

## **The Armenian Genocide in Brazil: emergence and development of a cause**

Heitor Loureiro (Ph.D. candidate – UNESP/Brazil)

This presentation aims at understanding the emergence and development of the Armenian Cause in Brazil between 1915 and 1920. I intend to look at the Armenian Genocide in Brazil as a political issue.

When Raphael Lemkin created the word *genocide* and the United Nations adopted the term in 1948, supporters of the Armenian Cause demanded that the Armenian massacres in the Ottoman Empire between 1915 and 1923 be recognized as such, in spite of the protests and denial of the Republic of Turkey.

In Latin America today, Uruguay, Argentina, Chile and Venezuela have recognized the massacre of Armenians as genocide. Although an Armenian community has existed in Brazil (mainly in São Paulo) since 1920s, Brazil has not followed the example of its neighbors. However, this does not mean that the Armenian Cause was not considered by Brazilian government during the Twentieth Century.

In the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brazil, it is possible to find some files that reveal efforts made by a representative of the Republic of Armenia in Rio de Janeiro between 1918 and 1920 to fight for the Brazilian recognition of the newly established Republic of Armenia. This man, Etienne Brasil, also wanted to convince the president of Brazil, Epitácio Pessoa, to support Armenian territorial claims during the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. By comparing these files with the national and American press, we find that the Great Powers had been considering a humanitarian intervention in

Armenia led by the Brazilian government in partnership with Spain. In addition, we discover that the USA mandate over Armenia, refused by Congress, would be assumed by Brazil or Argentina.

Understanding the path of the Armenian Cause in Brazil contributes to a rethinking of the history of Brazilian foreign policy regarding human rights. The Brazilian response to the Armenian question in the 1910s indicates an official concern about a humanitarian cause, even though this interest would be a pretext to maintain close ties with the US and promote the image of Brazil as a selfless country.

During the genocide, the Brazilian press followed the international newspapers and reported the killing of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. As early as 1914, some Armenian families in São Paulo organized the first Brazilian entity to help Armenians in Anatolia. In 1915, they created a pair of new institutions and raised funds to send to Boghos Nubar Pasha, founder of the Armenian General Benevolent Union, in Paris.

After the end of the Great War in 1918, Armenians in Brazil started to organize themselves in order to push the Brazilian government to work for Armenia during the Paris Peace Conference. In this context emerged an intellectual named *Etienne Brasil*, the first representative of Armenia in the country.

The biography of Etienne Brasil is not clear, but we are able to trace his life events thanks the Rio de Janeiro press, for which he worked as a journalist. Born in France, Etienne Brasil arrived in Brazil around 1908 as a Roman Catholic priest and he joined a group of Brazilian intellectuals in 1910. It

is possible that Ettiene Brasil was of Armenian origin, despite that fact that he does not appear to have mentioned it in public. Probably, 'Etienne Brasil' was a pseudonym that became his name over the years.

During 1916, Etienne Brasil wrote his first article about the treatment of Armenians inside the Ottoman Empire. This article was about the Armenian resistance in Zeytun, which he referred to as "the Armenian Troy". From that moment on, Etienne Brasil published several articles about the Armenian deportations, seizures and deaths. Still in 1916, the American ambassador in Brazil allowed Etienne Brasil to raise funds in the name of the Armenians in greatest need and send these funds to New York and then to the US embassy in Constantinople. In the next year, 1917, Etienne Brasil published a small book about Armenian history, the first in Brazil about this subject, titled "The Armenian People".

With the independence of Armenia in 1918, Armenians all over the world started to push for recognition of the new country and to raise funds for the Armenian people, who were trying to survive in a devastated land. At this moment, Etienne Brasil became the protagonist of the Armenian Cause in Brazil.

In December, 1918, one month before the Paris Peace Conference, some members of the Armenian community in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo joined forces to put pressure on the Brazilian delegation attending the Conference. The Armenians wanted Brazil to intervene for Armenia.

During the Conference in 1919, the Armenian mandate was offered insistently to the United States. In March 1919, American president Woodrow

Wilson accepted the mandate, but one year later Congress rejected it, basing its decision on a non-involvement policy. Although the USA did recognize the independence of Armenia in April 1920, it lagged behind France, United Kingdom and Italy by three months.

Meanwhile, in Rio de Janeiro, Etienne Brasil continued working in the same way. Still in 1919, as president of the Armenian Center in Brazil, Etienne sent a letter to the Minister of Foreign Affairs to protest against Syria, which intended to put the region of Cilicia under its rule during the Paris Peace Conference. In that letter, Etienne compared the Syrian action with the Alsace-Lorraine issue.

In May 1919, Etienne sent another letter to inform the Brazilian government about the treatment of the Armenians under Ottoman rule. In that document, he compared Turkey to a cancer that had to be removed to create peace in the Middle East.

During the first week of 1920, Etienne sent to the Minister of Foreign Affairs a letter designating him as the Armenian diplomatic representative to the country. He also asked for an audience with the Minister to show him the documents that proved his words. In this position, Etienne would want from the Brazilian government the immediate recognition of the Republic of Armenia, the Brazilian support of Armenian territorial claims as well as showing the Brazilian authorities the advantages of a commercial interchange between the two countries. Later, the then Armenian diplomat in Brazil sent to the Brazilian government files that explained the reasons why he believed Brazil should recognize the independence of Armenia.

It is plausible that Epiácio Pessoa, the Brazilian president was somewhat sympathetic, towards the Armenian Cause because the foreign policy of Brazil was very close with Woodrow Wilson and the USA. According to some Brazilian historians, the country supported the “illusion of power” between 1912 and 1930 thanks to its close ties with the United States of America. As the only Latin American country to get involved in the First World War, Brazil promoted its own image as an important player in America and a leader of the continent in the League of Nations after the declination of the USA to take part in that society. The act of creating a diplomatic representation in Brazil would indicate that Armenian politicians believed in the Brazilian leadership’s self-propaganda and with the acquiescence of Etienne Brasil, they invested in the country as a strategic ally for the Cause.

In January 9<sup>th</sup>, 1920, Etienne Brasil wrote to the Brazilian president to remind him about a letter sent by himself to Etienne in 1919 in order to congratulate the Armenians. In Etienne’s words, the letter “fills with hope” the Armenians who were waiting for the recognition of their country. To quote Etienne Brasil:

The recognition of the Armenian Republic will be well accepted not only for Europe, because the voice of Brazil is lacking of interest, as well as it will provoke the recognition by the other Powers; two South American republics promised following Brazil immediately. This noble gesture will make easy our claims on the Peace’s table. (...) We hope Your Excellency, who has already raised your voice for us, inscribes your name and the name of Brazil in gold letters in the Armenians’ hearts and in Armenian history, signing the recognition’s act of the organized Republic of Armenia.

In later letters, Etienne Brasil kept the Brazilian government posted about the Argentine recognition of the Armenian Republic (May, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1920). In August, the diplomat informed the Minister of Foreign Affairs about the signing of the Treaty of Sèvres and the number of twenty countries which had

recognized the independence of the country by that time. He also wrote to avoid the “rumor” of an “alleged invasion of Armenia by the ‘maximalists’”. Etienne denied the news about the rise of Bolshevik forces in the Caucasus.

In October, 1920, for the very first time, Etienne Brasil received an answer from the Minister. The official letter invited Etienne for a meeting with the Brazilian authorities to discuss the consequences of the Treaty of Sèvres. It is not possible to know the contents of this meeting. However, it is possible to imagine that it was fundamental to Brazil’s recognition of the Republic some days later, on November, 5<sup>th</sup>, 1920. To achieve his objective, Etienne Brasil sent dozens of letters between February 1919 and November 1920. However, Brazil just made this act many months later than France, United Kingdom, Italy and the USA. This delay made the act useless because only one month after, Armenia was occupied by the Red Army and lost its independence.

Even the USA could not keep up with the speed of political changes in the Caucasus. On November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1920, one day before the Bolshevik occupation in Armenia, Woodrow Wilson had been negotiating with representatives of Brazil and Spain in the League of Nations to create a common effort to avoid the escalating violence between Turkish troops, commanded by Mustafa Kemal, and the Armenian army. In response to Wilson’s call, the Minister of Foreign Affairs wrote in a letter published in *The New York Times* on December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1920: “*I have the honor to inform your Excellency that the Government of Brazil is ready to contribute alone, or jointly with other powers, to put an end to the situation of suffering Armenia*”. With this pragmatic act, Brazil had two interests: 1) pleasing Woodrow Wilson and the

US; 2) applying to a permanent seat on the Council of the League of Nations, where the country had only a temporary seat, like Spain.

A few months before, in May, the Brazilian press indicated that the Armenian Question could have a role in relations with the US and the League. The newspaper "*A Noite*" headlined this subject: "The League of Nations' mandate over Armenia was offered to Brazil". Based on information provided by Etienne Brasil, the article reproduced a sentence attributed to Wilson, in which he said that "one of the richest nations in South America" would assume the Armenian mandate. However, the newspaper did not have a good impression about this possibility, reflecting on the economical costs for Brazil to sustain the mandate.

The mandate over Armenia failed along with the independent nation. The former government of Armenia left in exile and did not recognize the Bolshevik government in the country. They worked in France until 1924, when that country recognized the Soviet Union. Etienne Brasil, allied with the Armenian government in exile in Paris, tried to keep his position in Brazil as the representative of the "legal government of Armenia" but he lost his influence at the same time as the Paris group. Etienne Brasil worked as a lawyer until his death in 1955. During the 1920s, the Armenian community grew in São Paulo and its institutions took the place of Etienne Brasil as the representatives of Armenian interests in the country. The Armenians in São Paulo built churches, schools, and clubs and kept the culture and political claims alive.

Motivated by a dynamic Diaspora that exerted pressure for the existence of a free and independent Armenia, the Armenians could get the

support of Woodrow Wilson, besides the refusal of US Congress to create a mandate over the country. For this reason, Wilson sought in emergent nations such as Brazil and Spain, whose foreign policies were looking for recognition from Europe and USA and increasing their powers in the international sphere.

In conclusion, it is possible that Brazilian interest in accepting the mandate over Armenia was meant to show the League of Nations and the USA that the country was ready to be a Power in the world, not just in South America. For this reason, the attention of Brazil to Armenia was based more in pragmatic motivations than humanitarian values.