

“The Dreadful Chasm”: American Recognition and Response to the Armenian Genocide of 1915-1916 and the Holocaust

Erin Chapman

“What is to be done? Is humanity so situated as to see deliberate murder committed? And on such a scale?

Ambassador Morgenthau is recorded as having done his utmost to stave off such happenings, but without avail, and if America cannot extend a helping hand no one else can at present...the only means of rescue is [the women and children’s] transportation to this or some other country. Efforts at relief are being made by various Armenian sources, but they are wholly inadequate. Even the removal of a part of the Armenians is such a great undertaking that it requires the best efforts of a powerful nation like America and the active cooperation of the government...But why not give it? Why not give the power and the work necessary for such work? The opportunity to do such service as can be rendered at present does not come but once in the history of a nation.”

-Vincent Yardum to the editor of *The New York Times* on “The Death of Armenia”, September 17, 1915¹

The opportunity that Vincent Yardum wrote about in 1915 presented itself to the United States not once but twice in its history. During the Armenian Genocide of 1915-1916 and the Holocaust, America stood in a position that gave it more latitude for intervention than most countries at the time. Yet, in responding to the genocide of the Ottoman Armenians and the European Jews, American leaders placed practical considerations above humanitarian concerns. In 1944 Dr. Israel Goldstein

¹ VINCENT YARDUM. 1915. THE DEATH OF ARMENIA :Her Land Has Been Devastated and the Few Survivors Driven Out.. *New York Times* (1857-Current file), September 17, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed November 18, 2008).

criticized this American pragmatism and challenged Americans to respond saying, "We ask our Government in this supreme hour of a people's agony to...see to it that the dreadful chasm between the verbal protest and actual rescue work be bridged."² Yet the "dreadful chasm" to which Goldstein referred was actually more of a gap of understanding that had yet to be closed. Although in both cases there were widespread public cries for American intervention, ideas about states' sovereignty and the humanitarian responsibilities of nations were still evolving. Ultimately, this emerging understanding of the humanitarian duties of bystander nations limited American intervention. Even though the State Department faltered in the handling of the Jewish refugees, for the most part the American response to each atrocity was consistent with the nation's military and economic capabilities and also with the intellectual environment of the time. In the end, it was political pragmatism and this evolving sense of responsibility that conditioned the American response to both Turkey and Nazi Germany and prevented Americans from bridging the "dreadful chasm" between recognition and response.

In order to understand the American response to genocide, one must first understand when the Americans originally learned of each atrocity. In the case of Armenia, Americans had a sense of the conflict before it even began. The Ottoman government had massacred 100,000 Armenians between 1894-1896, and 20,000

² Special to THE NEW YORK TIMES. "ZIONISTS APPEAL FOR JEWS IN EUROPE :Dr. Goldstein Asks the United States to Extend Temporary Havens at Once." New York Times (1857-Current file), July 10, 1944, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed December 10, 2008).

Armenians in 1909.³ Both of these episodes were well covered in the American media, and both American leaders and the public had a strong awareness of the Armenian cause.

American officials in Turkey were also attuned to the growing tensions. On August 27, 1914 *The Daily Telegraph*, a London publication, ran a story about American Ambassador to Turkey, Henry Morgenthau, Sr.'s warning to the American State Department about the mounting danger for the Armenians. Also, a December 14, 1914 *New York Times* piece told of Turkish impositions on the Armenians. The article said, "Three hundred thousand Turkish troops are mobilized at Erezeram. Hundreds of Armenians have been imprisoned and many hanged in the streets, without trial, as examples."⁴ Because of stories like these, knowledge of the Armenian plight pervaded the consciousness of typical Americans, and in 1914 public opinion remained decidedly anxious about the reports from Smyrna predicting catastrophe.⁵

Between March and April 1915 the Ottoman Turks began slaughtering Armenians in the Anatolia peninsula. The *New York Times* picked up the story almost immediately, and they ran a page four article about the massacred men, women and children on March 20, 1915. The story entitled *Whole Plain Strewn by Armenian Bodies* included an Armenian doctor name Derderian's description of an

³ Sir Martin Gilbert, *Twentieth-century genocides in America and the Armenian Genocide of 1915*, Jay Winter, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 9, 13.

⁴ HANG CHRISTIANS IN STREET :Armenians' Position at Erzerum Is Very Precarious.. 1914. *New York Times* (1857-Current file), December 14, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed November 15, 2008).

⁵ Simon Payaslian, *The United States Response to the Armenian Genocide*, in *Looking Back Moving Forward: Confronting the Armenian Genocide*, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian, (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2003), 55-57.

entire field covered with civilian bodies⁶. Three more articles depicting the atrocities ran in March and April of 1915⁷, and on May 1 the story made the front page of the *Times*. In *Kurds Renew Massacres* The *New York Times* chronicled how the Kurds and the Turks had escalated violence in the entire district of Lake Van. With such prominent coverage reaching Americans less than a month after the massacres began, there can be little doubt that the American people were aware of the deaths in Armenia.

The information had also reached the American government. On June 30, 1915 Henry Morgenthau received a dispatch from Consul Leslie Davis describing the mass murder that had been occurring in his region⁸. Within two months the Americans in Turkey understood what was happening, and the leadership in Washington became aware soon after that. In an October 1, 1915 letter to President Woodrow Wilson, Colonel House not only mentions the Turkish matter, but he goes

⁶ WHOLE PLAIN STREWN BY ARMENIAN BODIES :Turks and Kurds Reported to Have Massacred Men, Women and Children.. 1915. *New York Times* (1857-Current file), March 20, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed November 20, 2008).

⁷ POLAND, SERBIA, ARMENIA. 1915. *New York Times* (1857-Current file), March 25, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed November 20, 2008).; KURDS DISGUST THE TURKS :The Latter Protest Against the Atrocities of the Former.. 1915. *New York Times* (1857-Current file), April 18, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed November 20, 2008).; KURDS MASSACRE MORE ARMENIANS :All Inhabitants in Ten Villages Near Van Said to Have Been Killed. APPEAL SENT TO WILSON By Head of Church -- Evidences of Fearful Outrages Seen in Deserted Settlements. STORY OF GREAT EXODUS Flight from Persia Full of Suffering for Thousands Who Escaped the Sword.. 1915. *New York Times* (1857-Current file), April 26, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed November 20, 2008).

⁸ Peter Balakian, *From Ezra Pound to Theodore Roosevelt: American intellectual and cultural responses to the Armenian Genocide in Twentieth-century genocides in America and the Armenian Genocide of 1915*, Jay Winter, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 243-244.

so far as to dub it a "massacre" saying, " I am wondering whether this government should not make some sort of protest over the Armenian massacres." Wilson put the issues on the radar when he mentioned the matter in a 1916 speech in Cincinnati.⁹ There can be no doubt, that throughout the course of the killings, both the Washington officials and the American people remained cognizant of the atrocities occurring in Armenia.

The question of recognition of the Jewish Holocaust proves more difficult. Unlike, in the Armenian case, the Nazi extermination of European Jews began without antecedents, and the Nazis took better care to conceal their efforts than did their Ottoman counterparts. Yet, news of the systematic killing of Jews gradually crossed the Atlantic. By 1942, the American leadership had been informed of the murders in Europe. Undersecretary of State, Sumner Wells announced on November 24, 1942 that 2 million Jewish civilians had been massacred, and a month later, The *New York Times* covered the mass murder of Jews in Galicia. A number of other American newspapers covered the story of the March 1942 Press Conference where the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee estimated that 240,000 Jews had been slaughtered in the Ukraine. In addition, in June of 1942, American newspapers reported that 700,000 Jews in Poland had been killed at the hands of the Nazis¹⁰. By

⁹ John Milton Cooper, Jr. *A Friend in power? Woodrow Wilson and Armenia*, in *Twentieth-century genocides in America and the Armenian Genocide of 1915*, Jay Winter, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 104

¹⁰ David S. Wyman, and Rafael Medoff. *A Race Against Death: Peter Bergson, America, and the Holocaust*, (New York: The New Press, 2002) 28-29

1942 American leaders and the public had been repeatedly exposed to the reality of Nazi exterminations.

Even as the knowledge of genocide spreads, the question remains: at the time did Americans understand completely what was happening? Did they have a framework for understanding what the mass killings meant? In terms of Armenia, it is likely that they had some sense of the significance. The two episodes of mass murder had accustomed Americans to the violence of the Turks, yet the previous incidents had been extended acts of violence and not a premeditated attempt at extermination. The killings between 1915-1916 represented the Turkish government's attempt to annihilate the race of Christians in the Anatolian peninsula, and it is difficult to tell if Americans at the time understood the distinction,¹¹ yet the newspaper coverage of the time picked up on this difference. An August 6, 1915 *New York Times* article described the 1915 atrocities as of a new caliber of destruction. It claimed that the "terrible scale of these massacres" was "greater than any which occurred under Abdul Hamid."¹²

In addition, the Armenian genocide is often considered the first genocide of the modern era, and without any previous episodes to compare it to, it is often argued that Americans viewed the killings as internal uprisings resulting from an oppressive government. Moreover, in 1915 Americans' understanding was curtailed

¹¹ Yehuda Bauer, *Comparison of Genocides*, in *Studies in Comparative Genocide*, Levon Chorbajian, ed. and George Shirinian, ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1999), 36-37.

¹² Special Cable to THE NEW YORK TIMES. 1915. ARMENIAN HORRORS GROW :Massacres Greater Than Under Abdul Hamid, London Paper Says. *New York Times* (1857-Current file), August 6, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed November 20, 2008).

by the fact that the word genocide had not even been coined yet. Thirty-three years before the UN charter established a definition of genocide, expressing the full magnitude of the destruction proved difficult. Armenian poet, Avetik Isahakian captured this when he wrote, "There are no words in the dictionaries to describe the hideousness of the terrors."¹³ The emergence of a new scope of mass killing complicates the understanding of the American response, because although it is certain that Americans and their leaders were aware of the events taking place in Anatolia, it is difficult to know if they recognized the magnitude of what was unfolding.

Yet, the newspaper coverage at the time seems to indicate that people viewed the Ottoman episode as a new level of destruction. In the September 25's *Says Extinction Menaces Armenia* Nubar Pasha demonstrates a perception of the Armenian events that resembles the modern definition of genocide. The *New York Times* quoted him as saying, "What has occurred during the last few months in Cilicia and Armenia is unbelievable. It is nothing more or less than the annihilation of a whole people." Later on in the article another Armenian wrote in a letter, "Christian martyrdom has at no time assumed such colossal proportions."¹⁴ Although, the word genocide had not yet entered into the collective vocabulary, writers and readers at the time most certainly had a sense that the events in Armenia were different from previous episodes of murder.

¹³ Gilbert in Winter, 15-16

¹⁴ SAYS EXTINCTION MENACES ARMENIA: Dr. Gabriel Tells of More Than 450,000 Killed in Recent Massacres. 600,000 DRIVEN INTO EXILE Unless Neutral Powers Intervene, Says Nubar Pasha, Almost the Whole People Is Doomed.. 1915. *New York Times* (1857-Current file), September 25, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed November 20, 2008).

The same problem persists in trying to decipher Americans' reaction to the Holocaust. Although it is clear that both national leaders and many average Americans were aware of the Jewish death tolls by the end of 1942, it is not clear if they recognized the sheer scope of what was happening. In his analysis of the American response Thomas W. Lacquer distinguishes between "knowing" and understanding." He writes of how although a person can be exposed to information repeatedly, that does not necessarily mean that they have internalized it, or that they understand its ramifications.¹⁵ This difference between knowledge and understanding was evidenced in the pervasive doubts Americans garnered about Jewish exaggeration. Doubts about Jewish exaggeration of Auschwitz reports persisted into 1945, and even high-ranking government officials put stock in the existence of Jewish exaggerations. Henry Morgenthau Jr., Roosevelt's Jewish Secretary of the Treasury addressed to Secretary of War Oswald Shultz's doubts about Jewish exaggeration in a letter of December 1944. Morgenthau wrote:

I understand fully your skepticism concerning atrocity stories...I regret to state, however, that the evidence supporting these accounts is all, too abundant.¹⁶

Consequently, even though the American public was aware of the Holocaust by 1943, there remains doubt as to whether or not this actually meant that it was in a position to respond.

It is also important to understand whether or not the United States felt that it had an obligation to intervene in each case. Although today intervention might be

¹⁵ Tony Kushner, *Different Worlds: British perceptions of the Final Solution During the Second World War* in *The Final Solution: Origins and Implementations*, David Cesarani, (New York: Routledge, 1994), 248

¹⁶ U.S. Congress, Senate Judiciary Committee, *Morgenthau Diary (Germany) 1*, 809

perceived as the appropriate response, one must consider how the United States at the time viewed its relationship to the rest of the world, and whether or not it understood itself to be obliged to aid those countries. In Armenia, military intervention was not seriously considered. In 1915 the United States remained staunchly isolationist, and saw its national interests to be entirely separate from those of Europe and the rest of the world. Although, World War I would change these perceptions drastically, when genocide broke out in Armenia, the United States consequently did not consider military intervention¹⁷. Moreover, even if the United States had seen Armenian intervention as necessary they were in no place to offer assistance. Their peacetime army was not ready to be mobilized, and as Morgenthau noted in a letter to Secretary of State, ending the conflict would require a force that "...the United States are not in a position to exert."¹⁸ State Department officials echoed this sentiment in their October 16, 1915 statement to representative John J. Eagan of New Jersey. The State Department maintained that beyond using Morgenthau as a mouthpiece and warning the Turks of their decline in American popular opinion, they could do nothing more to help the Armenian cause.¹⁹

Nevertheless, many called for American diplomatic intervention. Viscount Bryce of the United Kingdom thought that The United States might be able to stop the murders by persuading Germany to act. He urged American policy makers to intervene:

¹⁷ Winter, 2.

¹⁸ Payaslian in Hovannisian, 64.

¹⁹ WE CAN DO NOTHING FURTHER :View of State Department as to Action Regarding Armenia.. 1915. New York Times (1857-Current file), October 16, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed November 14, 2008).

The civilized world, especially America ought to know what horrors have been passing in Asiatic Turkey during the last few months, for if anything can stop the destroying hand of the Turkish government it will be an expression of the opinion of neutral nations, chiefly the judgment of humane America.²⁰

Ultimately the United States wielded little power to influence Germany, and American intervention of this sort was never seriously pursued.

The question of international obligation during the Holocaust differed from Armenia. By 1942 the United States' role in geopolitics had changed. Intervening in European politics was no longer taboo, and the attack on Pearl Harbor had ended any lingering hopes for isolationism. Yet, by the time the extermination of the Jews was made known to American leaders, their scope for intervention was limited.²¹ Franklin Roosevelt found himself enmeshed in a global war with few resources to divert to a rescue effort. Although rescue was suggested, "rescue through victory" became the official mantra of the Roosevelt administration.²²

The American policy makers responded to the genocides in Armenia and Nazi Germany according to the ideologies and constraints of the time period. Although, military intervention was never seriously considered, the Americans still responded in part to the destruction of the Armenians. Immediately after he became aware of the atrocities Henry Morgenthau met with German overlord, Wogenheim

²⁰ BRYCE ASKS US TO AID ARMENIA :Says That All the Christians in Trebizond, Numbering 10,000, Were Drowned. WOMEN SEIZED FOR HAREMS Only Power That Can Stop the Massacres Is Germany, and We Might Persuade Her to Act.. 1915. New York Times (1857-Current file), September 21, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed November 20, 2008).

²¹ William D. Rubinstein, *The Myth of Rescue: Why the democracies could not have saved more Jews from the Nazis* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 212

²² David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust 1941-1945*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 312

to convince him to intervene on behalf of the Armenians, or to at least put pressure on his Turkish allies. Wagenheim and the Germans refused, and Morgenthau was left in the frustrating position of being forced to bear witness to an atrocity, with little ability to intercede.²³

Morgenthau was constrained by his position as ambassador to not intervene personally on behalf of the Armenians.²⁴ His duty lay solely in protecting Americans and American interests in Turkey, and he had little scope to intervene in what he perceived to be the internal affairs of another country."²⁵ Unable to do anything on the ground, Morgenthau turned to making appeals to Washington. He made three recommendations for American intervention. First, he proposed that the United States make a direct appeal to the Turks on a humanitarian basis. He also suggested that Wilson make a formal appeal to the emperor of Germany. Finally, he argued for a U.S. movement to open channels to Armenian refugees. Morgenthau did not receive a response for two months, at which time Secretary of State Robert Lansing responded by saying, "However much we may deplore the suffering of the Armenians we cannot take active steps to come to their assistance at the present time."²⁶

Although American officials channeled little energy into the Armenian cause, the American people took to raising money for the relief effort. Galvanized by the

²³, Henry Morgenthau III, *Mostly Morgenthau: A Family History* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1991), 167

²⁴ Henry Morgenthau, Sr., *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story*, (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1919), 328-329

²⁵ Morgenthau III, 169

²⁶ Morgenthau III, 170

frequent press coverage, Americans made donations to the Armenian cause in record numbers.²⁷ By 1920 American philanthropists had donated a staggering \$120 million to the Near East Relief effort.²⁸ The efforts of the American people proved that although, intervention was not necessarily the course of action that the government viewed as appropriate, humanitarian concerns remained important to the American public.

The American response to the Holocaust was similarly passive. The United States' failure to take an active role in aiding European Jews even before the Nazis began systematic extermination. First, American immigration policies prevented thousands of Jews from taking refuge in America. The Russian Revolution and World War I heightened Americans' fears of foreigners and fostered a sense of nativism. These fears helped to usher in the Immigration Act of 1924, which effectively closed America's doors to thousands of foreigners.²⁹ This was compounded when the Great Depression made Americans wary of foreigners taking American jobs, and consequently, Americans failed to respond to the loss of Jewish rights. Before the atrocities even began, American leaders and particularly Jewish groups largely failed to take notice of German regulations regarding Jews³⁰.

Beyond restrictive quotas, the United States State Department made immigration excessively difficult during the 1930s and 1940s and as a result

²⁷ Dickran H. Boyajian, *Armenia: The Case for a Forgotten Genocide*, (Westwood, New Jersey: Educational Book Crafters, 1972) 148

²⁸ Balakian in Winter, 253

²⁹ Wyman & Medoff, 1-3

³⁰ Helen Fein, *Accounting for Genocide: National Responses and Jewish Victimization during the Holocaust*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 166

condemned many Jews to remain in Nazi Germany. Despite the fact that it received more than enough applications to fill the German quota³¹, the State Department only filled enough visas to accommodate ten percent of the quota.³² Moreover, the State Department made it particularly difficult for German Jews procure visas by enforcing certain unreasonable regulations. For example, in order to obtain a visa to travel to the United States, a German Jew was required by American law to obtain a recommendation letter from their local police station—which often meant that in order to be granted asylum in America, Jews first had to be recommended by the local Gestapo.³³

In addition, throughout the duration of the war the State Department continued to refer to German Jews as “political refugees.” This label failed to capture the specific threat facing the Jews, and it prevented them from receiving special immigration consideration. In 1943 the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe argued for a change in the way that the State Department classified Jews. The State Department denied this request.³⁴ Moreover, in the three and a half years that America was engaged in World War II, only 21,000 refugees were allowed to enter the United States—a staggering one tenth of what the State Department quotas allowed. The State Department and Breckinridge Long refused, and in doing so prevented yet another channel for American intervention on behalf of the European Jews.³⁵

³¹ Fein, 167

³² Wyman & Medoff, 11

³³ Fein, 170

³⁴ Fein, 173-174

³⁵ Wyman, 313

The State Department also operated for a while in a way that kept other agencies in the dark as to what was going on in Nazi Germany. Henry Morgenthau, the Jewish Secretary of the Treasury challenged the State Department's inadequacy in early 1944. In response to a January 13, 1944 memo that Morgenthau received entitled "Report to the Secretary on the Acquiescence of this Government in the Murder of the Jews," Morgenthau requested a meeting with Roosevelt³⁶. The memo argued that the State Department, and particularly, Long's negligence was resulting in the destruction of German Jews. Morgenthau and other members of the State Department met with Roosevelt on Sunday January 16, 1944 to address these concerns. In the meeting Morgenthau indicted Long and his department for their "gross procrastination" with regards to the Jewish matter.³⁷ He argued to Roosevelt that though, unintentionally, the Department's actions had stymied the administration's larger attempts to help the Jews. Roosevelt was at first hesitant to respond, but he understood that in an election year he could not afford to look soft on the rescue effort, as public opinion had decidedly changed from supporting isolation to showing a concern for more widespread intervention.³⁸ In this way Roosevelt's concern for domestic popularity factored into his decision to intervene

³⁶ Wyman & Medoff, 47

³⁷ John Morton Blum, *Roosevelt and Morgenthau: A Revision and Condensation of FROM THE MORGENTHAU DIARIE*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1970), 532

³⁸ Michael Beschloss, *The Conquerors: Roosevelt, Truman and the Destruction of Hitler's Germany, 1941-1945* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002) 56-57

as much as his concern for the refugees. Nevertheless, Roosevelt did take action, and on January 22, 1944 he established the War Refugee Board.³⁹

The establishment of the War Refugee Board marked a turning point in the United States' commitment to the Jewish cause. Although, its head John Pehle would later acknowledge that its efforts were, "little enough; late and little," the board went further than any other American agency in advancing the Jewish cause.⁴⁰ The Board was made up of the Secretaries of War, Treasury and State and the body was charged with taking measures to prevent the slaughter of European Jews.⁴¹ From the beginning it was given little funds, and much of its operational expenses eventually came from private donations⁴². More than a lack of funding plagued the board. They began their charge after the majority of the Nazi victims had already been killed, and they faced problems including differences of opinions between the anti-interventionist Cordell Hull, the pragmatic Henry Stimson and impassioned Morgenthau.⁴³ Nevertheless, the War Refugee Board was able to make significant strides towards assisting the Jews of Europe. The Board worked to establish free ports in Europe and brought 932 Jews to a refugee camp in Oswego, New York.⁴⁴ Yet, in light of the magnitude of the Jewish loss, these efforts seem negligible.

In its response to the Nazi's attempts to exterminate the Jews and its response to the Armenian genocide, the United States proved more effective than

³⁹ Blum, 532

⁴⁰ Wyman & Medoff, 52

⁴¹ Beschloss, 56-58

⁴² Wyman & Medoff, 53

⁴³ Wyman, 313

⁴⁴ Bescholss, 56-58

any of the other Allied governments⁴⁵. Which begs the question: did the United States do all that it could have done to aid the Jewish victims of the Nazi Holocaust and the Armenian genocide? If not, what factors account for the lack of response and what could America have done better?

In Armenia, active American intervention was stymied by several factors. The first was the impracticality of American military intervention. The small, peacetime force was not at all prepared for or able to mobilize against a far off Ottoman aggressor.⁴⁶ More than military inability, the most significant factor precluded American intervention on behalf of the Armenians remains the fact that such a course of action was hardly considered at the time. Given America's tradition of isolationism, and Wilson's commitment to staying out of the war, intervention would have required a cataclysmic shift in American policy.

In addition, practical concerns kept the Americans out. American trade with Turkey amounted to \$6.2 million dollars in the years leading up to 1915, and prominent politicians wanted nothing to do with obstructing Ottoman trade.⁴⁷ In addition, Wilson was enamored with the idea of influencing the peace settlement in Europe, and was hesitant to undertake any policies that would have disrupted his bid for reelection in 1916⁴⁸. Beyond such domestic concerns, the thinkers of the time were not sure what to make of the meaning of the Armenian genocide. Such a large-scale attempt to eradicate a group of people had little precedents, and leaders

⁴⁵ Tony Kushner, *The Holocaust and the Liberal Imagination: A Social and Cultural History*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell, Inc., 1994), 201

⁴⁶ Payaslian in Hovannisian, 64

⁴⁷ Payaslian in Hovannisian, 52; Bloxham, 185-187

⁴⁸ Kushner, 189

of the time often erroneously looked upon the deaths as a matter of "domestic policy." Moreover outside of colonialism, the intervention of one country into the affairs of another sovereign country had little pretext in the early twentieth century; so intervention would have been an unprecedented breach of the current understanding of states' rights⁴⁹.

The lack of active American intervention in Armenia was not so much the result of a failure of conscience, but rather a failure of the international relations ideologies of the time to accommodate this new form of destruction. It cannot be argued that America was disinterested, as the overwhelming amount of money that the American people donated to the Armenian cause, speaks to how receptive Americans were to the plight of the Armenians. Above all, they lacked the proper political environment and military tools to have pursued large-scale intervention.

The American response to the Holocaust proved a larger disappointment than the response to Armenia, but it can be similarly understood in light of the thinking of the time. The emergence of Total War in World War I, and its extension in World War II conditioned how Americans viewed the numbers surrounding the Jewish disappearances, at least initially. Total War meant that for the first time the line between the battle field and the home front had become significantly blurred. Attacks on civilians had become commonplace, and the question of just how far war could extend into civilian life was only beginning to be understood. In this way, the

⁴⁹ Morgenthau III, 169; Payaslian in Hovannisian, 67

early losses of Jews in the Soviet Union could have been understood to Americans as the result of this new, all-encompassing form of war.⁵⁰

The pervasive xenophobia and anti-Semitism prevalent in pre-World War II America compounded this misunderstanding. The Great Depression and later the fear of German subversion had fostered a fear of immigrants in many Americans. One telling poll from the early 1940s reported that as many as thirty to forty percent of Americans would support or sympathize with an American effort to get rid of the Jews.⁵¹ The idea of a fifth column of German Jews operating in the United States to undermine the war effort, was pervasive, and this fear led many to view the reported numbers of Jewish deaths as blatant exaggerations⁵².

These fears were reflected in the failure of the United States State Department to accommodate Jewish refugees. Of all of the failures of the Americans, the State Departments' oversight remains the most prominent example of how American inaction directly affected the Jewish plight. Yet, beyond the State Department the reaction of prominent American officials proved reasonable, even if it was more concerned with pragmatic considerations than it was with humanitarian concerns.

Roosevelt and his administration repeatedly failed to pursue an active strategy in rescuing the Jews, but their reluctance stemmed not from a hatred of the cause but in part from the pressures of fighting a war on two fronts. Throughout his

⁵⁰ Jay Winter, *Under the cover of war: The Armenian Genocide in the context of total war, in America and the Armenian Genocide of 1915*, Jay Winter, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 104

⁵¹ Wyman & Medoff, 3

⁵² Kushner, 150

administration, Roosevelt and his top aides adhered to a philosophy of "rescue through victory" that although it was more passive than some activists may have hoped for, was drafted with the fate of the Jews in mind.⁵³ Because of his desire for reelection Roosevelt was also carefully attuned to what the American people were demanding in terms of the Jews, and his creation of the War Refugee Board, speaks the positive effects of this pragmatism.

Although the response of the United States to both the Ottoman massacre of Armenians and the Nazi Holocaust, proved largely passive, both responses were for the most part what could have been reasonably expected given the political and ideological setting. In the thirty years from the start of the massacres in Armenia to the fall of the Nazis in Europe, Americans' concept of the role of the United States in the world and of its international responsibilities was only beginning to evolve. Wilson, Roosevelt and prominent American leaders responded to these changes accordingly, but with a pragmatic understanding of the constraints of American power. With the exception of the State Department's blatant failure in dealing with Jewish immigration during World War II, the United States responded to the best of its ability and understanding in both genocides. While the temptation to wish that America could have done more to abate the catastrophes persists, the American capacity to intervene in both instances with curtailed by ideological constraints, and the demands of waging war. Americans proved sympathetic to both of the causes and although they could not significantly temper the destruction in either case the incidents underscore the difficulty of humanitarian intervention, and they also

⁵³Wyman, 312

reinforce the fact that even the most fundamental human rights violations exist in a sphere of political concerns.

Since 1945 much has changed about American foreign policy, but many of the issues that complicated American intervention in Nazi Germany and Ottoman Turkey persist. Questions of states' sovereignty and the responsibilities of bystander nations muddle humanitarian attempts to intervene on behalf of oppressed people. In light of the recent genocides in Rwanda and Darfur, more than one hundred years after he posed it to *The New York Times*, Vincent Yardum's question still rings true: "Is humanity so situated as to see deliberate murder committed? And on such a scale?" It will be the duty of American leaders and civilians as the witnesses of future genocides to answer these questions and to attempt to close the frightening gap between recognition and response.

Works Cited

- 1) Beschloss, Michael. *The Conquerors: Roosevelt, Truman and the Destruction of Hitler's Germany, 1941-1945*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002.
- 2) Bloxham, Donald. *The Great Game of Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- 3) Blum, John Morton. *Roosevelt and Morgenthau: A Revision and Condensation of*

- FROM THE MORGENTHAU DIARIES*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1970.
- 4) Boyajian, Dickran H. *Armenia: The Case for a Forgotten Genocide*. Westwood, New Jersey: Educational Book Crafters, 1972.
 - 5) BRYCE ASKS US TO AID ARMENIA :Says That All the Christians in Trebizond, Numbering 10,000, Were Drowned. WOMEN SEIZED FOR HAREMS Only Power That Can Stop the Massacres Is Germany, and We Might Persuade Her to Act.. 1915. *New York Times* (1857-Current file), September 21, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed November 20, 2008).
 - 6) Cesarani, David. *The Final Solution: Origins and Implementation*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
 - 7) Chorbajian, Levon, ed. and George Shirinian, ed. *Studies in Comparative Genocide*. New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1999.
 - 8) Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate. *Morgenthau Diary (Germany) Volume 1*. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1967.
 - 9) Fein, Helen. *Accounting for Genocide: National Responses and Jewish Victimization during the Holocaust*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.
 - 10) HANG CHRISTIANS IN STREET :Armenians' Position at Erzerum Is Very Precarious.. 1914. *New York Times* (1857-Current file), December 14, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed November 15, 2008).
 - 11) Hovannisian, Richard G. *Looking Backward, Moving Forward: Confronting the Armenian Genocide*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2003.
 - 12) KURDS DISGUST THE TURKS :The Latter Protest Against the Atrocities of the Former.. 1915. *New York Times* (1857-Current file), April 18, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed November 20, 2008).
 - 13) KURDS MASSACRE MORE ARMENIANS :All Inhabitants in Ten Villages Near Van Said to Have Been Killed. APPEAL SENT TO WILSON By Head of Church – Evidences of Fearful Outrages Seen in Deserted Settlements. STORY OF GREAT EXODUS Flight from Persia Full of Suffering for Thousands Who Escaped the Sword.. 1915. *New York Times* (1857-Current file), April 26, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed November 20, 2008).
 - 14) Kushner, Tony. *The Holocaust and the Liberal Imagination: A Social and Cultural*

- History*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell, Inc., 1994.
- 15) Morgenthau, Sr., Henry. *Ambassador Mogenthau's Story*. New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1919.
 - 16) Morgenthau III, Henry. *Mostly Morgentaus: A Family History*. New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1991.
 - 17) POLAND, SERBIA, ARMENIA. 1915. New York Times (1857-Current file), March 25, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed November 20, 2008).
 - 18) Rubinstein, William D. *The Myth of Rescue: Why the democracies could not have saved more Jews from the Nazis*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
 - 19) SAYS EXTINCTION MENACES ARMENIA: Dr. Gabriel Tells of More Than 450,000 Killed in Recent Massacres. 600,000 DRIVEN INTO EXILE Unless Neutral Powers Intervene, Says Nubar Pasha, Almost the Whole People Is Doomed.. 1915. New York Times (1857-Current file), September 25, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed November 20, 2008).
 - 20) Special Cable to THE NEW YORK TIMES. 1915. ARMENIAN HORRORS GROW :Massacres Greater Than Under Abdul Hamid, London Paper Says. New York Times (1857-Current file), August 6, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed November 20, 2008).
 - 21) Special to THE NEW YORK TIMES. "ZIONISTS APPEAL FOR JEWS IN EUROPE :Dr. Goldstein Asks the United States to Extend Temporary Havens at Once." New York Times (1857-Current file), July 10, 1944, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed December 10, 2008).
 - 22) WE CAN DO NOTHING FURTHER :View of State Department as to Action Regarding Armenia.. 1915. New York Times (1857-Current file), October 16, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed November 14, 2008).
 - 23) WHOLE PLAIN STREWN BY ARMENIAN BODIES :Turks and Kurds Reported to Have Massacred Men, Women and Children.. 1915. New York Times (1857-Current file), March 20, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed November 20, 2008).
 - 24) Winter, Jay, ed. *America and the Armenian Genocide of 1915*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
 - 25) Wyman, David S. *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust 1941-1945*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984.
 - 26) Wyman, David S., and Rafael Medoff. *A Race Against Death: Peter Bergson, America, and the Holocaust*. New York: The New Press, 2002.

- 27) VINCENT YARDUM. 1915. THE DEATH OF ARMENIA: Her Land Has Been Devastated and the Few Survivors Driven Out.. New York Times (1857-Current file), September 17, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed November 18, 2008).