

# From Armenian Red Sunday to Irish Easter Rising: Incorporating Insurrectionary Politics into the History of the Great War's Genocidal Turn, 1915-16<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract:*

The genocide of the Ottoman Armenians is not in doubt. But historicizing these events within the context of diverse and segmented Armenian responses to the 1914-1918 war has proved more problematic, not least as acknowledging any element of separatist or even insurrectionary intentions might appear to give retrospective legitimacy to the claims that the Ittihadist regime was acting against a genuine security threat. In considering the origins, scope and outcome of the Ottoman-Armenian collision by comparative reference to a synchronous British-Irish dynamic this essay seeks to more than simply illustrate how peoples across the globe were thrown through the maelstrom of war into unlikely, including sometimes murderous contact with one another. More importantly, its purpose is to probe how for all the singularity of the *Medz Yeghern*, the Armenian fate might be understood within a broader landscape of emergent European secessionist nationalism and imperial response both during and in the aftermath of the Great War.

*Keywords:* Armenian Genocide, Dashnaksutiun (Armenian Revolutionary Federation), Easter Rising, Irish Republican Brotherhood, World War I

## *1. Introduction*

Are two momentous events on the same day, in succeeding years, taking place at opposite ends of the European continent, a sufficient basis for

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historical linkage? In Armenian collective memory, Red Sunday, 24 April 1915, has come to be nationally marked and commemorated as the beginning of the Ittihadist-initiated and organised genocide of Ottoman Armenians – the Medz Yeghern though in fact what happened that day was the mass round up and deportation of up to 270 leading lights in the Armenian cultural and political community in Constantinople to two holding centres in Ankara (Kévorkian 2011, 251-254). It was later, when the mass deportations from eastern Anatolia got under way that the majority of this Constantinople elite were murdered. However, an exact year later, on Easter Monday, 24 April 1916, over 1800 miles to the west, in Dublin, the then provincial capital of British Ireland, the republican green, white and orange tricolour was unfurled over the city's General Post Office. This marked the opening of the Irish Easter Rising against London rule. Preemptive round-ups of potential lead protagonists as urgently advised by the viceroy went unrealised (Townshend 2015, 149-151). Even so within less than a week the Rising was expunged in a furious hail of British artillery shells and heavy machine gun fire. Total defeat notwithstanding, 24 April is a date of veneration in the Irish republican calendar and a subject for national commemoration one hundred years on from the Rising.

How can two such unrelated events, the serendipity of their dates notwithstanding, have any causative connection or consequence except as disparate outcomes of the larger catastrophe of the Great War? True, like something out of Tolstoy's verdict on history by way of the Napoleonic wars as a great mass of people locked into movement "from west to east and from east to west", Irishmen unwittingly found themselves party to the events of Red Sunday (Sanborn 2005, 290). The Committee of Union and Progress (hereafter Ittihad) round ups in Constantinople were precipitated by the imminence of the Anglo-French landings on the beaches of Gallipoli, some 150 miles away, in which, on the following day, Irish fusiliers of the 29<sup>th</sup> division, alongside ANZAC and other imperial troops fought and died. Much larger number of Irishmen in British uniform would suffer a similar fate a few months later, in August 1915, as the British attempted to break the Gallipoli deadlock with further disastrous landings at Suvla Bay, yet also at the very height of the first wave of Armenian deportations and killings (Jeffrey 2000, 37-78).

That as many as 4000 Irishmen died in the eight month Gallipoli campaign perhaps offers some tenuous point of connect between Irishmen and Armenians in the Great War. Small nations, like the Serbs and Belgians too, or if one prefers "little allies", these peoples were seemingly on the same side as partisans in the Entente struggle pitting initially Britain, France and Russia against the German-led Central Powers, the Ottoman empire, by late 1914, included.

Except that is not our story. Or at least can only be a problematic part of it given that it misses a whole other part, the exclusion of which could be read as either historical myopia, or a conscious sleight of hand. The picture of

loyal Irishmen fighting for and with the British empire to defeat the Turks, is indeed totally discombobulated when set against the Easter Rising in which other Irishmen consciously committed treasonable acts against the crown, as if they were repudiating any affinity between themselves and those serving in British uniform, not to say aided and abetted by the enemy, the Germans. But then, through the former prism, this would make the insurrectionists a trojan horse, seeking to deliver a stab in the back to the Entente war effort. By the same token, the Ittihadist regime's Armenian Red Sunday round-ups the previous year were carried out as a preemptive strike against those who were assumed to be aiders and abettors to the British landings, as they potentially broke through to Constantinople. In other words, the vanguard of an Armenian population, which supposedly was awaiting for the signal for a wider insurrection against Ottoman rule. Or put differently again, another trojan horse whose aim was to disrupt the internal security of the Porte at a moment when it was being mortally threatened by foreign invasion. This truth, if it were a truth, would place the cause of Armenian nationalism and that of Irish nationalism not on the same side of the wartime, geo-political equation but on diametrically opposite sides.

Again, however, our comparison jars, or simply falls apart at this point, given that there is little evidence of a general Armenian insurrectionary movement in 1915, any more than a year later there is much evidence of a general Irish uprising. Yet on one level this only muddies the water further for it is precisely in the respective states' responses to insurrection, real if partial, in the Irish April 24 case, debatable or largely imagined in the Armenian April 24 case that the outcomes radically diverge. Whether or not the perceived Armenian threat had some underlying reality, the regime's reaction went far beyond anything obviously proportionate. Rather, the Ittihad entered into a policy of genocide. By contrast, British retaliation in the Irish case though severe and brutal, cannot carry the genocidal epithet, at least not at this given moment in time. Indeed, it is in the overwhelming nature of the Ittihad assault on the Armenians and the manner in which it *morally* has overshadowed everything else which has also had one long-term, negative side-effect for historians; the blocking out or placing off-limits of any legitimate consideration of radical Armenian insurrectionary politics in the Great War – either on its own terms, or by way of comparative analysis. So much so that to unequivocally confirm that there was an optimal genocide in which up to one million Armenian men, women and children were slaughtered and *at the same time* there were *some* Armenian advocates or practitioners of what Irish historians would refer to as advanced nationalism – thus, thinking and acting in ways not unlike, for instance, the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) – would seem to represent not just a category error: a confusion of two elements but an unconscionable attempt to deflect from where true responsibility for the genocide lies.

Rather, however, than getting sidetracked by defending the merits of historicization against Holocaust-informed arguments as to the essence of evil, my inclination is to take a cue from Jo Laycock's recent plea for "the possibilities for moving beyond the national narratives which continue to dominate the field, in particular through connecting the case of the Armenian Genocide to what has been termed a 'transnational turn' in the writing of the history of the First World War" (Laycock 2015, 93). This essay thus seeks to address the confusion or plain contradiction alluded to above by adopting an integrative approach considering different strands of political action, or indeed non-action within the Armenian national camp alongside Irish parallels.

To embrace within this discussion in both cases minority elements who were prepared to consider and then act out radical, insurrectionary programmes for national freedom, does not mean that we either have to front load these programmes or treat them in adulatory terms. For the personal record, I find the romanticised, commemorative martyrology often invested in the IRB, Dashnaksutiun, or armed "freedom fighters" anywhere, highly suspect. Equally, an implicit hierarchisation of worth founded on valorising heroic Armenian fedayi or Gaelic believers in the idea of blood sacrifice for the good of the cause at the expense of those who acquiesced, were passive, silent, or ran away, may itself radically distort the historical record. Even, especially, when set against the reality of the Medz Yeghern. Yet by the same token, it seems to me important that a contextualised consideration of that same genocide incorporates the flesh and blood role of Armenian national actors, some of whom were seeking *avant la lettre* to take advantage of the possibilities that the war held out, even before the defensive struggle against the Ittihadists became a matter of sheer existentialist necessity. To acknowledge their existence, alongside other like-minded, avant-garde nationalists in other theatres of the Great War thus highlights the central problematic for Armenians in their ongoing quest for a universal genocide recognition: the imperative to make these actors temporarily invisible in order to streamline an essentialist narrative in which only victimhood counts.

Fortunately, for fear of the bad smell which this statement might elicit, there is an emerging historical tendency which is seeking to 'think' Armenian history within a much broader, global landscape, the genocide included and in which comparative questions may be legitimately asked. In particular, Sebouh Aslanian has recently breathed fresh air upon what he has inferred as a stultified, sometimes monolithic, even politically self-serving national monument of "bloated historical memory" by challenging – just as a recent generation of Jewish historians have done vis-a-vis a more traditional "lachrymose" conception of Jewish history – that Armenian history has to be like this too, or that the preservation of a people's identity in the wake of genocide has to eschew a critical approach to their past. Aslanian's riposte has been to demand a less parochial, less insular, and more interactive and con-

nected view of Armenian history as a sub-field of world history, even while reaffirming the obvious; that the Medz Yeghern was the great, overwhelming catastrophe of Armenian contemporary existence. This ‘think’ piece follows a similar path in attempting to ask difficult but necessary questions aimed at understanding the trajectory of Armenian national politics within the wider urge towards national self-determination as a consequence of the 1914-1918 trauma. This is not to propose a “teleological and linear unfolding of the nation-form [...] towards its natural nirvana of the nation-state” (Aslanian 2014, 130-134). It is, however, to pose a key conundrum as to why by the end of the war the advanced nationalists almost everywhere on the European or near-European stage, the Armenians as much as the Irish, had come from the margins to centre political stage.

Yet the paradox particular to the Armenians is that this radical tendency while central to a prior and then subsequent staging of national struggle as it has informed collective national memory and memorialisation has been largely blanked out or obfuscated in relation to the key period leading up to, including and immediately after the genocide. This essay does not suggest new information on the matter. Instead, by reference to the Irish parallel it simply sketches a comparative, exploratory pathway into the fraught and contested arena of Great War national politics, the role of Armenian insurrectionists included. We pursue this by a three part set of comparisons each one signposted by the names of metropolitan and provincial cities within the British and Ottoman empires.

## *2. Constantinople – London*

In the spring and early summer of 1914, before war clouds cast their giant shadow across the continent, the auguries for some sort of resolution of Irish and Armenian questions seemed both promising and plausible. State authorities at the Porte and Westminster were engaged in protracted negotiations involving leading representative spokesmen from the main Armenian and Irish political parties respectively. To be sure, it was foreign powers, not Ittihad, who had initiated the latest set of proposals. Even so, and albeit under duress, the Porte’s acceptance of the 1914 Armenian reform plan, as the British government’s commitment to the passing an Irish Home Rule Bill, represented singular developments which, if they had been carried through into practical implementation, might have morally disarmed and very possibly led to the complete sidelining of the advocates for liberation struggle.

In Ireland the demand for an autonomous and self-governing island of Ireland within the framework of an ongoing constitutional though subordinate relationship to London had been the subject of two previous failed late 19<sup>th</sup> century efforts. Now constitutional changes denying an historic veto repeatedly exercised by the House of Lords, provided the Liberal Asquith gov-

ernment with a window of opportunity to pass Home Rule into law. It came with the clamouring for and full backing of the elected Irish Parliamentary party (Dangerfield 1976, 113-117). By a rather different route the Russian-initiated, Great Power-backed reform plan for the six Armenian vilayets and province of Trabzon – again a reworking of an earlier failed effort – paved the way for direct European supervision of the region, with particular responsibility for the resolution of Armenian grievances. While not a programme for secession, or even Armenian autonomy, with leading political and religious figures from the Armenian National Assembly central to the programme's formulation, the reform package even in its diluted region as split into two February 1914 version, remained substantially weighted towards Armenian interests as against other especially Kurdish and Circassian groups on the plateau (Kieser, Polatel, Schmutz 2015, 285-304). With a Norwegian and a Dutch inspector readied in Constantinople in the early summer to take up their supervisory posts in the vilayets, the Reform Plan took on the force of law as did Asquith's Government of Ireland Act when it received Royal Assent on 28 September.

That by this juncture the Great War was already in full catastrophic swing in the West and about to be driven down an even more apocalyptic path by Ittihad adherence to the German side in the east, is testimony enough to the still-born nature of these developments. Home Rule was suspended for the duration of the war, the Reform Plan repudiated by the Porte. By the end of the war both projects were utterly redundant. Worse, one could persuasively argue that they actually accelerated the ensuing road to state-community conflict, perhaps further inferring that even in peace time neither project could ever have been implemented without recourse to massive violence.

The Russian Reform Plan's resurrection in 1912 came at a moment when Ottomania was reeling from a first set of disasters in the Balkan wars. Having lost almost the entirety of its European territory, the so-called Mandelstam scheme seemed to be pointing towards a more deviously Byzantine route by which the Porte would be wrested of almost half its remaining Anatolian heartland too. That in itself could be interpreted as a *casus belli*. The fact, however, that key figures in the Ottoman Armenian establishment had been party to the project, over the heads of their erstwhile and in some cases ongoing Ittihad interlocutors, not to say in foreign embassies in the very heart of Constantinople, could equally be viewed as hostile even treasonable acts (Kévorkian 2011, 153-165). Meanwhile the whiff of cordite was in some ways even more palpable in a London moving from a drawing board Home Rule to practical implementation. Opposition from Ulster Protestants – the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) – intent on sabotaging the plan by way of the illegal gun-running into northern Ireland ports of almost 25,000 modern German rifles and ordnance to match, in April 1914, was met by the self-formation of an Irish Volunteer force in the overwhelmingly Catholic south intent on its decisive implementa-

tion (Dangerfield 1976, 110-115). London was thus faced in the summer of 1914 with a situation in Ireland in some ways more akin to eastern Anatolia than a Western democracy ruled by law, with sectarian para-military forces facing each other off, dark talk of (and provisional state planning for) the partition of Ireland, and the prospect of a real, no holds-barred civil war.

However, before one dismisses out of hand the likelihood of either reformist programme ever being peacefully realised, a word in their defence. In the metropolitan world before August 1914, national grievances within imperial states were still sometimes perceived as resolvable (one thinks particularly of Austria-Hungary) without a maximalist recourse to complete and irrevocable national separation. The very idea of a devolved Ireland but still within some wider British framework thus speaks not just to realities of power but to ideas of rapprochement and accommodation as most clearly expressed by John Redmond, the head of the Irish party. This tendency reaching back into the 19<sup>th</sup> century was pursued in spite of and perhaps because of the depth of Catholic Irish resentment against historic subjugation to and continuing rule by the English through 'the viceroy' in Dublin Castle and in economic practice, through a landowning Protestant Ascendancy. Over and beyond the political struggle, not to say a cultural one in which Catholic Irish were repeatedly held in a contempt bordering on overt racism, the issue of land rights, and loss, further embedded in bitter memory through a perceived absentee landlord class's un pitying response to their peasants' mass starvation, death or flight abroad in the Great Famine of the 1840s, highlighted the necessity for a political process which would effectively return Irish land to an Irish people<sup>2</sup>.

It is perhaps significant that land rights, or more precisely the lack of them for an Armenian peasantry reeling from decades of lawless, violent encroachment from Kurdish tribal overlords and muhajir settlers were also at the core of Ottoman Armenian efforts to come to an accommodation with the post-1908 incumbents at the Porte and on the basis of the ongoing integrity of the empire. The notion is not outlandish. A pluralist Ottoman equality of peoples overriding a historic hierarchisation based on Muslims over millet dated back to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Tanzimat period of constitutional reform<sup>3</sup>. Then repudiated by the sultan Abdul Hamid II, Ittihad and Dashnaksutiun were closely aligned in their conspiratorial anti-Hamidian programmes and strategies for a change of regime and return to the constitution. Once ostensibly achieved in the 1908 Young Turk revolution, elected Dashnak deputies, as other leading Armenian politicians, shared a common milieu with Ittihad in the subsequently re-inaugurated parliament in Con-

<sup>2</sup> See Foster 1988, Chapters 8, 14, 16, 17, for critical overview.

<sup>3</sup> See Hanioglu 2008, for Tanzimat overview.

stantinople, identified in key respects with the latter's progressive, modernising goals, and often joined them in electoral lists and platforms. They mixed socially too just as Irish Party MPs did in London, especially with radical Liberals and Labourites. When the Young Turk movement was in danger in April 1909 from more reactionary forces, Ittihadists including latter-day *génocidaires*, Talaat and Dr Nazim, took refuge in the homes of high-ranking Armenian political friends (Kévorkian 2011, 43-74).

To be sure these close relationships were put under acute strain as the regime faltered in the face of anti-Armenian massacres which swept from Adana across Cilicia in the wake of the counter-revolutionary moment. Subsequent re-priminations, charges and counter-charges of bad faith or worse, equally soured the joint commission which the two parties set up a few months later to report on social problems on the plateau and to consider a land reform programme aimed to address entrenched feudalism on the one hand, and the range of arbitrary – and hence extralegal – exactions of peasants, Armenian and non-Armenian, on the other. It was Ittihadist dilatoriness or unwillingness to carry through in any meaningful manner on this programme which the Dashnaks held as grounds for the formal termination of the alliance in August 1912 as undoubtedly it also acted as a goad to the initiation of *pourparlers* with the Great Power embassies (Kaligian 2009, 53-59; Kévorkian 2011, 131-135). Still, this was not the end of Dashnak efforts to work with the regime. Nor were the Ittihad themselves yet so publicly ill-disposed to their erstwhile Armenian comrades to ignore the fact that in the essentially triangular ethnic struggle on the plateau, Armenians were the obvious counterweight to the Kurds and arguably the more reliable and loyal allies. Indeed, when in spring 1914 Kurdish tribes in the Bitlis region rose with rather overt Russian backing in armed revolt, Dashnak cadres were authorised to arm themselves against Kurdish attack and even on occasion to support regular Ottoman troops against the insurgency (Kaligian 2009, 184).

Even as war loomed, there were no clear signs that Armenian-Turkish, and more specifically Ittihad-Dashnak relations were in complete meltdown. News that the other main Armenian revolutionary party, the Hnchaks, in their September 1913 congress held in Romania had resolved to take up again “violent revolutionary tactics” to defeat Ittihad’s “criminal plans” were in turn greeted with alarm by many former party stalwarts within the empire who had been increasingly moving towards an entirely more moderate reformist position. Moreover, as mobilisation got under way, leading Armenian religious and political spokesmen affirmed their support for the war effort and to the integrity of the empire. At the local level, on the plateau, the tenor of these statements was corroborated by valis and other local officials who reported back to the Porte news of vocal Dashnak support for and assistance in the mobilisation schedule. *Union sacrée* between Ottoman state and peoples thus seemed to be the order of the day just as it was elsewhere



among the belligerent powers (Suny 2015, 196-197, and 220-221). If there were doubts, not to say restiveness among the wider Armenian population at the new, post-revolution innovation whereby non-Muslims were liable for military service alongside Muslim able-bodied menfolk, nevertheless, for the most part, there was a resigned compliance among an estimated 200,000 Armenian men eligible for induction into the army (Mann 2005, 136).

Irish elite pronouncements of loyalty to empire were altogether more profuse. Again, in the van was Redmond who in a House of Commons speech on 3 August, the day before Britain declared war on Germany, pledged that the Irish National Volunteers in the south would join forces with the Protestant ones in the north both to defend the island of Ireland and the British empire of which it was part, in its hour of need. Redmond was prepared to be more proactive still, issuing a manifesto in the following month in which Home Rule was due to pass into law, calling on Irishmen to join the British colours “for the defence of the sacred rights and liberties of small nations and the respect and enlargement of the great principle of nationality” (Hennessey 1998, 86). Indeed, with that in mind he urged the British government to create a recognised Irish army. No such specific entity was authorised by Westminster but there was an early surge of Irish nationalists responding to Redmond’s call to arms; a significant proportion of the some 200,000 Catholic as well as Protestant Irish who served in the British army during the Great War. Among them would be members of the 16th Irish Division slaughtered in the months after the Dublin Uprising on the Somme, as also those in the 10<sup>th</sup> Irish Division caught up in the carnage the previous year at Gallipoli<sup>4</sup>. By then, however, the war had so unravelled the tenuous sinews of rapprochement as to leave the political field seemingly open for decisive if albeit differently traumatic Irish and Armenian uncouplings from imperial subservience.

### *3. Van – Dublin*

An early indication of things to come in Ireland manifested itself at the very outset of the war when the original founders of the Irish Volunteers led by Eoin MacNeill repudiated Redmond’s co-option of the movement and organisationally broke away to re-found it effectively as the potentially insurrectionary arm of the IRB. Initially, the split still favoured the Redmondites whose newly named National Volunteers were estimated to number all but 11,000 of the 180,000 strong force prior to August 1914 (Hennessey 1998, 91). Yet thereafter the seepage from the moderates to the radicals was marked before it ultimately turned into a post-Easter Rising flood. It was not just

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey 2000, 5-7, for evaluation of the number of Irishmen who served.

that Redmond's declaration of a "war for high ideals" (86) sounded increasingly hollow not least when Asquith almost simultaneously reneged on the promise of an all Ireland Home Rule by pronouncing that there could be no British action to coerce Ulster to the fact. A year later, the breach widened with the apparent snub by the War Office, not least to Redmond himself, when there was no official mention of the role of Irish regiments in the Gallipoli campaign when other British units were cited in dispatches and suitably lionised (109).

The Irish were as used to being historically treated by the British, in military affairs as everything else, as a lesser form of pond life, or just simply invisible, just as Armenians were used to the pejorative connotations of Ottoman dhimmi status. Irish sensitivity to the shackles of British contempt was undoubtedly a factor in the founding of Sinn Fein, "We ourselves" in 1905. Its founder, Arthur Griffith, forcefully articulated the case for a free, sovereign and independent Ireland. It was argued Griffith, the only framework in which the Irish could participate on Britain's side in the war. As it was, Sinn Fein provided the key nexus for opposition to Irish recruitment. Its politics including its contesting of Irish seats against the Irish party, did not however translate into overt support for the insurrectionary strategy of the IRB, not least as Griffith's focus was on constructive non-compliance to British rule (including not taking up won seats in Westminster), not on fighting against impossible odds. It may have been in part Westminster animus against Sinn Fein's obstructive tactics which led them to misread the Easter rising as Sinn Fein-directed and organised (Kee 2000, 438-460).

Where Sinn Fein, the IRB and other advanced nationalist groupings held common ground was in their fervent adherence to the Irish cultural and more specifically language revival particularly fostered from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by the Gaelic League. Explicit in this movement was an opposition to the Anglicisation of Ireland which in turn intensified the search for the folkloric, literary, and historic roots of an 'authentic' Ireland before or beyond Anglo-Scottish domination. If the recovery of an almost defunct peasant vernacular was the seedbed of a modern Irish national identity formation – as essentially nurtured by an urban, educated, middle class – its political counterpart was the valorisation of those who in more recent times had sought to ferment anti-British insurrection. The IRB of the Easter Rising thus specifically saw themselves in a long-line of "Fenian" warriors going back through the failed IRB uprisings in Ireland and Canada of 1867, to the United Irishmen rebellion of 1798, and its key sequel, the Robert Emmett-led attempt to seize Dublin castle and other key strategic locations in the city, in 1803 (Foster 1988, 431-460). With the exception of 1798, none of these uprisings had come remotely close to their goal but then for Padraic Pearse, one of the leaders of and recognised voice of the 1916 rising what mattered was not that they had militarily succeeded but through their sense of mission, blood sac-

rifice and martyrdom to the cause had shown the way to how Ireland could yet be redeemed “from acquiescence to the Union” (Townshend 2015, 99).

Such arguments might underscore how the shapers of 1916 – with their almost mystical sense of nation on the one hand, acute anxieties about how that ideal was in danger of being subverted by a febrile self-governing relationship within Britain on the other – were in key respects a minority tendency remote from the daily life of the majority of ordinary Irishmen. That said there was a point of confluence. It was over the matter of conscription. For all Redmond’s declarations in support of the war effort, and their heeding by many Home Rule nationalists, there were droves of others in grass-roots rural Ireland who saw conscription over the horizon and the suppression or the radical nationalist press, plus the deportation of agitators who spoke out against it under the wartime Defence of the Realm Act, as proof of its imminence. By the autumn of 1915 the supposed threat was producing a veritable stampede of young men to North America. But already a year earlier, in September 1914, elements of the Irish Volunteers, IRB, along with the trade unionist leader, James Connolly, had taken their cue from a planned Dublin recruiting rally in which Asquith and Redmond were due to speak to carry out a *coup d’état*. With only eighty armed men responding to the call, the would-be insurrection was called off. But then there was no conscription in Ireland (Hennessey 1998, 125). Nor before 1916 was there a descent into violent internal conflict. Paradoxically, the promise of Home Rule plus the allegiance of the Sir Edward Carson-led UVF to Britain put paid – albeit temporarily – to that outcome.

The situation was wholly different on the Ottoman eastern Anatolian plateau as it merged with the Russian Caucasus. Even before the overt Ottoman attack on Russian Black sea ports on 29 October, the plateau had been in a state of ugly ferment for months. The levels of violence whether perpetrated by the army, the so-called *Teskilat-i-Mahsusa* (Special Organisation) local militias, or by ethnic protagonists as they attempted to defend their own communal space, were already a portent of the “war of all against all” conditions which would be prevalent in the latter years of the war. Having put so much purchase on the Reform Plan but alert to the fact that in practice it was already moribund, Armenian leaders were thus faced with an exquisite dilemma. They could follow the lead from *Ittihad*, or more precisely, its leading light, Dr Sakir, when he and two other Special Organisation emissaries pitched up at the end of the Dashnak’s congress in Erzurum in early August 1914. In return for helping to foment insurrection on the Russian side of the border, Sakir’s Dashnak interlocutors were led to understand that the Porte would back an autonomous Armenian state on both sides of the border (Kévorkian 2011, 175). Yet that would place the Ottoman Dashnaks in direct confrontation with their fellow Armenians who were Russian subjects, the eastern wing of the Dashnak party included. Alternatively, the Ot-

toman Armenians could succumb to the blandishments from the other side, the Russians, or that matter, the French, or the British. Signals by way of Count Vorotsov-Dashkov, Russia's viceroy in the region, included one from the tsar towards the end of 1914 informing the Armenians of their "brilliant future" (Salahi Sonyel 2000, 82). The Russians, however, were prepared to go further, actively encouraging by way of the Dashnak-dominated Armenian National Bureau in Tiflis that Armenians on the Ottoman side of the border join with fellow Russian Armenian *druzbin* – volunteers – in taking up arms against the Porte (Bloxham 2005, 73; Reynolds 2011, 117).

These sorts of bribes were hardly unique to the Armenian situation. The Russians made them equally at the time to Ottoman Nestorians and Kurds, as much later in 1916, Sir Mark Sykes in London toyed with another British-led, anti-Ottoman "small would-be nations" combination this time made up of Arabs, Jewish Zionists and Armenians. In fact, as the war deepened as did the Great Power military stalemate, the notion of attempting to entice troubled or troublesome *ethnies* on the enemy side to one's own interest became, for Central Powers as for the Allies, almost par for the course. The Ottomans were equally participants in this dangerous game of ethnic mobilisation, Muslim groups such as the Adzhars on the Russian Caucasus side of the border, one potential focus; while encouraged by the Germans, the Sheikh-ul-Islam's declaration of jihad was designed to foment rebellion especially in British India and Egypt (Levene 2017, 30, 34).

For groups like the Armenians, or for that the matter the Irish, the key issue – that is, for any element within the group both with national aspirations and at the same time ready to entertain a relationship with the 'enemy' – was the quid pro quo, the return, in other words, on their high risk investment in the undertaking. The prospect of aligning oneself to the enemy's chances of victory might seem to present opportunities for national fulfilment which otherwise might have appeared remote if not delusional. Yet the price of participation contained a nasty sting on two counts. Firstly, there was the blood price, literally, how many men could you offer as cannon fodder. And it is significant that numbers were often quite fantastically plucked out of the air by both patrons, or supplicants, often as equal indication of their desperation. At the time of the February 1915 planning for the so-called Alexandretta feint, for instance, in which the British were considering a diversionary landing in Cilicia in support of their main Dardanelles objective, an irregular auxiliary force of 15,000 Armenian Zeitunlis was conjured up seemingly out of nowhere. This figure however would be trumped by French confabulations that 100,000 Greek insurgents would rise in support of an Entente landing in Asia Minor while British military intelligence in Cairo a little later got into their heads the same or more Arabs in Ottoman uniform turning their guns on their Turkish officers in an even more fanciful flight of wish-fulfilment (Bloxham 1991, 176-178). But there again, just before the Easter Ris-

ing, Count Plunkett, the father of one its key protagonists, delivered a letter to the Pope claiming that the Irish Catholic nation had an “effective force of 80,000 trained men” ready for action (Townshend 2015, 123).

Which brings us to the second sting. However much numbers of supposed insurgents, Irish, Armenian, Czech, Polish, Ukrainian, Arab – were inflated or not, however much indeed any of these forces really counted for something, or not – they fed into a climate of paranoia, suspicion, hysteria and spy mania which gripped all the main belligerents almost from the war’s outset. The paranoia centred precisely on those *ethnies* who were considered most suspect if not downright traitorous to the state’s war effort. Thus, if it were *perceived* as true that any such ethnic group was organising disruption and sabotage in the rear of the actual fronts, by attempting to cut communication and supply lines, for instance, perhaps as a prelude either to a more widespread people war, or, then again, in support of foreign enemy invasion, then the state in turn might claim its worst fears had been realised. The argument had an inbuilt circularity, not least as all the belligerents were trying to foment exactly such uprisings among their enemies ‘subject’ peoples. That said, the very charge of insurgency was bound to expose any so accused community to the state’s special and extraordinary security measures, retribution, or worse.

So, how much evidence is there to suggest there was an insurrectionist agenda within the Armenian camp? Some of the reportage is unclear or contradictory. We know that there were intense discussions at the summer 1914 Dashnak Erzurum congress on what the party ought to do. In the wake of the arrests just weeks earlier of most of the Hnchak leadership in Constantinople on charges of anti-state conspiracy and with it the effective destruction of that party organisation, it is surprising that, equally sensing danger to themselves, the Dashnaks maintained a clear official line of support for the Porte. That said, there were dissenters who broke away to throw in their lot with the Russian Armenian *druzhiniy*. One notable example was Hovhannes Kachaznuni, who tasked by the congress with making contact with the western bureau to request they desisted from their volunteer programme, on arrival in the Caucasus joined the *druzhiniy* himself (Suny 2015, 221)<sup>5</sup>. Another was the almost legendary revolutionary, Armen Garo. Already in the Caucasus was the equally legendary Andranik who had only recently arrived from the Bulgarian front opposing the Ottomans in the Balkan wars, where he had led a several hundred strong Armenian volunteer battalion. This role he now resumed under the aegis of the Russian Caucasus army. Andranik in particular represented a strand in Armenian advanced nationalism founded on the idea of liberation through armed action and in which he had been a par-

<sup>5</sup> Sonyel 2000, 83-85, for contrasting interpretations.

ticipant since the 1880s, not least as a fedayi in the second Sasun uprising in 1904 and before that the fabled 1901 battle of the Holy Apostles Monastery<sup>6</sup>. His revolutionary career as that of Armen Garo thus offered a connecting thread back into a recent history of defiant resistance to Hamidian or Kurdish depredations, including the earlier Sasun uprising of 1894, and the 1862 Zeitun rebellion, in each case against seemingly impossible odds. But it also provided more than simply an emotional lifeline, given the anti-Armenian atrocities which preceded and followed but an 'awakened' latter-day confirmation especially among an increasingly literate and European-orientated Armenian middle class that warrior heroes and martyrdom were embedded in two millennia of national narrative.

In the precise context of conflict on the plateau and in the Caucasus in 1914 and early 1915 it also meant that the *druzhiniy* had veteran violence specialists at their helm who made the IRB likes of Pearse or Joseph Plunkett look like innocents abroad. In the early months of a shifting and very porous front, the evidence suggests a merciless warfare in which local Christian and Muslim communities who were unable to flee paid the price in untold atrocities. In short, the *druzhiniy*, where they could, gave as good as they got. The actual numbers who were Ottoman renegades is sketchy, a recent compromise estimate is of between five and eight thousand, a mere fraction of those conscripted into the Ottoman army (Mann 2005, 136). Yet their presence in the Russian battle line-up, especially at the first major Ottoman military disaster in the Caucasus, at the battle of Sarakamish in early 1915, was magnified in elite Ottoman military and Ittihad political circles into proof of a more general Armenian perfidy.

In fact the Caucasus was not only the arena in which some Armenians were willing to make common cause with the Entente. Nor were they only revolutionary Dashnaks or Hnchaks. We have already intimated that early planning for the Dardanelles campaign involved the notion of an Allied landing on the Cilician coast. Privy to these developments was Boghos Nubar, who had previously been the Armenian diplomatic interlocutor in negotiations for the Armenian reform plan. Appointed by the Catholicos as head of the Armenian National Delegation (AND), in practice representing a much more elite and socially conservative tendency than the Dashnaks, Boghos Nubar nevertheless from November 1914 established contact with General Maxwell, head of the British military command in Egypt with a view to creating volunteer units there not unlike those under Vorontsov-Dashkov. The latter indeed was in turn privy to the Boghos Nubar proposal that a Zeitunli-led uprising in Cilicia would help open up a British bridgehead at Alexandretta providing for an eventual link-up with the Russians and their

<sup>6</sup> Chalabian 1988, for a suitably hagiographic account.

Armenian partisans on the plateau. A further Armenian contribution to the project would be provided by several thousand diaspora volunteers most specifically provided by the Armenian National Defence Committee of America, who had also approached the British through the latter's Boston consul (Bloxham 2005, 80-82; McMeekin 2015, 241-243).

There is a shocking irony in the fact that the British shelved plans for the Alexandretta feint in spring 1915, given that retrospective assessments suggest this was the most "exquisitely vulnerable point in the Ottoman empire's wall of natural defences" (Anderson 2013, 96). A single warship, HMS Doris, had in fact penetrated Alexandretta's meagre sea defences and made an unopposed landing there in December 1915. A successful bridgehead from here might conceivably have cut the Ottoman empire into two entirely transforming the Entente's chances of bringing about its rapid defeat. With the Ottomans in retreat from Cilicia and the plateau, and what Sean McMeekin describes as Boghos Nubar's "kind of liaison Armenian government-in-embryo" (2015, 173) enabled by way of military materiel and open Entente support, perhaps not only might the deportations and hence genocide from eastern Anatolia have been forestalled but the way prised open for a more radical, more pro-Armenian version of the AND's Reform Plan agenda. Except all this is clearly counter-factual. Though Boghos Nubar would attempt to resurrect the Cilicia scheme to the British in July having upped the ante to 25,000 Armenian co-combatants while also this time making clear the humanitarian urgency of the matter, as far as the British were concerned, bogged down as they were in their self-inflicted Gallipoli quagmire, the project was dead in the water (McMeekin 2015, 173).

Even so, the AND scenario did contain aspects grounded in reality, though with unanticipated but catastrophic consequences. Though Boghos Nubar's figures were clearly exaggerated, anti-conscription feelings did engender a localised resistance among some young Armenian Zeitunlis which appears to have been an indicator of wider Armenian disaffection as well as desertion, both in Cilicia and elsewhere. The Zeitun rebellion, for what it's worth, seems to have been more a spontaneous grass-roots affair rather than anything politically coordinated, though Boghos Nubar, at the distance of Cairo, appears to have been operating on the assumption that a Cilician uprising was conceivable, going so far as to inform Maxwell in early February that local Armenians would offer the British "perfect and total support" (Arkun 2011, 221-243; McMeekin 2015, 173).

What matters much more about these developments however is their timing. In the wake of Sarakamish and with the first Anglo-French naval bombardments of the Dardanelles in February, followed up with greater force the succeeding month, panic set in the Ottoman capital, plans for the government's evacuation to inland Eskishehir were put in motion and one critical observer, the US ambassador to the Porte, Henry Morgenthau, reckoned that

the whole Ottoman edifice was “on the brink of dissolution” (Morgenthau 1918, 158). It was in the context of this potential “strategic meltdown”, producing again in McMeekin’s words “a perfect storm of paranoia” that the Ittihad – regardless of whether there was an actual, coordinated Armenian threat or not – acted as if they were getting their retaliation in first (McMeekin 2015, 234). Towards the end of February, the Ottoman General Staff sent a directive to field commanders removing all Armenian officers and men from headquarter staffs and senior positions of command. In quick succession, a general order from War Office supremo and *regime triumvir*, Enver Pasha, disarmed all Armenian serving soldiers with their reduction to labour battalions, while co-triumvir and Interior Minister, Talaat Pasha, ordered the deportation of Armenians from Dortyol a coastal rail hub close to Alexandretta. Almost simultaneously, the third triumvir and Syrian region supremo, Cemal Pasha, extended the initial deportation order to include Armenians from across Cilicia, first men, then women and children too, while mercilessly hunting down and executing all alleged Armenian rebels in the Zeitun region. Open season on the Armenians across the empire had yet to be officially declared but at least politically speaking that moment came on the eve of the Gallipoli landings when Talaat paved the way for the Constantinople round-ups with a new directive to the Ottoman High Command ordering the elimination of Hnchak, Dashnak and Boghos Nubar organisations on grounds of their incipient revolt. Meanwhile, back on the plateau especially in and around Van, the vilayet with the most significant and compact Armenian population, or indeed across the border around Urmia, in technically neutral Persia where Armenians (and Nestorians) had been armed by the Russians to parry major Ottoman incursions, no such declaration of Ittihad intent was required: directly state-orchestrated or promoted violence had been rising to a crescendo of mass atrocity for months (Kévorkian 2011, 227-234; Suny 2015, 234-237, 253-259, 272-275).

From this perspective, the open Dashnak-led rebellion in Van from mid-April 1915, and its successful defence until Russian and *druzhinny* relief the following month, should be read neither as the cause of, or justification for the Ittihad anti-Armenian agenda as it emerged thereafter but rather as the climax to the violent breakdown of Ottoman-Armenian relations on the plateau since the onset of the Great War. To be sure, the Dashnaks would not have been able to mount such an effective defence against the increasing firepower – including artillery – of Ottoman Third Army units deployed against them, without an arsenal of Mauser pistols and Russian weapons and ordnance smuggled into the city in preceding months. Nor without the organisational and planning skills of a veteran Dashnak fighter, Arum Manukian (McMeekin 2015, 227-235). In its own terms, the tenacity of the Van defence against overwhelming odds is extraordinary and heroic, the immediate consequences of which were, when the Russians broke the siege on 18



May, Aram became, albeit at Russian behest, “the first Armenian supreme authority in the region in more than half a millennium” (Suny 2015, 260). It also meant that when the Russians were forced to evacuate the region two months later, at least some of the Vanetsis avoided the wider fate of Armenians by then being deported or exterminated en masse.

Certainly, by contrast with the Dublin rising, for which most sanguine observers would agree “that the insurgents had no intelligible, or militarily speaking intelligent, blueprint”, the Van uprising had some positive effect. But then such an upbeat comparative analysis instantly falls down for a more fundamental reason (Townshend 2015, 111). After Easter 1916, the Irish volunteer movement and its yet to be properly mobilised cadres in the Dublin hinterland remained still intact as a potential future fighting force. Yet the Armenian *druzhiny*, dependent as they were on Russian or other Allied whim, had, bar those at Van no reserve force from within the plateau or Cilicia to draw on, should their leaders ever attempt an offensive posture. And the reason is a further stark contrast to the Irish situation. By 1916, the majority of “battle-age” Ottoman Armenian men were dead. Conscripted into the wider Ottoman army, but not into specific Armenian units where they might have been able to defend themselves, when they were reduced to unarmed labour by Enver’s February 1915 directives they fell into a trap where as soon as their Ottoman commanders received further instructions, or choose off their own volition to act, they were subject to mass slaughter. We know far too little about the particular circumstances of these events<sup>7</sup>. What we do know is that the Armenian recruits’ disappearance into the void, plus that of most remaining adult males on the cusp of the deportations, meant that in gendered terms there was no element in the community in the rear of the front to protect the otherwise most vulnerable: women, children, sick and the old, who would subsequently be wiped out in the genocide (Jones 2000, 201-202).

It raises a more general question as to degree to which any would-be ethnic insurgents, Armenian, Irish, or other, included in their politico-military calculations the consequences of their actions for the broad community for whom they were claiming to act. What guarantees were there that their open armed confrontation with the forces of empire would not provoke an altogether more vengeful retaliation or retribution? Sir Roger Casement, the key patrician exponent of German cooperation in the Hibernian cause, developing an already embryonic plan for alignment with Berlin as the strongest wartime card advancing Irish claims for sovereign independence, insisted that should the Germans then renege, for instance through annexation, it would then be overridden through Great Power outrage (Hennessey 1998, 133). Similarly, Armenian national efforts towards prising open the doors of

<sup>7</sup> See Zürcher 2002, 187-196 and Kévorkian 2011, 240-242, for further assessment.

autonomy had strongly relied since 1878 on playing the international card. But diplomatic overtures where they blurred as they did in the case of Casement and Plunkett, as Boghos Nubar, into strategic plans based on foreign invasion protected one's population not a jot. On the contrary, in rendering it captive to the Trojan horse accusation, supposed safety became entirely dependent on the unlikely outcome of the invasion's complete and, above all, swift victory.

However, Casement was no more successful *vis-à-vis* the Germans than his Armenian counterpart was *vis-à-vis* the British in realising a watertight commitment to such an agenda, the support of the Fenian, Irish-American Clan na Gael notwithstanding, nor his own efforts to create an "Irish brigade" strike-force from Irish POWs in Germany (Kee 2000, 538-547). Having failed with the German-backed scheme, Casement opted for the putative brigade's never realised deployment with the Ottoman forces at Suez, a perverse oddity of our entwined narrative, underscored by Pearse's praise for wartime Turkish patriotism as like that of the heroic Belgians in defence of their soil (Pearse 1924, 216; Townshend 2015, 116-117). Yet at fundament, just as with Alexandretta in 1915, so on the projected West Irish beachhead in 1916, the absence of an invasion force, barring a scuttled German boatload of mostly captured Russian rifles, left the projected Easter rising literally high and dry<sup>8</sup>. Yet arguably its saving grace at least in human terms was that with Casement landed separately by submarine but too quickly captured to halt the insurrection, MacNeill's countermanding order sufficient to achieve precisely that among most Irish Volunteer units but not those mobilised in and around Dublin, the uprising took on the appearance of a very isolated affair. Certainly, at odds with many of the Catholic Irishmen who still believed that wearing the King's khaki was the surest route to Home Rule and at wide variance with much of demotic Dublin who took the opportunity of civil breakdown not to support the insurgents but to go on a mass looting spree, London was well-positioned to demarcate (if hardly exonerate) the majority of Irishmen and women from the actions of a few extremists and hotheads (O'Brien 1992, 258-273). Too quickly, however, did the Liberal Asquith government dispatch to Ireland one General Maxwell – the same general who had held off the Ottoman late 1914 attack on Suez – as military governor. Armed with the authority to rule under martial law and intent on doling out exemplary justice to all rebels, London's intervention to forestall death sentences on ninety of some 3,400 arrestees came too late to halt the execution of fifteen insurgent ringleaders including Pearse, Plunkett and Connolly (Townshend 2015, 269-299). Thereafter, London tried to rein

<sup>8</sup> See "Aud 1916-Cork Shipwrecks", <<https://www.corkshipwrecks.net/1916aud.html>> (05/2018) for details.

in the forces of retribution, there were no mass reprisals; at least not in 1916 British-controlled Ireland. Yet the brutality of the British military in putting down the uprising, and above all the creation of martyrs, was treated by large swathes of Irishmen formerly ambivalent or even hostile to the insurrectionary tendency as an assault on the entirety of the Irish national cause.

#### *4. Salonika – Belfast*

Clearly, that still leaves one huge gulf between the scope and scale of British violence against the Catholic Irish, even as it accelerated towards Anglo-Irish war, and the Ittihad genocide against the Armenians. Even so, there is one further, if briefly stated, perspective to consider before drawing conclusions. In our first section, we emphasised the possibilities of accommodation in either case between state and community, obviating or diluting the urge to violent collision. Yet we have failed so far to fully identify and thus centre-stage the hard-line, indeed die-hard forces of “statist” resistance to any such arrangement. And here, despite the obvious difference in terms of outcome there are parallels. These might be summed up in the word “union”; in the notion of a marriage between imperialism and a strongly sectarian or identity-based nationalism; and in one other significant geographical “over the water” aspect: namely disaffected communities within provinces at one slight remove from the imperial heartland who saw themselves as having most culturally, cognitively, socially and economically to lose from any state-led political unravelling.

In the British framework it was in the areas of dense, historic, Protestant Anglo-Scottish settlement and supersession of the Catholic Irish, in Ulster, as centred on what by 1914, was the highly integrated and industrial port-city of Belfast, that opposition to Home Rule took on its most hard, unforgiving edge. If the Redmondites staked everything on support for the war in order to achieve their political freedom, Ulster Unionists under the leadership of Anglo-Irish patrician, Carson and Belfast magnet, James Craig, offered their support as a matter (to them) of sheer existential survival. Ulstermen consequently paid what their leaders would repeatedly iterate as the huge “sacrificial” price for their commitment to the Union in the battles on the Somme: their seminal 1916 event (Loughlin 2002, 136-145).

Yet, paradoxically, in the founding of the UVF four years earlier, they had already offered a version of the Union which was prepared to defy London in any attempted imposition of Home Rule, if necessary by armed confrontation with it. That said, the very threat had the potential to undermine the sinews of British liberal democracy, not least when in March 1914 as Asquith sought to carry through the policy, the majority of the army headquarters staff in Ireland, overwhelmingly of Ascendancy background, resigned in protest (Dangerfield 1976, 82-87).

Yet what is most intriguing about the so-called Curragh mutiny in terms of this discussion is its 1908 Ottoman resonances. Middle-ranking officers in the Third Army stationed in the great port-city and emerging industrial hub of Salonika, fearing rumours of a Great Power carve-up of Macedonia which would deliver the region to its former or present Christian subjects, sought to sabotage foreign intervention by marching on the Porte and demanding a return to the abandoned 1876 constitution. But behind this “Young Turk” mutiny-turned-revolution was not only the urgency of “saving the empire” but an equally visceral anxiety as to the fate of Muslims in Rumelia, that is what remained of Turkey in Europe<sup>9</sup>. For Irish Unionists, fears of Papist atrocities, harking back to massacres in the 1640s, were nothing short of “foundational” (Beiner 2007, 373). For Ittihad’s Salonika cadres, whether born there or not, the fear was not based just on historic memory but contemporary reality, as fully realised in the Balkan states’ 1912 onslaught. At least 240,000 terrified muhajirs fled from a Macedonian and Thracian hinterland to the Salonikan choke-point and, where they could, took ship to the relative safety of Anatolia (Rankin 1914, 304). The city itself fell to the Greeks in late October. But even before that catastrophe had struck, in the closed sessions of its 1910 and 1911 congresses there – around the same time that Ulster Unionism was moving towards its own strident belligerency – Ittihad was debating how to shore up and strengthen what remained of the empire by ensuring the hegemonic position of the Turkish nation within it. New to this agenda was the notion of breaking up the alleged disloyal and seditious ethnies through dispersal to far parts of the empire where they would be dissolved among loyal Muslims populations, a policy one British observer likened “to pounding the non-Turkish elements [...] in a Turkish mortar” (Akçam 2004, 131; 2013, 258-279).

Whether such considerations were part of a predetermined, intentionalist agenda to carry out a root and branch destruction of the Ottoman Armenians is part of a different discussion. What matters here is the way in which Ittihad began ‘imagining’ a still imperial Ottomania through a nationalising prism of zero-sum struggle for space against internal ethnic competitors. What one historian of Great War Ireland has referred to as “a conflict between traumatic sensitivities of victimhood and triumphalist proclamations of victory” might equally apply to the way Ittihad transferred their sense of existential struggle from the other side of Bosphorus to eastern Anatolia, casting former Armenian partners in the process into Bulgarian-style bogeyman (Beiner 2007, 368; Suny 2015, 361-364). This besieged mentality as it infected the whole post-1913 Ittihad-commanded, Ottoman edifice, in turn ensured that after they had done their worst in obliterating the Armenian presence on the pla-

<sup>9</sup> See Dekmejian 1986, 85-96, for a significant “the personal as political” analysis.

teau the only meaningful politico-military direction for Dashnaks and the like, was that of confirming Ittihad's self-fulfilling prophecy. The path to Armenian independence in what would reduce to a tiny remnant of historic Armenia from 1918 would be paved with ongoing massacres committed by its militias against Muslims, inter-communal massacres *and* Kemalist massacres on a grand-scale against the starving survivors of the genocide, all in conditions of apocalyptic suffering<sup>10</sup>.

If the Irish situation would seem to diverge from this absolute nadir it was not however because the post-Easter Rising political ground had somehow shifted back to the middle. On the contrary, with Carson's star in the ascendant in Westminster politics where he led the combined Conservative-Unionist opposition to Asquith, and with the backing of David Lloyd George – the vastly more bellicose and pro-Unionist Prime Minister in waiting – for a permanent exclusion of six Ulster counties from the terms of Home Rule, the Redmondite position became entirely untenable (Hennessey 1998, 144-152). His party's electoral obliteration would be confirmed in the December 1918 British general election in which a now overtly IRB, Eamonn de Valera led and hence physical force-orientated Sinn Fein, swept the board in the south, proceeding to unilaterally declare an Irish independence with its own separate republican Assembly. But the tipping point on the road to military confrontation between Dublin and London as well as between Dublin and Belfast had already occurred at the one key moment in the war when London had itself been faced with military collapse and hence defeat: the moment of the initially, massively successful March 1918 German offensive on the Western front. Lloyd George's response was to rush to impose the one thing on Ireland no Westminster administration had dared yet do; conscription. From there, the decision – made without any Irish political consultation – was treated not as some emergency attempt to plug an acute manpower shortage but as a pretext to the dismantling of Home Rule and hence Irish liberty. A Sinn Fein led-resistance campaign but with support from across the national political spectrum was met in turn by the attempted round-up and arrest of some 150 leading Sinn Feiners, accused – with only flimsy, and quite possibly fabricated intelligence – of being party to a “German plot” to foment another Irish insurrection. Nevertheless, the intelligence was believed by British ministers (McMahon 2008, 24). It was in a strange way as if the events of 24 April 1915 had come full circle. But with one compelling difference. Save those who had died in British uniform, or in the Easter Rising, Ireland still had the majority of its able-bodied, battle-age menfolk – at least in principle

<sup>10</sup> Hovannisian 1967, for the epic struggle against impossible odds; McCarthy 1995, esp. 198-200, 201, for atrocities committed in its name. See also Bloxham 2005, 103-105; Reynolds 2011, 197-198, 210-212.

– with which to parry the Empire striking back. Armenia had not. Most of its never-to-be freedom-fighters had signed their own death-warrant when they had acquiesced to their religious and political leadership’s counsel to enlist in the Ottoman army. In the subsequent wars of Irish and Armenian independence the cause of advanced Irish nationalism had a gender-based commodity which its decimated Armenian counterpart sorely lacked.

### 5. *Conclusion*

Within the wider catastrophe of the Great War, the Medz Yeghern stands out. The post-war absence of thousands of indigenous Armenian communities across Anatolia, and the fact that other groups, notably Kurds, were able to fill the ensuing political and cultural vacuum, confirms how thoroughly the Ittihad carried through its anti-Armenian extermination. While acknowledging its extraordinariness, this essay, however, has sought to draw parallels with another closely synchronous, wartime narrative the aim of which has been to propose that while at the extreme end of the violence spectrum, the Medz Yeghern remains an event which can be understood within a comparative historical framework. The scale of the brutality and atrocity committed by British forces, especially auxiliary units such as the Black and Tans in the Anglo-Irish war from 1919, or the reprisals and ethnic cleansing enacted by the UVF against Catholic Irish within Ulster in the same period, were clearly of a lesser scale than those enacted in Ottoman Armenia<sup>11</sup>. They also lacked an exterminatory agenda. Even so, otherwise socially conservative elites and their plebeian supporters, especially in increasingly exposed citadels of a once guaranteed imperial heartland such as Belfast; as they struggled to find ways of preserving the territorial status quo against the encroaching nationalist challenge, evinced the same or very similar shifts to a more firmly exclusive sense of community, a more hostile attitude to those who failed to fit that prescript, and a more ready recourse to extreme violence when believing themselves threatened, as did their Ittihad counterparts.

But it was not just on the presumed hegemonic, national-imperial side of the equation that the war had a radicalising effect. We began by emphasising that until the summer of 1914, grounds for political accommodation between national Ireland and imperial Britain as between the claims of Armenian autonomy within Ottomania, were plausible: that the notion that “neither Britishness nor Irishness were mutually exclusive identities” had its Ottoman Armenian parallels, and that just as Irish republicanism was “an obscure minority obsession” so the urge to physical force solutions to the fu-

<sup>11</sup> See Townshend 1975, for an overview; Wilson 2010, for comparative analysis of the violence in Ulster.

ture of the plateau were far from mainstream Armenian politics (Hennessey 1998, 235-236). Under peacetime circumstances these were the calculations of dangerous men, and women. They hinted at ideologues prepared to throw a dice on the possibility of getting a step closer to a national dream while thinking little or nothing of the consequences in terms of the welfare of those for whom the vision was supposedly intended. Arguably worse, some may have calculated in classic national liberation fashion that state retribution meted out against that populace would fan a people's insurrection.

Nevertheless, the war undoubtedly offered opportunities to nationalists willing to play for high risks. By the very nature of being subject to another more dominant nation, these opportunities largely revolved around bringing into play some outside force or forces willing to entertain military support for insurrection as part of some quid pro quo. If for no other reason than that such a course of action would brand protagonists as traitors and thus liable to an exemplary punishment of they and most likely their families and communities, there was unsurprisingly no grass-roots rush to follow. In this sense, the Irish Volunteers and Armenian Ottoman *druzhiny*, like other similar ethnic mobilisations at the war's outset, while part of the bigger picture, remained marginal. Yet there was an obverse side of this coin. Standing on the sidelines was quite different to being compelled to don the uniform of a perceived imperial master. Lack of enthusiasm for getting killed was not just the wartime preserve of sub-altern groups, whether metropolitan or colonial. But where it took on aspects of mass disaffection the relationship was a close one. In some colonial instances, as for instance, in the Volta-Bani region of French West Africa, or the Semirechye districts of Russian Turkestan, conscription very often directly into a labour battalions, in 1915-16, was the spark to major proto-national insurrections which were in turn met by imperial armies or state-armed settlers with genocidal violence (Levene 2015, 65-72). Enforced conscription was equally a touchstone in both Ireland and Ottoman Armenia as to where many ordinary people's loyalties lay. Growing murmurs of disaffection leading to desertion or direct resistance in early 1915 Armenia had their close corollary in Ireland where the IRB used a rumour of compulsion as the pretext for their Easter 1916 mobilisation while the actual British attempt to enforce it two years later led to a nation-wide resistance not to say the threat of Irish troop mutinies in the British army, and was the undoubted catalyst to the Anglo-Irish war (Hennessey 1998, 126-127; Townshend 2015, 351). In other words, while the advanced Irish nationalist mobilisation in 1914 or even 1916 was premature, by 1918 – with conscription as the trigger – it was the subject of popular, national acclamation. This is also in line with what was happening elsewhere in ethnically subordinate regions of imperial Europe where towards the end of the Great War demands for national self-determination as very often encouraged by vocal diaspora groups, become the goad to large numbers of men in uniform (very often captured POWs) jettisoning one imperial allegiance for another national one.

The Armenian experience was neither aberrant nor apart from this ‘new normal’. Except in one joyless regard. The early mobilisations envisaged or realised by breakaway Dashnaks and AND, could only have followed the same trajectory as Czechs, Poles, Ukrainians and other would-be successor nation-states if there had been a reservoir of men in or out of uniform who might have been turned at some later stage. Actually, where AND, for instance, did recruit, as it did for the French-aligned Légion Arménienne, from late 1916, there were many willing volunteers. But the majority of these were from France, America and Egypt. The very few, who were from Ottoman Armenia, were genocide survivors or escapees (Bloxham 2005, 140-143, 150-151).

The Armenian experience of the Great War by way of the “genocidal turn” thus offers a strong indication as to how a population that mostly refrained from following the advanced nationalist route in 1914 had – at least among those who were still alive – become avant-garde advocates of precisely that by 1916. Equally, “The terrible beauty is born” of Easter 1916, may not have converted all Catholic Irishmen into unequivocal Sinn Feiners but it certainly by then had discredited the alternative path of imperial accommodation (Yeats 2016 [1921], 53-54). The irony, of course, is that the ‘will to power’ alone in such asymmetrical military confrontations could never have been enough to win such little nations their dreams of independence. Ireland and Armenia needed international – especially at war’s end American – support to overcome their intrinsic weakness against imperial opponents. The Irish with at least a manpower to tap, got as far as achieving a state in the south, yet still under the aegis of the British crown and minus the six Ulster counties leaving Unionism triumphant in the north. In the final phase of this struggle, nationalist Irishmen fought nationalist Irishmen in this most bitter phase of “the Troubles”. An even weaker, militarily depleted Armenia having struggled to defend itself against resurgent Turkish-Kemalist forces had no choice but to accept absorption into the Bolshevik sphere as the only way to save itself from annihilation. In the now standard, post-1918 struggle for the modern nation-state, national-imperial or plain radical national, everything was seemingly allowable including compromise through force *majeure*, even genocide. Bar one thing: a return to the more fluid plurality of a world in which Protestant Ulstermen and Catholic neighbours, Armenian Christians and Muslim Turks, and many other peoples besides, could live in numbers and in safety alongside and together with.

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