

American missionaries and the Young Turk Revolution

Charlie Laderman | University of Cambridge

In 1908, a group of junior army officers launched a coup that led to the reinstitution of the Ottoman Constitution, which had been suspended for the majority of Sultan Abdul Hamid's reign, and the resumption of parliamentary politics. This revolution, which became known as the Young Turk Revolution, captured the imagination of people around the world. This was especially the case in the United States, where Americans regarded it as a highly significant event that had the potential to transform Ottoman society and pave the way for a constitutional system of government. American interest in the Revolution derived from the belief that the downfall of autocratic government had been brought about by their missionaries, who had been active in the Ottoman empire from the outset of the 19th century. Since then, American missionaries had developed a more extensive network in the empire than any other nationality group. By contrast, America's economic interests in the Near East were minimal at this time.

The rising power of the United States at the turn of the 20th century enhanced the role of missionaries as international guides responsible for interpreting the wider world for ordinary Americans and policymakers. Missionary expertise was especially in demand when revolutions occurred in nations in which they were the most prominent American presence. The Young Turk Revolution, at least initially, was interpreted in the United States as the Ottoman empire refashioning its governmental system in the American image. The missionaries, the only Americans active in many regions of the empire, were widely credited by their countrymen as being the instigators of reform.

The pre-eminent American missionary group, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, greeted the revolution in the Ottoman empire as a 'nation's sudden conversion'. The American Board embraced the new 'Ottoman nation' and, in their schools and publications, employed a secular message that promoted 'modern Ottoman citizenship' to advance co-existence between all its communities. If the revolution established a 'free Turkey', one that safeguarded missionary institutions and allowed them to proselytise with the permission and protection of the authorities, the American Board believed it would then have prime access to the most promising mission field in the world.

The missionaries' relief at the demise of autocratic government and their excitement for the future of constitutional government was reflected across Ottoman society. Ahmed Emin Yalman, a Turkish journalist who would soon leave for New York to begin a PhD at Columbia University, recalled that, 'everyone was inclined to celebrate the end of the nightmare of despotism and oppression'. Halide Edip, a renowned Turkish author and the first female graduate of an American missionary college, declared: 'There had never been a more passionate desire in the peoples of Turkey to love each other, to work for the realisation of this new Turkey ... it looked like the millennium'. The Ottoman empire's Muslim majority did not subscribe to the millennial vision of the Christian missions, which looked forward to the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth at the end of the age. Nevertheless, close ties were established between American missionaries and Turkish reformers as they both were looked to as constructors of civil society in the new Ottoman polity. Dreams of building a new Ottoman nation vanished amid the turmoil of the First World War and the missionaries' main constituents, the Armenians, were subject to unprecedented violence. However, the links forged between the missionaries and reform-minded Turkish leaders would prove instrumental in the reconstruction of the region after the war and would provide the basis for the ultimate establishment of relations between the United States and the Republic of Turkey.

The American Research Institute in Turkey (ARIT) has recently become the custodian of the archives of the Amerikan Bord Heyeti, the historical descendent of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions' administrative agency in Turkey. Much of the material in these archives is unique to this collection, including site reports, drafts and administrative correspondence. ARIT also holds the Board's library, which includes missionary biographies, a full run of its monthly news bulletin, *The Missionary Herald*, and a collection of books, periodicals and pamphlets printed by the Board. Thanks to the generosity of the British Institute at Ankara, I have been able to spend time this past summer accessing the Board's library and archives, one of the most significant international source material collections related to missionary undertakings in Turkey during the Ottoman and Republican periods. This research has enhanced my understanding of the historical basis for Turkish-American relations, a relationship that was of enduring importance to the stability of the eastern Mediterranean region during the 20th century and which remains critically significant today.

