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THE ASSYRIAN GENOCIDE IN THE OTTOMAN TURKEY

(Late 19th early 20th century)

The first genocide of the 20th century which took place almost a century ago was the Armenian Genocide in the Ottoman Turkey. This Genocide is presently understood by much of the world to have been the climax of a long history of oppression and violence for a group that had suffered for centuries as a Christian minority at the hands of great powers, most notably the Turks. Less recognized is the fact that the Assyrians have shared a similar history. It is a history of a dispersed, Christian group with a prolonged experience of marginalization by foreign rule, particularly in the Ottoman Turkey. This marginalization culminated in the same genocide that befell the Armenians in World War I.

Who were the Assyrians in the Ottoman Empire? The Assyrians are one of the most ancient people of the world, whose ancestors stood at the cradle of the early civilization and made great contributions to the development of world culture. After the fall of their Kingdom (7th century B.C.), the Assyrians continued to live on their historic land in ancient Bethnahrin, which occupies the territory between the Persian Gulf, the Mediterranean Sea, Lake Urmia, and the Mesopotamian deserts. At the end of the 19th century, they inhabited the eastern regions of the Ottoman Empire: in six provinces of Western Armenia, as well as in the territories of Urmia

in Iran, Mosul in Iraq, and northwestern regions of Syria. The sources show the Assyrians living in Turkish-controlled and adjacent territories during Ottoman times to be about one million.¹ This figure includes those peoples who possessed a common language, culture, national customs, and leadership under the Patriarch Mar-Shimoun Benyamin.

What was the cause of the Assyrian genocide and was it possible to avoid it? In order to understand this we need to have some knowledge about the era of the late Ottoman Empire.

At the end of the 19th century the Ottoman Empire was a multinational state, in which along with Turks lived Arabs, Armenians, Assyrians, Greeks, Bulgarians, Jews, Kurds, and other nations. 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 20th 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 Assyrians, Armenians, and Greeks.

In 1876, Sultan Abdul Hamid II rose to the Ottoman throne, who governed with iron fist for 30 add years, up until 1909. Everyone was kept in fear and horror: his advocates and opponents, all the peoples, even the Turks. As the best method to settle the problems facing the Empire, he introduced individual and mass murders into the Ottoman political “culture”. A pivotal theme of sultan’s external and internal policies was Pan-Islam, which sought a religiously homogenous empire joining with Turkey all the neighboring territories populated with Muslims.

To this end, the nationalist aspirations of non-Muslim elements in these regions were suppressed.

The massacres of Assyrians began in October 1895 in Diyarbakir. The Assyrian Church of the Holy Mother of God gave refuge to many Assyrians, Armenians, and Greeks. Here a revealing exchange occurred when several Assyrians suggested to their priest that the Armenian refugees be expelled from the building so as not to aggravate Turkish sentiment. The Assyrian priest replied: "The people who Cross themselves will stay in church to the end. Should we be killed, we will be killed together".² In the end, 119 villages in Diyarbakir were scorched and ruined; 6,000 Christian families - about 30,000 people were killed.³

In October 1895, the Turkish army along with the Kurdish Hamidiye regiments entered Urfa and killed 13,000 Assyrians.⁴

In early 1896 the Turkish forces destroyed 12 Assyrian villages, raped the women, and robbed everything: sheep, cows, and wheat among other assets. All possessions, such as gold, silver, money were confiscated. Thousands of Assyrian men, women, children, and old people were brutally assassinated.

The massacres of the Assyrians, genocidal by nature were continuing in every region of the Ottoman Empire, where mass slaughters reached unprecedented levels. Sultan Abdul Hamid's anti-Christian pogroms had disastrous consequences for Assyrian population as up to 55,000 people were killed.⁵ About 100,000 Assyrians from 245 Christian villages were Islamized and countless young girls and women were forced into Turkish harems.⁶ While these numbers set a precedent in the extent of Turkish brutality toward its minority groups, World War I would provide the Young Turks with the opportunity to carry out its devastating Pan-Turkic dreams on a much grander scale.

The Young Turks' decision to enter World War I hinged on their belief that participation in the war will considerably raise Turkey's authority, satisfy their vanity and dignity. 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 of foreign diplomatic intervention.⁷ The ensuing events would bear out this sentiment, as thousands of Assyrians, Armenians, and Greeks fell victim to the Turkish genocide while the world's great powers remained silent. During one of the secret meetings the Young Turkish ideologist Dr. Nazim said: "The massacre is necessary. All the non-Turkish elements, whatever nation they belong to, should be exterminated".⁸

Ronald Stafford, an Englishman who was the former administrative inspector of Iraq's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, fairly observed: "It would be a great progress for Turks if they could show that regardless of what happened to the Armenians, another Christian community in Turkey [Assyrians] is quite satisfied with its fortune".⁹

The manner in which the massacres were organized and implemented serves as irrefutable evidence 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 province of Diyarbakir, Reshid Bey, directed some of the earliest of these exterminations in his region. The priest of the local Chaldean Assyrians, Joseph Naayem, reported that massacres 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 Christians oppressed Muslims.¹⁰

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. It is absolutely impossible to read the multiple trustworthy documents describing those atrocities and remain apathetic or indifferent.

Turkish armed forces slaughtered Assyrians in the region of Tur-Abdin beginning on June 5, 1915, where 10,000 Assyrians were murdered.¹¹ 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.”¹²

Assyrians also suffered in the province of Van, where the governor Jevdet Bey had a “butcher” regiment of 8,000 men that carried out unprecedented massacres. Sixty Assyrian villages in Van had been subjected to atrocities. One striking example was the terrible slaughter in the Hakkari region in spring 1915, where Turks murdered approximately 60,000 Assyrians.¹³ The village of Kochanis, which was the residence of the Assyrian Patriarch, was completely destroyed.

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

On June 30, 1915, the American consul in Kharberd Leslie Davis wrote to Henry Morgenthau, the American ambassador in Constantinople, that the Turks had found another way of exterminating the Christians - forced emigration. “...It was publicly announced that all the

Armenians and Syrians [Assyrians] were to leave ...”.¹⁴ This was the way in which the deportations and massacres began in most regions of the Ottoman Turkey.¹⁵

Assyrians endured massacres not only inside the Ottoman realm but on its periphery as well. The destruction of Assyrian villages accompanied German and Turkish military operations in Iran, which the two allies intended to use as a corridor to the oil regions of Baku and thereafter to invade Central Asia. Iran thus became a battleground on which acts of mass violence were perpetrated against undesirable elements. The Assyrians of the Urmia region were among the most unfortunate elements. In September 1914, more than 30 Armenian and Assyrian villages were burned.

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.¹⁶

In January 1915, a platoon headed by Kachali Khan encircled and destroyed the largest and richest Assyrian village in Urmia – Gulpashan - where 300 Assyrian families (2,500 people) lived. All but a couple of hundred Assyrians were killed. In the village of Khosrova the Assyrian population which included refugees from neighboring villages (about 7,000 people) was gathered and slaughtered. In the village of Haftvan 750 people were beheaded, and later 5,000 Assyrian women were taken to Turkish and Kurdish harems. In the village of Kanachar 200 people were burnt alive. Turks, furious about the occupation of Dilman by the Russian army in April 1915, murdered the populations of the 20 neighboring Assyrian villages.¹⁷

The painful exodus from Urmia to Mesopotamia began and was accompanied by severe

human losses. An English eyewitness noted: “I saw the picture of the tragic flight of an outcast nation. I speak about the Assyrians”.¹⁸ Ronald Stafford wrote that “the Assyrians’ exodus is one of the most tragic pages of the military history. More than 17,000 Assyrians died on that way.”¹⁹

In November, 1916 the *New York Times* published an article by Dr. William W. Rockwell titled “The Total Number of Armenian and Syrian Dead”, in which the author noted: “The Armenians are not the only unfortunates; the Syrians [Assyrians] also have been decimated. ...Great numbers have perished, but no one knows how many”.²⁰ Another American periodical, the *Atlantic Monthly* wrote: “Within six months they [Young Turks] succeeded in doing what the Old Turks were unable to accomplish in six centuries. ...Thousands of Nestorians and Syrians [Assyrians] have vanished from the face of the earth”.²¹

The systematic manner in which the massacres of Assyrians was conducted, along with the documented intentions of Turkish leaders and sheer number of individuals murdered, demonstrate that the Turkish government planned and, to a great extent, succeeded in fulfilling a policy of genocide toward the Assyrian people. World War I was an ideal context in which Turkey could accomplish this goal: the war not only absorbed the resources 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.

Thus, a real genocide toward the Assyrians was implemented according to the criteria of international law. With the criminal connivance of the world’s major powers and taking the

opportunity presented by the martial law, Turkey committed the gravest crime against humanity - *genocide*. The criminal policy of Sultan Abdul Hamid II and the Young Turks against Assyrians permits to conclude that at the end of the 19th - early 20th century, the Ottoman state developed into a genocidal state and became the cradle of genocide. Indeed, the victims of this genocide and their ethnic progeny continue to struggle with its reality which still denied by the Turkish government today.

The Assyrian Genocide officially has been recognized by the International Association of Genocide Scholars in 2007 and by the Swedish Parliament in 2010.

Notes

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4. *Asuri-Süryani-Keldani halkinin 1915 soykirim (SEYFO) dosyasi, Bethnahrin yurtsever devrimci örgütü Asuri-Süryani halkina yönelik 1915, Soykirim ve katliamlari arastirma komisyonu* [The Genocide File (SEYFO) of the Assyrian-Syriac-Chaldean People: Bethnahrin, the Patriotic Revolutionary Organization, the Investigation Commission for the Genocide and the Massacres of 1915 against Assyrian-Syriac People] (Frankfurt, 1999), p. 55.
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7. Johannes Lepsius, *Deutschland und Armenien 1914-1918: Sammlung diplomatischer Aktenstücke* (Potsdam: Der Tempelverlag, 1919), p. 26.
8. Mevlan Zade Rifat, *Osmanyanyan heghapokhutyan mut tsalkere ev Ittihati hayajinj tsragrere* [The Obscure Folds of the Ottoman Revolution and the Ittihad's Plans for the Extermination of the Armenians] (Yerevan: "KPH", 1990), pp. 98-99.

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14. Leslie A. Davis, *The Slaughterhouse Province. An American Diplomat's Report on the Armenian Genocide, 1915-1917* (New Rochelle, NY: Aristide D. Caratzas, 1989), pp. 143-144.
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17. Anahit Khosroeva, *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), pp. 80-82.
18. Ibid., p. 77.
19. Ronald S. Stafford, *The Tragedy of the Assyrians*, pp. 33-34.
20. Richard D. Kloian, *The Armenian Genocide: News Accounts from the American Press (1915-1922)* (Richmond, CA: ACC Books, 1985), pp.188-189.
21. Ibid., p. 193.