

Il viaggio in Armenia
Dall'antichità ai nostri giorni
a cura di Aldo Ferrari, Sona Haroutyunian, Paolo Lucca

The Buxtons' Missionary Visit to Armenia

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Abstract Travel memoir-accounts created by travellers and missionaries in 1914 contain the pre-requisites of the Armenian Genocide of 1915. The Buxtons, British noblemen visiting Armenia, discovered the true creative nature of the Armenians who lived on the land of their ancestors under the Turkish yoke. The Buxtons' observations of the reality the peaceful and hard-working Armenians had occurred in allowed them to understand that they were in fact eye-witnesses of the pre-genocide period of the Armenian life in Western Armenia.

Keywords British noblemen. Memoirs. Armenia. Identity. Genocide stages.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Geopolitical Intentions of the British Empire and the Visit of the Buxton Brothers to Armenia. – 3 The Buxton Brothers' Identification of the Types of Armenian Character. – 4 On the Way to Eastern Armenia. – 5 The Buxton Brothers as Eye-Witnesses of the Pre-Genocide Period of the Armenian Life. – 6 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

Travel writings and written memoirs have long proved to be sources of important information¹ spreading additional light on various historical facts of the

1 Cf. Jamalzadeh Mohammad-Ali, who travelled to Constantinople in 1917 and eye-witnessed the deportations of Armenians, and thus published two books based on his horrible experiences: *Qatl o garat-e Armaneh dar Torkiye* (On the Massacres of Armenians in Ottoman Turkey: Jamalzadeh 1963) and *Qatl-e Amm-e Armanian* (Armenian Massacres: Jamalzadeh 1972). See about it also in Gasparyan 2017a.



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past and enhancing the process of cognizing and understanding them, particularly when the authors of the memoirs are intellectual people, capable of presenting the historical reality impartially. The objective of the present article is to show, by applying the descriptive and comparative methods of analysis, how important the role of travel accounts can be for studying the social and historical contexts of this or that historical event, to bring out the peculiar features of this or that nation's worldview and understand the specificities of their national identity.

The study is based on the textual material of the book *Travel and Politics in Armenia* (1914) by the Buxton brothers, the overall investigation of which allows to deduce the methods and mechanisms employed by the Turkish government in the accomplishment of their pre-planned genocidal scheme of exterminating Armenians. In order to achieve the realization of their far-going intention of creating a pan-Turkic super state, the Turkish authorities did not hesitate to implement all possible and impossible methods of ousting the Armenians from their native land.

2 The Geopolitical Intentions of the British Empire and the Visit of the Buxton Brothers to Armenia

Viewed from the abovementioned point the travel memoirs of the British noblemen and politicians Lord Noel Buxton and his brother Reverend Harold Buxton² have a very specific value for establishing important facts, often denied by the Turkish government and some of the modern Turkish historians. Initially presented as a record of their missionary visit to both Western and Eastern Armenia, their memoirs were published in 1914, and, as the authors themselves believed, this undelayed publication was highly demanded and quite in time, for only a few Englishmen, even among the statesmen and politicians understood the actual state of things in the eastern regions of Turkey. The book was meant to carry light into the darkness of the region, and its authors, who bore an honoured name, endeavoured to call attention to the oppressions practised by the successors of Abdul Hamid on Turkish subjects. The Buxtons' preliminary investigations had brought them to the belief that under the tyranny of the Sultan the situation was even graver in the Armenian provinces of North-Eastern Turkey (Baberd, Sper, Erzerum etc.). According to J. Bryce who wrote an introduction to the book, every journey to the historic land of Armenia, interesting on many different grounds, im-

² Buxton, N.M.P.; Rev. Buxton, H. (1914). *Travel And Politics in Armenia*. London: Smith Elder & CO.

posed on the traveller an obligation to report exactly what he saw.³ Thus, the book presents impartial information about the social-political, moral and psychological situation in Armenia, analysis aimed at elucidating a variety of facts revealing the real identity of Armenians and their real physical, economic, psychological and cultural state in the period of 1913-1914, in fact before the peak of the Turkish Genocide of Armenians.⁴

This missionary visit of the brothers to Armenia was accounted for by the great interest of the British government towards Armenia and the Armenians. Considering the unnatural and extremely dangerous situation Armenia had occurred in, as well as “the impossibility for Armenians to adapt to either the barbaric East or the civilized West” (Laycock 2008, 25-35), the British Empire tended to make the utmost use of the circumstances and have Armenia serving its geopolitical goals, namely - keeping control of India, in their terms - protecting the latter. The real reason for this interest, however, was that the British government was enormously worried by Germany's possibly dominant role in the region, if the Bagdad railway were built, and in 1872 the Committee attached to the House of Commons was quite determined to decide that the so-called Silk Road leading to India should, by all means, be under the dominance of the British government. Britain was also well aware of Russia's ambitions which had its decisive influence over the region. On the other hand, the French were already rather powerful in Asia Minor, Jerusalem and Cyprus (cf. Dunn 1905). Thus, to conceal its actual plans the British government formulated the task of the missionaries differently, as quite a positive, honest and supportive intention of “civilizing” Armenians.⁵ One wonders if the British government was unaware of the fact that since ancient times Armenia was well known as a cradle of world civilization. Armenian scribes and the famous translation school well known since the fifth century, Grigor Narekatsi in the Middle Ages and in general the rich cultural heritage created by the Armenian people

3 J. Bryce mentioned in the introductory part of the Buxtons' book that the level of intelligence and culture attained by the Armenian population was much higher than its neighbours', and they were closer to European races. What was of no less importance for J. Bryce, was that the Armenians were the first nation taking Christianity as their national religion. Cf. Buxton, Buxton 1914.

4 The details of the treatment of Armenians in the Genocide period can be found in Bryce 1916.

5 It should be mentioned that speaking about “civilizing Armenians” the British government used the term ‘civilization’ in the meaning of *colonization*. This meaning of the term first occurred in connection with Africa at the Berlin conference of 1884, and since then it has been used to mention the spread of culture, language and the system of economy of an advanced colonizer to a backward country with the aim of civilizing the latter. Cf. Khapoya 2015, ch. 4, retrieved from <https://www.pearsonhighered.com/assets/samplechapter/0/2/0/5/0205208606.pdf>.

throughout the five millennia of its history provided reliable grounds to describe the Armenian Highlands as the cradle of the Armenian and World Civilization (cf. Lang 1970).

The British government was quite persistent in achieving its goal, and thus, among many other missionary visits Noel and Harold Buxtons, by the decision of the British Parliament, started their tour of Armenia in 1913 in order to study every detail of the Armenian life and present it to the British government for the latter to make efforts to use Armenia for the benefit of Britain.

The publication of the volume, as the travellers mention, could be justified not only by their journey to Turkish and Russian Armenia but also by their previous experience of the Turkish Empire, for one of them had lived in Armenia for many years and the other had acted as an agent of relief funds in European Turkey.

They arrived in Turkish Armenia, and their first impressions were neither of Armenians, nor of Turks, but of Kurds who spread themselves widely by seizure of land and houses, often with the help of the government. Their presence on frequented routs was particularly risky for Christians. When the first October snow drove them down from the hills, where they lived with their sheep and flocks, they moved to the Mesopotamian plains and lived in their beloved tents. They always carried modern rifles⁶ and were dressed in colourful dressing, while the scanty rags their children and women were in were considered quite appropriate.

Having appeared among Kurds the Buxtons had a deep feeling of disappointment, for it turned out to be absolutely impossible to find a more or less modernized dwelling to stay in for the night, and after all they had to go underground and grope along dark passages with a broken floor to come to a room full of ponies. However hard and unusual it might have been for European noblemen to spend even a single night under those conditions, they had to do so.

When they continued their ride next morning the naked and untidy land around seemed very unusual to them though they thought of the

⁶ The authors of *Travel and Politics in Armenia* actually state the fact which became obvious due to modern German research. The new report by Global Net - Stop the Arms Trade (GN - STAT) confirms that "While German companies provided the guns, and German soldiers the expert advice on how to use them, German officers also laid what Landgraeber calls the 'ideological foundations' for the genocide". It is also mentioned that, "in 2015, German President Joachim Gauck acknowledged Germany's 'co-responsibility' for the Armenian Genocide, while a book published in the same year by the journalist Jürgen Gottschlich detailed the political collusion of Turkey's most important European ally in the First World War, which provided military advice and training for the Ottoman Empire throughout the Wilhelmine period. But the new GN-STAT report is the first to detail the sheer extent of the material support provided by Mauser and Krupp". Cf. *New Report Details Germany's Role in Armenian Genocide*, <https://www.dw.com/en/new-report-details-germanys-role-in-armenian-genocide/a-43268266>.

natural scenery as magnificent. When the travellers realized the pleasures of the life of Kurds – fourteen hours daily in the open air, a freedom from letters and papers, they understood that it was preferable for the Kurds to be nothing else but a nomad and show absolutely no inclination to settling down, for they forcibly occupied Armenian villages in winter months without any responsibilities of housekeeping. Frequently the Turkish government, using gendarmes and local officials, supported the Kurds to turn the Armenians out of their paternal homes.

On their way after overcoming the difficulties of climbing steep slopes and passing through gorges under the burning sun, they came to a rock and climbed up to the top and felt gifted to enjoy the exceptional beauty of the Lake Van. The shining coverlet of the blue waters spread in front of them. The pinkish and violet mountains aspiring to the sky added to the enchanting beauty of the lake, and in the distance the mysterious Biblical Mount Ararat could be shaped in the fog. After a while when they had greedily enjoyed the beauty of that unique creation of nature, they went straight to the monastery, were heartily received by the abbot and were pleasantly surprised to learn that the building with beautiful carvings on the walls was rather old. Their room was clean and tidy, and the floor was covered with a carpet which was said to be 400 years old. Through the window at a three-miles' distance from the shore the rocky island Aghtamar could be seen, and on a level space stood the famous Church of Aghtamar (tenth century), peculiar on account of the rich friezes adorning its external walls.

The travellers confess that some of their most pleasant memories were connected with their visits paid to remote monasteries high up on the great central tableland of Asia Minor. They knew that in early centuries the monasteries had been centres of education and culture, but now they retained a mere shadow of their former glory, though they still looked very elegant in that wild and desolate country and continued to play an important role in the national scheme.

3 The Buxton Brothers' Identification of the Types of Armenian Character

The travellers' impressions of the Armenian character were based not only on their personal observations made in the Turkish and Russian parts of Armenia but also from India where Armenians were classed among Europeans and formed a very useful section of the community. They had also known Armenians as expert and pushing traders in their larger towns, yet this exceptional chance to study all the details of the Armenian life at home convinced them that the commercial classes of Armenians who had settled abroad and become cosmopolitan were not to be taken as typical of the nation. The journey

in Armenia helped them understand that, like other nations, the Armenians too had many types; this could be observed to the best advantage in their own country.

They saw that the best type of Armenian was often met in the country: tall, rather silent, slow and deliberate in speech, and much tidier and less greedy than his Moslem neighbours. His sparkling black eyes bespoke resolution and intensity of purpose. When touring in Russian Armenia and driving from village to village the Buxtons were reassured once again that the Armenian peasant was indeed very enthusiastic and laborious, for the plain that would be arid waste without irrigation, had turned there into orchards of mulberries and peaches, looking like the rich plains of Lombardy. Sometimes the Armenian peasant was reproached to fail in self-defence, particularly in the Turkish side of Armenia. But the Buxtons realized that Armenians were not cowards. When in an emergent situation his honour or that of his nation was endangered, however desperate he might be, he displayed more strength and much more determination to become a warrior and fighter like the heroes of Zeitun, in Cilicia (1895-96), who had never surrendered to the Turkish yoke. Besides, they had rendered good account of themselves in the Russian army as well as with the Turks. A company of Armenians had fought for the Bulgarians the previous winter. Their part in the Russian Revolution was also well known (Buxton, Buxton 1914, 30).

Of another type was the revolutionary leader, extraordinarily eloquent and rapid in speech, more often though adopting a disguise when moving about Turkey and organizing, preaching, instructing the peasants. When facing official outrages and legalized robbery, particularly when the moral sense of an Armenian was outraged, they were driven to extremes and took desperate measures, for they knew very well that no mercy would be granted, and instead of helping and protecting its citizens the Government was ready to imprison and torture them even without trial (Buxton, Buxton 1914, 33).

The third class of Armenians, according to the Buxtons, was recognized as making a huge contribution to the arts and cultures of the world. They were typical of the Armenian race, but, unfortunately, not sufficiently recognized. Thus, trading was not the only virtue Armenians deserved to be qualified by. The Armenian type, as they said, was intellectual, rather skillful in language teaching, laborious and neat both mentally and physically, and they were sure the world could not afford losing this type. Thus, it was not by chance that J. Bryce sincerely believed that among the peoples of Western Asia the Armenians were unquestionably the strongest, the most industrious, the most intellectual and energetic part of the population, capable of seeking and securing their prosperity (Buxton, Buxton 1914, vii).

4 On the Way to Eastern Armenia

Taking their direction to Russian Armenia and travelling two days and nights in a crowded train from Moscow the travellers noticed that the country was a real jumble of Europe and Asia. To the Buxtons it really looked like a unique "museum" of more than sixty different races and tribes of which Armenians, Georgians, Lesgians and Persians were the chief, while the land had been mainly developed by the enterprise of Armenians.

When in Tiflis, the Buxtons understood that the city, best known as the ancient capital of the Georgian kingdom, was then as much the capital of the Armenians who had built that modern city and had the larger share in its control and administration. Moreover, the Armenians here had no restrictions on either educational questions, or the use of their own language. They had a well-equipped and successfully progressing Seminary in Tiflis. The educational standards were very high not only here but also in the Academy of St. Etchmiadzin. And what was pleasantly surprising for the brothers was that both those educational institutions were strongly supported by rich Armenians, so that however poor the intelligent young men might be they gained access to higher education and culture. It was here in Tiflis that the missionaries learned about the strong desire of the Armenians to open a University for the Caucasus to avoid the necessity for many Armenian students to go to foreign Universities for degrees.

The brothers were delighted to discover rather a high level of cultural life in Tiflis: the so-called "people's palace" - a theatre, a library and a club combined in one building and run by rich patriots for the sake of the national cause; Armenian artists who had played on the best stages of European countries, providing free services to secure the production of good Armenian plays; the garden club - in fact, a social invention of Tiflis, providing a freedom of social intercourse between the local Armenians and Russians; publication of daily newspapers, literary and philosophical journals, a monthly paper with quality reproductions dealing with archeology, music and art.

Thus, comparing Russian Armenia with the state of things in Turkish Armenia, the travellers noted an amazing contrast describing the latter as "perfect revelation of tyranny and crime", whereas they could obviously see that Russia provided order, security and elementary justice. Their minute observations in both the Turkish and Russian Armenia, the honest attitude, the subtle psychological insights and impartial estimation of side viewers helped to reveal the important constituents of Armenian identity, and those were the unconditional desire and devotion of Armenians to science and education and their readiness for self-sacrifice for the sake of their motherland and their faith. The Buxtons' persistent and scrupulous investigation of the Armenian - Turk relationship brought them to the conclusion that the

ideology and value system of Armenians were so much incomprehensible and unavailable to Turks that it gave birth to a feeling of hostility in the latter. Intellectuals that formed rather a large percentage of the Armenian population, were all tangled in national ideology, and every single Armenian was worried about the dominant political mode of the country and the unbearable hardships and humiliations they were forced to undergo at every step. The Buxtons firmly believed that the underlying reason for all the misfortunes the Armenian nation had to undergo in their Motherland under the Ottoman yoke first and foremost consisted in the high level of their development, their exceptional intellectual, physical and organisational capabilities, advanced business-mindedness which provided them with good economic and financial means.⁷ The missionaries were amazed to see that for Armenians it was so important to protect their cultural traditions, their national educational principles, their language and their faith that even on the verge of extermination they opened schools and made great efforts to solve problems of educational and spiritual nature. Their surprise and delight were even doubled when they found out that the Armenian church and the Armenian clergy did their best to support the realization of educational and cultural programmes initiated by the people. The Buxtons had no doubts that the cognizance and evaluation of Turkish and Armenian identities presupposed the consideration of historical circumstances and their consequences, and those consequences spoke for themselves, in fact, disclosing the image of the Turk to the missionaries who did not conceal their disgust towards the behaviour of the Turks, their religious fanaticism, their barbaric attitude not only towards Armenians but also the Christian minorities who had been destined to live in the Ottoman Empire at that period. For the Buxton brothers the most estimable features in the Armenian identity were the Armenians' strive for cultural and intellectual advancement and their persistent optimism which saved the race from extinction and endowed it with an astonishing power of recovery from the worst of the disasters - the Genocide.

5 The Buxton Brothers as Eye-Witnesses of the Pre-Genocide Period of the Armenian Life

One of the most important privileges of the Buxtons was that they made observations of the reality the Armenians had occurred in, and their insight allowed them to understand that they were in fact eye-witnesses of the pre-genocide period of the Armenian life in Turkish

⁷ Lawrence of Arabia confessed that the Armenian is perfect with his logics, psychology and physical vitality. Cf. Steffens 1931.

Armenia. They didn't have difficulties to understand that the Ottoman authorities followed by the would-be progressive government of the Republic of Turkey pursued the goal of extirpating the Armenian nation in its cradle and were very skillful in accomplishing their scheme of extermination. The stages of action in the pre-genocide period, established on the basis of the Buxtons' memoirs can be adjustable to Gregory Stanton's genocide theory: the Turks and Armenians were viewed as opposing forces, and this resulted in differentiating two antagonistic classes in the society (classification); the Turks symbolized Christian Armenians referring to them as "infidel giaours" (symbolization); they also accomplished discrimination as Turks considered Armenians "inferior" and employed all the power they had (political, legal etc.) to deprive them of any human rights, though the Armenian population was indigenous to those lands and, as many sources and the Buxtons' memoirs among them confirm, they were skillful enough to have been trusted the Turkish artillery on the eve of the WWI; "giaour and infidel" Armenians were treated by the Turks as second-class citizens and were later declared "prisoners" which was a synonym for "enemies of the state...". Hatred, humiliation, torture and all kinds of physical abuse was part of everyday Armenian life (dehumanization); the massacres before 1914 assured the Buxtons that Armenians should be rescued from the Turks since the policy of the Turkish government was inhuman and aimed at the extermination of a whole nation. It became clear for them that there were no massacres in Turkey except when ordered by the Government (organization); the policy of the Turkish government resulted in polarization - hate groups broadcast propaganda that reinforced prejudice and hate; moderate leaders were those best able to prevent genocide, and they were often the first to be assassinated; antagonism could not be negotiated because of mass killings and massacres; moreover, massacres were seen by the Turkish government as the sole solution to the Armenian question, hence the addresses of Armenians were fixed by the authorities, lists of the victims were made beforehand, armies were built and weapons bought (preparation); Armenian victims on ethnic, national, religious basis were segregated and confined to famine-struck regions where they starved if not killed (persecution), and the act of the 1915 Armenian Genocide was accomplished.⁸

As R.J. Rummel states in his book *Power Kills* (1997), all genocides have proved to have "denial as their final stage". Turks, the organizers of the 1915 Genocide of Armenians and their followers, take all possible and impossible efforts to explain and justify the Genocide

⁸ Gregory Stanton first presented the article *8 Stages of Genocide* as a briefing paper at the US State Department in 1996 (Stanton 1996). A detailed discussion is also available in Gasparyan 2017b, 52-3.

confining it to two factors: the on-going WWI and what they euphemistically describe as *demographic engineering* (Şeker 2013).

Thus, as the research establishes, the 1915 Armenian Genocide was already in store in 1914, and there are all the reasons to believe that the Buxtons could have foreseen the awaiting tragedy of the Armenian Genocide without failure (see also Mayerson 2014).

6 Conclusion

The Buxtons' book of memoirs is a well-grounded study of the particular period in Western and Eastern Armenia and can serve as a detailed record of not only the Armenian lifestyle, the strive of Armenians for advancement, the Armenian identity and the persistent Armenian optimism which helped the nation survive and continue its creative life, but also of the prerequisites of the 1915 Armenian Genocide. The most estimable message sent through their account to the British government and through their published book of memoirs to the international community at large was an alarm to warn the world that a whole nation was on the verge of extinction, and it needed to be rescued from the Turkish yoke. However, the indifference of the international "vampires"⁹ who had become "the pimp and patron of the bloodthirsty tyrant" (Spirov 2000, 29) did not allow them to stir a finger to prevent the great disaster, thus laying the burden of co-responsibility for the events on their own shoulders.

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⁹ The abovementioned attitudinal words have been used by Dmitr A. Spirov in his description of the disposition of the European governments towards the Hamidian period policy which further developed and became even worse in the Republic of Turkey. Cf. Spirov 2000.

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