

## THE IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM AND THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

ZAVEN MESSERLIAN

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In September 2001 I visited my brother David and his family in England and, profiting from the occasion, I visited the headquarters of the campaign for recognition of the Armenian genocide (CRAG) in Ealing, London and met there the office manager Hratch Koundarjian. During our discussion he mentioned to me that the Imperial War Museum was planning an exhibition in August 2002 on genocide and ethnic violence, and gave us the name of the person responsible for the exhibition, Susan Bardgett, so that I could write to her in order to include the Armenian Genocide.

The Imperial War Museum had received a complaint from the Turkish Embassy in August 2000 that an exhibition in the museum "should make textual changes to references about the Armenian killings", which the Turkish diplomat Mehmet Akat termed a "messy and painful affair". The British *Independent* in an editorial said that "it almost beggars belief"<sup>1</sup>. The newspaper said "imagine the German government declaring that, although a number of Jews died in the Second World War, it was because of poor health and as a result of the fighting"<sup>2</sup>

Robert Fisk wrote "but even the Imperial War Museum could bow to Turkey. When it staged another exhibition, *Crimes Against Humanity*, just over a year later - the very expression first used in 1915 about the Armenians - it included an entire panel in the Armenian sector containing Turkey's denial that the mass murders even took place"<sup>3</sup>

Fisk further wrote that "Turkey had already tried to undermine the authenticity of the photographic evidence of the genocide, demanding that the Hulton Getty picture library withdraw their famous picture of the Armenian dead-including a portrait by the brave German Armin Wegner of an Armenian girl and two smaller children lying dead amid garbage in 1915 on the grounds that there was no genocide. Hulton withdrew the pictures for three days but the agency's general manager, Matthew Batson, dismissed the Turkish objections".<sup>4</sup>

Such was the background at the Imperial War Museum when, upon the request of the representative of CRAG, I wrote to Susan Bardgett. The letter is given below in full.

ZAVEN MESSERLIAN, B.A., M.A.

P.O.B. 129, BEIRUT – LEBANON

December 28, 2001

Mrs. Susan Bardgett  
Genocide Exhibition office  
Imperial War Museum  
London Road  
London  
SE16HZ

Dear Lady,

Last September 2001 I had the opportunity to visit the Imperial War Museum. I saw amongst others the Holocaust Exhibition and the First World War section.

In the First World War section, I did not find any exhibit related to the Genocide perpetrated on the Armenians by the Ottoman Turkish Empire, to which fell 1,500,000 Armenians. As the author of the recently prize awarded book *The Premeditated Nature of the Genocide Perpetrated on the Armenians* (available in the British Library), I was disappointed. However, I was informed that your goodself and the staff of the Genocide Exhibition are preparing a Genocide Exhibition in August 2002.

I hope that the Genocide perpetrated on the Armenians will be included in this forthcoming Exhibition.

The Genocide perpetrated on the Armenians, termed "the holocaust of 1915" by former British Prime Minister Lloyd George (in his Memoirs of the Peace Conference), cannot be left out of any Genocide Exhibition for the following reasons.-

a) The Polish Jewish author Raphael Lemkin, who coined the term genocide and who is commonly regarded as the father of the Genocide Convention, frequently invoked the Armenian experience as an example of genocide. *The History of the Holocaust*, a handbook and dictionary (ed. Abraham J. Edelheit and Hershel Edelheit, San Francisco, Oxford, 1994) clearly states "World War I also witnessed the first modern act of genocide" (p. 16) referring to the Armenian Genocide.

b) Any serious Genocide Exhibition must include the first act of Genocide of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially if the oblivion of one encouraged the next one. Adolph Hitler was definitely encouraged by the Armenian Genocide's oblivion in committing the Holocaust. Hitler's phrase "After all who remembers today the extermination of the Armenians" when he gave orders to annihilate countless innocents in Obersalzberg on August 21, 1939 is well documented. Within three days on 25 August 1939, a short account of the speech, smuggled out the meeting, was transmitted to the British government by the British Embassy in Berlin (*Documents of British Foreign Policy 1919-1939*, edited by E.L Woodward and Rohan Butler, Third Series, vol VIII, 1939, [London, 1954], p. 257-269). The same document was made public in the U.S.A. on 17 October 1942, and *The New York Times* reported the story and excerpts from the document on the following day. In the summer of 1945 the document was in the possession of the prosecution at Nuremburg, and was used in the prosecution of war criminals (*Nazi Conspiracy Aggression*, office of the United States Chief Council for Prosecution of Axis Criminality, Washington D.C, 1946, vol VII, p.753).

c) The Armenian Genocide was termed "Crimes against humanity" in 1915, in an Allied (including the British) warning to the Ottoman government on May 24, 1915. This Allied warning and Article 230 of the Treaty of Sevres, constituted the legal basis of articles 6 (c) and 5 (c) of the Nuremburg and Tokyo charters for trying the World II criminals (see UN restricted E/CN.E/W.20 and F.O. 371/72810).

d) The genocide perpetrated on the Armenians was exposed to the world, essentially by the British *Blue Book, The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire* (Miscellaneous No. 31, [1916]. The genocide was successful in that there are no Armenians left on the Armenian plateau, our ancestral home for three millennia. The native Armenians were either massacred, starved to death, burnt alive, or deported. Former British Prime Minister, Sir Winston Churchill, wrote: "1915, the Turkish government began and ruthlessly carried out the infamous general massacre and deportation of Armenians in Asia Minor... the clearance of the race from Asia Minor was about as complete as such an act, on a scale so great, could well be... There is no reasonable doubt that the crime was planned and executed for political reasons." (W. Churchill, *The World Crisis: The Aftermath*, (London, 1929, p. 405).

e) The Ottoman Turkish government officially promulgated the Deportation Law on May 26, 1915, after the massacres had already begun, and continued after the above law. British intelligence found out from

Ottoman prisoner of war, Lt. Sayied Ahmed Moukhtar Ba'aj, that "deportation" meant "massacres" (F.O. 371/2781/264888 Secret Arabian Report of the Foreign Office, dated December 27, 1916).

In a letter dated October 3, 1918, and addressed to Lord Bryce, Robert Cecil, British Assistant Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, wrote: "The Ottoman Armenians were systematically murdered by the Turkish Government in 1915. Two-thirds of the population were exterminated by the most cold blooded and fiendish methods..."

f) Even the ambassadors of the wartime allies of the Ottoman Empire, Imperial Germany and the Austria-Hungarian Empire, sent secret reports to Berlin and Vienna respectively clearly stating the terrible premeditated plan of extermination of a subject people of the Ottoman Empire. Below is such a report by Ambassador Hohenlohe "The systematic butchery of the uprooted and deported Armenians have assumed such a scope...It wasn't only tolerated but openly promoted by the government. It meant the extermination of the Armenians" (die Austrottung der Armenier, *Turkei* 183/38, A 24507, 12 August 1915). The Austro-Hungarian Ambassador, Pallavicini, informed Vienna, "The Armenian population which is being expelled from its homeland is not only being subjected to the greatest misery but also to a total extermination" (12 *Turkei*209/, No. 50/P.C 27 June 1915).

In my opinion, the Armenian Genocide, for the above historical, legal and moral considerations, should be included in the Genocide Exhibition. Political considerations should not overrule historical accuracy. Future genocides should be prevented, and this can come through the full awareness of past genocides, especially those of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One can only hope for a brighter future for humanity by accepting, recognizing and condemning past genocides, not ignoring "the first case of genocide in the twentieth century", as a UN report (E. /CN.4/Sub. 2/L.583) termed the Genocide perpetrated on the Armenians.

I hope you will consider having the Armenian Genocide included in the planned Genocide Exhibition.

Yours Sincerely,  
Zaven M. Messerlian, M.A.  
Principal of the Armenian  
Evangelical College of Beirut

Twelve days after the date I had written my letter I received a reply signed by Victoria Cook, Research Assistant, Holocaust Exhibition Project office.

Zaven M. Messerlian Esq  
Principal  
Armenian Evangelical College of Beirut  
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Beirut  
LEBANON  
10 January 2002

Dear Mr. Messerlian,

Thank you for your letter to Suzanne Bardgett and I must apologize for the delay in replying.

With regards to your comment on the First World War gallery at the Museum, this exhibition deals with campaigns, battles and other events directly related to British and Commonwealth troops in Gallipoli, Palestine and Mesopotamia. Lack of space rules out the inclusion of any events that did not impact directly on these troops and that took place in other regions of the Ottoman Empire.

However, plans are advancing for the exhibition on genocide and ethnic violence, and it is currently scheduled to open in autumn of 2002. Please rest assured that the fate of the Armenians will be included and that we will do everything we can to achieve a fair and historically balanced display.

With many thanks for your interest,

Yours sincerely,

Victoria Cook  
Research Assistant  
Holocaust Exhibition Project Office

IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM. HMS BELFAST. CABINET WAR ROOMS.  
DUXFORD

I received also an acknowledgment of the receipt of my book *The Premeditated Nature of the Genocide Perpetrated on the Armenians* dated March 28, 2002. They said "we will add this book to our collection of research material on the subject".

After some time I received a pamphlet sent to me personally, entitled "Crimes against humanity, and exploration of genocide and ethnic violence".

The pamphlet included the following text:

"A specially-commissioned 30-min. film is the central element of the Museum's new permanent exhibition which examines the theme of genocide and ethnic conflict -- looking at some of the common features shared by the bloodshed in Armenia, Nazi-occupied Europe, Cambodia, East Timor, Bosnia, Rwanda and elsewhere. The exhibition is sited in the recently-created vaulted top floor space at the Imperial War Museum, London.

Using the words of well-known commentators on the theme, among them broadcaster Fergal Keane, African affairs expert Alison Des Forges, war correspondent Martin Bell, and international jurist Richard Goldstone, the film explores some of the pressing concerns of our time".

In a subsequent visit to London, I visited the Imperial War Museum, got to the top floor, pressed the button to view the film and viewed it. The Armenian Genocide was included, though I do not recall that the term was used.

There was some echo of the film in the Armenian, Turkish and British press.

The British *The Observer*, in its issues of October 27, 2002, informed its readers that the Imperial War Museum would inaugurate an exhibition devoted to genocides in December. During the exhibition a film would be shown on crimes against humanity. The film would present essentially the Armenian Genocide and the massacre of Tutsis in Rwanda. Its viewing would not be allowed to youngsters 16 and below. The film would show also the Jewish holocaust and the Bosnian and Cambodian massacres.

According to *The Observer*, a spokesman for the museum had said the film was problematic as it raised a sensitive issue, but as a war museum they should raise such serious thought-creating subjects. *The Observer* added that the Turkish embassy in London was thinking of raising an official complaint.<sup>5</sup>

The Turkish *Milliyet* newspaper, on the first page of its October 28, 2002 issue, echoed *The Observer's* information. The Turkish paper said giving such a great place in the planned exhibition to the Armenian genocide would be the first step of a crisis between Turkey and Great Britain.<sup>6</sup>

The British *Guardian* newspaper in its turn informed its readers the film contained impressive scenes from Nazi Germany, Bosnia, Armenia, Cambodia and Rwanda which had not been shown before. The paper added that the annihilation of 1.5 million Armenians by Turkey in 1915 and the mass killing of Tutsis in Rwanda are subject to serious controversies. *The Guardian* added that the Turkish embassy in London had presented a formal complaint.<sup>7</sup>

The Armenian newspapers basically gave information about the exhibition. In Beirut, *Aztag* and *Zartouk* and in Istanbul *Marmara* daily newspapers were among them.

The Imperial War Museum's exhibition opened on December 5, 2002. It had two parts, one a 30-minute film and the other an exhibition, in which one section was devoted to the Armenian Genocide. A 14-page booklet was published, the last page of which was given over to the Turkish negation of the Armenian genocide. The Imperial War Museum had bowed to Turkish pressures.

The Armenian information center informed the Armenian public that the film spoke about the Armenian massacres without once mentioning the word genocide. Many Armenians protested to the president of the Museum's administration, Jack Slater, for the inclusion of the Turkish denial in the exhibition. The Museum told them that by including the Turkish denial they had wanted to transmit the "latest developments".<sup>8</sup>

In 2005 the Turkish *Zaman* newspaper was still writing about the exhibition of the crimes against humanity in the Imperial War Museum and the place it had given to the Armenian genocide. The newspaper also stated that out of the 16 exhibitions two dealt with ethnic violence and genocide. The first centered on the 1915 Armenian genocide and the second on the massacre of Kurds.<sup>9</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Fisk, *The Great War for Civilization*, New York, 2005, p. 348.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> *Aztag* daily, Beirut, November 1, 2002, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> *Zartouk* daily, Beirut, November 1, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> *Aztag* daily, Beirut, November 17, 2002, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> *Aztag* daily, Beirut, November 25, 2005.

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Հեղինակը տեղեկություններ կու տայ 2000 թուականին Միացեալ Թագատրութեան մայրաքաղաք Լոնտոնի Կայսերական Պատերազմական Թանգարանին մէջ ցուցադրուած նիւթերու մասին, որոնք կ'անդուլին ցեղասպանութեան: Ըստ անուանի լրագրող Րապըրթ Ֆիսքի, Թուրքիա յաջողած էր այդ նիւթերը վերացնել եւ նոյնիսկ զանոնք փոխարինել թրքական ժխտողականութեան տուեալներով:

Հեղինակը Լոնտոն այցիւն Հայոց Ցեղասպանութեան ճանաչման համար պայքարող հայկական յանձնախումբէն կը տեղեկանայ թէ Օգոստոս 2002ին նոր ցուցահանդէս մը պիտի կազմակերպուի ցեղասպանութեան եւ էթնիք բռնութիւններու մասին: Ան Պէրոյթ վերադարձին հիմնատրեալ նամակ մը կը յղէ գլխաւոր պատասխանատուին որմէ պատասխան նամակ մը կը ստանայ թէ Հայոց Ցեղասպանութեան եւս տեղ պիտի տրուի: Ի վերջոյ ցուցահանդէսին մէջ հայկական եղեռնին կ'անդրադարձուի առանց Ցեղասպանութիւն բառը օգտագործելու: