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## DEFENDER OF THREE EMPIRES

## Ármin Vámbéry and the Eastern Question

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Ármin Vámbéry (1832–1913)<sup>1</sup> is one of the best-known Hungarian orientalists besides Sándor Kőrösi-Csoma, Ignác Goldziher and Aurél Stein. In contrast to the others, however, he has caused many a heated dispute and controversy, both amongst his contemporaries and for posterity, especially with his opinion on Hungarian ethnogenesis, considering Hungarians to be of Turkic origin. It could be argued that his standpoint, now considered mistaken in the 'Ugric–Turk War' concerning Hungarian ethnogenesis and language history, overshadows his other, equally important, achievements both as an academic and as a political analyst. On the one hand, it would be extremely unjust to evaluate him merely in the light of an erroneous view taken in an academic dispute, because the methods of historical and comparative linguistics were just beginning to get established when he came up with his etymological views shared by several other scholars of the time. On the other hand, linguistics was just one of his several fields of academic activity encompassing human anthropology, ethnology and Turkish philology.<sup>2</sup> It was the very material that he brought home from his travels in Central Asia that his academic adversaries utilised against him, as much of the lexicography concerning these languages had not been written yet.<sup>3</sup> Regrettably little is known about his political activities, which had both a public and a clandestine aspect. On the one hand, as a highly distinguished expert on Central Asian and Middle Eastern affairs, he wrote best-selling books, articles, commentaries and analyses for several British, American, German and French newspapers and periodicals, while on the other, his expertise and extensive network of contacts in the Muslim world,

and especially in the Ottoman Empire, did not escape the attention of the British Foreign Office, which employed him from 1889 to his death in 1913 as a clandestine political agent, or rather go-between at the court of Abdulhamid II (1876–1909), and enrolled him as a pensioner by the end of his life.<sup>4</sup> Vámbéry's journalistic activities still awaiting elaborate studies and publication in a collected form, in this paper I endeavour to outline the background of the Turko- and Anglophile views reflected mostly in the reports and memoranda written for the British Foreign Office,<sup>5</sup> focusing on the progress of Anglo-Ottoman relations in the two decades prior to the First World War, as Vámbéry, the Austro-Hungarian Jewish political analyst and secret agent, perceived it.

His career seemed very far from promising in the beginning. An orphaned, lame child of a bankrupt Jewish family living in Dunaszerdahely,<sup>6</sup> home of one of the largest orthodox Jewish communities of Hungary, he was unable even to afford to complete his secondary education. His prodigious mind, especially talented in learning languages, his devotion and will power, however, helped him through all difficulties, and, by the age of twenty-five, he could fairly master, besides Classical, a number of Western European languages, and had strong bases in Ottoman Turkish, Persian and Arabic as well. With the help of Minister of Culture and Education Baron József Eötvös, and under the auspices of the Hungarian National Academy, he was given the opportunity to travel to Istanbul, where he stayed from 1857 to 1861, becoming fully conversant in the Ottoman Turkish language and Muslim culture and getting acquainted with the Ottoman political elite. After returning home, he set out on yet another journey, this time to Central Asia, again with the material help of the Academy, in order to find traces of the Hungarian language. This undertaking was further facilitated by his knowledge of Uzbek and other Eastern Turkic languages, which he had acquired during his stay in Istanbul.

With this journey he undertook to be a player in one of the most unique chapters in the history of British–Russian political contacts, the Great Game, a phrase made famous in Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*.<sup>7</sup> With the acquisition of India,

<sup>1</sup> Vámbéry's evaluation is made more curious by the fact that no complete biography of academic value has appeared yet in Hungarian, the best one still being only available in English: Lory Alder and Richard Dalby, *The Dervish of Windsor Castle* (London: Bachman & Turner, 1979). I also have to admit that the title of this essay strongly resembles one of the chapters of this excellent book, 'Defender of the Empire.' There is also a Turkish book about his clandestine activities. Mim Kemal Öke, *Vámbéry: Belgelerle Bir Devletlerarası Casusun Yaşam Öyküsü* (Istanbul: Bilge Yayıncılık, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> Now preserved in the Public Record Office, London, FO 800 32 and FO 800 33. The reason why there are two separate Vámbéry files is that he handed over his confidential correspondence with the Foreign Office to Esme Howard, the British Consul-General in Budapest on 19 January 1911. The affair was highly embarrassing for the Foreign Office, as Vámbéry, due to advanced age or in order to ensure that he would continue receiving his pension, had dropped some hints to an informant of Howard about the correspondence (Alder and Dalby 455–59).

<sup>3</sup> Today Dunájska Streda, Slovakia.

<sup>4</sup> It was actually coined by one of its players and victims, Captain Arthur Conolly (Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: On Secret Service in High Asia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, 123).

<sup>1</sup> Though in Western European contexts he also used a Latinised version of his name, Arminius Vambéry, in this paper I adhere to the Hungarian form of his name. As far as Turkish, Arabic and Persian names are concerned, I shall keep to well-established Anglicised spellings.

<sup>2</sup> Hungarian Oriental Studies have much to thank him for the establishment of the Chair of Oriental Languages at the University of Budapest in 1870.

<sup>3</sup> Mihály Dobrovits, 'Vámbéryval 2000-ben,' *2000* 11:3 (March 1999) 49–61. For a less commendatory, though rather biased, view see Robert Simon, 'Goldziher és Vámbéry (Két választás Magyarországon),' *Goldziher Ignác* (Budapest: Osiris, 2000) 177–203.

British foreign policy was mainly concerned with keeping the balance of power in Europe and looking after its huge dependencies. From the end of the eighteenth century, however, Russian eastward expansion was beginning to rouse suspicion among the British that the ultimate goal of this expansion was India. The influence over the vast and unexplored regions of Iran, Central Asia and Afghanistan between the two empires thus gaining enormous significance, the struggle began. Besides the diplomatic struggle at the court of Teheran to gain political influence by getting concessions for the modernisation of the Persian economy, both powers sent clandestine missions to the small and mutually rivalling backward khanates of Bokhara and Khiva, just to mention the two most important ones, in order to obtain intelligence as to their political situation and military potential. It is beyond words to what terrible dangers Vámbéry exposed himself, disguised as an Ottoman dervish joining a caravan of Hadjis, that is, pilgrims returning to Kashgar in East Turkestan from their pilgrimage to Mecca, as revelation of his identity would have brought instant death on his head, the fate of several other Great Game players. As agents of some great power, the latter ones disposed of at least some political protection in the region, unlike Vámbéry, who had no such background. His journey was really astonishing for European diplomatic circles, not only because of the perils he had faced, but also by the fact that he was probably the last European to have seen an independent Bokhara and Khiva, as these khanates fell to Russia one after the other in the second half of the 1860s, causing great alarm in Britain. His homecoming, however, was only partially successful, as he met a relatively cold reception in Hungary, his journey being a mere curiosity in the eyes of both the public and Academe, since he failed to accomplish what he had been sent for: apparently he did not have much new to add to the study of Hungarian ethnogenesis.<sup>9</sup>

His reception abroad, on the other hand, was extremely gratifying. He was welcomed very warmly and given attentive ears in all the diplomatic circles in Teheran and Istanbul, as he did not forget to report to the British Consul-General in Teheran, Sir Charles Alison, whom he had met before his departure, and who was happy to provide him with letters of reference for influential politicians and scholars in London. Âli Pasha, one of the most outstanding and all-powerful Turkish statesmen in what is known as the Tanzimat, or the Ottoman age of reform, was also eager to receive him in audience, and it is quite obvious that his journey received some moral support (any other kind of support would have been impossible) from the Ottoman Sultan Abdulaziz, the Caliph of the Truebelievers as well. Thus Vámbéry turned his attention to Britain, hoping that his warnings, especially over India, would be heeded there. When he arrived in London in 1864, he was surprised to discover that word about his remarkable journey had preceded him and he immediately became lionised. His references also did their job and ensured a warm reception,

including meetings with, amongst others, the Prince of Wales, Benjamin Disraeli, Lord Palmerston and, later, with Queen Victoria herself. His *Travels in Central Asia* was an enormous bestseller and saw translations into several other languages,<sup>9</sup> and its success was further enhanced by the increased threat of the Russian menace after their advance into Tashkent, Bokhara, Samarkand and Khiva, in accordance with the Russophobes' predictions, amongst whom Vámbéry was now counted as a prominent member. In the next two or three decades he was one of the most distinguished and influential experts on Central Asia and the Islamic world in general, urging the British government to take a tougher line with the Russians. His greatest moment came with the fall of Merv in 1884, followed by the Pandje crisis, named after a small Afghan fort stormed by the Russians, who thus seemed to be seriously menacing British influence in Afghanistan, the gateway to India. War threatening to be imminent for a while, Vámbéry was again the lion of the season in Britain, but this time the public also had an opportunity to listen to his warnings at a series of crowded meetings he addressed during a whirlwind tour of England. After these weeks of triumph he returned to Budapest and took to work, completing another best selling book, *The Coming Struggle for India*.<sup>10</sup>

By this time, however, more than twenty years had passed since Vámbéry's daring journey into the then unexplored terrains of Central Asia. Moreover, he did not know anything about modern military tactics and strategic thinking, which would have been of great service for British military experts pondering the logistic background of a possible Russian attack on India via Afghanistan. Although Vámbéry continued writing on Central Asian affairs until the end of his life, he also had a new subject, British and Ottoman contacts, which had been gradually becoming quite gloomy by that time. The story can be traced back in 1858, when, under his Turkish name Reshid Efendi, being famous among Ottoman high society as a master linguist and tutor, he obtained the honour to give French lessons to Fatime, the daughter of Sultan Abdulmedjid I (1839–1861), and there he met the young Hamid Efendi, who would become Sultan in 1876. Their acquaintance was renewed in 1879 or 1880 with the Sultan's invitation sent to him.<sup>11</sup> His visit, however, only came about following the opening of the railway line between Istanbul and Budapest, when, accompanied by Vilmos Fraknói, the general secretary of the Hungarian National Academy, he was commissioned to search for codices at the Topkapı Palace, which had been taken as booty from the Hungarian Royal Library in Buda Castle after its fall in 1541 to the Ottomans. While this first visit bore little fruit, the second one in 1889 was far more encouraging and marked for Vámbéry the beginning of a long series of sojourns as the guest of

<sup>9</sup> Arminius Vámbéry, *Travels in Central Asia: Being the Account of a Journey from Teheran across the Turkoman Desert on the Eastern Shore of the Caspian to Khiva, Bokhara, and Samarkand, Performed in the Year 1863* (London: John Murray, 1864).

<sup>10</sup> Arminius Vámbéry, *The Coming Struggle for India* (London, 1885).

<sup>11</sup> The invitation is referred to in a letter sent to one of his friends, Sir William White, later British ambassador in Constantinople (Alder and Dalby 348).

<sup>12</sup> Although it was his Uzbek servant he brought home from his journey who would later teach Uzbek to one of his greatest opponents in the dispute, Bernát Munkácsi

Abdulhamid, often sitting face to face with the Sultan, an extraordinary circumstance with the apparently paranoid monarch. Vámbéry duly reported to the British Foreign Office about these interviews, obviously with the tacit consent of the Sultan, who wanted to use him as an adviser and a mediator in Britain and urged him to improve the public image of the Ottoman Empire, which had been far from favourable among the British. Moreover, as a direct correspondent of the Sultan for several years, Vámbéry also provided regular political advice to the Ottoman ruler. While the messages were enriched by Vámbéry's insight, he always sought the opinion of the British Foreign Office before sending a major missive to Istanbul.

These reports and, in fact, all of Vámbéry's political writings abound in strong anti-Russian views, which have both biographical and political motives, shared by the Hungarian political elite in the age of the Dual Monarchy. Identification of Imperial with Hungarian national interests and, consequently, the wish to formulate Imperial foreign policies along Hungarian lines – these were the results of the realisation on the part of the Hungarian political elite that the current European political and ethnic conditions, as represented by an all-powerful Russia and an ascending Germany on the one hand and the majority of the non-Hungarian element within Hungarian territories on the other, were extremely unfavourable for an independent Hungary. The suppression of the Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence in 1849 by Russian arms, a sore memory of every Hungarian patriot, had proved that such an independent Hungary would be far too weak in the proximity of the powerful nations of Germany and Russia. As Hungarian supremacy within Hungary was strongly conditioned by the ethnic composition of the Empire, the Hungarian political elite was reluctant to consider any territorial expansion, which they viewed as modification of the ratios of the constituent ethnic groups to the detriment of the Hungarian element. The Balkans seemed a natural outlet for an eventual Imperial expansionist policy, but there it was confronted by similar Russian aspirations, which seemed to be in direct proportion to the weakening of Ottoman control.<sup>12</sup> However, German backing, one of the keystones of Austro-Hungarian foreign policy, was predicated on co-operation with Russia, and thus politicians of the Monarchy, who did not wish to have independent Slavic neighbours, that is, *protégés* of Russia, were inclined to keep – be it only nominal – Ottoman presence in the Balkans as far as possible, considering it to be favourable for balance in the Balkans. They would only entertain expansionist schemes when Russian expansion seemed no longer avertable and were willing to co-operate with the powerful eastern neighbour on a conservative basis. Despite their ultimately opposing Balkan interests, the relation between the Monarchy and Russia could thus mainly be characterised as co-operation until the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. It was especially true after the Russian failure to make the newly

autonomous Bulgaria a Russian puppet, and her new aspirations in the Far East. Russia was thus also interested in Balkan stability.<sup>13</sup>

These views are reflected in one of Vámbéry's memoranda written in 1890, where he passionately exclaims:

You Sir! And many other members of the British Government, may find fault with me for the discrepancy between my public writings and the tenour of this my private report, and I might be rebuked for my zeal in defending a country and a society [the Ottoman Empire], whose future I am bound to paint with dim rays of hope. I might be reproached for trying to uphold the rotten state of things against a possibly better government – but as a Hungarian by birth and an Englishman by feelings, I have to keep in view our mutual interests, and not any humanitarian doctrines, which may well sound from the pulpit, but have no place in politics. As a Hungarian, I have to avert the deadly blow, with which Russia threatens my country by her continual encroachment upon the Balkan peninsula, and as a European, proud of Liberty and Culture, I have to defend England, the glorious champion of Liberty and Civilisation: England, whose position will be greatly imperilled, if Russia ever gets to Constantinople and to Asia Minor. This purpose unites us both, You as an Englishman and I as a friend of England.<sup>14</sup>

The passage reveals quite explicitly the views on the Eastern Question that were taken by most of the Hungarian political elite in the dual Monarchy. They thought the Russian menace was threatening the existence of Hungary together with its national-liberal political system. For them Russia stood for tyranny, against which they wanted to maintain a national-liberal Austro-Hungary with a foreign policy that is ultimately in favour of self-determination. However, independent Balkan states born at the Congress of Berlin were potential allies of Russia, that is, proponents of autocracy and detrimental to the existence of Hungary, and thus they would only be tolerated under Austro-Hungarian control. The Treaty of Berlin of 1878 ended the Ottoman Empire as a significant European power, giving way to petty Balkan states which were in competition with one another and harboured passionately nationalist new-born ideologies threatening Balkan stability. Vámbéry, too, quite naturally considered Britain to have mutual interests with Austria-Hungary: European liberalism and culture could be best defended on the Bosphorus by delaying the final

<sup>12</sup> A most striking example of Russian-Austrian co-operation in the Balkans is manifested in the Murzsteg Reform Pact worked out by the Russian and Austrian Foreign Secretaries, A.P. Izvolsky and A.L. Aarenthal, respectively, which was designed to improve the state of the rebellious Christians in Macedonia. However, it only signalled Russia's unwillingness to commit herself for her Orthodox brethren and the emptiness of pan-Slavic propaganda (Diószegi 109–10).

<sup>13</sup> Vámbéry's memorandum to Sir Philip Currie, permanent undersecretary of the Foreign Office, Public Record Office, London, 19 June 1890, FO 800 32, 104v–105r. His phraseology is similar in an earlier letter: 'I am Hungarian by birth, but my soul is English, and it is the greatest pride of my life to serve to your glorious country with which I am connected 25 years ago [*sic*]. Here in Austro-Hungary where the foreign policy is shaped in Berlin, the official mould was never averse to the spirit and tendency of my writings, and as far as regards Hungary, my nation feels as warm as I do for the common interests we have to defend' (Vámbéry to Sir Philip Currie, 20 May 1889, FO 800 33, 7v).

<sup>14</sup> Diószegi István, *Az Osztrák-Magyar Monarchia külpolitikája, 1867–1918* (Budapest: Vince Kiadó, 2001) 22.

collapse of the decaying Ottoman Empire. It also meant that defending British imperial interests was also an act of Hungarian patriotism and thus he extended his attention to every aspect of Anglo-Russian contacts from the Ottoman Empire, Central Asia and Persia to the Far East. The struggle was not over for the Great Game veteran, who perceived Britain as the 'champion of Liberty and Civilisation' with a cultural mission justifying her imperialist colonial policies.<sup>15</sup> His own 'Great Game' was a gigantic struggle between the two civilising powers, Britain and Russia, that is, liberalism and autocracy, respectively.

One might ask whether it is self-evident that Vámbéry could have been an exponent of Hungarian nationalism. The answer to the question lies in the character of the assimilated Hungarian Jew, very different from his brethren in Poland, Russia, Germany or even other parts of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, who suffered a lot from religious intolerance and social discrimination. As Hungarian bourgeoisie was very small and weak, and Hungarians as the ruling ethnic group within Hungary were in a relative minority up to the end of the nineteenth century, it was the nobility that took up the cause of modernisation with the help of the Jews, whose progressive (non-orthodox) segment was the best partner in creating a modern Hungary. On the social field their co-operation provided for the religio-institutional emancipation of the Jews in exchange for their identification with the Hungarian political elite in politics, culture and language, that is, for their assimilation. In the economy they had a free hand and received effective state support in modernising the economy, while the Hungarian nobility and the non-Jewish political elite controlled the administration.<sup>16</sup> The framework provided excellent prospects for the progressive segment of Hungarian Jewry as their mentality, multi-linguality, openness to Western modernism and pronounced secularisation meant greater ability to adapt to the new capitalist Hungary in contrast to the non-Jewish element. These characteristics also made them able to retain a majority within the Hungarian intelligentsia. On the other hand, it can by no means be said that they were fully satisfied with their situation, since, despite their assimilation, they were largely excluded from political and administrative positions, a most explicit example of which being Vámbéry himself, who was never offered a post at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Dual Monarchy, or was only given a membership in the *Úri Kaszinó* ('Gentlemen's Casino'), an informal prestige club of Hungarian high society, when his great friend, the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII) expressed

his astonishment at not finding him there. It is also interesting to note that he did not completely renounce his Jewishness and had close contacts with the instigator and leader of the Zionist movement, Theodore Herzl, who was also born in Hungary. Thanks to his intimacy with Abdulhamid, Vámbéry managed to arrange that Herzl be received in audience by the Sultan on 17 May 1901.<sup>17</sup> Herzl presented the offer to buy off the Ottoman Public Debt in exchange for a Charter for Palestine. The plan came to nothing, but Vámbéry kept in touch with Herzl's successor at the head of the Zionist organisation, David Wolffsohn.

Very few European politicians would doubt that the Ottoman Empire was approaching its end. The main reason why the final collapse and dismemberment of the 'sick man of Europe' had still not come was not so much its vigour as the rivalry of the great powers, always on the lookout lest the other should get a bigger portion of the booty, thus threatening the balance of power in the region. It was feared that the collapse of the Ottomans would inevitably lead to a major European war. Further, the Ottoman Empire seemed to serve as the best counterbalance, or buffer, against the military presence of any other naval power in the Eastern Mediterranean, British policy being primarily concerned with the security of the route to India and thinking in naval terms.<sup>18</sup> This is the Eastern Question, one of the most dangerous issues threatening the European balance of power, which was the question of the existence of the Ottoman Empire as opposed to the rising nationalist movements within her territory. Up to the 1880s British colonial policy tended to be consolidationist, anxious to avoid new territorial gains, which were considered to be a military and fiscal burden.<sup>19</sup> Then the first signs of a change in this attitude began to take shape, which led to new structures in international relations. The change had both economic and political reasons. Economic competition and over-production led to a search for new outlets for surplus goods, and to maintain the pace of industrial development, there emerged an ever increasing need for raw materials, which produced the logic that if a territory is not taken somebody else will take it.<sup>20</sup>

Germany appeared on the stage of international politics with its farsighted creator, Chancellor Bismarck. He based German foreign policy on two pillars, the alienation of France and co-operation with Russia. The latter manifested in the alliance between Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy concluded in 1879 and the *Dreikaisersbund* of 1880. After the defeat of Napoleon III in the Franco-Prussian war of 1871, depriving France of Alsace-Lorraine, he encouraged the West Mediterranean power to seek compensation in Africa. France was frustrated in her African aspirations anyway, as Britain had already

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, his *Western Culture in Eastern Lands: A Comparison of the Methods Adopted by England and Russia in the Middle East* (London: John Murray, 1906). Vámbéry, comparing the colonising activities of Russia and Britain, comes to the conclusion that, although both have a civilising effect upon their Muslim subjects, Russia's 'civilising efforts' mean Russification, whereas British Muslim subjects do not lose their Islamic identity.

<sup>16</sup> Viktor Karády, 'A zsidóság polgárosodásának és modernizációjának főbb tényezői a magyar társadalomtörténetben,' *A zsidókérdésről* (Szombathely: Németh László Szakkollégium, 1989) 95–135, at 103; Viktor Karády: *Zsidóság Európában és a modern korban* (Budapest: Új Mandátum, 2000) 169.

<sup>17</sup> Alder and Dalby 382.

<sup>18</sup> A.J.P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1848–1918* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1954) 350.

<sup>19</sup> E.A. Benians, 'The Empire in the New Age, 1870–1919,' *The Empire-Commonwealth, 1870–1919*, ed. E.A. Benians, Sir James Butler and C.E. Carrington (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), vol. 3 of *The Cambridge History of the British Empire*, gen. ed. E.A. Benians et al., 8 vols. (1929–1959), 1–16, at 2.

<sup>20</sup> E.H. Hinsley, 'International Rivalry in the Colonial Sphere, 1869–1885,' *The Empire-Commonwealth* 95–126, at 115.

twice prevented her from taking a grip of Egypt in 1798–99 under Napoleon I and in the 1830–40s, when Britain threw in her lot against the French protégé Muhammad Ali and his aspirations to elevate Egypt to the level of a first-rate power in the Mediterranean. Alienation of France and Britain finally came with the opening of the Suez Canal, the French occupation of Tunisia (1881) and the British occupation of Egypt (1882).<sup>21</sup>

The occupation of Egypt had far reaching consequences in British Eastern Affairs and Ottoman–British contacts. Until then, the route to India seemed to be best defended by ensuring the security of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, which meant maintaining Ottoman posts on the Balkans against all odds. The policy was also backed by pro-Turkish public opinion, which only began to change with the massacres committed during the suppression of the Bulgarian revolt in 1876, when Gladstone condemned Disraeli's pro-Ottoman policies. The alienation between the Ottomans and the British was further aggravated when, anxious not to let control over the Suez Canal slip to the French, let alone Arab, nationalist hands, Britain first obtained the majority of its shares and then occupied Egypt, nominally Ottoman territory. The conviction that Ottoman collapse can only be delayed and not averted was getting stronger, but it took the British some time to decide whether to accelerate or to slow it down. The occupation of Egypt allowed the line of the defence of India to be shifted from the Bosphorus to the Nile, only strengthened by the acquisition of strategic posts in the Mediterranean like Cyprus (1878). To find the right way for the implementation of the new course of imperial policy, advisers like Vámbéry with his wide ranging Ottoman contacts, his acquaintance with the Sultan and his expertise in Middle Eastern affairs were invaluable. The Foreign Office was anxious to know the opinions of the Sultan and the feeling at his court, as official channels were not always the best means to learn about sensitive issues. While on occasion Vámbéry could be treated condescendingly, several of his memoranda were forwarded to the Foreign Secretary of the day.

It is also important to explain the unique political regime maintained in Abdulhamidian Turkey. Sultan Abdulhamid's reign is generally depicted as both the culmination and the termination of the Tanzimat, the Ottoman Age of Reform (1839–76),<sup>22</sup> which was essentially a reaction to serious internal problems emerging as the result of confrontation with Western influences. One of these pending issues was state ideology and legitimacy. Ottoman legitimacy was based not so much on religion as the politico-cultural achievements of the ruling dynasty, that is, on social stability and the security of its tax paying citizens.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The climax of the conflict came, in fact, with the Fashoda Crisis in 1898, putting France and Britain on the brink of war and finally excluding the former from the valley of the Nile.

<sup>2</sup> Stanford J. Shaw and Ezel Kural Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Turkey*, 2 vols. (Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press, 1976–1977) 2:172. Salâhi R. Sonyel, *Minorities and the Destruction of the Ottoman Empire* (Ankara: Turkish Historical Society Printing House, 1993) 242.

Fodor Pál, 'Állandóság és változás az oszmán történelemben,' *A szultán és az aranyalma: Tanulmányok az oszmán-török történelemről* (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2001) 11–24, at 21.

The recognition of this legitimacy by the diverse religio-ethnic groups (Greeks, Bulgarians, Armenians, Jews, Arabs, and so on) being central to the system, their emerging nationalism together with the economic and military crisis led the Tanzimat leaders to realise that the very existence of the Empire was at stake. Therefore, they effected far-reaching reforms in administration, education and the military and were gradually convinced that a reform in the political structure was also inevitable. In 1876, revolts in Bosnia, Herzegovina and Bulgaria and the pressure of foreign powers and the reformist elite forced the newly-ascended Sultan Abdulhamid II to promulgate the first Constitution for the Empire. The ideological background was Ottomanism, the ideal of which was to make all the subjects of the Sultan Ottoman citizens and equal before the law, regardless of faith, origin and language in the framework of 'a federation of mininations,' controlled from above.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, the constitution implicitly sanctioned the existence 'of an entity called the "people" as the source of authority,' this people being the Ottoman people, which consisted of a variety of ethnic groups, including non-Muslims. 'However, without common organic, psychological and cultural roots shared by the entire population, Ottomanism merely helped raise to the conscious level the existing ethnic, religious and economic differences between Muslims and Christians.'<sup>25</sup> Abdulhamid seemed to regard the constitution as a danger both to his personal power and to the existence of his Empire and thus, considering it premature, suspended it.

The motives of Osman's thirty-fourth successor for such a move were partly the result of the desperate situation of the Ottoman Empire following the war with Russia in 1877–78. He might have been quite embarrassed had he pondered where the frontiers of his once huge empire lay, or would certainly have provided definitions utterly different from those given by any contemporary statesman. The size of the territories he exercised effective control over became significantly smaller, and even those were subject to serious European economic and political encroachments. He managed to retain only nominal sovereignty in a number of his provinces, while the Balkans seemed gone for good. With nationalities constantly revolting, a staggering economy always on the verge of bankruptcy,<sup>26</sup> a weakened military having suffered enormous defeats at the hands of Infidels, very few survival prophecies for the Empire were in circulation. Hence he was forced to devote all his efforts to maintain the very existence of his Empire, and this attitude led to an autocracy and centralisation of power unseen before in Ottoman history. During the Tanzimat, central authority and effective power had been in the hands of the Bâb-ı Âli, the Sublime Porte and its able Grand Viziers, the sultan reigning but

<sup>24</sup> Kemal Karpat, *Politicization of Islam: Reconstructing Identity, State, Faith, and Community in the Late Ottoman State* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) 315–16.

<sup>25</sup> Karpat 315–16.

<sup>26</sup> In fact, the Empire did become bankrupt in 1875, which led to the allocation of some of its revenues to the service of the public debt under the auspices of a European controlled organisation, the *Düyükün-i Umumiye Idaresti* (Ottoman Public Debt Administration).

not ruling. With the suspension of the 1876 Constitution and the elimination of the powerful Tanzimat elite, the centre of power shifted from the Porte to the Palace, the Sultan actually dealing with state affairs himself, which made his person the hub of this extremely autocratic system. To check the loyalty of his people, an overriding concern of his, he developed an internal espionage system and implemented a strict system of censorship for publications. Corruption and favouritism flourished, demoralising the army and the bureaucracy.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, however, he carried on developing the education and communications systems, commenced in the Tanzimat.

Abdulhamid was in a desperate need of foreign support, but the good old days of Palmerstonian and Disraelian backing were over. He thus resorted to two main devices not utilised before in Ottoman history. One was strict neutrality, which effectively meant playing off the competing foreign powers, mainly Russia and Britain, against one another. Once he jokingly remarked to Vámbéry,

I am still a virgin – said the Sultan smilingly to me, when I touched the subject in my conversation – I am befriended to all, but to none of them particularly my ogling with this or with the other Cabinet, rests on mere conjectures.<sup>28</sup>

These were also the times of German ascendancy in Constantinople. German–Ottoman relations had already had a history dating from the 1830s, when Prussian military experts and advisers under the leadership of General von Moltke, helped to carry out the reconstruction of the Ottoman army.<sup>29</sup> The Ottomans' trust in the Germans was further enhanced when Bismarck, unwilling to entertain German colonial aspirations, did not consider the Eastern Question 'worth the bones of a German grenadier.' He was convinced that the disappearance of the Ottomans would surely lead to a major European war, which he did not wish Germany to get entangled in.<sup>30</sup> From the second half of the 1880s, however, with the attenuation of British support for the Ottoman Empire, German influence in Constantinople was beginning to gain momentum, which, of course, was not to Vámbéry's liking:

In matters of railway concession,<sup>31</sup> commercial and industrial undertakings and what is the most important in friendly advice and suggestions referring to the reconstruction of the Ottoman Empire, England had ostensibly to give way to Germany and France and the formerly staunch friend and ally of Turkey is continually losing ground in the councils of the Oriental state whose fate can by no means remain indifferent to England.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Erik J. Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History* (London and New York, 1993) 84.

<sup>28</sup> Vámbéry to Sir Philip Currie, 22 October 1890, FO 800 32, 119r.

<sup>29</sup> Enver Ziya Karal, *Birinci Meşrutiyet ve İstibdat Devirleri, 1876–1907* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayinevi, 2000), vol. 8 of *Osmanlı Tarihi*, 6th ed., 9 vols. (1995–), 165–66.

<sup>30</sup> Karal 168.

<sup>31</sup> Here Vámbéry is referring to the Berlin–Baghdad railway project signed on 27 September, 1888.

<sup>32</sup> Vámbéry's memorandum to Lord Kimberley, 14 June 1894, FO 800 32, 315r–v.

In seeking foreign help and to check the encroachments of colonial powers ruling over Muslim populations, Abdulhamid began to put into effective use his title of Caliph, the leader of Muslims. Although the Ottoman Sultan was a caliph by virtue of his guardianship of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina and of Egypt, as has already been stated, the legitimacy of the dynasty was not religious and the sultans had not used this title until the nineteenth century. However, the Peace Treaty of Küçük Kaynardja of 1774, marking the Ottoman defeat at the hands of Russia, provided for their mutual right to protect their co-religionists in the other country.<sup>33</sup> Russia – and later other European powers – thus had an excellent tool for intervention in the affairs of the Ottoman Orthodox community and Abdulhamid only followed their example when he sought contacts with the Muslims worldwide. As both Russia and Britain had millions of Muslim subjects, they were right to apprehend that the Sultan-Caliph might discomfort them. Their abhorrence was increased when the German Kaiser Wilhelm II paid a visit to the Ottoman Empire. As Vámbéry commented later,

Certain Mohammedan circles some time ago began to look upon Germany's policy in the Mohammedan world as openly antagonistic to Great Britain and obviously sympathetic to Islam. The Kaiser's intimate friendship with Sultan Abdul Hamid, his speech in Damascus at the time of his visit to Palestine, when he called the Khalifa the lord supreme of three hundred millions of Mohammedans – his appearance and behaviour at Tangiers, and many other ostentatious demonstrations of friendship to Islam have unavoidably flattered and raised the hopes of a certain class in the Moslem world.<sup>34</sup>

This was the ideology of Pan-Islamism, a phrase most probably coined by Vámbéry himself and made popular in his publications. This ideology as a weapon in international relations to bribe Russia and Britain proved to be a bluff, as the Muslim states were far too weak to implement it. 'Pan-Islamism came forward in proportion as the political independence of the Mohammedan countries was threatened or annihilated by the growing superiority of the West and the accelerated communication of modern times.'<sup>35</sup> Islam was thus the ideology that Muslim societies could use as a unifying force to meet the challenge posed by their encounter with Western supremacy. This encounter, mainly the consequence of the integration of the Islamic world into the modern capitalist world essentially undermined the Muslim way of life, thus giving impetus to the increasing activities of both the established religious system and popular grassroots movements. Abdulhamid, sensing the danger to his rule imposed by the latter and trying to integrate them, financially supported the lodges of

<sup>33</sup> Dobrovits 51. Russia's Muslim population had consisted of the population of Astrakhan and Kazan, to which that of the Crimea was now added. This was the first Muslim territory that the Ottomans lost to Infidels and the Sultan as Caliph continued to exercise spiritual sovereignty over it until the collapse of Tsarist Russia.

<sup>34</sup> [Arminius] Vámbéry, 'Pan-Islamism,' *The Nineteenth Century and After* 356 (October 1906) 537–58, on 553.

<sup>35</sup> Vámbéry, 'Pan-Islamism' 538.

dervishes coming from various parts of the Muslim world, for example, the Bokhara Tekkesi and the Hind Tekkesi of Istanbul, in order to use them as sources of intelligence regarding the state of worldwide political affairs. Vámbéry was thus right in remarking that

he may be called the first Sultan of Turkey, who turned his attention to the whole body of Islam, as seen by his continual missions sent openly and secretly to Sheikh Jenussi and his Mahdi in Africa, to Central-Asia, to Afghanistan, to Swat, to Java and to all parts of India – as well as by the favour and hospitality bestowed upon Sheikhs and Dervishes coming from the most distant parts of the Islamite World.<sup>36</sup>

The Sultan became the host of many religious scholars and Islamist thinkers, for example, Sheikh Abulhuda, Muhammad Zafir and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, proclaiming the united action of the Muslim *umma* or religious community all over the world. He also made efforts at proselytising on a universal scale<sup>37</sup> and maintaining contacts with the whole community of Muslims.<sup>38</sup> It had already been a tradition that diverse Muslim rulers from the Caucasus and Central Asia to India and the Far East<sup>39</sup> turned to the Sultan-Caliph for political or even military help against the colonial aspirations of the West or for confirmation of their ascendance to the throne. Pan-Islamism, on the other hand, was not merely a reaction against Western encroachments upon the Islamic world, but also a kind of modernist-nationalist movement to counter, and achieve unity against, the challenge posed by the nationalism of non-Muslim subjects and Western activities. Indeed, this was the only ideology that could legitimise any modernising action. Vámbéry, having witnessed for forty years the progress of the Muslim world in general and the Ottoman Empire in particular, had no fear of a universal Muslim uprising against Europe and claimed that

instead of speaking of a general rising of Pan-Islamism, we have before us at present only local outbursts of those Mohammedan countries where the Moslem population exceeds the number of non-Moslems, and where a certain progress on the path of Western culture has awakened the premature desire for political independence.<sup>40</sup>

As is apparent throughout his works, he deeply believed in the superiority of Western culture, which he thought to have a civilising mission in the world.

<sup>36</sup> Vámbéry to Sir Philip Currie, 6 June 1889, FO 800 32, 37r.

<sup>37</sup> The fate of the *Ertugrul*, the most famous cruiser of the Ottoman fleet is worth mentioning here. Following the universal joy and hail in the whole Islamic world after the Russian defeat at the hands of the Japanese, i.e. an Asiatic race, Abdulhamid sent the Japanese Emperor presents with the best vessel of his navy, even toying with the idea of getting a Muslim foothold in the Far Eastern country. All his dreams, however, came to nothing when the *Ertugrul* sank in a storm on her way to Japan (Karal 517).

<sup>38</sup> In Beijing there was even a university bearing his name (Cevdet Kuçuk, 'Abdulhamid II,' *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, ed. Azmi Özcan, Istanbul: Turk Diyanet Vakfı Yayınevi, 1993, 216–20, on 220).

<sup>39</sup> Karpal 48–67.

<sup>40</sup> Vámbéry, 'Pan-Islamism' 550.

What he, with his European contemporaries, failed to note, however, 'was not a predetermined, unilinear absorption of solely Western concepts, but a multidimensional evolution that incorporated values and ideas of the traditional culture and history as well.'<sup>41</sup> He knew that the spread of private property and the incorporation of the Ottoman Empire into global capitalism resulted in the emergence of a middle class:

Before all we must bear in mind the progress the country – and especially the Middle Class – has made during the last thirty two years under the ever pressing influence of Western Civilisation and increasing means for instruction.<sup>42</sup>

As a positivist, he believed in the Enlightenment to have freed Europe from the yoke of religion, an achievement, he thought, the East had yet to accomplish with the help of the West. This view, of course, prevented him from perceiving in Islam the potential to become a modernising force and ideology.<sup>43</sup>

Islamism in an Ottoman context can also be viewed as a 'counter-nationalist' ideology, a reaction against the rising 'partisan-nationalist' movements of the various *millets*, or non-Muslim religious communities of the Empire, which were backed by the Great Powers.<sup>44</sup> In the Classical age, the Sultan had not interfered with the internal affairs of these *millets*, leaving them to their own leadership and only retaining nomination of the leaders. During the era of the Tanzimat and especially after the proclamation of the Constitution, however, these *millets* were given political equality, which enhanced their superiority that they had already possessed over their Muslim compatriots. This superiority was obtained through the Capitulations, which originally had been voluntary concessions granted by the Sultan to foreign countries but had gained treaty status by the second half of the nineteenth century. They provided foreign powers with immense commercial advantages over Ottoman subjects and exempted them from Ottoman jurisdiction. Muslim commercial inferiority further increased due to the *berat*-system, which was a decree of appointment that granted more and more Ottoman Christians (especially Greeks and Armenians) the opportunity to obtain the status of subject of a foreign power and thus fall under the Capitulations, gaining enormous economic clout over

<sup>41</sup> Karpal 328.

<sup>42</sup> Vámbéry's memorial to Edward VII, 11 September 1908, FO 800 33, 421r.

<sup>43</sup> Vámbéry, *Western Culture in Eastern Lands*. For a contemporary Muslim view holding that Pan-Islamism is 'merely a free and complex expression of progress in Moslem societies,' see Behidjet Wahby Bey, 'Pan-Islamism,' *The Nineteenth Century and After* 363 (May 1907) 860–72, on 862.

<sup>44</sup> It is enough to list territorial losses (Greece, Serbia, Rumania, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Egypt), de facto or de jure, the Russian advances in the Caucasus, the loss of suzerainty over Algiers and Tunis, the autonomy of Samos since 1832, the special status of Lebanon since 1861 under a Christian governor appointed with the consent of the powers, the autonomy of Crete, whose governor was appointed by the Greek king from 1898, the constant danger of revolt in Macedonia, and since 1881 the foreign control of the Ottoman debt, meaning that a large part of the revenues was out of the Sultan's control (M.S. Anderson, *The Eastern Question, 1774–1923: A Study in International Relations*, London et al.: Macmillan, 1966).

their Muslim countrymen.<sup>45</sup> Though foreign capital and expertise were important in modernising the Empire, the system of the Capitulations became increasingly a burden on the Ottoman economy and was a cause of considerable discontent on the part of Muslims. They also feared, and not without reason, that Western economic encroachments were just the beginning of expansion, as had been shown in the cases of Tunis and Egypt occupied by France and Britain, respectively, where the pretext of interference had been the defence of French and British economic interests. The consequence of Christian superiority in the economy was that control over much of the economy of the Empire was exercised by Ottoman Christian or Western entrepreneurs.

One such *millet* was that of the Armenians, who quite substantially supplanted the Greeks in the administration after the establishment of the independent Greek state. Unlike the Greeks, however, instead of living in big ethnic blocks, the Armenian population of about 1.4 million was scattered in the Empire and thus they were in the minority everywhere. Furthermore, due to the missionary work carried out largely by Americans, the Armenians were divided into Gregorian (their original creed), Protestant and Catholic communities. From the early nineteenth century there had been an Armenian cultural revival particularly among the new Catholic and Protestant groups, and many wealthy Armenians sent their children to study in France, several of whom, when returning home, began to advocate reforms like secularisation and national autonomy within the *millet*. In the 1860s some of these Armenians joined the small opposition called Young Ottomans, and were amongst the progenitors of the 1876 Constitution, but there were also Armenians in leading administrative positions.<sup>46</sup> After the Ottoman defeat in the war of 1877–78 against Russia, however, which ended with the Treaty of San Stefano and brought about the creation of the independent states of Serbia and Bulgaria, the Armenian Patriarch Nerses wished to follow suit and proposed the idea of an autonomous Armenian state in Eastern Anatolia. The Tsar, however, whose army had already had many Armenian officers, did not support the idea of an autonomous or independent Armenia, as he justifiably feared that such a state would create an Armenian Piedmont in the Caucasus. He preferred revolting Armenians in Turkey to the anxiety caused by them within his own frontiers.

The Armenians also sent a delegation to various European capitals like London, Paris and St. Petersburg to gain international support. Their cause in Britain was taken up by public opinion, the genuine religious and humanitarian sympathies of which for the Armenian Christian brethren were also stoked by writers such as James Aberdeen, MP for Aberdeen;<sup>47</sup> while the Liberals and Gladstone could use the issue as a weapon against Disraeli and his pro-Turkish

policies. The British political atmosphere thus provided a strong backing to pro-Armenian schemes, as it was feared that Armenian hopes for Russian support would undermine British influence in Anatolia. The British, thus, committed themselves to protecting the Armenian cause, which is clearly shown by the inclusion of the following passage in the Treaty of Berlin:

The Porte engages to realise, without further delays, the improvements and reforms demanded by local requirements in the provinces inhabited by the Armenians, and guarantee their security against the Kurds and Circassians. She will periodically render account of the measures taken with this intent to the Powers, who will supervise them.<sup>48</sup>

Britain's espousal of the Armenian cause and the raising of the question of reforms to be introduced for them, furthered her alienation from the Ottomans. The Armenian Question thus gaining international acknowledgement, the Armenians intensified their efforts and took to arms, revolting in Eastern Anatolia during the 1890s under the leadership of revolutionary organisations called Henschak<sup>49</sup> and Dashnakzoutiun.<sup>50</sup> Both these groups aimed at independence, something the majority of the Armenians, especially the wealthy ones, did not yet contemplate. They carried out terrorist attacks to attract worldwide attention, the most spectacular of which being the occupation of the headquarters of the Ottoman Bank in Istanbul. Its result was massacres committed against them, and there seemed for a while a real danger of a British attempt to force the fleet through the Dardanelles. Of course, not only Armenian, but also Muslim blood was shed during the revolts, but the latter being ignored, suppression of the revolts was termed 'massacres' in the international press, which labelled the Sultan the 'red Sultan.'<sup>51</sup> He wanted Vámbéry to paint a friendly picture of his measures in the Western press, letting him know his own views on the problem:

It is quite erroneous to suppose that the Armenians be able to furnish a case analogous to that of the Bulgarians. Before all it must be shown that Armenia is an ancient geographical notion and that centuries ago it has lost its political and ethnical signification. In Erzerum, Bayazid, Erzinghan, Mush, Van, Bitlis and Diarbekir, where political exaltado's [*sic*] dream of an independent Armenia, two thirds of the inhabitants are Mohammedans and belong to the Turkish and Kurdish nationalities and only *one third* is Armenian, subdivided in catholic, protestant and orthodox sections. English liberals will not expect me that I shall hand over the majority and my fellow believers to the fanatic and uncivilised minority, and to open a wide breach for the continual

<sup>45</sup> Salisbury to Secretary of State (the 15<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Congress), 13 July 1878, FO 97 526, quoted by Şaşmaz 22.

<sup>46</sup> Established in Geneva in 1887. Its members were radical nationalist émigré students.

<sup>49</sup> Established in Tiflis in 1890. A larger, more moderate organisation.

<sup>51</sup> I must confess to the reader that I have lost my way in the controversy about the number of victims lost during the bloody history of the Armenian Question, as most of the works written about it are biased and treat the problem under the light of the tragic events of 1915. Pro-Armenian literature talks about 1.5 million dead whereas we find a few hundred thousand in pro-Turkish writings.

<sup>45</sup> Zürcher 13.

<sup>46</sup> One of the closest companions of Midhat Pasha, the leader of the reformists, was an Armenian, Krikor Odian (Sonyel 239).

<sup>47</sup> Musa Şaşmaz, *British Policy and the Application of Reforms for the Armenians in Eastern Anatolia 1877–1897* (Ankara: Turkish Historical Printing House, 2000) 9.

meddling for Russia? If politicians in Europe argue that my entrusting Armenians with high offices in the government is a sufficient proof of the capacity and rare talents of the Armenian nation, then they are grossly mistaken, for the Agop Pashas, Artvin Pashas, Vahan Efendis etc. can never be taken for a standard of the national culture of the Armenian nation. The forenamed dignitaries represent patterns of Ottoman Elendi Culture, whilst their brethren in Asia Minor have to progress on the path of general culture and have to learn a good deal before they acquire the importance attributed to them by a certain class of politicians in Europe.

The Imperial logic did not stop here, adding the following:

And further it must be borne in mind that the Armenians, a strictly Oriental race, with Oriental habits and manners live with us two hundred years ago [*sic*] in good understanding and peace, they are neither warlike nor rebellious and if there is an isolated movement in certain places, it has been stirred from outside by men incited by foreign politicians totally unacquainted with the character of the Armenian people. You know the best, that I have not got the slightest trace of religious fanaticism, with me each of my subjects, without any distinction of creed and race, is equally dear to me [*sic*] and it is not myself, but the foreign European Powers, who are ready to make distinctions in the difference of religion. To quote an example, I will give You, privately and confidentially, a fact which came to my knowledge just a few days ago – I intended to send to the embassy of St Petersburg a secretary who was formerly an Armenian and who turned afterwards a Mohammedan. Now will You believe me that the Russian government has refused to accept this man, and I have now to send another one. – A similar case has occurred in Rome, and in the place of Vahan Efendi, I have to send a Mohammedan ambassador.

The Sultan also reflected on the emerging Kurdish problem:

As to the wrongs which the Armenians have to suffer by the hands of the rapacious and disorderly Kurds, You must not imagine that I am not aware of the gross neglect of my civil officers in the interior. [...] I myself alone, cannot cure the evils at once, it requires time and patience, and if my friends, and particularly the English, whom You designate as such, go on in augmenting [exacerbating] my troubles instead of supporting me, then my task must become much arduous [*sic*] and we both will have to suffer by it. At all events, be so kind and tell Your English friends and particularly to Lord Salisbury, for whom I have a great consideration, that I am ready to cure the evils in Armenia, but I will sooner allow to sever this head from my body (and here he grew very much excited) than to permit the formation of a separate Armenia, which is not only the most wrying injustice, but which would be also the deathblow to my power, nay to the existence of Turkey.<sup>52</sup>

The Sultan was clear in expressing his disappointment with British politics and pledging himself for the integrity of his Empire. Apparently he was still thinking in Ottoman terms, considering the Armenians as one of the ecclesiastical communities constituting the political structure and not as a nationality, and holding nationalist aspirations detrimental to the Empire. It was on this basis

<sup>52</sup> Vámbéry to Sir Philip Currie, 22 October 1889, FO 800 32, 57v–60r.

that they could ascend into the ranks of the administration, as had been the case since more stable Ottoman times. He took British pressure for reforms, perhaps with some justification, as interference with his sovereign rights, as had been the case throughout his reign. The dirty work of large-scale slaughtering was carried out by irregular Kurdish regiments called Hamidiye, which were modelled on the Russian Cossacks.<sup>53</sup>

Vámbéry's views on the Armenian Question differed strongly from the generally pro-Armenian British public opinion and were closer to those of the Sultan:

As to the Armenian difficulty, I venture to say that in spite of the nefarious doings of certain politicians who encourage the Armenian revolutionary society in London and who are continually misleading public opinion, the government could nevertheless do a great deal towards allaying the apprehension and distrust of the Sultan. When in Constantinople, I heard the Grand Vezier mentioning with satisfaction that the Archbishop of Canterbury has issued a letter against my staunch interference in that matter, pointing to the political gist of the so called pro Christian religious movement. On the other hand the Sultan complained to me bitterly against the English government permitting the transmission by post of anti-Turkish revolutionary papers to Turkey. A considerable number of parcels containing copies of the revolutionary paper 'Hurriet'<sup>54</sup> arrive weekly in Constantinople and are remitted by the servants of the British Post-office. Sir Philip Currie has acted wisely to put a stoppage to that usage, but I vainly used all my persuasive power to convince the Sultan that the hands of the English government are bound and that they cannot act contrary to the constitutional laws of the country.

Vámbéry clearly identified British and Ottoman interests in the Armenian question, and was at a loss to understand why the British were, as he thought it, acting against their own interests:

In viewing and in examining the grievances of the Armenian malcontent it would be idle to deny the sad effect of Turkish misrule, but on the other hand by forcibly ignoring the ethnical configurations of Asia Minor we could easily fall in the mistake to sacrifice thousands of Mohammedans for hundreds of Armenians, [and a] gross injustice and cruelty would be the result of our humanitarian efforts, besides the one done to the imperial interests of Great Britain by opening the door to Russia lying in am[bush] in the North of Anatolia, anxious to hurl on to the plains of Mesopotamia. From m[y] English point of view I look upon every con[nivance] shown to the creation of an Armenian pro[vince] as upon a sinful attack against the vi[rtual] interests of England, and whether liberal or conservative, England's statesmen c[an] act with good conscience in putting a check upon the premature national [aspirations of] the Armenians. If these peaceful and industrious Christians of the East have not been crushed hitherto by their Moslem masters, the future is the much more promising for them and the quiet march of events will assist them better than any forcible means. The

<sup>53</sup> Zürcher 87.

<sup>54</sup> One of the organs of the Young Turks the strongest opposition to Abdulhamid, which was published in London (Karal 512).

situation of Greeks, Romanians, Servians and Bulgarians, who always lived in compact masses, cannot serve as an encouraging example to the thinly scattered groups of Armenians.<sup>55</sup>

As a pro-Turkish and anti-Russian writer, Vámbéry's views were quite logical. He was aware that an independent Armenia with a Muslim majority in the vicinity of Russia would be extremely vulnerable to Russian advance and thus considered pro-Armenian British propaganda detrimental to both the Ottoman Empire and to British interests in the region.<sup>56</sup> He held that even Turkish misrule was preferable to a Russian takeover of Ottoman Armenia, as it would secure Russia's access to Iraq and a good post to threaten British Mediterranean interests. He therefore still adhered to the view that the Ottoman Empire be given sustained British support, as the best means of maintaining the balance of power in the Middle East and of averting Russian expansion. It is also worth noting that his pro-Ottoman arguments in opposition to nationalist aspirations echoed Hungarian views on the subject: both empires being multi-ethnic political formations, the nationalism of their ethnic groups was extremely dangerous to their existence.

Until the 1890s British attitude to the Ottomans still seemed to be undecided. Despite Salisbury's reiterated proposal made privately to dissect the Ottoman Empire, the British still wished to come to an understanding with the Sultan, especially over the question of Egypt, nominally still under Ottoman sovereignty. The Sultan, however, was not averse to dallying with the Russians at the same time, and was only willing to approach the British if given guarantees of protection in case of any eventuality. He also had the following conditions: no pressure for reforms, no interference with his government and a settlement of the Egyptian question.<sup>57</sup> Perhaps the third was the most difficult one as it was already clear that the British would stay there for good. The Sultan had tried to save face by putting forward the idea of garrisoning a few thousand soldiers officered by Turks on the Nile,<sup>58</sup> but this came to nothing. The British were always afraid that in the event of their evacuation the country would again fall into turmoil and consequently attract French interference, as the Ottomans were far too weak to defend it.<sup>59</sup>

Alienated from his ex-friends the British, the Sultan turned his back on them, rousing their grave apprehensions. Vámbéry alluded to this problem in one of his interviews with the Ottoman ruler.

Knowing your Majesty's exalted mind and political sagacity I have always ridiculed the idea of Y. M.'s anti-English feelings and I will always do my best to dissuade my English

friends from it.<sup>60</sup> But unfortunately they always come forward with one or another reason and amongst others they most frequently allude to the fact, that Your Majesty, whilst having the ports on the entrance of the Bosphorus from the Black Sea in a neglected state of defence, you have strongly fortified the Dardanelles, by putting Krupp-guns in that place; a military precaution, which the English believe or imagine to be against them. They must be forgiven if this measure furnishes them with a striking contrast, if compared with the sense of security shown by Your Majesty to the entrance from the Black Sea.<sup>61</sup>

The new forts, in the hands of hostile Ottomans or a Russian expeditionary force, would make it much more difficult than ever to pass a British fleet through the Straits.<sup>62</sup> Accordingly, Vámbéry told the Sultan that 'apprehensions are growing continually about an intended *Coup de Main* of Russia, whose Black Sea fleet is constantly increasing and who is long time ago [*sic*] planning a surprise.'<sup>63</sup> Moreover, British fears were further aggravated by the Franco-Russian rapprochement concluded in the Entente Cordiale of 1894. A Russian attack on the Ottoman capital leading to British naval intervention to protect it would thus put British positions at the mercy of the French fleet, as it would risk the escape of the French Toulon squadron into the English Channel.<sup>64</sup> This meant that the British naval position in the Mediterranean had been markedly weakened, since such an eventuality could only be averted if France were a British ally, a sheer impossibility at the time, or if the French navy were destroyed. To meet the challenge, the British raised their naval estimates<sup>65</sup> and put out feelers to achieve an understanding with Russia in the Middle East.<sup>66</sup>

As has been stated above, the occupation of Egypt had already shifted the line of defence of the Indian Empire from the Straits to Egypt. This did not escape Vámbéry's attention either, who tentatively remarked in 1892,

The Sultan always flatters himself with the idea that England can not allow the possession of the Dardanelles in any other hands excepting Turkey and that the Russian flag on the Golden Horn means the uncontested [*sic*] ruin of British influence in the East. Papers and speeches proving the contrary have been always ridiculed in the palace as well as on [*sic*] the Porte and have been looked upon as means of coercion. [...] But is it not time to ask whether this utter reliance of the Grandseigneur will not turn out a sad illusion and whether England's position on the Nile and in Cyprus may not be taken as foreshadowing the future policy of the cabinet of St James in securing a new hold and a fresh standing point against the relinquished old one?<sup>67</sup>

<sup>55</sup> I.e. he will do what he can to maintain a friendly relationship between the British and the Ottomans. He kept his word.

<sup>56</sup> Vámbéry's interview with Abdulhamid, 4 June 1889, FO 800 32, 22v.

<sup>57</sup> Anderson 252.

<sup>58</sup> Vámbéry's interview with Abdulhamid, 4 June 1889, FO 800 32, 21r.

<sup>59</sup> Anderson 252.

<sup>60</sup> This naval superiority proved decisive in the Fashoda crisis of 1898.

<sup>61</sup> Anderson 253.

<sup>62</sup> Vámbéry's memorandum, 28 August 1892, FO 800 32, 223.

<sup>55</sup> Vámbéry's memorandum to Lord Kimberley, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, from 4 to 14 June 1894, FO 800 32, 321v-323r.

<sup>56</sup> History justified him after his death with the Bolshevik ascendance in Armenia and the establishment of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic.

<sup>57</sup> Vámbéry's memorandum to Sir Philip Currie, 8 June 1890, FO 800 32, 93v-94r.

<sup>58</sup> Vámbéry's memorandum to Sir Philip Currie, 6 July 1889, FO 800 32, 31v.

<sup>59</sup> Karal 101.

To Vámbéry's regret, he proved right. The Straits and the fate of the Ottomans now played a secondary role in British political thinking, and in 1896 Salisbury could plainly inform Parliament that 'the parting of the ways was in 1853, when the Emperor Nicholas' proposals were rejected. [...] Many members of the house will keenly feel the nature of the mistake that was made when I say that we put all our money on the wrong horse.'<sup>68</sup> Russia in the next decade began to look to the Far East as a natural field of economic and territorial expansion, and it was the Japanese who would take over the Ottomans' role in British policy and pin down Russian forces.<sup>69</sup> The two Great Powers settled their disagreement over Persia in 1907, dividing it into spheres of interest, leaving a neutral zone in the middle. The Russians renounced Afghanistan, and Tibet became a neutral buffer zone. With the British taking the side of the Franco-Russian Entente, Vámbéry felt disappointed.

You will be astonished that I withhold my opinion about the Anglo-Russian connection. Well, I do not like it at all. You have paid a too high prize for a temporary peace, for such it is, and the humiliation undergone will not enhance British prestige in Asia. You have shown excessive caution in the face of a sick adversary, although England was not in need of doing so.<sup>70</sup>

For his part, Vámbéry continued to write and lecture on Middle Eastern and Central Asian affairs. As an interpreter, he accompanied the Persian Shahs Nasruddin (1848–1896) and Mozaffaruddin (1896–1907) on their journey to Hungary, a part of their European tour. He had contacts with the Young Turkish movement, the opposition of Abdulhamid, and also with Muslim political activists in India, Egypt, which quite often provided him with a better insight than policy makers.<sup>71</sup>

Vámbéry might be criticised for his adherence to the pro-Turkish cause to the end. One should not forget, however, that he never became pro-German, and his ideal was to join the interests of the Dual Monarchy with those of Britain, for which the best field was inevitably the Ottoman Empire, as stated above, a natural standpoint for a Hungarian Jewish patriot.<sup>72</sup> It can be argued that history justified him by the enormous deficiencies of both the Balkan and the Middle East settlement following the war, in which further conflicts were encoded. Turkey witnessed a second constitutional period from 1908, when the Young Turks carried out a coup d'état. Abdulhamid was deposed in the following year, but this could not delay the approaching end. The Empire, reduced to an Asian state in the Balkan Wars and becoming more and more Turkish both ethnically and ideologically, joined the Axis Powers in the First

World War, and their defeat brought an end to the Eastern Question. Russia being a member of the Entente, the war was not the gigantic struggle between Autocracy and Democracy, Western Civilisation and Eastern Despotism, as Vámbéry had predicted, but it led to the fall of the Russian Empire together with Germany, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire. Vámbéry's pro-Turkish political views were closely connected to British and Austro-Hungarian interests, fearing lest the final collapse of the Ottomans should make the Russians and their allies too strong. Had he lived to see post-war Europe, Hungary and Turkey, Vámbéry would surely have been most disheartened by the outcome he had struggled so devotedly to avert.

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<sup>68</sup> Andrew Roberts, *Salisbury: Victorian Titan* (London: Phoenix, 2000) 6-16.

<sup>69</sup> Dobrovits 60.

<sup>70</sup> Vámbéry to the Permanent Under-Secretary, 20 October 1907, FO 800 33, 392r-v.

<sup>71</sup> The British honoured Vámbéry posthumously with a street name in London (it might have been the idea of his publisher Charles Marvin). There was also an English trawler 'Vambéry' hitting the headlines in the 1930s for illegal fishing in Icelandic waters (Alder and Dalby 489).

<sup>72</sup> He was by no means alone with his anti-Russian views in British politics.