

The Hard Lessons of Sèvres – Again (2006)

In diplomacy as in life, “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.” This saying is attributed to the veteran Roman statesmen Cicero, but more often remembered as Dante’s lament on the human condition. Whether Cicero or Dante, it is a lesson Armenians learned only too well in the 19th and 20th centuries. Coaxed into relying on great powers and forced to deal with fickle neighbors, their fate became a victim of good intentions.

Such was the case on August 10, eighty-six years ago, when the Treaty of Sèvres was solemnly signed by a dozen countries, including Great Britain, France, Italy, Greece, Japan, Armenia and Turkey. With great expectations, the parties commissioned US President Woodrow Wilson to draw a new map that would secure national self-determination and regional peace. He did so, but the map and treaty were not honored, at least as regards the Armenians. Despite these good intentions, Armenians lost most of their ancestral homeland to their neighbors, who continue to enjoy the fruits of their genocidal labors.

Karabakh is yet another case in point. With promises of a lasting diplomatic solution in the aftermath of WWI, the British induced the Armenians to forego their successful efforts to liberate Artsakh. Eighty years later, the situation is not resolved. In the meantime, generations of Armenians were sacrificed to unfulfilled promises and Soviet gerrymandering and misrule. In the waning years of the Soviet empire, lawful Armenian aspirations for democracy and self-rule in Artsakh were answered by Azeri violence.

Before long, neighboring Turkey joined in with blockades and more. However, this time the Armenians did not stop short. They successfully defended themselves against the Turkish ethnic alliance. Unlike the quagmires in the Balkans, Iraq, Somalia, Darfur and Lebanon, neither US nor European blood was shed in order to restore the peace or to protect the Armenians of Karabagh, who have wisely chosen *de facto* independence as the best guarantee of their security. For this alone, the world’s bystanders should be grateful.

Like most do-gooders, great nations are often distracted, and despite their best intentions, they leave a trail of devastation in their wake. Ignoring the fundamental rule of any humanitarian intervention—“first, do no harm,” they become impatient with “petty matters” of small peoples and urge them to make compromises without calculating the consequences.

History has taught Armenians to be wary and self-reliant. They learned long ago that good intentions (their own and others’) are not enough to avoid bad outcomes. And when there are bad outcomes, the well-intentioned advocates often blame the victim, pass the buck and take bureaucratic cover. Indeed, when they are not totally oblivious, the most they can manage is condolences, after it is too late.

Armenians have laid too many wreaths on the graves of valiant citizen soldiers and innocent civilians. Too much of their heritage, heartland and culture has been wrenched from them in internationally brokered concessions aimed at appeasing their unrepentant neighbors. They cannot be expected to

accept peace plans for Artsakh without concrete benefits and real assurances. This time, good intentions will not be enough. Once again, it is being brought home to Armenians the hard way that good intentions, however sincere, never were enough.