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**New perspectives on the Eastern Question(s)  
in Late-Victorian Britain, Or How ‘the Eastern Question’  
Affected British Politics (1881-1901).<sup>1</sup>**

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**Mots-clés :** Question d’Orient, libéralisme gladstonien, mouvements sociaux, historiographie.

In 1921, in the preface to Edouard Driault’s second edition of *La Question d’Orient depuis ses origines jusqu’à la paix de Sèvres*, a work originally published in 1898, French historian Gabriel Monod postulated that “the Eastern Question was the key issue in European politics” (v). In his 1996 concise introductory *The Eastern Question, 1774-1923*, Alexander L. Macfie similarly stated that “for more than a century and a half, from the Russo-Turkish War of 1768-74 to the Treaty of Lausanne of 24 July 1923, the Eastern Question, the Question of what should become of the Ottoman Empire, then in decline, played a significant, and even at times a dominant, part in shaping the relations of the Great Powers” (1). Undoubtedly, the Eastern Question has always been deeply rooted in the intricacies of European diplomacy, more obviously so from the Crimean War onwards. After an almost three-year conflict (1853-6) first opposing Russia to the Ottoman Empire, then supported by France, Britain, Sardinia, Austria and Hungary, belligerents drafted peace conditions. The preamble to the 30 March, 1856 Treaty of Paris made the preservation of Ottoman territorial integrity and independence a *sine qua non* condition to any settlement – which was taken up in Article VII of the treaty as a collective guarantee. Through that article, the Ottoman Empire was also admitted to the European Concert of Great Powers – which otherwise comprised all belligerents – on the understanding that it

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<sup>1</sup> I would particularly like to thank Edward Hampshire, whose knowledge of Foreign and Colonial Offices Collections at the National Archives (Kew, London) he was in charge of in 2010 was extremely precious.

behaved as one, meaning that the Sultan would indeed respect his promises of “generous intentions towards the Christian population of his Empire” (Oakes & Mowat 1930, 169). At the time, Christian subjects were a majority in “Turkey in Europe” (the Balkans) and were also present in “Turkey in Asia” (Anatolia) – two provinces of the Ottoman Empire, which then also included “Turkey in Arabia” and the North of Africa (Tunis, Egypt, the Sudan and Tripoli).

Despite renewed promises as part of a wider programme of reforms (the *Tanzimat*), Ottoman Christians were not on a par with Muslim subjects. As the quarrel at the origin of the Crimean War over the Holy Places (1848-53) had shown, Great European powers might be tempted to enter war for the exclusive protection of Ottoman Christians (Goldfrank 2013, 77), at the risk of shattering the Sultan's authority and the whole Empire's balance.<sup>2</sup> To prevent the repetition of such a war, while still offering protection to fellow Christians in the Ottoman Empire, the Treaty of Paris of 30 March, 1856 officially made Great Powers legal partakers in the “fate of Turkey” (Barry 1880, 1), even conferring upon them “a moral right” to watch over the accomplishment of promised reforms. In the name of (sometimes alleged) humanitarian intervention on behalf of Ottoman Christians and collective preventive diplomacy (essentially aimed at postponing the death of the “Sick Man of Europe”), European powers intervened in Ottoman affairs throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, on the occasion of the Greek struggle for independence (1821-1833), of the Druze-Maronite conflict in Ottoman Syria (1860-1861), of Cretan revolts (in between 1866-1869 and again in between 1897-1900), of crises in the Balkans (especially in Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Bulgaria in between 1875 and 1878, in Montenegro in 1880-1881, and in Macedonia in 1903), of the Armenian question (1878-1916), but also regarding the principle of passage of warships in the Ottoman Straits.

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<sup>2</sup> As Cadan Badem shows in his 2010 *“The” Ottoman Crimean War (1853-1856)*, the quarrel over the Holy Places, i.e. over “whether the Latin or the Greek clergy should possess the key to the Great Church of Bethlehem and [over] which of them should have the priority of holding services in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre” (64), sparked the Crimean War as Russia, which protected the Greek Orthodox clergy, repeatedly reasserted the latter's right over the French-supported Catholic Church, with the Sultan. While Badem acknowledges that the quarrel over the Holy Places was but “a pretext for the Crimean war” (65), that it was “a fabrication to conceal the imperialist aims of tsarist Russia”, which met with the opposition of France and Britain out of imperialist rivalry, he contends that the Crimean war needs to be analysed in a wider context of widespread opposition to Russian autocratic rule (61) and competition for markets (58), in which the Ottoman Empire, although thought of as “the Sick Man of Europe”, actually had its part to play (65).

It should then be no surprise that as a central issue in European politics since the late eighteenth century at least, the Eastern Question has generated a vast body of literature, both primary and secondary. The last few years have seen a surge in publications, attesting to the vitality of the field, after Theophilus C. Prousis's *H-Net* review of Macfie's 1996 *The Eastern Question, 1774-1923* invited "scholars and students of Eastern Question history [...] to re-examine the subject in several ways." Indeed, "traditional interpretations such as Macfie's focus[ed] almost exclusively on Great Power diplomacy and geopolitical strategy and pa[id] insufficient attention to trade, culture, education, religion, and philanthropy." This article aims at reviewing the historiography of Britain and the Eastern Question and at showing that the almost exclusive diplomatic focus and the prevalence of the idea that its impact was short-lived led to an underrating of its importance for British politics, in particular for British Liberalism, in the long run, including in recent publications.

### **"The Eastern Question has no bearing upon domestic politics": The primacy of the diplomatic lens**

"The Eastern Question has stirred more deeply the feelings of the country than any other question of our time. But the Eastern Question has no bearing upon domestic politics" (Argyll, v). This is what the Duke of Argyll, former Secretary for India in Gladstone's first government (1868-1874), wrote in the preface to his contemporary study on the Eastern Question published in 1879. The latter had originally been reopened in July 1875, but had really been brought to the fore in Europe with fresh rumours of atrocities committed by Ottoman Circassian irregulars on Ottoman Bulgarian Christians in the spring of 1876. When these rumours were revealed in the *Daily News* on 23 June, 1876, the Eastern Question and the future of Turkey had already been widely covered in the British press, especially in the *Times*, the *Daily News* and the *Northern Echo*. Soon after, Argyll became an active member of the Eastern Question Association (EQA), which was organised "for the purpose of watching events in the East, giving expression to public opinion, and spreading useful information" (*EQA Report*, preface). Written with over three years' hindsight and involvement in the Eastern Question, Argyll's testimony requires utmost attention: he was indeed well aware that the "Bulgarian atrocities" were having a major impact in Britain; he knew they had generated mass meetings – especially

those convened by the Eastern Question Association – and thousands of resolutions passed in meetings throughout Great Britain with about 500 petitions sent to the Foreign Office, mostly denouncing these “outrages” and the flippant attitude of the Premier Benjamin Disraeli as he mocked the rumours of atrocities as “mere coffee house babble” before the recess of Parliament in July 1876 (*Hansard*, HC Debate, 31 July 1876, § 203).

Paradoxically, in 1879, Argyll stated that he doubted the Bulgarian atrocities agitation would have any long-lasting impact on British politics at all. Although he certainly wrote so to have Conservatives believe that Liberals would not capitalize on the success of the Bulgarian atrocities agitation in the imminent General Election – out of respect for the principle that foreign policy was above electoral party politics<sup>3</sup> –, his pronouncement seemed to give credit to the personal conviction of Benjamin Disraeli (Lord Beaconsfield since August 1876) on 10 September, 1876, that the agitation could only prove temporary:

Generally speaking, when the country goes mad on any subject, Lord Beaconsfield feels that, for a time, explanation is hopeless; it is useless to attempt arguing the question; it is absolutely necessary to wait till everything has been said in this one direction, and even, and often, repeated; when the public, getting a little wearied at hearing the same thing over and over again, begins to reflect a little more calmly, and opinion often changes just as quickly as it began. (in Buckle, QVL, vol. II, 476-7)

For the Conservative Premier, the fact that the allegedly apolitical, but in reality Liberal-leaning EQA met with financial and organisational difficulties only a few months after its creation in 1876 was only blatant proof that he was right (*Mundella Papers*, MSS. 6P/105, 111-2). Consequently, neither Argyll nor Disraeli could imagine that in the 1880 General Election, the Conservative government would be brought down precisely by Gladstone’s denunciation of the latter’s mismanagement of the Eastern Question and more largely of his Eastern policy during his Midlothian campaigns of 1879-1880. In 1876, when Gladstone published his *Bulgarian Horrors* pamphlet denouncing Ottoman rule and Disraeli’s Turcophile policy, he did so to respond “to the virtuous passion in fine frenzy”, that is to chime in with the *vox populi*,

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<sup>3</sup> *The Annual Register for 1876* sensed that this was a possibility (114), but Gladstone himself was not favourable to an election taken then. The secretary of the Workmen’s Neutrality Committee, a sub-branch of the Labour Representation League formed to watch over events in the Balkans, on 7 October 1876, agreed as he thought that Tories might be returned, as elections were not normally fought over foreign policy. See: Workmen’s Neutrality Committee Archives, LMA O/529/1.

which, for him then, was the *vox dei* (Shannon 1999, 172): the results of the 1880 General Election seemed to confirm that his “intellectual sentimentality” (Jenkins 2002, 425) had eventually won over voters.

Intriguingly, historians of Britain and the Eastern Question have overall taken Argyll’s and Disraeli’s assertions at face value. In particular, in *Gladstone and the Bulgarian Agitation 1876* (1963), Richard T. Shannon argued that the Eastern Question only affected British politics at the time of the “Bulgarian atrocities” as it provided the two main politicians of the time, the then Conservative Premier Benjamin Disraeli and his Liberal rival William E. Gladstone, with a verbal sparring opportunity that naturally ceased with the former’s death in 1881. In other words, Shannon assumed that “the Bulgarian atrocities agitation achieved nothing more than a temporary and superficial diversion of British Eastern policy” that stopped in 1881 (1963, 226). Meanwhile, through close analysis of papers of EQA members unavailable at the time of publication of Harris’s *Britain and the Bulgarian Horrors of 1876* (1939), Shannon detailed the Bulgarian agitation movement of June-December 1876. He could confirm what Seton-Watson had already highlighted in *Disraeli, Gladstone and the Eastern Question* (1935, reprinted in 1963 and 1971) that British diplomacy and party politics interacted at the time of the “Bulgarian atrocities” and that the two arch-rivals fundamentally disagreed over their understanding of British Eastern policy.

Subsequent readings of the impact of the Eastern Question in Britain tended to still hinge upon the Disraeli-Gladstone rivalry of the late 1870s, meanwhile overlooking later developments in the Eastern Question (in particular the Bulgarian Question of the 1880s and the Armenian Question of the 1890s). John P. Rossi’s *The Transformation of the British Liberal Party* (1978) exemplifies this, with his demonstration of how the “Bulgarian atrocities” agitation led to a shift in power within the Liberal party away from the Whigs. In *Reluctant Icon: Gladstone, Bulgaria and the Working Classes, 1876-1878* (1991), Ann P. Saab showed how “under the leadership of William Ewart Gladstone, a loose coalition of Nonconformists, Radicals, and High Churchmen, drawn primarily though by no means entirely from the middle classes and the so-called labor aristocracy, created a climate of indignation strong enough to limit substantially the [Conservative] government’s options in the ensuing crisis in the East”, from “the Bulgarian atrocities” to the signature of the Berlin Treaty (1).

With Shannon's apparently irrevocable, definitive interpretation of the significance of the nineteenth-century Eastern Question in Britain, a lull in publications occurred in the 1980s. Despite renewed interest in the last few years, especially with publications on Liberal internationalism and humanitarianism, often in a broader European perspective – see Bass's *Freedom Battle* (2008), Rodogno's *Against Massacre* (2012) or Tusan's *Smyrna's Ashes* (2012) – or attempts at unravelling personal motivations for concern about the Eastern Question – as in Ković's *Disraeli and the Eastern Question* (2011), the historiographical focus is still mostly diplomatic and geopolitical, even in those works. As such, canonical works like Marriott's *The Eastern Question: An Historical Study in European Diplomacy* (1917), Seton-Watson's already quoted *Disraeli, Gladstone and the Eastern Question: A Study in Diplomacy and Party Politics* (1935), Anderson's *The Eastern Question, 1774-1923* (1966), Clayton's *Britain and the Eastern Question* (1971), Millman's *Britain and the Eastern Question, 1875-1878* (1979) and Swartz's *The Politics of British Foreign Policy in the Era of Disraeli and Gladstone* (1985) remain points of reference.

As made clear in the introduction, the Eastern Question as an international question had diplomatic or geopolitical relevance by nature, including for Britain, which feared that “the shifting geography of the Eastern Question” (Tusan 2010, 212), the closing of the Straits and possibly of the Suez Canal might imperil the British sea and land routes to India (Mahajan 2003, 40). It is equally undeniable that the concomitance of the “Bulgarian atrocities” agitation with a wider debate in Britain over the nature of British imperialism involving Disraeli and Gladstone, spurred its redefinition in that part of the world, especially in the wake of rampant Jingoism and of the British occupation of Cyprus from 1878 – “a quasi-acquisition” made, according to disapproving Gladstone, “under the prostituted name of patriotism” (1878, 570). Recent research has been undertaken by Andrekos Varnava (*British Imperialism in Cyprus*, 2009) and Leslie R. Schumacher (“A ‘lasting solution’: The Eastern Question and British Imperialism, 1875-1878”, 2012) with this in mind. But it could be argued that the role of the Eastern Question in British diplomacy and high politics is only one side of the coin, with Schumacher even trumpeting in 2014: “Limiting the Eastern Question to the realm of traditional domestic history is outdated and, moreover, false” (66). Michelle Tusan similarly warned historians in 2010:

Taking a longer view of the Eastern Question, one that starts with the end of the Crimean War and continues through to the turn of the century, can

offer a new perspective on Britain's engagement with the Near and Middle East. As historians have begun to rediscover, debates over the Eastern Question animated Victorian cultural life through the pages of the press, in popular culture and in high politics. British historians would do well to explore the power of these representations over time and across methodological divides. This re-engagement of the political has much to offer historians. (218)

This invitation to reconsider the political impact of the Eastern Question for Britain anew, beyond the Bulgarian question of the 1870s and pure diplomacy, is also present in the conclusion of Ković's *Disraeli and the Eastern Question* (2011, 317). Certainly, one of the ways of doing this is by a more comprehensive reappraisal of the Eastern Question, especially of the late nineteenth-century Armenian Question.

**“Was it [the Armenian Question, 1894-1897] really a matter of great importance to anyone except the Armenians and possibly the British Liberals?”**

While Shannon's 1963 study was ground-breaking and remains a source of inspiration for anybody interested in the issue, the spontaneity hypothesis of British protests against the “Bulgarian atrocities” (13-14), taken up from Seton-Watson's *Disraeli, Gladstone and the Eastern Question* (1935, 72-73), unfortunately led to a misapprehension of the “Armenian massacres” agitation of the 1890s. The fact that its very existence has been doubted is not only a consequence of Shannon's interpretation of the Eastern Question as only operating a temporary and superficial diversion of British policy, but also of the idea that agitation was necessarily spontaneous and manifested itself through written protests to the Foreign Office. The apparent absence of such petitions in the Foreign Office archives for those years 1894-1896 has led historians, like Roy Douglas, to ponder over whether these “Armenian massacres” occurring throughout Anatolia generated any response at all in Britain. “Was it [the Armenian Question, 1894-1897] really a matter of great importance to anyone except the Armenians and possibly the British Liberals?”, Douglas rhetorically mused in 1976 (113), although Grenville had underscored in his 1964 *Lord Salisbury and Foreign Policy* that the second wave of “Armenian massacres” had resulted in a bulk of petitions by Non-Conformists being sent to the Foreign Office (47). The latter did not however provide any evidence.



More recently, Arman J. Kirakossian seemed similar confounded. He observed in *British Diplomacy and the Armenian Question* (2003) for the period September 1895-September 1896 that “despite the support and sympathy for the Armenian population expressed publicly by [the Conservative Premier] Salisbury, Gladstone and other prominent public figures, as well as overwhelmingly by the public, nothing influenced the implementation of reforms in the Armenian-populated provinces of the Empire” promised in article LXI of the Berlin Treaty (227). By contrast, in *The Armenian Massacres 1894-1896: British Media Testimony* (2008), he puzzlingly insisted that “British political and public figures no longer addressed Armenian issues with the same frequency and fervor” in the spring and summer of 1896 (49). Kirakossian’s change of mind about the centrality of the Armenian Question in British political discourses in 1895-1896 ill-fits with the presence of many periodical articles on that issue in his 2008 work and illustrates the difficulty that historians still have to grapple with the elusive Armenian agitation movement. Only David Bebbington and Stewart J. Brown did allude to the existence of “a national agitation to protest the massacres” (Brown, 364) from the autumn of 1894 to late 1896, respectively in *The Non-Conformist Conscience* (1982, 118-9) and in *Providence and Empire* (2008). It was nonetheless a side issue in their master narrative about nineteenth-century British Non-Conformism so that only an estimate of the scope of the movement was given: it was sustained with peaks of intensity in the autumns of 1895 and 1896, which correspond to the second and third waves of “Armenian massacres”.

In a way, one could argue that little progress in the knowledge of the Armenian agitation movement of the 1890s has been made since William H. Dawson’s 1923 statement that “there was an outcry on the part of generous humanitarians in England when the Government [of the Liberal Earl of Rosebery] took no measures independently with a view to compelling the Porte to make amends for the present” (231). Apart from Jo Laycock’s *Imagining Armenia* (2009), whose focus is cultural and away from high politics, diplomacy and imperialism, there has been no recent attempt in print at a reappraisal of British responses to the late nineteenth-century Armenian question. And Nassibian’s seminal work *Britain and the Armenian Question, 1915-1923* (1984) only briefly reviewed late nineteenth-century British Armenophile pressure groups (44-46), but did not look into the Armenian agitation movement of the 1890s, since its very existence had been questioned by Roy Douglas, but a few years before, in 1976. Other works on the Armenian question that

have not been referred to so far (Marsh 1972, Salt 1993 and Zeidner 1976) defer to an almost exclusive diplomatic reading of the Eastern Question, with no mention of a national agitation.

That the lack of archival evidence to such a protest movement in the Foreign Office records devoted to the Ottoman Empire (FO 78 series) should result in such misconstrued conclusions about the late 1890s-Armenian agitation movement is somewhat mind-baffling to any researcher consulting the British press for that period. At the time of renewed “massacres” in the Armenian provinces of Trebizond and Erzurum in October 1895, reports by the news agency Reuters were immediately reprinted in both the national – *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Standard*, *The Daily News*, *The Times*, *The Manchester Guardian*, etc. – and the local press – see *The Leeds Mercury*, *The Liverpool Mercury*, *The Sheffield and Rotherham Independent*, *The Northern Echo* and *The Glasgow Herald* to name but a few. Between 29 October, which corresponds to the first Reuters report, and the end of that month, it appeared in no less than a dozen British press articles, all entitled “Renewed Armenian Horrors” (*The Liverpool Mercury*, 29 October 1895, 5). It must be remarked that by contrast to what happened in 1876, the Conservative press, which had until then been Turcophile, did not dispute the veracity of the Reuters reports – the only exception being *The Pall Mall Gazette* (29 October, 1895, 2). More surprisingly, *The Daily Telegraph*, which had supported Disraeli at the time of the “Bulgarian Atrocities” (Birns 2009, 159), had already commissioned its correspondent in Russia “to visit the scenes of the alleged atrocities, and to make close and impartial inquiry as to the truth or falsehood of the statements circulated” in the wake of the first wave of “massacres” of the autumn of 1894 (“The Truth about Armenia”, 27 February, 1895, 5). Nine articles entitled “The Truth about Armenia” appeared in the columns of *The Daily Telegraph* in between 27 February and 23 May, 1895 and were reprinted often *in extenso* in *The Leeds Mercury*, *The Sheffield and Rotherham Independent*, *The Glasgow Herald* as well as, more unexpectedly perhaps, in the Protestant Unionist *Belfast News-Letter*. *The Daily News* and *The Times* did not reproduce Emile Dillon’s articles, simply because they had their own correspondents at Constantinople and in Russia, whose reports concurred (Prévost, 388-393).

Dillon’s style is reminiscent of William T. Stead’s “Government by Journalism”, which sanctified sensationalism in journalism and harrowing details “up to the point that it [was] necessary to arrest the eye of the public and compel them to admit the

necessity of action” (67). The report of Dillon’s supposed visit to Semal, in the Sasun Ottoman Armenian *vilayet*, fulfilled that objective as it contains the testimonies of two young female survivors whose “parents had been butchered with the rest. The girls were half-naked, hungry and cold” (*The Daily Telegraph*, 16 March, 1895, 5). Dillon framed his commissioned articles as some independent counter-expertise to the official investigation into the “massacres” that France, Britain and Germany had secured in the autumn of 1894. Indeed, Dillon distrusted the European Commission of Enquiry, which he thought might bow to the pressure of the Sultan – the early reluctance of the British Liberal Premier, the Earl of Rosebery, to call forward such a Commission strengthened this feeling. Besides, Dillon remembered only too well that the 1876 official (Turkish) investigation had not shed full light on the steps leading to the “Bulgarian atrocities” – not to mention the number of victims, estimated at less than 1,000, whereas Walter Baring, who had been entrusted by Disraeli with conducting an official British enquiry, arrived at the figure of 12,000 (*Turkey N°5* (1876), 25).

The confirmation of most of Dillon’s conclusions by the Commission of Enquiry in their official report<sup>4</sup> did much to keep the interest of British journalists (of all political shades) alive to the plight of Armenians, who were recurrently presented as a Christian, “industrious, frugal and peaceful population”, “as one of the most wretched, woegone, and withal patient and deserving people that ever fed under the yoke of incarnate fiend.” (*The Daily Telegraph*, 23 May, 1895, 3).

Most newspapers, as shown before, reprinted Reuters reports about the second wave of massacres, especially concerning that of Erzurum on 30 October, 1895. It is in that context that *The Graphic* decided to bring news from Armenia home more forcefully than had done Dillon. The daily’s editor commissioned two reports into the “The Massacre at Erzeroum”, the first one including allegedly genuine half-tone photographs of “the house where the massacre began” (7 December, 1895, 725). Although it may never be known whether these photographs were indeed taken at Erzurum at the time – rather than the result of a later staging –, the introduction to the

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<sup>4</sup> Only, Dillon incriminated the Sultan for his direct role in the massacres, which the Commission of Enquiry did not do. His exact role in the “Hamidian Massacres” (named after him), as to whether it was genocidal, is still disputed. In 1982, Robert Melson proposed “A Theoretical Inquiry into the Armenian Massacres of 1894-1896” (*Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 24/ 3, 481-509) in which he reviewed different degrees of the Sultan’s responsibility, while François Georgeon admitted in his 2003 biography of Sultan Abdul Hamid II (295) that without being able to confirm the genocidal thesis, it was blatant that the Sultan knew of the massacres and did not take the necessary steps to prevent them.

first report called attention to the supposedly unmediated, truth-revealing power of photography. This report obviously aimed at revealing the horror of the “massacres”, but also at waiving the blame away from Armenian revolutionaries, who were sometimes held responsible for provoking regular and irregular Ottoman forces. The photos were even put on display in the windows of the East London offices of *The Graphic*, which was not only a way to enhance the spread of the news, but also to have passers-by bear witness on what was presented as truth brought alive to them through the still-marginally-resorted-to-in-the-press photographic medium (Barthes 2008, 138; Price 2000, 87). Beyond this even – and without downplaying the grisly sensationalism –, such exposure, both in print in a well-circulated newspaper and in a popular area of London, called upon people to remind them that they, through their government, had a duty in overseeing the implementation of the Sultan’s promised reforms.

The publication of *The Graphic*’s photographic report precisely coincided with speeches by the Conservative Premier and Foreign Secretary, Lord Salisbury, in which he sent the Sultan a warning, after news of massacres against Armenians at Zeytoun reached Britain in November.<sup>5</sup> Taking stock of the fact that the situation of Armenia “[had] occupied [the audience’s] minds for many months past” (*The Daily News*, 11 November, 1895, 3), Salisbury deftly insisted on the wrongfulness of the Sultan’s attitude in delaying promised reforms for Armenians, while suggesting that Britain could only act together with the other European powers – and not unilaterally as some demanded, since it could spark another Crimean War. Salisbury’s sympathy to the lot of Ottoman Christians back in 1876 and his role as British plenipotentiary at Berlin in 1878 had nonetheless raised expectations amongst British Armenophiles. With this in mind, *The Graphic*’s report on 7 December, 1895 reads both like some indictment against Salisbury’s powerlessness in moving other European Powers to protect Armenians, and an incentive for England to take up her own moral, ethical – rather than purely legal and European – responsibility to intervene in the Armenian Question.

More and more voices in England asked for such unilateral intervention on behalf of Britain, to the point that in the wake of the third wave of massacres of August-

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<sup>5</sup> It must be noted that “Armenian massacres” also occurred outside of Ottoman Armenia, as was the case with Zeytoun (in the Aleppo *vilayet*).

September 1896, Salisbury had to temper the enthusiasm of his Guildhall audience: “No fleet in the world can go up the mountain of Taurus [sic] in order to protect the Armenians” (*The Leeds Mercury*, 10 November, 1896, 5). Salisbury’s acknowledgement that the Eastern Question was at a stalemate – especially after the Tsar’s September 1896 refusal to agree to a joint military intervention of Russia, France and Britain only – did nothing to soothe the discontent of sympathetic British people. In a private letter to High Anglican Canon and former EQA agitator, Malcolm MacColl on 12 September, 1896, Salisbury had confessed: “Under these circumstances, I doubt whether any practicable result can come from any loud outcry here” (in Russell, ed., 151). Such a statement suggests the existence of an agitation movement, which a letter in the MacColl-Salisbury correspondence (also dated 12 September, 1896) proves was actually orchestrated by MacColl: “it was no longer a question of meetings or no meetings, but only of guiding the meetings” (in *ibid.*, 151). Interestingly, the Canon of Ripon, a close friend of Gladstone, had attempted to “act as broker between [the latter] and Salisbury on two important occasions” in the 1880s. Despite the fact that Matthew further remarked in his *DNB* biography of MacColl that “his links with Salisbury, at that time foreign secretary as well as prime minister, were a useful but not very effective entrée for the campaigners”, there has been no attempt at “interpret[ing] the [Armenian] agitation from the inside”, as Shannon had done for the Bulgarian agitation (1963: v), nor at exposing MacColl’s precise role in it. One may thus wonder how much can still be learnt about the Armenian agitation, given the blatant absence of traces in the official Foreign Office Series 78.

**“The Eastern Question has as many heads as a hydra”: arguing for a more comprehensive consideration of Eastern-Question social movements and pressure groups**

It is interesting to note that MacColl’s correspondence was edited by George W.E. Russell, who precisely thought the Armenian question could then be turned into a party question in an endeavour to re-unify the many mansions of the Liberal party behind Gladstonian Christian moralism as had been done in the 1870s. In a January 1897 *Nineteenth Century* article, Russell announced: “The Forward Movement in relation to Armenia is an attempt to do by the moral force of the Liberal Party that

which the 'Non-Party' movement, so greatly auspicated a year and a half ago, has signally failed to do" (21). Russell's statement delineates a multi-faceted Armenian agitation movement with several phases. As a matter of fact, Russell identified two, but there were three (Prévost, 452-455). These did not exactly coincide with the three waves of massacres, but confirm that the Armenian agitation movement did start as soon as the news of massacres hit Britain in November 1894, while testimonies by both MacColl and Russell demonstrate a high degree of orchestration from the start – which contrasts with the idea of spontaneity on which Shannon's analysis of the Bulgarian agitation movement, but also Saab's, hinged.

Works on social movements, unavailable at the time of Shannon's publication of *Gladstone and the Bulgarian Agitation 1876* in 1963, have moved away from the idea of "pure spontaneity" in protest movements (Barker, Johnson & Lavalette, 2001, 2), which Joe Foweraker thought "may have been overestimated" (1995, 51). It is interesting to note that in *Reluctant Icon: Gladstone, Bulgaria and the Working Classes, 1876-1878* (1991), Saab considered protests in 1876 the emanation of "essentially spontaneous meetings" (99), while drawing upon Neil Smelser's *Theory of Collective Behaviour* (1963) to show that mobilization was "a striking feature of the effectively organized agitation beginning in the second half of 1876" (13). Saab had the same hesitation as to the degree of spontaneity (v. mobilisation and conscious leadership) at the time of the peace movement of late 1877-1878 when those involved in the Bulgarian agitation movement resented the Russophobic war spirit of die-hard (often Conservative) Jingoists, which seemed to gain ground with the Disraeli government. This shift in the rhetoric of the pamphlets of the Eastern Question Association from the denunciation of atrocities against Ottoman Bulgarian Christians (1876) to the support of Russia in the Russo-Turkish war (1877) and against a Russo-British war (1878) is quite telling of the kaleidoscopic nature of the Eastern Question – or one should perhaps write "Eastern Questions." In an 1879 *Nineteenth Century* article entitled "Greece and the Berlin Treaty", Liberal Opposition leader William E. Gladstone even sighed that "the Eastern Question ha[d] as many heads as a hydra" (1121).

Making a detour via the Greek Question (at the heart of Gladstone's article) is absolutely key to understand the orchestration of the Armenian agitation movement and beyond that, the long-lasting impact of the Eastern Question on British politics. Its reopening in 1875 had provided Balkan populations with hopes of emancipation,

or, in the case of the Kingdom of Greece – a former Ottoman province independent since 1830 – of aggrandizement. As an enthusiast Philhellene, Gladstone had striven to prevent Greece from intermingling into the 1877-1878 Russo-Turkish War as any such action constituted a violation of the 1856 Treaty and would lead to a backlash against the young Greek nation. This, he wanted so much to avoid that he, together with other British (Liberal) Philhellenes, suggested to the King of Greece that his respecting Ottoman territorial integrity would eventually benefit his country in the context of the Berlin Conference. Article XXIV indeed proposed that the Greek-Ottoman boundary should be redrawn. To promote the interests of a Greater Greece in the context of post-Treaty-of-Berlin discussions, Gladstone encouraged fellow Liberal Philhellene and former EQA member, Charles Dilke, to set up a pressure group, the Greek Committee, in 1879. That same year, another – more discrete at first – body was formed by Liberal former EQA member, James Bryce, with Gladstone's encouragements (Letter on 26 April 1880, Bryce Papers, MSS. Bryce 10, 26-7): the Anglo-Armenian Association. By the time Gladstone became Premier (in April 1880), the two groups had taken over objectives of the then moribund Eastern Question Association to watch over events in the Balkans and acted as avatars that could be revived if developments in the Eastern Question required it.

In her PhD defended in 2008 – now a book, *Calculating Compassion* (2013) –, Gill was the first historian to intimate that protest movements connected with the Eastern Question were mediated: she exposed the “simulacrum of spontaneity” of the Bulgarian agitation, which she identified as a recurring feature of post-1870 relief movements (81). My being able to actually track down EQA members' later activities, especially involvement in the Armenian agitation of the 1890s, did not only prove the “simulacrum of spontaneity” hypothesis, but also revealed that the Armenian agitation was not the exact repeat of the 1876 Bulgarian agitation, as *Punch's* 1895 cartoon “The Old Crusaders” would have us believe – which has misled many historians (Prévost, 398-452). Similarities existed, but differences are most interesting and two need to be mentioned before considering the Armenian agitation in some more detail: first, “the Armenian massacres” dragged over two years – rather than over a few months with “the Bulgarian atrocities” – and second, when the first rumours of massacres reached Britain in November 1894, the government was Liberal. As agitation in favour of Ottoman Christians was overall Liberal, the physiognomy of the Armenian movement could not but be different from that of 1876, even forcing

historians to actually ponder over its nature given that for Charles Tilly, a social movement necessarily was a “sustained, organised challenge to the existing structure or exercise of power in the name of some large interest” (174).

Close analysis of the MacColl correspondence shows that he first hoped the Rosebery government would co-operate with the Anglo-Armenian Committee<sup>6</sup> in the autumn of 1894 and in the spring of 1895, with the AAC ideally acting as a benevolent pressure group that would provide “her Majesty’s Government [...] [with] a clear expression of the wishes of the Armenians of Turkey, so far as they were ascertainable through reliable channels” (“The Armenian Question”, *The Liverpool Mercury*, 11 May 1895, 5). By March 1895, British Armenophiles had lost patience with the Rosebery government, which refused to uphold Gladstonian Christian moralism and through the Foreign Secretary, to receive their deputations. MacColl, who was in the lead of the pressure movement – though not the president of the Anglo-Armenian Committee (Liberal MP Francis S. Stevenson was) –, sought to start a national anti-Rosebery agitation movement connected with the Armenian question. Two days after the 7 May, 1895 national conference at St James’s Hall at which Argyll, Westminster and others pressed the government to take immediate measures, MacColl raged in a letter to Gladstone: “By the God Who made me and Whose strength I stand, I mean to do my level best to set the heather on fire on this question, cost me what it may, and cost the [Rosebery] Government what it may” (Russell, 140). From that moment on, MacColl shed all conciliation and made systematic attacks on Rosebery’s handling of the Armenian affairs, which he compared with that of Disraeli. The change in attitudes was helped by the creation of a new body, the Grosvenor House Committee on Armenian Affairs, which could spark a social movement along Tilly’s lines in May 1895.

The Liberal defeat in the August 1895 General Election and the subsequent return of Salisbury to both the Premiership and the Foreign Office was met with enthusiasm by members of both the AAC and the Grosvenor House Committee, as his sympathy to Bulgarian Christians in 1876 and again in 1885 seemed good omens. MacColl, who thought the government’s hands should be strengthened, encouraged fellow Armenophiles to make conciliatory speeches alongside the lines of Gladstone’s at Chester on 6 August, 1895, the day after Rosebery’s defeat. The “Non-Party”

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<sup>6</sup> It changed names in 1893 and had been previously called the Anglo-Armenian Association.



movement, to take up Russell's description of this phase which started with the Chester meeting, continued until September 1896. During that period, MacColl tried to rein in discordant voices, who might want to turn the movement into a party one. *The Graphic* report of 7 December, 1895 suggests that not all were ready to be as complacent as MacColl: clearly the news of massacres in Constantinople in late August 1896 (corresponding to the third wave of massacres) put an end to the second stage of the Armenian agitation movement, which became overrun by those (Liberal) Non-Conformists, who denounced Salisbury's powerlessness and called for single-handed interference. By that time, Gladstone favoured unilateral action (*The Daily News*, 25 September 1896, 2), which led Rosebery to step down from the leadership of the Liberal party as he opposed such a view, which seemed to gain more and more ground with Liberals (*The Daily News*, 9 October, 1896, 5). For a contemporary observer, it seemed clear that the Armenian agitation movement eventually split the Liberal party, although Russell's Liberal Forwards were an attempt at avoiding this.

Without reference to social movement theory and to Bourdieu's notion of "field" – and to the fact that the political, the journalistic, the humanitarian and the religious ones could be permeable (Gruel 2005, 125) –, mapping out the Armenian agitation movement would have been impossible. More, it proved essential to posit the existence of a sustained, but multi-faceted movement, as well as of petitions to the Foreign Office. Special attention devoted to issues of main national and local newspapers in between 1894 and December 1896, is rewarded with the discovery of petitions printed on their pages, especially after the revelation of each new outbreak of violence against Armenians. *The Daily News*, which was closely associated to the AAC and the Grosvenor House Committee through its Armenophile editor Peter Clayden (*The Daily News*, 18 December 1894, 4), offers texts of Armenian petitions sent to Parliament (5 February, 1895, 8), the Queen (26 March 1896) and even to the Foreign Office. Other newspapers do as well, especially Liberal ones for which improving the lot of Ottoman Christians remained a leitmotiv inherited from the days of the Bulgarian agitation, if not of the 1856 Treaty of Paris. Flicking through the pages of any Liberal newspaper at the time of the publication of Dillon's "Truth of Armenia" articles or of the third wave of massacres in September 1896 shows how vibrant the British response was, the echo of which transpires in the MacColl-Salisbury correspondence.

The absence of any petition protesting against the Armenian massacres for the years 1894-7 in the FO 78 series is all the more surprising, especially as the Bulgarian agitation resulted in about 500 protests sent to the Foreign Office in between September and December 1876 – still to be found today in that particular series (FO 2551-2556). What if such petitions were elsewhere, and therefore be off the radar of historians who would expect them to be in the FO 78 series? Checking FO correspondence registers for that period, which have fortunately survived,<sup>7</sup> has allowed me to substantiate Bebbington and Brown's intuition of a sustained movement with peaks in the autumns of 1895 and 1896. Such registers (FO 566/1001, 566/1004 and 566/1005) have never been consulted. They keep track of invoices with the name of the sender, sending and receipt dates, as well as with a short description of its contents, and record over 6,000 petitions and other protests in between November 1894 and December 1896. Over 4,200 had been sent at height of the Armenian movement in between September and December 1896, when it escaped MacColl's management, whereas only 500 had been received at the Foreign Office in between September and December 1876.

The title page of register FO566/1005 containing "resolutions about Armenia and Crete, 1896-1897" offers a partial explanation as to the absence of petitions in the FO 78 series, through that added line, in red: "Note that all these papers have been destroyed by authority of the Secretary of State. See minutes, January 17-21,1901". Not only are these minutes nowhere to be found, but the other registers bear no such mention. Upon detailed reading of all the entries, it seems that FO 566/1005 contained protests that challenged the Salisbury government, whose Foreign Secretary in 1901, Lord Lansdowne – as Salisbury had resigned from that position a few months before – allowed the destruction of the petitions listed in that very correspondence register (Prévost, 671-4). That the petitions arrived at the Foreign Office and recorded in the other two (FO 566/1001 and FO 566/1004) cannot be located anywhere in the National Archives is another puzzle still to be solved.

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<sup>7</sup> This was not always the case as they did not contain documents themselves and for various reasons, including space saving measures, could be destroyed. This is also why historians normally prefer to check in the relevant FO Series (theoretically always kept) rather than in the FO Correspondence registers.

Undeniably, the Eastern Question mattered for Victorians and had long-lasting influences over the late-Victorian political life, especially for the Liberal Party. But the destruction of petitions connected with the Armenian agitation movement on the order of the Liberal-Unionist Foreign Secretary, now part of Salisbury's Conservative-Unionist government, suggests potentially wider relevance, which should not be overlooked. The scale of the Armenian movement, which generated over 6,000 protests to the Foreign Office over two years, with about 2,350 for just September 1896, is simply mind-baffling and has passed relatively unnoticed because of its unexpected nature. The complexity of the Eastern Question was already pinned down by Gladstone in 1879 when he described it as "a hydra" with many constantly renewed heads, meaning collateral issues. Studying them together, in their minute complexities and varieties, definitely requires greater attention to networks, pressure groups and social movements connected with the Eastern Question(s) is necessary to fully grasp the centrality of this issue in British politics and its lingering in twentieth-century foreign policy debates – as recent works (Dackombe 2008 & Livanios 2008) would tend to confirm.

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