

## ՅԵՂԱՍՊԱՆԱԳԻՏՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ

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### THE ASSYRIAN GENOCIDE AS A PART OF THE CHRISTIAN GENOCIDE IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

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The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire is in both historiography and public memory almost solely associated with the murder of the Armenians. Although the Turkish government still denies that the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire fell victim to systematic murder, the extermination of the Armenians is far from being a “forgotten genocide.” No book on the history of genocide can omit the case of the Armenians. Unfortunately, achieving the global remembrance of the genocide against the Armenians seems to have downplayed the fate of all other Christian minority groups in the Ottoman Empire such as Assyrians that suffered from ethnic cleansing and mass murder at the hands of the Sultan Abdul Hamid II and Young Turks. Henry Morgenthau, who served as US ambassador in Constantinople until 1916 stated in his memoirs: “The Armenians are not the only subject people in Turkey which have suffered from this policy of making Turkey exclusively the country of the Turks. The story which I have told about the Armenians I could also tell with certain modifications about the Greeks and the Syrians (Assyrians–A. Kh.)”<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, the suffering of the Assyrians is largely forgotten

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<sup>1</sup> Morgenthau Henry, *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story*, reedited by Ara Sarafian (Ann Arbor, MI: Talderon Press, 2000), p. 214.

internationally and not recognized as genocide, which embitters the descendants of the victims. This ancient civilized nation forced faced the menace of total physical extermination—in the name of bringing about the insane plans of the Young Turks’ to create a “pure” Turkish state and “Great Turan”.

**The suffering of the Assyrians is largely forgotten internationally and not recognized as genocide**

The genocidal quality of the murderous campaigns against not only the Armenians, but also the Assyrians is obvious. Historians who realize that the Young Turks’ population and extermination policies have to be analyzed together and understood as an entity are therefore often tempted to speak of a “Christian genocide.” The destruction of these two Christian communities was one aspect of the “homogenizing” process.

The Assyrian genocide occurred in the same circumstances as the Armenian genocide. It was part of the same process, taking place in the same locations and at the same time. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Assyrian people in the Ottoman Empire amounted to about one million<sup>1</sup> with common language, culture and national traditions. They were concentrated in the modern territory of Turkey, Iran, and Iraq. There were predominately large communities located in the lands near Hakkari Mountains of province of Van, such as the provinces of Diarbekir, Erzerum, Kharberd and Bitlis, also the regions of Urmia in Iran, Mosul—in Iraq, and the north–western regions of Syria.

Like other Christians living in the empire, Assyrians were treated as second–class citizens. Slavery was a common fate of Ottoman Christians. Many Assyrians studied in Turkish educational institutions, but getting the diplomas declined public positions of authority. They did not have even an opportunity to economically develop their regions. Turkish authorities dissolved the Assyrians among other nations in order to deprive them of the possibility of joining and putting up a united front. An active public policy was conducted to arouse national and religious animosity among the nations inhabiting those territories. Certainly, this kind of distribution of Assyrian people would make the process of their integration quite difficult, and this is what Turkish authorities were seeking.

<sup>1</sup> Sahak Mesrop, Hayun Taretsuyts [Armenian Calendar] (Constantinople, 1913), pp. 67–68.

The history of the Ottoman Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly of its last decade, is one of increasing internal weakness and deterioration in the machinery of Government and of sustained external pressure by the Great Powers, which ultimately led to the dissolution of the Empire. All the political, military and spiritual power belonged to the Turks which only served toward their interests. Under such circumstances, the Turks only managed to maintain the authority by violence. It was not accidental that the policy of slaughters, which scope increased in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and rose to the level of state policy, presented the most critical feature of the internal political and national life of the Ottoman Empire and its principal weapon in solving the national problems. Hence, the history of the Ottoman Empire of this period appears as infinite series of slaughters, tortures and demeaning the dignity of the Armenians and Assyrians.

During the Hamidian phase of Christian massacres the entire preparatory work was carried out not by the leadership of the ruling party, but in the depths of the supreme body of the state. It is known that sultan Abdul Hamid II exercised one-man rule and the important political decisions were made by him alone. He was in full concord with the bloodthirsty sultan. The tyranny of Abdul Hamid introduced a new element in the social dynamic of the Ottoman system. Victimization through atrocities was adopted as a method of government, as an instrument of repression, and as an acceptable policy in the treatment of a subject population. The Austria-Hungarian Ambassador to Constantinople defined it as “a crusade of Muslims against Christians”.<sup>1</sup>

The apex of the Assyrian massacres organized by the Ottoman Empire was the slaughters of 1895–1896, perpetrated against the unarmed people in the peacetime. Its implementation ended in mass killings of the Assyrian population of the Ottoman Empire, which victims totaled 55 thousand.<sup>2</sup>

The genocidal nature of sultan Abdul Hamid’s anti-Christians, in this case anti-Assyrian policy beyond any doubt. On June 2, 1895 “The New York Times” wrote about it: “We have the unanimous verdict of the native Christians of Turkey: Armenians, Assyrians, Greeks, that the Sultan is

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<sup>1</sup> Akcam Taner, *Insan Haklari ve Ermeni Sorunu: Ittihat ve Terakki'den Kurtulus Savasi'na* (Ankara, 2002), s. 93.

<sup>2</sup> Naayem Joseph, *Shall This Nation Die?* (New York: Chaldean Rescue, 1921), p. 274.

personally responsible, not only because he gave direct orders that men, women, and children should be tortured, outraged, and murdered, but because for years past he has persistently followed a course that would infallibly end in just such a condition of things as the present”<sup>1</sup>

The massacres of the Assyrians, genocidal by nature were continuing in every region of the Ottoman Empire, where mass slaughters reached unprecedented levels. The Assyrian villages and towns were sacked by organized mobs or by Kurdish bands. Tens of thousands were driven from their homes. About 100 thousand Assyrian population of 245 villages forcibly converted to Islam.<sup>2</sup> Their property was plundered. Thousands of Assyrian women and girls were forced into Turkish and Kurdish harems. The massacres were perpetrated as barbarously as possible regardless of gender or age. Thus, atrocity became policy.

So, the Ottoman Empire entered the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a backward dictatorial state, which organized mass massacres of the diverse nations living in the Empire. The crisis embracing the political, economic and social spheres still deepened. Western European countries wanted to get benefits interfering in Ottoman Empire’s internal affairs. Turks, certainly, realized they were weakening gradually and the West becoming stronger by every day. The eyes of some European countries were cast Ottoman Empire with the intention how to find foothold or strengthen their position in the Middle East. They also tried to attract the Assyrians to their side in order to use them for pursuing their own political goals in these regions. To reach this goal they used every means, including religious activists. The European missionaries started pouring the regions where the Assyrians lived as a Christian community among Muslim majority.

After the Young Turks’ revolution the people of the Empire hoped it was the dawning of new age in the history of their country. But as appeared shortly after, the Young Turks were ardent nationalists, who continued the policy of oppressions and slaughters, carried out prior to them by sultans. They were advocates of the idea of assimilation of

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<sup>1</sup> Armenians at the Twilight of the Ottoman Era, Compiled and edited by V. Mekhitarian and Rev. V. Ohanian, News Reports from the International Press, V. I, The New York Times 1890–1914 (Genocide Documentation and Research Center, 2011), p. 184.

<sup>2</sup> Sargizov Lev, *Druzhiba idushchaya iz glubini vekov (Assirytsi v Armenii)* [A Friendship Coming from the Ancient Times (The Assyrians in Armenia)] (Atra, # 4, St. Petersburg, 1992), p. 71.

all the nations of the Empire to create a “pure” Turkish nation, never stopping even before mass slaughters in order to execute that idea.

Thus, people changed, new rulers came, but the policy persisted. The Young Turks intended to transform the pluralistic Ottoman

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society. The ambitions of the Young Turks, however, exceeded these primary goals.

According to Prof. Taner Akcam, the CUP had prior to WWI “formulated a policy that they began to execute in the Aegean region against Greeks and, during the war years, expanded to include the Assyrians, and especially the Armenians, a policy that eventually became genocidal...Detailed reports were prepared outlining the elimination of the Christian population.”<sup>1</sup>

During one of the secret meetings the Young Turkish ideologist Dr. Nazim said: “... The massacre is necessary. I want Turks and only Turks to live on this soil and to be in full possession of it. The hell with all the non-Turkish elements, no matter what their nationality or religion is!”<sup>2</sup> According to Dr. Johannes Lepsius, the Young Turk party’s program stated: “Sooner or later all the nations under the Turkish control will be turned into Turks. It is clear that they will not covert voluntarily and we will have to use force”.<sup>3</sup>

The Young Turks would not wait for circumstances to define their policy. They would seek the opportunity to proceed with their plans. That occasion offered itself sooner than expected in 1914, when Europe plunged into World War I, and the Young Turk triumvirate secretly and eagerly brought their country into the world war.

During a talk with Dr. Mordtmann, an employee of the German Embassy, Turkish minister of interior Talaat Pasha said that, exploiting the opportunity of martial law, the Turkish government would eventually get rid of its internal enemies—the Christians—without fear

<sup>1</sup> Akcam Taner, *The Ottoman Documents and the Genocidal Policies of the Committee for Union and Progress (Ittihat ve Terakki) Toward the Armenians in 1915* (Genocide Studies and Prevention, Volume 1, no. 2, 2006), pp. 133–134.

<sup>2</sup> Rifat Mevlan Zade, *Osmanyan heghapokhutyun mut tsalkere ev Ittihatı hayajinj tsragrere*, [The Obscure Folds of the Ottoman Revolution and the Ittihad’s Plans for Extermination of the Armenians] (Yerevan: “KPH”, 1990), pp. 98–99.

<sup>3</sup> Lepsius Johannes, *Bericht über die Lage des Armenischer Volkes in Türkei* (Potsdam: Tempelverlag, 1916), p. 220

of foreign diplomatic intervention.<sup>1</sup> Dr. Behaeddin Shakir, Executive Committee member told almost the same thing: "...We are in war, there is no danger of European intervention; the world press cannot protest, and even if they do, it will not bring any results. In the future the present problem will have become a matter of fact, the voices will fade and no one will dare to raise a voice of protest. We must take full advantage of these delicate circumstances, since they will not present themselves again..."<sup>2</sup>

On October 29, 1914 the Ottoman Empire announced the war against the Allies. While the world was busy taking sides in the war, the British and the Russians took advantage of the situation to win the Assyrian nation towards the Allies. Some Assyrian leaders were not in favor of rising against the Ottoman Empire, but the Turkish attitude against the Christians of the Empire made Assyrians submit to the suggestion offered by Allies to save the total elimination of their race. With support of majority of Assyrian leaders Patriarch Mar-Shimoun Benjamin declared siding with the Allies.

The Assyrians were trying to keep relationship with both England and Russia. It was strategically important for the British to gain the assistance of the Assyrians. This occurred by allowing the persecuted Assyrians their own homeland. Britain wanted to make sure that the Mosul land would be part of the newly-colonized Iraq instead of the future state of Turkey.

Russia unlike Britain had neither made great political efforts nor to had promised an Independent Assyrian State in order to win the support of the Assyrians. For the Assyrians, Russia, as well being the most credible power in the region was a state that might bring them the

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best standard of living. Just a little earlier before Turkey entered to war, the Assyrian patriarch predicting his people upcoming catastrophe wrote a letter to the Russian authorities asking for weapons to

<sup>1</sup> Lepsius Johannes, Deutschland und Armenien 1914–1918: Sammlung diplomatischer Aktenstücke, Herausgegeben und Eingeleitet (Potsdam: Tempelverlag, 1919), p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> Levon Mesrob, Verabrogner, Der Zor (Paris, 1955), p. 258.

defend his people and sent it with a messenger. The messenger was intercepted by Turkish intelligence and sent to Constantinople for further instructions. In future, this gave the Turks an excuse to start whatever they had in mind. Turkish authorities circulated false rumors as if Russia armed Assyrians against Kurds. The Turkish soldiers and Kurdish bands began attacking and killing the Assyrian people and looting their villages.

Years before the WWI and even the Young Turk's Revolution, in October of 1906, R. Termen, Russian vice-consul in the province of Van received the Russian government's order to meet with the Assyrian Patriarch Mar-Shimoun Benjamin. The main goal of this meeting was to make a pact with Assyrians providing for cooperation in case of war with Turkey. During that meeting Assyrian patriarch agreed to help Russians, and informed vice-consul that "because of the crisis in the Empire discontent was growing inside his community day by day, and he was in fear one day it could end with huge disaster."<sup>1</sup>

As soon as war began in August 1914, the Turkish government sent a message to the Assyrian Patriarch, desiring that the Assyrians should at very least remain neutral to the Ottoman entry into the war. In return it promised to listen to the complaints of the Assyrians in the region and to institute reforms in all areas. The Assyrians would be given weapons, the new schools, the medical clinics would be opened, tribes' leaders and clergy would be paid salaries from the Ottoman

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government. From the strategic point of view, the mountainous parts of Hakkari where the Assyrians lived were important to the Ottoman government. This

was because Iran, despite having declared its neutrality in WWI, could be used by Russia from the north and Britain from the south as a route to attack Ottoman forces. It was especially important to win over the Assyrians to the Ottoman side since the Armenians were already in revolt. Of course, the promises of Turkish authorities to Assyrians were not kept.

During the World War I, the Assyrians who joined the war on the side of Russia certainly gave a good advantage to the Russian units in

<sup>1</sup> Hambaryan Azat, Azatagrakan sharzhumnere Arevmtyan Hayastanum (1898–1908) [The Liberation Movements in Western Armenia (1898–1908)] (Yerevan, 1999), p. 458.

the area. With the Russian advance into eastern Anatolia, Armenian units within the Russian army were of great importance. Similarly, armed Assyrian units, who knew the area well, were better adapted to the environmental conditions than Russians. The Assyrian units were able to obtain support from local people and, in the areas in which they were located, served as guides and advance guards for the Russian army.

**Slaughters of Assyrians took place not only close to the front line, but also in distant places.**

According to Dr. Tessa Hofmann, the main difference in the treatment of the Aramaic-speaking Christians (*Assyrians*–A. Kh.) can be described in the following ways: They fell victim predominantly to direct and massive killings by the Ottoman forces and their Kurdish auxiliaries in two states: the Ottoman Empire and northwest Iran, which the Ottomans occupied twice, in 1914 and 1918.<sup>1</sup>

It is truth! The Assyrians endured massacres not only inside the Ottoman realm but on its periphery as well. Iran became a battleground on which acts of mass violence were perpetrated against these undesirable elements. The Assyrians of the region of Urmia were among the most unfortunate. Already in September 1914 more than 30 Armenian and Assyrian villages were scorched out.<sup>2</sup>

On October 3, 1914, Russian vice-Consul in Urmia Vedenski along with the local governor visited Assyrian villages which were already ruined by Kurds, Turks and Iranian rabble. He wrote: “The consequences of jihad are everywhere. In one village I saw burnt corpses of Assyrians with big sharp stakes in their bellies. The Assyrian houses are burnt and destroyed. The fire is still burning in the neighboring villages”.<sup>3</sup>

Success of Russian troops at the Caucasian front in 1915 “made” the Young Turks undertake steps to get rid of the “interfering” non-Turkish population. Slaughters of Assyrians took place not only close

<sup>1</sup> Hofmann Tessa, *The Genocide against the Christians in the Late Ottoman Period, 1912–1922, The Asia Minor Catastrophe and the Ottoman Greek Genocide*, ed. By George N. Shirinian (The Asia Minor and Pontos Hellenic Research Center, Inc., Bloomingdale, IL, 2012), p. 60.

<sup>2</sup> Khosroeva Anahit, *The Assyrian Genocide in the Ottoman Empire and Adjacent Territories, The Armenian Genocide: Cultural and Ethical Legacies*, Edited by Richard G. Hovannisian (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2nd printing, 2008), p. 271.

<sup>3</sup> Sargizov Lev, *Assirytsi stran Blizhnego i Srednego Vostoka [The Assyrians of the Near and Middle East]* (Yerevan, 1979), p. 25–26.



to the front line, but also in distant places.

The unexpected retreat of the Russian army from Urmia in January 1915 had further tragic consequences for Assyrians living in Iran. Turkish troops along with Kurdish detachments organized mass slaughter of the Assyrian population. Only 25,000 people managed to escape death and take refuge in Transcaucasia.<sup>1</sup>

Turks, furious about the occupation of Dilman by the Russian army in April 1915, brutally murdered the populations of the 20 neighboring Assyrian villages.<sup>2</sup> Several hundred Assyrian women were undressed and brought out to the central street. They were given an hour to decide whether they would change their religion or be killed. According to an eyewitness the blood of those killed women was flowing down from the central street of Dilman<sup>3</sup>.

The manner in which the Assyrian slaughters and massacres were organized and implemented serves as irrefutable evidence

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of the Turkish government’s decision to eliminate a people whose nationalism and Christian identity ran contrary to the Young Turks’ own ethnic and religious chauvinism.

The governor of Diarbekir, Reshid Bey, directed some of the earliest of the Christian exterminations in his region. The Assyrians of the Mardin, Midiat, Urfa and Jezire regions were especially victimized. Most brutal slaughters of tens of thousands Assyrians were perpetrated here. The priest of the local Chaldean Assyrians, Joseph Naayem, reported that the “massacres in this region had taken place since April 8, 1915. The culprits gathered men over 16 years of age, beat, tortured, killed them, and afterwards put turbans on their heads and photographed them in order to prove to the world that

<sup>1</sup> Yohannan Abraham, *The Death of a Nation* (New York and London: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1916), p. 120.

<sup>2</sup> Khosroeva Anahit, *Asorineri tseghaspanutiune Osmanian Turkiaum ev harakic tiurkabnak vairerum (XIX dari verj–XX dari arajin qarord)* [The Assyrian Genocide in the Ottoman Turkey and Adjacent Turkish Territories (late 19th–first quarter of the 20th century)] (Yerevan: Institute of History, National Academy of Sciences, 2004), p. 82.

<sup>3</sup> Naayem J., *Shall This Nation Die?* p. 288.

Christians oppressed Muslims”.<sup>1</sup>

The Turkish armed forces slaughtered Assyrians in the region of Tur–Abdin beginning on June 5, 1915, where 10,000 Assyrians were murdered.<sup>2</sup> One document reads: “The skulls of small children were smashed with rocks; the bodies of girls and women, who resisted rape or conversion to Islam, were chopped into pieces; men were mostly beheaded, or thrown into the nearby river; the clergy, monks and nuns were skinned or burnt alive.”<sup>3</sup>

On June 30, 1915, the American consul in Kharberd Leslie A. Davis wrote to US Ambassador Henry Morgenthau, that the Turks have found another way of exterminating the Christians–forced emigration. “On Saturday, June 28, it was publicly announced that all the Armenians and Assyrians were to leave after five day.”<sup>4</sup>

In the provinces of Diarbekir and Bitlis the Assyrians mainly were deported together with the Armenian population.

So, as we could see, once the Christian society was completely paralyzed, the Young Turks’

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government issued the deportation edicts. Throughout the spring and summer of 1915, across the length and breadth of the Ottoman Empire, the Assyrians were ordered to prepare themselves for removal from their homes. Their destination was unknown. With only few days’ notice in most places the entire villages and towns were deported. Thousands upon thousands were set upon the roads, forced to abandon homes and belongings. Within days and weeks, travel for the deportees turned into a test of physical strength and of the will to survive. Whole families, young and old, children and women, were thrown into the open, to walk by day, and sleep on the ground by night. Families began to wither from exhaustion. This was the slowest way to die. Weakening day by day, with food recourses running out, tens of thousands perished silently as their bodies were reduced to skin and bones. Countless people died of thirst. Some

<sup>1</sup> Alichoran Joseph, *Du génocide à la Diaspora: Les Assyro–Chaldéens au XX siècle* (Paris: Revue Istina, 1994), p. 370.

<sup>2</sup> Hovhannisian Nicolay, *The Armenian Genocide* (Yerevan: Zangak 97, 2005), p. 51.

<sup>3</sup> Documentation on the Genocide Against the Assyrian–Sryoye–Chaldean–Arameic People (Seyfo) (Frankfurt, 1999), p. 7,

<sup>4</sup> Davis A. Leslie, *The Slaughterhouse Province. An American Diplomat’s Report on the Armenian Genocide, 1915–1917* (New Rochelle, NY: Aristide D. Caratzas, 1989), pp. 143–144.

of the young girls were taken as servant girls; others were seized as unwilling brides.

The governor of Van Jevdet Bey had a “butcher” regiment of 8,000 soldiers that carried out unprecedented massacres. Here the genocide of the Assyrians was perpetrated with unspeakable brutality. All possible methods of killing were used: shooting, stabbing, stoning, crushing, throat cutting, throwing off of roofs, drowning, and decapitation.

In June 1915, the armies of Jevdet Bey and general Halil Bey organized a general massacre in the vilayet of Bitlis which lasted throughout the month. The Assyrians were mercilessly killed in their houses and on the streets.

In November, 1916 the New York Times published an article by Dr. William Rockwell titled “The Total Number of Armenian and Assyrian Dead”, in which the author noted: “The Armenians are not the only unfortunates; the Assyrians also have been decimated. Great numbers have perished, but no one knows how many”.<sup>5</sup> Another American periodical, the “Atlantic Monthly” wrote: “Within six months they (*Young Turks*–A. Kh.) succeeded in doing what the Old Turks were unable to accomplish in six centuries. ...Thousands of Nestorians and Syrians (*Assyrians*–A. Kh) vanished from the face of the earth”.<sup>6</sup>

The Assyrians themselves have estimated that they lost 2/3s of their people during World War I.

The systematic manner in which the slaughters of Assyrians was conducted, along with the documented intentions of Turkish government planned and, to a great extent, succeeded in fulfilling a policy of genocide toward the Assyrians. WWI was an ideal context in which Turkey could accomplish this goal: the war not only absorbed the recourses and focus of the world’s major powers, but it also created a morally ambiguous atmosphere where brutality and death on a massive scale could be justified or trivialized. The Assyrians whose Christian identity and cultural durability were perceived by Turkish nationalists to be undesirable obstacles to the realization of a Pan-Turkic nation–found themselves bearers of a misfortune with reverberations lasting to this very day.

The criminal policy of Sultan Abdul Hamid II and the Young Turks

<sup>5</sup> Kloian D. Richard, *The Armenian Genocide: News Accounts from the American Press (1915–1922)* (Richmond, CA: ACC Books, 1985), pp.188–189.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

against the Assyrians permits us to conclude that at the end of the 19th–early 20th century a real genocide was implemented according to the criteria of international law. As a consequence of actions taken by the Ottoman Turks with their intention of race purification, today the Assyrians have been forced to live as a stateless people in the Diaspora. They hope that countries such as Turkey harboring such a past will be compelled to evaluate their past with objectivity and humanitarianism, so that future evils may be forestalled. It is the moral responsibility of the international community to recognize this historical injustice. By now, the Assyrian Genocide in the Ottoman Empire officially has been recognized by the International Association of Genocide Scholars in 2007 and by the Swedish Parliament in 2010.