

# THEODOR HERZL AND THE ARMENIAN QUESTION ACCORDING TO MARWAN BUHEIRY'S WORK

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## **Abstract**

In the article is discussed the monograph "Theodor Herzl and The Armenian Question" written by the Lebanese scholar Marwan Buheiry, specializing in modern and contemporary history of the Middle East, Arab peoples and international policy of Zionism. The study is devoted to the Armenian-Jewish relations in the early stages of political Zionism.

**Keywords:** Marwan Buheiry, Theodor Herzl, Ottoman Empire, Zionism, Armenian question

## **Marwan Buheiry**

It is known that in 1975 a civil war broke out in Lebanon, which turned that prosperous Middle Eastern country into ruins. The death toll was in the tens of thousands, the war entered every Lebanese home, many fled the country, state institutions ceased to function, and the army disintegrated. Each party or group had its own military force. The war affected all Lebanese communities without exception, including Armenians, people of different religions: Muslims, Sunnis, Shiites, Druze, Christian Maronites, Orthodox, Catholics, all parties and social groups. Although the Armenian community officially declared neutrality, however, twice in 1978-1979 it was attacked by the Maronite military force. There was a serious threat to the existence of the community.

In these conditions, to help the Armenian community the Armenian government sent a delegation of two people to Lebanon, one of whom was the author of these lines: "At that time I was the head of the Department of Arab Countries of the Institute of Oriental Studies of NAS RA. My relations with not only Lebanese scholars but also other state, political, military, religious and public figures played a big role in choosing the candidate. In 1970-1980 I visited Lebanon multiple times. My task was to mobilize their capabilities to ensure the security of the Armenian community, to establish contacts with Lebanese forces that could become an ally of the Armenians. We met with former Prime Minister Rachid Solh, then former Lebanese President Hussein Husseini, Head of the military-political organization "Amal" - Nabih Berri, Lebanese Progressive Socialist Party's influential leader Walid Jumblatt, leader of the Lebanese Sunni and Shiite Muslim communities, leaders of the Palestine Liberation Organization Yasser Arafat, Abd Rabbo, Farouk Kaddum, Abdullah Haroun and many other figures.

I must say that I managed to solve the problems I was tasked with. Among the scholars, I had a very close relationship with Professor Darwaza, director of the Palestinian Research Institute. In 1978 I visited the institute headed by him at his invitation. There I had the opportunity to get acquainted with the Institute's publications, including the "Journal of Palestinian Studies", in one of the publications of which I found the above-mentioned work by Buheiry. I inquired about the author and asked if I could meet with him. I was very happy when they said he was in Lebanon. They promised to arrange a meeting with him, which took place at the same institute. He was relatively young, with very cheerful eyes, energetic and talkative. He was an assistant professor at the prestigious American University in Beirut and at the same time a member of the Institute for Palestinian Studies. Buheiry told me that he was a specialist in the contemporary and modern history of the Arab peoples, and simultaneously studied the international history of Zionism. Naturally, I wondered how he had come up with the idea to write a work on Herzl, the founder of Zionism and the Zionist movement in the context of the Armenian question. While studying the international policy of Zionism, I became acquainted with Herzl's "Diary", which discussed in great detail his views on the Armenian question in 1896".

### **Buheiry's work**

"Theodor Herzl and The Armenian Question", a small but substantive in its scientific significance work by Lebanese scholar Marwan Buheiry, specializing in modern and contemporary history of the Middle East, Arab peoples and international policy of Zionism, is devoted to the study of Armenian-Jewish relations in the early stages of political Zionism.

The topic covers a relatively small period, several months of 1896, a few months after the Armenian massacres by Sultan Abdul Hamid II in 1894-1896. It is full of important events, political intrigues, secret deals between the leaders of the Zionist movement and the Turkish executioner Sultan Abdul Hamid II, and a great deal of attention was paid to secret diplomacy against the national interests of Armenians.

The coverage of the key issues of the mentioned period reveals new layers in the Armenian question, both in the issue of the Ottoman sultan-padishah and in the Zionist secret diplomacy.

The work shows the attempts of the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire and the Zionist leaders to solve their problems at the expense of the national interests of Armenians.

Marwan Buheiry's work significantly enriches our knowledge about the Armenians and Armenia, Armenian-Jewish relations and the national problems of Armenians, the Ottoman regime - Zulum, as well as the Ottoman Empire and the non-Turkish peoples in that important period.

## **THE CONSPIRATORY PROGRAMS OF THE ZIONIST SECRET DIPLOMACY IN THE ARMENIAN QUESTION IN 1896**

The 90s of the XIX century entered the history of Western Armenians as one of the bloodiest eras.

At the International Congress of Berlin in 1878, after making a decision to implement reforms in six Armenian vilayets - Erzurum, Kharberd, Sivas, Bitlis, Van and Diyarbekir - Sultan Abdul Hamid II and the Zulum regime established by him, instead of carrying out reforms, undertook the following policy: the best solution to the Armenian question is "the physical extermination of Armenians". The bloodthirsty Sultan Abdul Hamid II was a staunch supporter of discriminatory policy. In 1894-1896, massacres of Armenians were organized in Arabkir, Bitlis, Bayburd, Trabzon, Diyarbekir, Kharberd, Sivas, Sasun, Mush, Karin, Yerznka, Bitlis and other places in Western Armenia. The mass extermination of Armenians took place in Caesarea, Constantinople, Urfa and other cities as well. More than 300 thousand Armenians were annihilated. The extermination of Armenians and national minorities - Greeks, Assyrians, Balkan Slavs and others - was an organic component of the domestic state policy of the Ottoman Empire. The Armenian population did not stop fighting against the Ottoman dictatorship for the right to exist, to preserve its national identity, language, culture, traditions and religion. The Armenians regrouped their forces preparing for a new powerful struggle in the second half of 1896.

In those turbulent times, the Jewish journalist Theodor Herzl appeared in the Jewish political arena with his enthusiastic plan to use the Armenian question for creating a Jewish state by getting concessions from the Ottoman sultan in the territory of Palestine, which was then part of the Ottoman Empire.

Theodor Herzl or Benjamin Zeev went through a very controversial path, from advocating Jewish assimilation to being the founder and godfather of political Zionism, and was its undisputed leader from its creation in 1897 until his death in 1904.

His ancestors moved from Belgrade to Budapest, where Theodor was born on May 2, 1860. He was the second child in the family. In 1878, when Herzl turned 18, his family moved to Vienna, where he became a law student at the University of Vienna.

His parents were assimilated, they were German-speaking Jews, and the atmosphere in the family greatly influenced young Theodor. He was not interested in Judaism and grew up as an assimilated young German who rejected religion. Moreover, he mocked and sometimes cynically spoke about Judaism. He viewed the expression of religious sentiments as lack of education. After graduating from the University of Vienna in 1884, Herzl preferred the literary-journalistic genre to law. In Paris he worked for the influential Viennese newspaper "Neue Freie Presse". Paris stunned Herzl with its tumultuous political life. Paris expanded Herzl's horizon. He first encountered anti-Semitism there. He was greatly affected by the 1894 trial of Dreyfus, a French army officer of Jewish descent, accused of treason by the French court. Herzl, being the

Parisian correspondent for the Viennese newspaper, did not miss the court hearings. Thousands of Parisians often shouted “Death to the Jews” during the court hearings. Many of Herzl’s biographers note that the “Dreyfus affair” marked a turning point in his political career. He gave up his idea of Christianizing the Jews, although many Jews and their leaders, especially in Russia, considered that the only way to escape persecution and massacre was to convert to Christianity, preferring the Armenian Apostolic Church and they converted to Christianity through the Armenian rite. It is interesting why they preferred the Armenian Apostolic Church.

The mass conversion of Jews to Christianity with the Armenian rite began in 1910, when the anti-Jewish regime in Russia reached its peak. It is interesting why the Jews in Russia chose to become followers of the Armenian Apostolic Church rather than the Russian Orthodox Church. Answering this question, it should be noted that “when a Jew becomes a follower of the Russian Orthodox Church, they do not cease to be a Jew and do not cease to be called a “Jew”, being subjected to massacres. By becoming a follower of the Armenian Apostolic Church, a believer “Armenian”, they become safe. In this issue a great role was played by the following: after the conversion to Christianity 1700 years ago, humanism and love towards people became important features of the Church. After the conversion to Christianity, love towards people and neighbors penetrated into the body and blood of Armenians”. The Jews were well aware of this humanistic feature of the Armenian Church and they applied to the Russian Empire to allow them to become followers of the Armenian Apostolic Church. This is evidenced by the numerous requests of the Jews. Let us bring an example: in his request Khalevsky, an honorary citizen of Kharkov, expressed a desire to convert to Christianity, to become a follower of the Armenian Apostolic Church, representing the most sympathetic of Christian teachings – “love of the neighbor”. After the Dreyfus affair Herzl came to the conclusion that the only salvation for the Jews was to establish their own state in Palestine. Herzl devoted the rest of his life to the realization of this project. In 1895 he began working on his book “Der Judenstaat” (The Jewish State), which was published in February, 1896. In 1897 the World Zionist Congress (WZC) was formed, and Herzl was elected president of the newly-formed Congress, remaining in that position until the end of his life (1904). His book “The Jewish State” is considered the Bible of Zionism, and Herzl is considered the godfather of Zionism.

But the question arose as to where the Jewish state should be created. Of course, the Jews and Herzl himself would like the return of all the Jews to, as they call it, their historic homeland – Palestine. But the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid refused to give Palestine to the Jews. And Great Britain raised the issue of creating a Jewish state in Africa, in Uganda, but the WZC rejected it. An attempt was made to settle the Jews in Al-Arish in Sinai, but the Egyptian government refused. In 1903 Herzl tried to get the consent of Pope Pius X, to which the Vatican replied: “Since the Jews do not accept the divinity of Christ, the Church cannot issue a declaration in favor of the Jews”. After all this, the Jews and Herzl again opted for Palestine.

Herzl died from a heart attack on July 3, 1904, at the age of 44. He was buried next to his father in Edlach (Austria). His wish was to bury him there until the Jewish people returned to Palestine, and only then to move his body to Jerusalem. Indeed, after the establishment of Israel in 1948 his body was transported from Austria to Israel in 1949 and he was reburied on Mount Herzl.

But in this case, we are interested not in this but in the adventurous policy and the secret diplomacy of early Zionism on the Armenian question, Herzl's attempts to solve the problems of the Jews and their statehood with his Zionist comrades-in-arms and supporters at the expense of the national interests of the Armenians, entering into a deal with bloodthirsty Sultan Abdul Hamid II, executioner of Armenians. Marwan Buheiry devoted a rather interesting and unique scientific work to the study and coverage of this issue. Buheiry is a Lebanese historian who wrote the work "Theodor Herzl and The Armenian Question".

Zionism godfather Herzl's secret plan consisted of three points: first, to establish relations with the leaders of influential Armenian revolutionary committees, to persuade them that the Armenians should stop fighting against the Turkish barbaric yoke, against the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid and should express their readiness to obey him.

Second, the European press in London, Paris, Berlin and Vienna should stop exposing the monstrous struggle of the Turkish authorities against Western Armenians, should soften criticism of the Ottoman sultan and his policy and should change their pro-Armenian orientation and stop supporting Armenians and the Armenian question.

Third, the sultan should in return promise the Armenians his readiness to carry out reforms in the Armenian vilayets.

And most importantly, as Herzl hoped, in exchange for those services of the Zionists the sultan would agree to the establishment of Jewish autonomy and would offer Palestine "on a plate". That would be the price the Armenians had to pay by ending the struggle against the sultan and by declaring their allegiance to executioner Abdul Hamid II.

The astonishing thing with its cruelty and cynicism is that Theodor Herzl and his supporters, being the representatives of a nation that had been persecuted and massacred multiple times over the centuries, were supposed to be sensitive to the suffering of other people. But they were deaf to the misfortune of others.

The program of Herzl and the first Zionists, as Marwan Buheiry shows, completely failed, in which the patriotic position of the Armenians and their leaders played a very important role.

Avetis Nazarbekyan and his wife Maro Nazarbekyan, whom Herzl met in London in 1896, abruptly refused to submit to the Sultan, decided not to come to terms with their grave situation and fight against him and the Turks to the end. The position of the leaders of the Hunchakian party was an expression of the mood of all Armenians. As for the sultan, he refused to accept the plan of Herzl and the Jews to cede Palestine. The

Sultan responded to the offer of the Jews this way: "Let the Jews keep their billions. When my empire is divided, they can get Palestine for free".

Before presenting his plan to the Armenians and the Sultan, Herzl warned the Zionist leaders: "Armenians should not know that our participation is conditioned by the national interest". This warning of the godfather of Zionism to his comrades-in-arms gives us the right to conclude that Herzl's actions were secret and conspiratorial in nature and were directed against the vital interests of Armenians. Herzl was well aware that his secret diplomacy behind the Armenians' back and at the expense of their national interests could be described as villainy and immorality. Why did Herzl resort to secret diplomacy and conspiracy, trying to hide his plan not only from Armenians but also from the international community? Interestingly, there were honest people among the Zionists who criticized Herzl. For example, one of his close associates, Bernard Lazare, resigned from the executive committee of the Zionist movement, thus showing his protest against Herzl for establishing relations with the bloodthirsty Sultan Abdul Hamid. And Herzl's other close friend, the future president of Israel, Chaim Weizmann criticized Eduard Bernstein, a prominent leader of the German Social Democratic Party of Jewish descent for "taking the affairs of Armenians, not Jews, under his sponsorship". Weizmann referred to the fact that Bernstein, like many social democrats in Europe - Germany, France, Russia and other countries, publicly condemned the Ottoman sultan and his policy of "resolving" the Armenian question by physically exterminating Armenians, and was defending them. Weizmann criticized Bernstein, arguing that a Jew should sponsor Jews, not Armenians, even at the cost of the lives of Armenians.

Buheiry's article highlights an interesting idea that deserves special attention: Herzl's attitude to the national liberation movements of the non-Turkish peoples of the Ottoman Empire in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Observing these processes, Herzl tried to play the Armenian question.

Buheiry concludes that "Herzl views the Armenian national movement as a potential rival". This is where the roots of the conflict of interests between Armenians and Jews should be sought. This also partly explains the historical fact that among the Young Turk leaders, who in 1915 planned and carried out the Armenian Genocide in the Ottoman Empire, there were Jews, the so-called Donmehs. The latter officially renounced Judaism and converted to Islam. Many found the sincerity of the Donmeh Jews doubtful, suspecting that they secretly remained loyal to Judaism and served world Zionism. The Young Turk Minister of Finance, Javid, was of Jewish descent, and the Minister of Enlightenment (Education), Nazim was a Donmeh Jew. Nazim played a special role in organizing the Armenian Genocide in the Ottoman Empire in 1915. He was not only a minister of the Ottoman Empire, but also a theorist of the Young Turk Party, who theoretically substantiated the need for the Armenian Genocide.

The Ottoman author Mevlan Zade Rifat included in his book Nazim's speech at one of the secret Young Turk sittings, during which a final decision was made on the Armenian Genocide. Here is a part of that speech: "The Armenian people need to be

completely annihilated so that no Armenian remains in our country, so that even that name is not remembered. Now a war is waging and there will be no other such convenient occasion. The interference of the great powers and the loud protests of the world press will go unnoticed, and if they find out, they will face the fact that it has happened and thus the issue will be resolved. This time a complete annihilation of Armenians must be carried out, everyone must be exterminated, till the last person... I want the Turks to live on this land, only the Turks. Let all the non-Turkish elements get lost, regardless of their nationality or religion”.

Apparently, the refusal of the Israeli government to recognize the Armenian Genocide can be explained by the factor of rivalry. And the Jewish community in the United States supports Turkey and opposes the recognition of the Armenian Genocide.

The Zionist leadership of the Herzl era had a negative, unfriendly attitude not only towards the Armenian national movement but also towards the national movements of other peoples of the Ottoman Empire. This is evidenced by the facts mentioned in Buheiry's work.

In 1887, during the Greek-Turkish war, Herzl and his supporters declared their pro-Turkish position, set up a fund to help Turkey, enlisted volunteers, particularly doctors who acted on behalf of Turkey. And as Buheiry points out, in this case also rivalry played a role - between the Jews and the Greeks.

The Zionist leaders had negative attitude towards the Arab national movement, which reached its peak in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The discussion of this issue undoubtedly increased the national value of the Arab author.

Buheiry's work, as mentioned, is based on sources, where a special place is occupied by Herzl's "Diary", published openly and available in many libraries around the world. Buheiry's main conclusions are based on his "Diary", especially its first and fourth volumes.

***Translated from the Armenian by Syuzanna Chraghyan***