



# REVISTA INCLUSIONES

HOMENAJE A FRANCISCO JOSÉ  
FRANCISCO CARRERA

Revista de Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales

Volumen 7 . Número 3

Julio / Septiembre

2020

ISSN 0719-4706

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**THE ARMENIAN QUESTION ON THE EVE OF THE RUSSO-TURKISH WAR FROM 1877 – 1878  
AND ITS PLACE IN THE POST-WAR PLANS OF THE RUSSIAN GOVERNMENT**

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**Fecha de Recepción:** 12 de abril de 2020 – **Fecha Revisión:** 30 de abril de 2020

**Fecha de Aceptación:** 17 de mayo de 2020 – **Fecha de Publicación:** 01 de julio de 2020

**Abstract**

This article is intended to present and analyse the condition of the Armenian Question on the eve of the Russo-Turkish War from 1877–1878 and its place in the Russian foreign policy. The deeper insight and interpretation of this initial phase of the internationalization of the Armenian Question is to allow a more regular assessment of the reasons due to which Saint Petersburg – a traditional defendant of Christianity within the Ottoman Empire, followed a generally neutral and indifferent position towards the repressive policy of the Sublime Porte regarding the Armenians within the Empire. As a whole, the Russian policy towards Armenia can be defined as hesitant, inconsistent, and indecisive. This problem lacks a clear governmental programme; there are multiple and different views in the political circles of the country in connection to the nature of the Russian interests in Armenia. The accurate rationalization of the foreign political strategy of Saint Petersburg in this region has to take into account that the Armenian Question has always taken a secondary place in its Near East policy compared to the questions concerning the Balkan region. To a great extent, this circumstance is the reason for the Russian attitude towards the Armenian Question not to exceed the strictly diplomatic spaces, i.e., the Armenian Question appears to be an object of a pure diplomacy lacking foreign political or military factors.

**Keywords**

Armenian question – Eastern Question – Russo-Turkish War 1877–1878  
Treaty of San Stefano

**Para Citar este Artículo:**

Karenovna Papoyan, Diana. The Armenian question on the eve of the Russo-Turkish war from 1877 – 1878 and its place in the post-war plans of the Russian government. Revista Inclusiones Vol: 7 num 3 (2020): 200-211.

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## Introduction

The war between the Russian and the Ottoman Empire from 1877–1878 and the contracts concluded after it (in San Stefano and Berlin) represent one of the most significant international events of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which events marked a new stage of the history of the Eastern Question connected to the exacerbation of the National Question within the Ottoman Empire. Not only did the Congress of Berlin (1/13 June–1/13 July 1878) leave the question of national identification and union of the Balkan nations unfinished, but it also created a new problem for the Sublime Porte and the European governments which engaged their attention as far as the end of World War I, the so called Armenian Question<sup>1</sup>.

The Armenian Question was one of the most complex and complicated national questions of the Ottoman Empire in which solution all the Great Powers had been involved through the years, led by their own political and economic interests in this region. Russia was a factor with essential significance in the solution of this Question, which is due to several circumstances: 1) the general Christian religion; 2) the territorial proximity; 3) the commercial and economic relations dating back from the time of Kievan Rus; 4) the pro-Russian feeling among a great part of the Armenian society according to which the movement and establishment of Russia in the Caucasus matches the national liberation aspirations of the Armenians; 5) the frequent Russo-Turkish wars (16<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> centuries) and the necessity of providing a compassionate attitude among the Armenians in the eastern borderlands of Anatolia.

However, the Russian policy connected to Armenia was generally hesitant, inconsistent, and indecisive, which, according to some authors, was its general policy connected to the Eastern Question. This issue lacked a general governmental programme; within the political circles, there were multiple different positions regarding the essence of the Russian interests in Armenia. The accurate rationalization of the Russian foreign political strategy in this region has to take into account that the Armenian Question always took a secondary place in the Near East policy of Saint Petersburg compared to the questions concerning the Balkan region. While there were strong ethnic, language, cultural, historic, and religious connections with the Balkan peoples which affected the public opinion and the emperor's decisions, these connections were significantly weaker and unstable with the relations with the Armenians. That is, to a great extent, the reason why the Russian attitude towards the Armenian Question did not exceed the strictly diplomatic areas, i.e., the Armenian Question was an object of pure diplomacy which lacked extra-political and military factors. This is also confirmed by the words of the Russian Colonel Dmitry V. Putyata, who was sent in Asian Turkey in 1895 and who said: 'In its policy towards the East, Russia has given itself the fundamental task to patronize Slavs and the Greek Orthodox Church... However, the question about the state of the Armenians in Turkey originates from different conditions which do not have any relation to the Greek Orthodox idea, and these conditions have a merely political character'<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The international issue which occurred in connection to the Armenian Question is focused around the western Armenians governed by the Ottoman Sultan. In 1828, the eastern half of Armenia was situated within the borders of the Russian Empire which is why the prevailing opinion in historiography is that the destiny of Eastern Armenia is not treated as a part of the Armenian Question.

<sup>2</sup> A. Kirakossian, *Mec Britanian yev Haykakan harcy (XIX dari 90–akan t.)* (Erevan: Hayastan, 1990), 132-133.

## 1. The state of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire before the Russo-Turkish War from 1877–1878 and the attitude of Saint Petersburg to them

The 1870s were a decisive moment not only for the history of Balkan peoples but also for the destiny of western Armenians – the biggest Christian minority in the Anatolian part of the Ottoman Empire. The documentary sources clearly show that it was back in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Armenian national self-awareness started to form, to grow with the idea of closeness between eastern and western Armenians, and to arise the necessity of fundamental changes in all the spheres of public, economic, political, and cultural life. This resulted to a quick spread of the movement for gaining civil rights and for the introduction of reforms into the Ottoman Empire. Taking these circumstances into account, as well as the strategic position of East Anatolia vilayets which progressively attracted the attention of the Great Powers, the Sublime Porte tried to pacify the Armenians through internal reforms and to prevent them of becoming a reason for European interference. As is commonly known, the Edict of Gülhane from 1839, the Ottoman Reform Edict from 1856, and the Ottoman Constitution from 1876 proclaim religious, national, and legal equality between all the subjects of the Empire. In 1863 the Sultan gives Armenians a special status, confirming the so called Sahmanadrutyun – a national constitution giving some rights of self-management in the spiritual and secular sphere. The National Assembly of Armenia was established which turned into the political centre of western Armenians.

Yet, the proclaimed reforms and innovations could not be realized in such a way as to satisfy Armenians. The previous anarchy still continued in the eastern vilayets of Anatolia; the relations between Armenians and Muslims deteriorated; the Kurds' attacks became more frequent. The complaints and requests of the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople and the National Assembly towards the Sultan and the Grand Vizier did not have any effect. During one of the first sessions of the newly formed Ottoman Parliament, the Armenian Members of the Parliament even criticize the government about the reasonless attacks and murders the Armenians were subjected to in the eastern borderlands by the regular and irregular Ottoman armies and Kurd gangs,<sup>3</sup> but their activity on the Armenian Question was soon stopped due to the suspension of the Constitution by Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1876–1909)<sup>4</sup>. Under the conditions of social and economic backwardness and lack of security for the life and property of the Empire, the Armenians demonstrate their dissatisfaction with various armed activities – the uprisings in Zeitoun (1862, 1865, 1867), Van (1862), Moush (1863), Charsandzhanak (1865), etc<sup>5</sup>. The revival of the Balkan peoples expressed in deep social and cultural changes and awakening of the idea of system of state, the multiple Russo-Turkish wars during the whole 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the consistent policy of Saint Petersburg for protecting the Christian nations on the territory of the Ottoman Empire had a significant effect on the Armenians and most of them were convinced in the rescue mission of Russia. Did the hopes of Armenian national figures match the foreign political purposes of Saint Petersburg, though?

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<sup>3</sup> According to the American historian Vahakn Dadrian, the essence of the Armenian Question is the conflict between Armenians and Kurds, deliberately incited by the Ottoman power – V. N. Dadrian, *Istorija armjanskogo genocida. Etnicheskij konflikt ot Balkan do Anatolii i Kavkaza* (Erevan: Nojan Tapan, 2007), 55-58.

<sup>4</sup> A. O. Sarkissian, *History of the Armenian Question to 1885* (The University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1938), 58-60.

<sup>5</sup> Hay Jhoghovrdi *Patmowtyown harcerowm ev patasghannerowm* (Erevan: HRH Hratarakchowtyown, 2009), 244-249.

It is indisputable that for Russia the Balkan-Caucasian area had an essential strategic, economic, and military meaning. The main objects Russia concentrated its diplomatic and military political activity on in this region were Constantinople and the Straits (the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles), through which, according to the views of Russian rulers, passed the pathway of the progress of the Empire<sup>6</sup>. Within this general foreign political direction, the Balkans and Anatolia were the two military political bases which had to guarantee and secure the Russian influence in the Black Sea Basin as well as the control over the Straits.

The extreme complexity of the Question, however, predetermined the contradiction and hesitance in the Russian foreign political strategy. It cannot be denied that the idea of expansion southwards, of division of the Ottoman inheritance, and of establishment of a full control over Constantinople, the Black Sea, and the Straits had always been present in the plans of the Russian diplomacy. Despite that this idea had some tactical changes, it never disappeared in strategic plan. Yet, along with this, a part of the Russian political circles shared the idea that the interests of the country dictated the preservation of the Ottoman Empire as 'a weak neighbour', which made Russia give up its final target of conquering Constantinople and the Straits. In the 1830s and 1840s, Emperor Nicholas I (1825–1855) adopted the second tendency and became forefather of 'the weak neighbour' doctrine. A decade later, however, the government of Saint Petersburg realized that this policy was an absolute self-delusion, as on the Ottoman land tsarism did not face a degrading Sublime Porte, but the powerful and energetic western countries. After the Crimean War (1853–1856), the main foreign political course of Russia was directed to the complete destruction of the Ottoman Empire, the creation of independent national countries under its protection, and, certainly, the conquering of the Straits in the long run.

On the other hand, regarding both strategic zones – the Balkans – on the west, and Anatolia – on the east, the methods of the Russian foreign policy were totally different. The only unit between them were Constantinople and the Straits. The words of the Russian ambassador in Constantinople from 1864–1877 – Nikolay P. Ignatyev: 'to keep the adjacent regions under moral subjection and turn Bulgarians and Greeks, on one hand, and the Armenians, on the other, into an obedient instrument of the Russian policy as permanent allies, destroying each possibility of turning to the side of the enemy camp' are of extreme interest on this topic<sup>7</sup>.

Unlike the Balkans, where Saint Petersburg planned to provide natural allies and strategic base stations by creating sovereign countries which, on one hand, were to play the role of a barrier against the intrusion of western European influence, and on the other – they were to confirm and expand the Russian positions and influence in the Black Sea hinterland, in Anatolia Russia did not intend to let the formation of any autonomous or independent Armenian country<sup>8</sup>. Within the ruling circles of the tsar, there was a prevailing negative attitude towards the growing Armenian national liberation movement in the Ottoman Empire, as it was threatening to spread among the Russian Armenians, which were over 1 million. Here is the difference in the Russian liberation policy towards the Balkan nations and the policy towards the Armenians. In this sense, the Russian

<sup>6</sup> G. Genov, *Iztochnijat vapros. Politicheska i diplomaticheska istorija*. Chast 1 (Sofia: BAN, 2008), 6.

<sup>7</sup> N. P. Ignatyev, "Zapiski grafa N. P. Ignatyeva", *Istoricheskij vestnik*, t. 135, janvar, 1914: 53.

<sup>8</sup> V. A. Parsamyan, *Griboedovy yev hay-rowsakan haraberowtyownnery* (Erevan: Haykakan SSR Gitowtyownneri Akademiayi Hratarakchowtyown, 1947), 138-139.

government did not consider the Armenian Question as a target, but only as a means of achieving the foreign political tasks of the Empire, which was why it did not provide any enormous resource to control and solve this problem and did not want to engage with it too much.

The accurate comprehension of the Armenian Question has to include that in difference to the Balkan nations, the idea of the Armenians for the recovery of the national independence in the 1870s, and even later, was not vastly spread; only a handful of educated Armenian emigrants in Europe, as well as the Armenian intellectuals in Constantinople shared it. The majority of the population wanted only improvement of the state of the Ottoman Empire through the introduction of reforms. These were the observations of the French ambassador in Constantinople, Paul Cambon, whose report to his government stated the following: 'by 1881 the idea of Armenian independence did not exist. The masses crave for reforms, dreaming only for the normal governance by the Ottoman Power'<sup>9</sup>.

The Armenians did not have a clearly structured national programme. The Armenian national circles outlined different and contradictory alternatives about the political future: I) a part of the figures relied on the cooperation of Russia and even wanted Russian protectorate for whole Armenia (both Eastern and Western); II) another part connected the improvement of the state of Western Armenia and even the acquisition of its autonomy with the help of Europe, especially England; III) a big part of the west Armenian intellectuals thought that the Armenian nation had to prepare and achieve its national liberation alone; IV) there were such which insisted on an agreement with the Sublime Porte; these suggestions came mainly from the highly positioned Armenians in the Ottoman administrative, state, political, and economic system.

## 2. The Armenian Question in the plans of the Russian military political circles during the Russo-Turkish War from 1877–1878

The Great Eastern Crisis from 1875–1878 and the declared war between Russia and the Ottoman Empire gave Armenians additional excitement<sup>10</sup>. During the international conference of the ambassadors in Constantinople, called in December 1876 to discuss the Balkan crisis, the Armenian Patriarch Nerses Varjabedian and the Members of the National Assembly made attempts to raise the Armenian Question for hearing in the sessions of the conference, but this was unsuccessful. At this stage, none of the Great Powers did not want to raise the Armenian Question in the Ottoman Empire, which led to additional complications of the present critical situation. After the refusal of the Sublime Porte to accept the solutions of the Conference, on 12/24 April 1877, the Russian Emperor Alexander II (1855–1881) declared war against the Ottoman Empire. The military operations took place on two fronts – the Balkan and the Caucasian, and lasted till 19/31 January 1878, when the Edirne Ceasefire Agreement was concluded. During the war, thousands of Armenians fought on the side of the Russian army – both in the regular infantry and in voluntary parties and partisan groups<sup>11</sup>. Moreover, the Russian army

<sup>9</sup> V. N. Dadrian, *Istorija armjanskogo genocida...* 44.

<sup>10</sup> The Great Eastern Crisis from 1875–1878 is a number of revolts, uprisings, and wars led by the Balkan nations against the Ottoman Power – the uprising in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1875–1878), the April Uprising in Bulgaria (1876), the war between Serbia and Montenegro, being the first side, and the Sublime Porte being the other (1876), the Russo-Turkish War (1877–1878).

<sup>11</sup> V. Krbekjan, *Uchastieto na armencite v Rusko-turskata vojna, 1877–1878* (Sofia: Voennno izdatelstvo, 2010), 23-95.

received valuable information of military significance, supplies, etc., from the Armenians in the region. In this sense, it can be said that the military victory of Russia was significantly determined by the help of the Armenians on the east, and of the Balkan nations on the west.

With a view to this topic, it is important to note that the government of Saint Petersburg entered the war without clearly outlined programme or set goals. In the higher governing circles of the Empire, there were significant disagreements regarding the military political strategy which was to be followed during the war. This ambiguity and contradiction have a particular manifestation in the plans regarding the Eastern Caucasian front. For example, the Minister of Defence Dmitry Milyutin and the head of the military headquarters – Nikolai Obruchev, insisted that the Russian Army concentrate its activities on the Balkans, and, more particularly, on Bulgaria and the operations in Anatolia had a secondary meaning, while the Ambassador of Constantinople – Nikolay Ignatyev supported the idea that Asian Turkey had to become the main military theatre<sup>12</sup>. In a detailed, memorable memo, Ignatyev stated his considerations giving an answer to the question – why the main impact had to be on Anatolia, not on the Balkans<sup>13</sup>. According to him, Russia could have a great benefit and achieve quick victories. The main reasons for that were the following:

- From the first day of declaring the war, the military operations in Anatolia were to be led on Turkish lands, in difference to the Balkans.

- Since the power of the Sublime Porte was significantly greater and the Muslim population was more numerous, then the impact there would make a significantly greater impression on the Ottoman government and army.

- None of the other Great Powers was not able to stop the Russian advance in Anatolia and to put the Russian Army in a difficult position due to the remoteness of the Caucasian military theatre. Thus, in contrast to the Balkans, the Caucasian Army had greater chances to reach the Bosphorus.

However, Ignatyev's suggestions were rejected, and it was decided that the Balkan Peninsula was to be the main theatre of the military operations<sup>14</sup>.

What place did Turkish Armenians take in the military plans of the Russian governing circles? The information we have, gives us a reason to state that in 1870s the Armenian Question took a totally secondary place within the governing military political circles of Saint Petersburg, as a means of achieving the main foreign political tasks in the Near East. The Russian policy in this region was traditionally directed to the Balkan Slavs and it was mainly their status that was discussed during the pre-war, war, and post-war programme of the government. The only reason mentioned about Armenians was connected to the provision of their support for the successful military operations on the Eastern Front. For example, a report of the Minister of Foreign Affairs – Alexander Gorchakov from 1 October 1876, i.e., before the declaration of the war, mentioned that if Russia had decided to lead independent operations against the Sublime Porte, it would have been able to defeat the Ottoman army for no more than a month. Yet, the complete

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<sup>12</sup> N. P. Ignatyev, "Zapiski grafa N. P. Ignatyeva", *Istoricheskij vestnik*, t. 136, ijun, 1914: 836.

<sup>13</sup> N. P. Ignatyev, "Zapiski grafa N. P. Ignatyeva" ... 836-838.

<sup>14</sup> N. P. Ignatyev, "Zapiski grafa N. P. Ignatyeva" ... 838.

success of this action would need to prepare uprisings of Bulgarians and Greeks from the west, and of Armenians and Kurds – from the east<sup>15</sup>. Nikolay Ignatyev stated similar plans in his report to the Emperor on 12 February 1877 – ‘if we decide to declare war, we must try to use all the elements in our favour to make our tasks easier and to attract the local nations as allies... Persians, Greeks, Armenians, and the other nations can help us distract the attention of the Ottoman Powers’<sup>16</sup>.

Ultimately, however, the Russian military political government did not accept it expedient to encourage uprisings among Anatolian Armenians against the Porte. Nevertheless, thousands of Armenians took part in the war on the side of Russia hoping that the Empire would appreciate the loyalty and help them in the future. In this period, there was a massive spread of the Russophile spirits among the western Armenian society. At the end of October 1877, the members of the National Assembly of Armenia even decided to turn to the Etchmiadzin Catholicos Gevorg IV to solicit in Saint Petersburg about the provision of an autonomous status of Armenia, and, in case that it was planned to join it to Russia – to preserve the cultural and spiritual freedom of the Armenians<sup>17</sup>. In addition, in December 1877, in Constantinople, a spectacular manifestation was organized as a demonstration of support to Russia, under the slogan: ‘Free Armenia’<sup>18</sup>. The self-initiative of the Armenian community did not attract the attention of the tsarist regime though.

### 3. The issue about the status of the Armenians in the Russian programme for a peace treaty

For less than a year, the Russian Army defeated the Ottomans both on the Balkan and on the Caucasian front. The proceedings of the juridical and political finalization of the results of the war were started. In connection to this, Nikolay Ignatyev was sent to the General Headquarters of the Russian Army in Edirne. However, during the execution of the preliminary conditions for peace-making,<sup>19</sup> nothing was mentioned about the Armenians. It was at the execution of the peace treaty project when Armenia was mentioned. The task of its execution was assigned to Nikolay Ignatyev, which was the reason why we are going to turn to his reports. On 12 January 1878, Ignatyev presented his project, which directly regarded the interests of the Armenian population in the part of the military compensations. The contributions which were to be paid by the Sublime Porte for the caused damages, were calculated to 1410 million roubles, but, due to the financial insolvency of Turkey, Ignatyev offered that a part of the money be compensated with territorial concessions. As a result, Russia insisted to receive back Bessarabia on the west, which territory was taken from it under the Treaty of Paris from 1856; and on the east – to receive a part of the Armenian lands, which were of strategic significance on the Caucasian borderline – Ardahan, Kars, Kagizman (Kaghzvan) near Saganluk, and of the Georgian ones – Batumi, with the adjacent part of Lazistan<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> N. P. Ignatyev, “Zapiski grafa N. P. Ignatyeva”, *Istoricheskij vestnik*, t. 136, may, 1914: 435-436.

<sup>16</sup> N. P. Ignatyev, “Zapiski grafa N. P. Ignatyeva”, *Istoricheskij vestnik*, t. 136, ijun, 1914: 844.

<sup>17</sup> E. Gh. Sargsyan, *Osmanyany kaysrowtyan qaghaqakanowtyowny Arevmtyan Hayastanowm yev petowtyownnery XIX dari verji qarordowm yev XX dari skzbin* (Erevan: Haykakan SSH GA hratarakchowtyown, 1972), 87.

<sup>18</sup> E. Gh. Sargsyan, *Osmanyany kaysrowt'yan ...* 88.

<sup>19</sup> The truce between the Russian and the Ottoman Empires was concluded on 19/31 January 1878. Its text was published in *Russkij vestnik*, t. 133 (1878): 995-999.

<sup>20</sup> N. P. Ignatyev, “San-Stefano (zapiski grafa N. P. Ignatyeva)”, *Istoricheskij vestnik*, t. 139, janvar 1915: 44.

Meanwhile, Armenian national figures showed initiative trying to contact the Russian official representatives on the Balkans and to learn about their opinion on the future of the Armenian lands. The Constantinopolitan Patriarch Nerses Varjabedian sent a proxy to the General Headquarters of the Russian Army in Edirne – Archimandrite Gevorg Rushukliyan, who was to negotiate with Nikolay Ignatyev on the status of the Armenians. Separate from him, two Armenians came as well – senior officials in the Ottoman Empire – Stepan Pasha and Ovanes Nuriyan<sup>21</sup>. The Armenian delegates asked for protection and provision of an autonomy for the regions of Sivas, Van, Moush, Erzurum, which were under the temporary occupation of Russia. Stepan Pasha and Nuriyan Effendi explained the initially, Armenians found it advisable to be loyal to the Porte, by the time they had believed in the vitality of the Empire and its revival through the reformed suggested by Europe. But as the last events showed that ‘it was impossible for Turkey to exist as a powerful country, it is definitely more beneficial for Armenia to be revived under the protection of Russia’<sup>22</sup>. The delegates also met the commander-in-chief Nikolay Nikolaevich with a request to undertake protective measures at the conclusion of the peace treaty, as the retraction of the Russian armies from Western Armenia would deteriorate Armenians’ state even more<sup>23</sup>. Soon after that, a new delegation came on behalf of the Patriarch, with a request the same autonomous self-government be provided to the Armenians in Anatolia like the one planned for European Turkey<sup>24</sup>.

In his work dedicated to the policy of the Ottoman government in Western Armenia, the Armenian historian Ervand Sarkisyan referred to the English author James Greagh, according to whom during the meetings with Armenian delegates, Ignatyev stated the following: ‘Do not despair, there is hope for you as subjects of Turkey. Start preparing for the future... Be ready for the moment when your policy will lead you to liberty, and I myself will always be ready to help. Let your Patriarch start to act immediately, without wasting time’<sup>25</sup>. The authenticity of this statement has not been confirmed in any of the sources accessible for us, including the notes of Ignatyev himself. The Russian diplomat did not give any hope or make promises to the Armenians; moreover, he even criticized them that they had showed western European orientation not only once, which was considered hostile for Russia and the Russian interests<sup>26</sup>.

However, in the end, the interest of the Russian government regarding the Near East policy changed their tactics towards the Armenian Question. Although the opportunity to provide an autonomous regime to the Armenians in Asia was rejected, their use for strengthening the Russian influence in the region was not excluded. That was why, Ignatyev tried to implement two clauses in the negotiations with the Ottoman representatives<sup>27</sup>:

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<sup>21</sup> N. P. Ignatyev, “San-Stefano (zapiski grafa N. P. Ignatyeva)”, *Istoricheskij vestnik*, t. 140, aprilja, 1915: 52-53.

<sup>22</sup> N. P. Ignatyev, “San-Stefano (zapiski grafa N. P. Ignatyeva)” ... 53.

<sup>23</sup> E. Gh. Sargsyan, *Osmanyanyan kaysrowtyan* ... 89.

<sup>24</sup> E. Gh. Sargsyan, *Osmanyanyan kaysrowtyan* ... 53.

<sup>25</sup> E. Gh. Sargsyan, *Osmanyanyan kaysrowtyan* ... 88.

<sup>26</sup> N. P. Ignatyev, “San-Stefano (zapiski grafa N. P. Ignatyeva)”, *Istoricheskij vestnik*, t. 140, aprilja, 1915: 52-53.

<sup>27</sup> At the beginning of February 1878, the Russo-Turkish peace negotiations were transferred from Edirne to San Stefano.

- To introduce re-organization of the Anatolian regions within the Empire, which would guarantee public safety and provide administrative self-government.

- Since the majority of Christian population within the eastern vilayets were Armeno-Gregorians, they, as well as the Sublime Porte, had to recognize the supremacy of the Etchmiadzin Catholicos as a head of the church of all the Armenians, regardless of the country they were in<sup>28</sup>.

The acceptance of these clauses in the future peace treaty would give Saint Petersburg an excellent opportunity to officially interfere and influence on the internal policy of the Porte regarding its Armenian subjects, as well as to keep the development of the Armenian Question within strict frames. Becoming a guarantor of the introduction of reforms in the eastern vilayets, Russia would attract the Armenian population to its side, would confirm its positions and authority, and would prevent the penetration of the western European influence among the Armenians. On the other hand, the tsarist government was trying to use the Etchmiadzin Catholicos who was a subject of the Russian Empire as an instrument of influence on the Armenian community in the Ottoman Empire, which would additionally expand the Russian zone of influence<sup>29</sup>.

The Ottoman representatives showed a stubborn reluctance to discuss the Armenian Question and stated the following: 'You have already deprived us of almost all the European possessions, leave us alone at least in Asia'<sup>30</sup>. Yet, finally, Ignatyev managed to force his ideas on the issue of improving the status in the Armenian regions by introducing reforms and protecting the populations from Kurds and Circassians, giving up the idea of the clause of the Christian supremacy of Etchmiadzin<sup>31</sup>. Ignatyev explained the rejection of this idea with the reluctance of the Saint Petersburg government to strengthen the international significance of the Armenian Apostolic Church, which would directly reflect the tsarist internal political interests<sup>32</sup>. Since 1870s, in the Russian Ministry of Interior and the Caucasian vicarage, worries had been spreading for separatist moods among the Armenian population, which was why the policy was initiated of limiting the rights and privileges of the Etchmiadzin power as a spiritual and political centre of the Armenians.

On 19 February/3 March 1878, in San Stefano, the representatives of Saint Petersburg and the Sublime Porte concluded a Preliminary Peace Treaty, i.e., a temporary treaty which conditions were later to be reviewed by the other Great Powers. That was the first international treaty which particularly concerned the status of the Armenians, not only of the Christian subjects of the Sultan. Art. 16 of the document stated the following: 'As the withdrawal of the Russian units from the occupied territories of Armenia which are to be returned to Turkey may provoke conflicts and complications, which would have unfavourable effect on the good neighbourly relations, the Sublime Porte shall be obliged to immediately introduce improvements and reforms regarding the local needs in the Armenian-populated regions and shall guarantee their security against Kurds and

<sup>28</sup> N. P. Ignatyev, "San-Stefano (zapiski grafa N. P. Ignatyeva)", *Istoricheskij vestnik*, t. 141, ijul, 1915: 58-60.

<sup>29</sup> P. Vert, "Glava cerkvi, poddannyj imperatora: Armjanskij katolikos na perekrestke vnutrennej i vneshnej politiki imperii, 1828 – 1914", *Ab Imperio*, No 3 (2006): 99-138.

<sup>30</sup> N. P. Ignatyev, "San-Stefano (zapiski grafa N. P. Ignatyeva)", *Istoricheskij vestnik*, t. 141, ijul, 1915: 59.

<sup>31</sup> N. P. Ignatyev, "San-Stefano (zapiski grafa N. P. Ignatyeva)" ... 59-60.

<sup>32</sup> N. P. Ignatyev, "San-Stefano (zapiski grafa N. P. Ignatyeva)" ... 60.



Circassians'<sup>33</sup>. With this clause, both Russia and the Ottoman Empire publicly confess the fact that Anatolia had a compact Armenian population and this population was threatened by the activities of Kurds and Circassians. The Sultan undertook the obligation to conduct reforms and provide their safety; the engagements he had undertaken were to be executed under the supervision of the Russian Army and the Russian administration, which was witnessed by Art. 25 of the Treaty: 'The evacuation of the Russian Armies from Asian Turkey is to be realized within 6 months after the conclusion of the final peace treaty'<sup>34</sup>. Moreover, according to the Treaty of San Stefano, the Sublime Porte was to give Russia the following Armenian provinces: Ardahan, Kars, Alashkert, and Bayezid (Art. 19, item b)<sup>35</sup>.

## Conclusion

The abovementioned statements may lead to the conclusion that the main purposes followed by Saint Petersburg regarding the Armenians in 1870s were as follows:

- If not the active support of the Armenian population the Russian administration and the Russian military government needed at least their favourable neutrality during all the Russo-Turkish and Russo-Persian wars which took place from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, it was not surprising that in the course of the Russo-Turkish War from 1877–1878, when the Armenian population became extremely disastrous as a result of the destructions and murders of the Ottoman Army, the Russian representative in Constantinople suggested that measures be undertaken to 'encourage' the Armenians in order to strengthen their hopes for a better future: 'On one hand, both with words and with actions, we have to calm and encourage the foreign congregation of Etchmiadzin, which is loyal and ready to serve in favour of our interests, and to provide their sympathetic attitude to us in the future. On the other hand, we have to act in such a way as nobody, even Turkish Armenians, will not be able to reproach Russia that under the influence of their ideas of Pan Slavism, would sacrifice everything about the nations of the same tribe and beliefs, sacrificing all the other Christians as victims of Muslim fanaticism'<sup>36</sup>. In addition, attention has to be paid to the fact that during the long-term struggle of the tsarist government to take the North Caucasian region under control (Caucasian War, 1817–1864), it was the Armenian population which was the most reliable support of the Russian Army in the Caucasus<sup>37</sup>. After the completion of the military activities along the southern border, the conquest of the Caucasus and the establishment of peace in this end of the Empire, Saint Petersburg immediately changed the policy both towards the Russian Armenians and towards the Turkish Armenians.

- The role of a patron of Christian nations within the Ottoman Empire, including the Armenians, gives a convenient pretext for the interference into the internal affairs of the Sublime Porte and for the execution of a diplomatic pressure. The great sympathies of the Armenian population appeared to be an important prerequisite for the creation of a vast Russian region of influence in Anatolia. That is why, the negative attitude towards the Armenians which followed in the 1890s, has been assessed as a tactical mistake for the

<sup>33</sup> Sbornik dogovorov Rossii s drugimi gosudarstvami. 1856–1917 (Pod red. E. A. Adamova, sost. I. V. Kozmenko) (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatelstvo politicheskoy literatury, 1952), 168-169.

<sup>34</sup> Sbornik dogovorov Rossii ... 173.

<sup>35</sup> Sbornik dogovorov Rossii ... 170.

<sup>36</sup> V. Tunjan, *Rossija i Armjanskij vopros* (Erevan, 1990), 73-74.

<sup>37</sup> A. Jivelegov, *Towrqian yev Haykakan harcy*. Kazmogh E. Minasyan (Erevan: EPH, 2014), 68- 70.

interests of Russia itself, as in this way it lost the trust of the three-million Armenian population for a long time, which was later followed by a significant reduction of its influence in this strategically important region.

- The desire to support the Pro-Russian spirits among the Armenians in Anatolia has to be also reviewed within the context of the traditional contradictions with Great Britain in the Near and the Middle East. Thus, the Armenian population fell into the centre of the diplomatic struggle between both powers. England, on its hand, feared of a potential Russian expansion towards Mesopotamia and Persia, as well as of the advanced Russian influence towards the Mediterranean Sea, which was why they hoped to use the Armenian vilayets as a kind of a barrier.

- Some of the representatives of the military and political government of Russia thought that due to strategic reasons, the Empire had to annex Western Armenia. For example, on the eve of the Russo-Turkish War from 1877–1878, the Minister of Defence Dmitry A. Milyutin prepared a military plan which stated the following: 'Even in the distant future, Russia must conquest the whole Anatolia to the south as the one who possesses this cradle of mankind, surrounded by five great seas, is to rule the world'<sup>38</sup>. However, those plans did not grow into an official state policy.

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<sup>38</sup> V. Tunjan, Rossija i Armjanskij vopros ...70.

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