

Book Review: Sharing the Burden: The Armenian Question, Humanitarian Intervention and Anglo-American Visions of Global Order by Charlie Laderman

On 24 April each year, many communities across the world come together to commemorate the mass killing of the Armenian people of the Ottoman Empire during World War I. Grant Golub reviews **Sharing the Burden: The Armenian Question, Humanitarian Intervention and Anglo-American Visions of Global Order**, in which Charlie Laderman shows how the US and British responses to the atrocities were intimately tied up with the changing role of the United States in the international order.

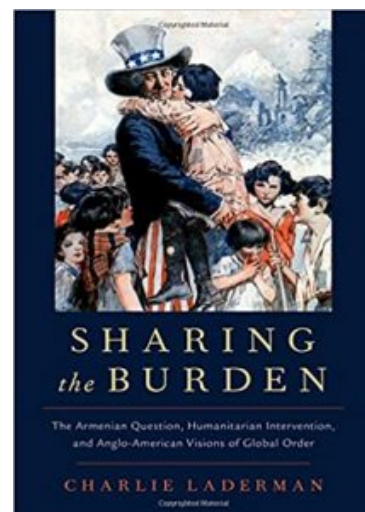
Sharing the Burden: The Armenian Question, Humanitarian Intervention and Anglo-American Visions of Global Order. Charlie Laderman. Oxford University Press. 2019.

In the spring of 2011, President Barack Obama was considering whether the United States should join a NATO military intervention in Libya. An armed uprising had broken out against the country's dictator, Colonel Muammar el-Qaddafi, and his forces were approaching the city of Benghazi, the heart of the revolt. Qaddafi promised to crush the rebellion, and European leaders were pressing Obama to support a United Nations resolution establishing a no-fly zone over Libya to prevent Qaddafi's troops from massacring civilians. Obama reluctantly decided to support the humanitarian intervention, but privately admitted it was a '[51-49](#)' decision. Years later, with Qaddafi deposed and Libya in the midst of a brutal civil war, Obama called the Libyan decision a '[mess](#)'.

The Libyan intervention raised important questions that policymakers have been grappling with for over a century. When should nations intervene abroad to stop large-scale mass murder or genocide? And what conditions need to exist domestically and internationally to convince elected leaders to get involved?

Luckily, a smart new book has arrived that helps us answer these vital questions.

[Sharing the Burden: The Armenian Question, Humanitarian Intervention and Anglo-American Visions of Global Order](#) by Charlie Laderman addresses the role of humanitarian intervention in international politics by examining Britain's and the United States' repeated attempts to stop the Ottoman atrocities against the Armenian people at the beginning of the twentieth century. By analysing a series of episodes many today have forgotten about, Laderman, a lecturer in International History at King's College London, reminds us that the dilemmas of humanitarian intervention that have bedevilled policymakers in recent decades are, in fact, not new problems at all.





For centuries, the Armenians had [lived](#) in the Ottoman Empire as one of its many minority communities. Mostly residing in eastern Anatolia toward the fringes of the Empire, the Armenians were considered by many to be the oldest Christian community in the world. Although the Ottoman Empire was an Islamic one, the Armenians, like other minorities, were allowed to retain their religious and social systems in exchange for paying additional taxes.

But, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the security of the Armenians shifted. As the Ottoman Empire began to unravel, many blamed minority groups for Ottoman weakness. After the Ottomans' crushing loss to a Russian-led coalition in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78, Armenians increasingly fell under suspicion as foreign agents of Christian powers. Ottoman authorities began to encourage the terrorising of Armenian villages and towns. Increasingly convinced that the Ottoman government was complicit in their oppression, Armenians organised self-defence groups and formed secret political societies to push for greater regional autonomy, civil liberties and additional economic opportunities. In an effort to reassert his authority, the Ottoman sultan, Abdul Hamid II, authorised a wave of terror in the mid-1890s, now known as the 'Hamidian massacres', that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Armenians. Two decades later, amidst the throes of the First World War, heavy fighting broke out between the Ottomans and the Russians again on the Ottomans' eastern borders. Once more, Ottoman leaders suspected the Armenians were aiding the Russians, leading them to ultimately deport, massacre or starve over one million Armenians (2). These acts have since been formally recognised as a genocide by [over 30 nation states](#) and a number of international organisations.

Laderman's main argument is that the US response to the 'Armenian question' provides an overlooked, but vital, view on the rise of the United States as a global power at the turn of the twentieth century. As the Hamidian massacres unfolded, a growing debate was taking place inside the United States over the rise of American power and the best methods to wield it if the nation desired great power status. Laderman contends that the 'Armenian question' had a significant impact on American ideas about new directions for US foreign policy and that the Ottoman atrocities galvanised American leaders and opinion-makers into considering a larger American role in the world order. He also maintains Britain's response is central to this story, and that British policymakers attempted to leverage shared sympathy for the Armenian plight into a formal Anglo-American alliance: an alliance that British politicians believed could shore up their flagging international position.

Throughout the book, we spend a lot of time with familiar faces such as Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. Yet one of the strengths of Laderman's work is how he introduces lesser-known figures like Oscar Straus, the US ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, and W.T. Stead, the editor of the British newspaper, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, highlighting their impact on Anglo-American responses to the 'Armenian question'. While Straus espoused caution about US involvement and advised against overcommitting in the region, Stead passionately championed the Armenian cause as a way to unite the two powers of the English-speaking world. As policymakers dithered, American missionaries kept the 'Armenian question' front and centre in US political discourse. Laderman enriches his narrative with characters like these and makes his case that the 'Armenian question' was one that gripped American and British policymakers for more than two decades.

One of the most interesting aspects of the book is how Laderman vividly shows that widespread outrage in the United States over Ottoman atrocities convinced many that the US needed to intervene to stop Spanish atrocities in neighbouring Cuba. At the same time as American politicians were contemplating intervention over the 'Armenian question', reports began to emerge of Spanish soldiers massacring Cuban civilians who were rebelling against Spanish rule. While many of these accounts were deeply exaggerated, they helped convince US leaders that armed intervention to help the Cubans was necessary. While the Armenians were half a world away, it was commonly said, Cuba was on America's doorstep. In April 1898, the US declared war on Spain, and three months later, it quickly won the Spanish-American War. The decisive American victory persuaded many Americans that it was now a world power and that it should utilise its growing capabilities to help others suffering around the globe.

Over the next two decades, Roosevelt and Wilson both attempted to use American power to help the Armenians. However, while a growing number of Americans wished to aid them in some way, most were not prepared to assume overseas responsibilities or enter into formal alliances with other countries. A sensitivity to public opinion ultimately pressured Roosevelt not to commit US power to the region. As reports emerged of renewed massacres starting in 1915, the Wilson administration came under increasing pressure to help the Armenians despite US neutrality. Once the United States entered the war, Wilson tried to mount an intervention to save the Armenians, but others argued he should utilise overwhelming American military resources to defeat Germany as quickly as possible as the best way to advance the Armenian cause. After the First World War, Wilson sought an American mandate under the League of Nations to protect the Armenians from further atrocities, but after the US Senate rejected the Treaty of Versailles in November 1919, the United States did not join the League. Debate continued for another year over an American mandate for the Armenians, but it never materialised. After the massive tolls of war, there was little appetite for continued overseas military engagement, especially on behalf of those deemed strangers in far-off corners of the world.

Laderman's book presents sage reminders about the vexing issues policymakers face when debating potential humanitarian interventions. He persuasively argues that the 'Armenian question' is intimately tied up with the rise of the United States as a world power. If we are to properly understand the values underpinning US foreign policy, we must grasp how the plight of the Armenians animated American foreign policymaking at the beginning of the twentieth century. Ultimately, Laderman concludes, it is sometimes simply not possible to achieve a good solution. The next time American leaders consider such an intervention, they would be wise to read Laderman's impressive book.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

Image Credit: Armenian Genocide Memorial Complex, Yerevan, Armenia ([Shant Kha CC BY 2.0](#)).
