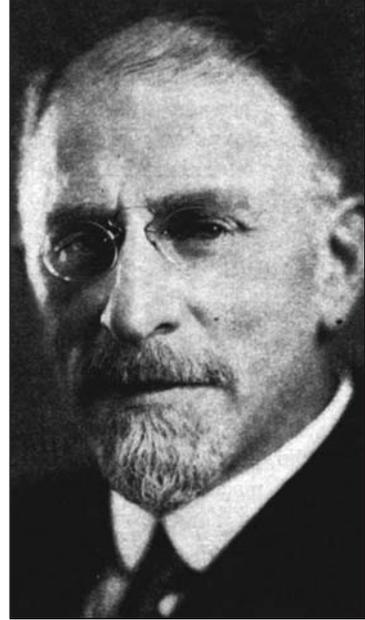


## Reading 5 — THE AMERICAN AMBASSADOR IN CONSTANTINOPLE

The Armenian Genocide did not take place without witnesses. Journalists, missionaries, and diplomats from many countries witnessed the genocide or listened to first-hand accounts. The question was, what to do about it? The problem was particularly troubling to Henry Morgenthau, an American businessman and lawyer who served as the American ambassador to the Ottoman Empire. Pulitzer-prize winner Samantha Power describes the choices he faced as his understanding of the genocide grew. In May 1915, the Allies issued a declaration warning the Turks of the consequences of committing “crimes against humanity and civilization.” Power notes:

*The United States, determined to maintain its neutrality in the war, refused to join the Allied declaration. President Woodrow Wilson chose not to pressure either the Turks or their German backers. It was better not to draw attention to the atrocities, lest U.S. public opinion get stirred up and begin demanding U.S. involvement. Because the Turks had not violated the rights of Americans, Wilson did not formally protest.*



**Henry Morgenthau**

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*But in Turkey itself America’s role as bystander was contested. Henry Morgenthau Sr., a German-born Jew who had come to the United States as a ten-year-old boy and had been appointed ambassador to the Ottoman Empire by President Wilson in 1913, agitated for U.S. diplomatic intervention. In January and February 1915, Morgenthau had begun receiving graphic but fragmentary intelligence from his ten American consuls posted throughout the Ottoman Empire. At first he did not recognize that the atrocities against the Armenians were of a different nature than the wartime violence. He was taken in by Talaat’s assurances that uncontrolled elements had simply embarked upon “mob violence” that would soon be contained. In April, when the massacres began in earnest, the Turkish authorities severed Morgenthau’s communication with his consuls and censored their letters. Morgenthau was reluctant to file reports back to Washington based on rumors, and the Turks were making it impossible for him to fact-check.*

*Although he was initially incredulous, by July 1915 the ambassador had come around. He had received too many visits from desperate Armenians and trusted missionary sources to remain skeptical. They had sat in his office with tears streaming down their faces, regaling him with terrifying tales. When he compared this testimony to the strikingly similar horrors relayed via consular cables,*

Morgenthau came to an astonishing conclusion. What he called “race murder” was under way. On July 10, 1915 he cabled Washington with a description of the Turkish campaign:

*“Persecution of Armenians assuming unprecedented proportions. Reports from widely scattered districts indicate systematic attempt to uproot peaceful Armenian populations and through arbitrary arrests, terrible tortures, whole-sale expulsions and deportations from one end of the Empire to the other accompanied by frequent instances of rape, pillage, and murder, turning into massacre, to bring destruction and destitution on them. These measures are not in response to popular or fanatical demand but are purely arbitrary and directed from Constantinople in the name of military necessity, often in districts where no military operations are likely to take place.”*

Morgenthau was constrained by two background conditions that seemed immutable. First, the Wilson administration was resolved to stay out of World War I. Picking fights with Turkey did not seem a good way to advance that objective. And second, diplomatic protocol demanded that ambassadors act respectfully toward their host governments. U.S. diplomats were expected to stay out of business that did not concern U.S. national interests. “Turkish authorities have definitely informed me that I have no right to interfere with their internal affairs,” Morgenthau wrote. Still, he warned Washington, “there seems to be a systematic plan to crush the Armenian race.”

Local witnesses urged him to involve the moral power of the United States. Otherwise, he was told, “the whole Armenian nation would disappear.” The ambassador did what he could, continuing to send blistering cables back to Washington and raising the matter at virtually every meeting he held with Talaat. He found his exchanges with the interior minister infuriating.<sup>107</sup>

As Morgenthau became increasingly aware of the conflict between his role as ambassador and his moral outrage, he faced a dilemma. Power elaborates:

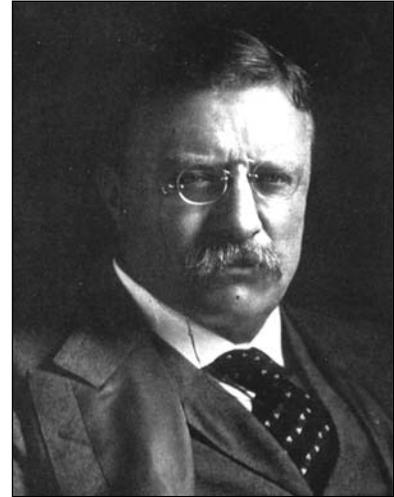
*Morgenthau had to remind himself that one of the core prerogatives of sovereignty was that states and statesmen could do as they pleased within their own borders. “Technically,” he noted to himself, “I had no right to interfere. According to the cold-blooded legalities of the situation, the treatment of Turkish subjects by the Turkish Government was purely a domestic affair; unless it directly affected American lives and American interests, it was outside of the concerns of the American Government.” The ambassador found this maddening.<sup>108</sup>*

Without support from the American government, Morgenthau had to look for help from private sources. He lobbied his friends at the *New York Times* to give the story prominent coverage and helped raise funds for Armenian relief. Power describes this work and its limitations:

*The Congregationalist, Baptist, and Roman Catholic churches made donations. The Rockefeller founda-*

tion gave \$290,000 in 1915 alone. And most notable, a number of distinguished Americans, none of Armenian descent, set up a new Committee on Armenian Atrocities. The committee raised \$100,000 for Armenian relief and staged high-profile rallies, gathering delegations from more than 1,000 churches and religious organizations in New York City to join in denouncing the Turkish crimes.

But in calling for “action,” the committee was not urging U.S. military intervention. It was worried about the impact of an American declaration of war on American schools and churches in Turkey. In addition, the sentiment that made committee members empathize with their fellow Christians in Armenia also made some pacifists. In decrying the atrocities but opposing the war against Turkey, the committee earned the scorn of former president Theodore Roosevelt. In a letter to Samuel Dutton, the Armenia committee secretary, Roosevelt slammed the hypocrisy of the “peace-at-any-price type” who acted on the motto of “safety first,” which, he wrote, “could be appropriately used by the men on a sinking steamer who jump into boats ahead of the women and children.” He continued:



**President Theodore Roosevelt**

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“Mass meetings on behalf of Armenians amount to nothing whatever if they are mere methods of giving a sentimental but ineffective and safe outlet to the emotion of those engaged in them. Indeed they amount to less than nothing. . . . Until we put honor and duty first, and are willing to risk something in order to achieve righteousness both for ourselves and for others, we shall accomplish nothing; and we shall earn and deserve the contempt of the strong nations of mankind.”

Roosevelt wondered how anyone could possibly advise neutrality “between despairing and hunted people, people whose little children are murdered and their women raped, and the victorious and evil wrongdoers.” He observed that such a position put “safety in the present above both duty in the present and safety in the future.” Roosevelt would grow even angrier later in the war, when the very relief campaign initiated to aid the Armenians would be invoked as reason not to make war on Turkey. In 1918 he wrote to Cleveland Dodge, the most influential member of the Armenia committee: “To allow the Turks to massacre the Armenians and then solicit permission to help the survivors and then to allege the fact that we are helping the survivors as a reason why we should not follow the only policy that will permanently put a stop to such massacres is both foolish and odious.”<sup>109</sup>

Despite the criticism, Morgenthau continued to work tirelessly to aid the Armenians, including an offer to raise money to relocate survivors to the United States. Yet he remained frustrated that he had not achieved more. “My failure to stop the destruction of the Armenians had made Turkey, for me a place of horror—I had reached the end of my resources.”<sup>110</sup>