and children are reported to have been locked in a wooden building and burned to death. In another large village thirty-six persons, it is said, escaped massacres.”<sup>13</sup> Other article titles are “6,000 Armenians Killed,”<sup>14</sup> and “1,500,000 Armenians Starve.”<sup>15</sup> These articles urged people to help, acting as a form of propaganda.

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<sup>7</sup> Henry Morgenthau to Robert Lansing, Washington, July 10, 1915, in Ara Sarafian, ed., *United States Official Records on the Armenian Genocide, 1915-1917* (London: Taderon Press, 2004), 51.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Lansing to Henry Morgenthau, Constantinople, July 16, 1915, in Sarafian, *United States Official Records on the Armenian Genocide*, 53.

<sup>9</sup> Balakian, *The Burning Tigris*, 279.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 282.

<sup>11</sup> "Appeal to Turkey to Stop Massacres," *New York Times*, April 28, 1915, in Armeniapedia: The Armenian Encyclopedia, [http://www.armeniapedia.org/index.php?title=Appeal\\_To\\_Turkey\\_to\\_Stop\\_Massacres\\_-\\_nyt19150428](http://www.armeniapedia.org/index.php?title=Appeal_To_Turkey_to_Stop_Massacres_-_nyt19150428) (accessed November 15, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> "Morgenthau Intercedes," *New York Times*, April 29, 1915, in Armeniapedia: The Armenian Encyclopedia, [http://www.armeniapedia.org/index.php?title=Morgenthau\\_Intercedes\\_-\\_nyt1915\\_0429](http://www.armeniapedia.org/index.php?title=Morgenthau_Intercedes_-_nyt1915_0429) (accessed November 15, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> "Burn 1,000 Armenians," *New York Times*, April 20, 1915, in Armeniapedia: The Armenian Encyclopedia, [http://www.armeniapedia.org/index.php?title=Burn\\_1,000\\_Armenians-nyt1915\\_0820](http://www.armeniapedia.org/index.php?title=Burn_1,000_Armenians-nyt1915_0820) (accessed November 15, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> "Armenian Genocide Contemporary Articles," Armeniapedia: The Armenian Encyclopedia, [http://www.armeniapedia.org/index.php?title=Armenian\\_Genocide\\_Contemporary\\_Articles](http://www.armeniapedia.org/index.php?title=Armenian_Genocide_Contemporary_Articles) (accessed November 15, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

This agitation helped elicit a quick, popular response in the form of the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief (ACASR). After Morgenthau sent his July telegrams asking for aid, the Department of State asked the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions to find a way to secure funds. The people in charge were James L. Barton, once a missionary in the region, and Cleveland Dodge, a philanthropist who set up schools overseas. Members of ACASR, described as “businessmen-philanthropists,” donated \$100,000 in their first meeting.<sup>16</sup> They sponsored rallies and fundraisers and sent that money to the U.S. diplomats in Armenia. ACASR researched what exactly was occurring in the Ottoman Empire and published the findings through the press, which inspired more help. President Wilson called ACASR “the true spirit of our country,” after it raised \$20 million by 1916.<sup>17</sup> When the U.S. entered World War I in 1917, ACASR operations slowed, but Congress incorporated it in 1919, renaming it the Near East Relief and leaving Barton in charge. The committee continued to raise funds through smaller events until it disbanded in 1929. The total amount it raised during its existence was \$116,000,000.<sup>18</sup>

ACASR’s events, ranging from mass rallies to small fundraisers throughout the country, helped unify the organization and the country to support relief. Rallies were held in places like Detroit, New York’s Amsterdam Opera House and the Philadelphia Stadium. The rally at the New York Hippodrome raised \$76,000. Other fundraisers occurred, such as the 1916 Harvard-Yale football game from which all proceeds went towards Armenian relief. ACASR also enticed wealthy American families to donate to the cause. The Rockefeller Foundation had given \$610,000 by 1917, and the Guggenheim Fund donated \$30,000. Additionally, ACASR asked local clubs to hold fundraisers. Lions, Kiwanis, and Rotary clubs across the country collected money from their members and held events.<sup>19</sup>

ACASR even solicited help from children. Before the Armenian crisis, adults did not make children purposely aware of other countries’ suffering. During it, parents and teachers used the phrase “starving Armenians,” with children, which was coined by missionary Clara Barton and promoted by ACASR.<sup>20</sup> Parents often told their children not to waste food and to clear their plates because of the “starving Armenians” overseas. Children contributed to the Armenian cause through weekly Sunday school fundraisers. They participated in bake sales and helped with lemonade stands during the summer. Children raising money for the Armenians show ACASR’s cause even reached a local level in American society.

In addition, films and documentaries on the Armenian genocide helped raise money and awareness. One prominent film was *Ravished Armenia* which is about Armenian survivor, Aurora Mardiganian. Upon her arrival in America, publishers made her survival story public through newspaper articles and by turning it into a novel. This caught the attention of Hollywood which

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<sup>16</sup> Balakian, *The Burning Tigris*, 281.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 289-290.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.

produced a film version of Mardiganian's story. ACASR used the film to raise \$100 million, in part because it allowed the general population to contribute just by buying a movie ticket.<sup>21</sup> ASCAR successfully raised millions of dollars for Armenian relief through its self-directed efforts to hold fundraisers and rallies throughout the country.

The American Committee for the Independence of Armenia (ACIA) suffered a different fate. After WWI, the Ottoman Empire collapsed, and the allied world powers had to determine what to do with it. Even though the Armenian killings had ended, concern for the Armenians continued into 1919 because of the instability that attended the Ottoman collapse. The U.S. government responded informally to this concern through the ACIA, formed in 1919 to help Armenia gain independence and become a nation unto itself. Vahan Cardashian, an Armenian lawyer who immigrated to New York in 1902, created the ACIA. The 1915 mass killings in Armenia affected him because his immediate family members were victims. He quit his law practice to advocate for Armenian independence. Cardashian sent letters to prominent political, business, and church figures that then pushed the United States government to formally recognize an Armenian Republic and to provide the Armenians with any assistance they needed.<sup>22</sup>

The ACIA was unsteady from its start. Committee members united in the same goal to help Armenia support itself through independence, but once they began to determine how to accomplish nationhood, members disagreed over the level of autonomy Armenia should have. James L. Barton, of the ACASR, was a key member of the ACIA since he already had experience with the Armenian conflict. He supported partial independence because full independence might adversely affect missionary operations in the Ottoman Empire. He wanted to protect the century's worth of investment and resources missionaries had put into the region. In this case, Barton's self-interests motivated his opposition towards the main goals of the ACIA. Barton constantly debated Cardashian over Armenian nationhood, affecting the group's unity and effectiveness.<sup>23</sup>

Many important government officials originally supported the ACIA's goals. Former President Theodore Roosevelt believed President Wilson had done too little to aid the Armenians and should have declared war on Turkey. He blamed Wilsonian diplomacy in a letter to Cleveland Dodge stating, "The Armenian horror is an accomplished fact. Its occurrence was largely due to the policy of pacifism this nation has followed...the presence of our missionaries, and our failure to go to war, did not prevent the Turks from massacring a million Armenians."<sup>24</sup> Roosevelt, though his bellicose persona and opposition to Wilson diminished the value of his opinion, was not alone. Others also wanted to use military intervention. Cardashian proposed this and even Ambassador Morgenthau mentioned troops were needed to stop the killings in one of his July 1915 telegrams to Lansing.

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<sup>21</sup> Leshu Torchin, "Ravished Armenia': Visual Media, Humanitarian Advocacy, and the Formation of Witnessing Publics," *American Anthropologist* 108, no. 1 (March 2006), 214-220.

<sup>22</sup> Malkasian, "The Disintegration of the Armenian Cause," 351-352.

<sup>23</sup> Balakian, *The Burning Tigris*, 308.

<sup>24</sup> Theodore Roosevelt to Cleveland Hoadley Dodge, Oyster Bay, May 11, 1918, in *Armenian National Institute*, <http://www.armenian-genocide.org/roosevelt.html>

No matter the support, the U.S. did not want to get involved in the Turkish War of Independence against the Allies' occupation following WWI. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge—Theodore Roosevelt's closest friend—opposed the ACIA's March 1919 request for the U.S. to send in 50,000 troops. Lodge's resistance was entangled in his isolationist opposition towards the U.S. entrance into the League of Nations. He did not want the U.S. obligated to other countries' conflicts. The senator's concerns influenced President Wilson who denied ACIA's request.<sup>25</sup>

Hope came to the ACIA in 1920 when the Ottoman Empire and Allies signed the Sévres Treaty, one of the terms of which called for the creation of the Democratic Republic of Armenia and recognition of independence. This was short lived because a conflict arose among Turkey, Armenia, and Russia. For protection from the Turks, Armenia signed an agreement with Russia to be annexed as Soviet Armenia.<sup>26</sup> After this, the ACIA cause was finished. The committee did not succeed in part because of internal disorganization. Factions within, one side led by James Barton, disagreed over the level of independence Armenia should be granted. External factors, however, played a much bigger role. Lodge's opposition to military intervention, and Wilson's refusal to send troops was one, the Turkish-Armenian-Russian contretemps was another, and the solution to both—Armenia's annexation to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics—was the final impediment to the ACIA's goal of an independent Armenian state.

Examination of two U.S. responses to the Armenian genocide indicates that the goals each committee sought were key factors in effectiveness. The American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief (ACASR) responded quickly, holding its first meeting in September 1915 just months after Morgenthau's requests for American humanitarian aid.<sup>27</sup> The next step it took was holding rallies, which brought together members to organize. ACASR campaigns, such as *Ravished Armenia*, encouraging children to help, and the rallies allowed success because it was achieved through its own efforts. ACASR did not have to rely on another entity to achieve its goals. Supplies and funds that came from the relief organization helped Armenians survive. During this time there were no humanitarian relief organizations other than the Red Cross, which was still very young. ACASR began without a model to follow for large-scale relief. ACASR was able to organize itself and raise resources on its own despite not having a previous example as a guideline.

In contrast, the quasi-governmental American Committee for the Independence of Armenia (AICA) was unsuccessful. The internal disorganization partly contributed to ACIA's Armenian aid. Its original unity disintegrated when factions formed over the level of independence Armenia should have and the question of using the U.S. army to impose Armenian independence. Debate over how to gain independence for Armenia slowed the committee's efforts and left Armenia vulnerable to annexation into the Soviet Union. A major factor in their failure to make Armenia independent was having to persuade another entity, the United States government, help to establish this. ACIA had no control over the government's final decision on military involvement or allowing Armenian annexation.

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<sup>25</sup> Malkasian, "The Disintegration of the Armenian Cause," 353.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 355.

<sup>27</sup> Balakian, *Burning Tigris*, 279.

No matter how much of a failure the ACIA's efforts were, the more immediate response of the ACASR was beneficial and appreciated by the Armenians. The funds and supplies helped Armenians who had escaped the concentration camps survive. The Americans who went to Armenia were able to treat wounds and counsel them. Appreciation from the Armenian people is seen in a letter sent to Morgenthau from the Archbishop of Armenia:

We are grateful that at this time when such a large portion of the civilized world is engaged in a deplorable and disastrous war, the United States of America turn their benevolent attention to the suffering of Armenians and most generously render their moral and material help for their much needed relief.<sup>28</sup>

From the outside world, the aid given to the Armenians could have been better, but the people directly in the situation greatly appreciated what help they received. Examining the differences between the nongovernmental and governmental responses shows the ACASR was more successful than the government sponsored ACIA because the ACASR accomplished a smaller magnitude of goals and did not answer to another entity. This uncommon viewpoint on Armenian aid points out different aspects and gives a better understanding of the genocide and America's involvement. Official records, newspaper archives, and telegrams are important in advancing research in the United States response to the genocide.

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<sup>28</sup> Arch. Zaven Der Eghiyayan to Henry Morgenthau, Constantinople, December 24, 1915, in Sarafian, *United States Official Records on the Armenian Genocide*, 423.

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