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Assyrian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey and Adjacent Turkish Territories **By Anahit Khosroeva**

*This is an excerpt from the book **Assyrian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey and Adjacent Territories**, by Anahit Khosroeva.*

Throughout the history of the world, namely the 20th century, there have been numerous wars and much genocide to go along with them. So, the 20th century has entered into history as a century of genocides. In the history of mankind it had never occurred before that so many nations be subjected to physical extermination or the danger of it. The reality of the genocide has been one of the worst acts throughout the history of mankind.

The word "genocide" originally comes from the combination of the ancient Greek word "genos", meaning people or folk, and the Latin word "caedere", meaning slaughtering or destroying. The term "genocide" first appeared in scientific literature and political lexicon in 1944, with the right of authorship pertaining to Raphael Lemkin, a Polish lawyer of Jewish descent. This invention of Lemkin's is mainly due to two tragedies of the 20th century : the genocide of the Armenians in the Ottoman Turkey during World War I, and the holocaust of Jews in Fascist Germany during World War II. As Lemkin has truly noticed, those were not the ordinary carnages or slaughters, but, qualitatively, a new phenomenon, which required a fundamentally new approach and assessment, and a new scientific definition. As a term and definition of crime, genocide was accepted by various international organizations, and first and foremost - by the United Nations, the most authoritative international body of today. On December 9, 1948 the General Assembly of UN adopted the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, which is an international document of historical significance.

The International Convention of the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide on December 9, 1948 set the United Nations definition of genocide

General Assembly Resolution 260A (III) Article 2

In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such :

1. Killing members of the group
2. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group
3. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part
4. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group
5. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group

Today it is very well-known sad fact that the first genocide of the history, which took place ninety two years ago was the Armenian Genocide in the Ottoman Turkey. But during the same period together with Armenians, some non-Turkish nations were subjected to or faced the risk of genocide, also. Let's particularly mention the Assyrians. Who are they ?

The Assyrians are one of the most ancient nation of the world, whose ancestors stood at the cradle of the world civilization and made a great contribution to the development of world culture. More than two and a half thousand years have passed since the fall of the Assyrian kingdom (605 B.C.). The descendants of Assyrians, continuing to live on their historical land in ancient Betnahrain, which occupies the territory between the Persian Gulf, the Mediterranean Sea, Lake Urmia and the deserts of Mesopotamia, were consistently oppressed by Persians, Arabs, Mongols, Ottoman Turks and Kurds. Now this long-suffering people have refuged on the boundaries of Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria - on a limited territory of the Upper Mesopotamia.

During their centuries-old history the Assyrian nation passed a severe way of struggle for existence and went through quite a few fateful moments. In the second half of the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th century they were subjected to the oppressions carried out by Turkish authorities and fought against the Ottoman dictatorship. But the terrible ordeals that this nation underwent during World War I were unprecedented throughout the history of mankind. In 1914-1918, during World War I unleashed by the Great Powers, the traditional Turkish destructive policy reached its zenith. The Assyrians subjected to the severe Turkish yoke were murdered and died on the ways of deportation in the deserts of the Middle East.

What were the causes 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. Let's see why and how the genocide of the Assyrians happened in this area ?

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

spiritual power belonged to the Turks and only served toward their interests. Under the 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 the principal weapon in solving the national problems. Hence, the history of the Ottoman Empire of the 19th and early 20th centuries appears an infinite series of slaughters, tortures and demeaning the dignity of the Armenians, Assyrians, Greeks and the other non-Turkish peoples of the Empire.

At the end of the 19th century a number of Assyrian villages could be found in the Eastern parts of the Ottoman Turkey : in the Hakkari sanjak of the vilayet (region) of Van, in the vilayets of Erzerum, Diyarbekir, Bitlis, Kharberd (Harput) and Sebastia (Sivas) in Western Armenia, as well as on the territory of Lake Urmia in Iran, Mosul in Iraq and in the north-western regions of Syria. More than one million Assyrians with common language, culture and national traditions lived there. By their social and religious characteristics they were divided into several groups. In terms of religion Assyrians were divided into Nestorians, Chaldeans, Jacobites and Orthodox believers. Socially they were divided into two large castes : Ashirets (independent tribes) and Rayas (the subordinate people), who were mainly engaged in farming and cattle breeding. Ashirets paid only nominal taxes to the Turkish government, but Rayas constantly suffered from its pillages and lived in extremely poor conditions : they were almost starving, exposed to Kurdish forays and often were forced to serve in the Turkish army.

Many Assyrians studied in Turkish educational institutions, but getting the corresponding certificates could not fill public positions. They did not even have 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. Eventually, as the subsequent historical events showed, the Assyrians suffered the same cruel fate as the Armenians and other minorities living under the control of the Ottoman Turkey.

In 1876, Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1842-1918) rose to the Ottoman throne, who governed with iron hand for 33 years, up until 1909. He kept in fear and horror everyone, both his advocates and opponents, all the peoples, even the Turks. The years of his reign went down in the history of the Ottoman Empire as years of "zulum" - horror and autocratic dictatorship. He introduced individual and mass murders into the Ottoman political "culture", as the best method to settle the problems the Empire faced. Mass murders of the non-Turkish peoples in the Empire a component of the new political "culture" by Abdul Hamid. It is known that the pivotal idea of Abdul Hamid's external and internal policies was Pan-Islamism, which aimed at joining together around Turkey all the countries and territories populated with Mohammedans, by no means excepting the oppressions of non-Turkish nations and repression of national liberation movements. Military and political authorities, Kurdish Hamidiye cavalry units, and Muslim mobs all participated in the crime. In this period along with hundreds of thousands of Armenians, tens of thousands of Assyrians also fell a victim to the mass slaughters, which were organized based upon this very political intentions.

In October 1895 the mass massacres of Assyrians started in Diyarbekir and, afterwards, spread everywhere in the Empire. The Assyrian slaughters reached unprecedented levels : horrible events happened in many places, during which a great number of people emigrated, were forcedly converted to Islam or murdered. About 100 thousand Assyrians from 245 Christian villages were Islamized². Thousands of Assyrian young girls and women were forced into Turkish and Kurdish harems.

On October 20, 1895 in Amid (Diyarbekir) slaughters of Christians were perpetrated by Turkish and Kurdish rabble. The Assyrian Church of The Blessed Virgin gave refuge to many Christians : Assyrians, Armenians, and Greeks. Fortunately, this church was not exposed to aggressions which can hardly be said about the Assyrian villages most of which were ruined and plundered by Kurds. During those dire days several Assyrians went to their clerical leader suggesting making Armenians go out of The Blessed Virgin Church in order not to draw down Turk's anger. In response to this request the Assyrian priest answered to his people : "The people who cross themselves will stay in church to the end. Should we be killed, we will be killed together"³. 119 villages in Diyarbekir region were scorched out and ruined. 6 thousand Christian families, about 30 thousand people were killed⁴.

The massacres of the Assyrians were continuing in every region of the Ottoman Empire. At the end of the 19th century as a result of the massacres organized by Sultan Abdul Hamid II in the Ottoman Empire along with 300 thousand Armenians 55 thousand Assyrians also fell a victim to the Turkish dictatorship⁵. During the Armenian slaughters these brutalities perpetrated towards the Assyrians added new pages to the bloody history of the Ottoman Empire. These were the total massacres, genocidal by nature. In fact the 19th century and especially the dreadful events of its last decade had baneful consequences for the Assyrians in the Ottoman Empire paving the way for even greater disasters.

So, the Ottoman Empire entered the 20th century as a backward dictatorial state, which organized mass slaughters of the nations inhabiting the Empire. The crisis, which involved the political, economic and social systems, still deepened. The massacres exacerbated the situation and bared the vices of the Ottoman state. In the eyes of all the peoples of the Empire, even in the eyes of the Turkish people, Sultan Abdul Hamid was an odious person, the symbol of their misfortunes, violence and torture. The idea of riddance of the bloodthirsty sultan was growing and maturing. The Young Turks were the ones to effect it. On July 23, 1908 the Committee of Union and Progress (Ittihat ve Terakki) organized a coup. Sultan Abdul Hamid was deprived of power ; in 1909 he was dethroned.

The Young Turks came onto Turkish arena under the slogans of the French Revolution : "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity". All the nations in the Empire, Moslems or Christians, welcomed the overthrow of the "red sultan" with enthusiasm. The people believed in that a new era in the history of the Ottoman Empire had dawned. Yes, shortly after, it turned out, that the Young Turks were well disguised ardent nationalists, who continued the policy of oppressions and slaughters, carried out by the preceding sultans. They were advocates of the idea of assimilation of all the nations of the Empire to create a pure Turkish nation, never even stopping before mass slaughters in order to achieve that goal.

As Henry Morgenthau, the American Ambassador to Turkey 1913-1916, says : "The Young Turks were not a government ; they were really an irresponsible party, a kind of secret society, which by intrigue, intimidation, and assassination, had obtained most of the state"⁶.

It was stated in the Young Turks' party program : "Sooner or later all the nations under Turkish control will be turned into Turks. It is clear that they will not convert voluntarily and we will have to use force"⁷. During one of the secret meetings a Young Turkish ideologist Dr. Nazeem said : "The massacre is necessary. All the non-Turkish elements, whatever nation they belong to, should be exterminated"⁸.

So, as we can see, the figures changed, new rulers came, the policy persisted. And the problem of minorities, racial and religious, had been to a large extent solved by the simple method of extermination⁹.

On August 1, 1914 World War I broke out. World War I was a most tragic episode in the history of mankind, which, certainly, didn't go past the Assyrian nation. The Ottoman Turkey officially joined in the war on October 29, 1914. Turks thought that participation in the war will considerably raise Turkey's authority, satisfy their vanity and dignity. In fact this war was a good opportunity for Young Turks to test the viability of the all-Turkish ideas in practice, to realize their aggressive and wild plans, which met with support among the military-feudal, bourgeois, itihatic-chauvinistic elite. Talaat Pasha, Turkish Minister of Interior, in a conversation with Dr. Mordtman, the dragoman of the German Embassy in Istanbul, said : "Turkey is intent on taking advantage of the war in order to thoroughly liquidate its internal foes, i.e., the indigenous Christians, without being thereby disturbed by foreign intervention"¹⁰. A central committee member Union and Progress Bahaeddin Shakir told almost the same : "We are in war, there is no threat of intervention by Europe and the Great Powers, and the world press either will not be able to voice a protest. Even if we do not succeed, the problem will become an accomplished fact, the voices will calm down, and no one will dare to express a protest. We should make use of this exceptional situation as much as possible. This kind of opportunity is not always available ..."¹¹.

The subsequent events showed that Turks really were not afraid of the Great Powers' intervention and perpetrated massacres of a number of nations in the Ottoman territory. The Assyrians also did not elude the mass slaughters and forced emigration. The genocide of the Assyrians was perpetrated with unspeakable brutality. From May, 1915 mass murders and deportation of the Armenians and Assyrians began in the regions of Bitlis, Diyarbekir, Erzerum, Kharberd, Sivas and Van. The expelled Assyrians, attended by armed detachments of Turks, were exiled to the deserts of Syria and Mesopotamia.

The American Ambassador H. Morgenthau says : "When the Turkish authorities gave the orders for these deportations, they were merely giving the death warrant to a whole race ; they understood this well, and, in their conversations with me they made no particular attempt to conceal the fact"¹².

The extermination of the Christians in Diyarbekir was controlled by the head of that region Reshid Bey. The Assyrians of Mardin, Midyat and Jezire regions were especially badly hit by the Turkish massacres. The priest of local Chaldean Assyrians Joseph Naayem reported that "since April 8, 1915 horrible massacres had taken place : Turks gathered men above 16, beat, tortured, killed them, and afterwards put turbans on their heads and photographed them in order to prove the world in future that Christians oppressed Mohammedans¹³.

In September 1916 the American periodical "Martyred Armenia" translated from the "Original Arabic" an article by an Arab eyewitness of massacres, Favez El Ghosein, where the author adverted to the slaughters of the Assyrians in Diyarbekir : "In Midyat and Mardin an order was issued to murder only Armenians, and not to disturb the members of all the other communities. Learning about the misfortune of their brothers (the Armenians) the Assyrians immediately took a position in three villages close to Midyat and rebuffed the Turkish army exhibiting bright examples of valour. ...The Assyrians fully recognized that they were dealing with a deceitful state, which will tomorrow withdraw the promise of not disturbing them and will strike more badly those whom it had granted a pardon yesterday"¹⁴.

Jevded Bey, the governor of the region of Van, a person with a number of negative characteristics, who was a master of misdeeds, conspiratorial plans and at the same time was specialized in lying and shamming, had a "butchers' battalion" comprised of 8,000 soldiers. Jevded organized horrible massacres of the Assyrians in this region never seen before. One of the striking examples of this was the terrible slaughter organized in Hakkari region in spring 1915, where Turks murdered about 60 thousand Assyrians. Then during the following years about 70 thousand Assyrians were annihilated : some of them were murdered, others starved to death or were killed in the battles against Mohammedans.

In early June 1915 mass slaughters of Assyrians took place also in the northern part of region of Van. The village Qochanis, which was considered the Assyrians' clerical leader Mar-Shimoun's residence, was totally destroyed. The patriarchy building was scorched out.

On June 30, 1915 Leslie A. Davis, the American Consul in Harput 1914-1917, wrote to US Ambassador H. Morgenthau : "Turks have found another way of exterminating the Christians - forced emigration. On June 18 it was publicly announced that all the Armenians and Assyrians should leave Harput within five days"¹⁵.

Hundreds of children were bayoneted by the Turks and thrown into the Euphrates, and how men and women were striped naked, tied together in hundreds, shot, and then hurled into the river. In a loop of the river near Erzinghan, ...the thousand of dead bodies created such a barrage that the Euphrates changed its course for about a hundred yards¹⁶.

Unfortunately, during the World War I the Assyrian massacres were carried out also on the territory of Iran, which had proclaimed itself a neutral country on November 2, 1914. On the Iranian side of the border a catastrophe took place during five months of Ottoman occupation in 1915 (January to May). Kurdish tribes and Ottoman troops moved in to an area characterized

by anarchy. The Ottoman occupation of the Urmia was very bloody and the atrocities grew in violence once it became clear that the Russian army along with its Assyrians volunteers were returning. The first major massacre committed by Ottoman troop in Iran on defenceless civilians took place at the village of Haftevan at the end of February 1915. Assyrian males from the area between Dilman and Khosrowa were assembled allegedly for registration, but instead were slaughtered in very primitive fashion. In the town of Urmia Ottoman officials entered the French mission compound on February 12 and seized more than 150 persons. Sixty of these men were kept in jail. Some were hanged just outside the city gates and the rest were shot at Jewish Hill cemetery on February 23. The inhabitants of the outlying village of Gulpashan were massacred and plundered despite having paid "protection" money to authorities¹⁷. The actual number of deaths during this time has never been calculated, but they must have been enormous.

R. 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 (the Assyrians) is quite satisfied with its fortune"¹⁸. And what was their fortune ?

The strategy of the slaughters, the way they were organized and carried out served as an irrefutable evidence of the slaughterers' decision to totally exterminate a nation whose striving for unity, the desire to be loyal to its national identity and the Christian religion was impossible to destroy or shatter for a long time. Doomed to a total extermination, this outcast nation could rely only on its desperate bravery. The Assyrians really did not let that villainous crime be committed in obscurity. Even though unarmed, they fought to the very end without a slightest hope of victory.

As it can be seen, the Assyrians, being a national and religious minority, were in a dependent position in the society they lived. This means that in the existing Ottoman regime, this nation had to suffer oppression and different forms of deprivation of rights. The antichristian oppressions became more acute especially because of the existing religious hostility towards this nation.

Andr. Mandelstam, the first dragoman of the Russian Embassy at Constantinople wrote : "The Young Turk government was able to only partly carry out its plan to establish a radically turkified Ottoman Empire by way of profiting from the opportunities afforded by the Great War. Nevertheless, it succeeded in destroying approximately one million Armenians, and hundreds of thousands of Greeks, Lebanese, Assyro-Caldeans"¹⁹. In reality, as we know today 1,5 million Armenians²⁰ and 750,000 Assyrians were subjected to genocide during World War I.

In November, 1916 the New York Times published Dr. W. Rockwell's (Professor in Union Theological Seminary and member of American Committee for Armenian and Syrian relief) article entitled "The Total of Armenian and Syrian Dead", where telling about the Armenian massacres in Turkey the author wrote : "How many Armenians and Syrian non-combatants have died of disease, hardship, or violence during the last two years ? ...The Armenians are not the only unfortunates ; the Syrians (Assyrians) also have been decimated. Great numbers of them have perished, but no one knows how many"²¹.

Another American periodical, newspaper the Atlantic Monthly wrote : "In six months the Young Turks succeeded in doing what the Old Turks were unable to accomplish in six centuries. The extermination of the Armenians is well under way. Thousands of Assyrians have vanished from the face of the earth"²².

Thus, during the World War I in the Ottoman Turkey and the adjacent Turkish territories a real genocide was implemented according to the criteria of international law. The Ottoman Turkey and the Great Powers are guilty of the bloody massacres of both Armenians and Assyrians. With the criminal connivance of the Great Powers and taking the opportunity presented by the martial law Turkey committed the gravest crime against mankind - genocide. The criminal policy of Sultan Abdul Hamid II and the Young Turks against the Armenians and Assyrians permits us 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.

But the tragedy of Assyrians did not come to the end with this. Both during the World War I and after it the Assyrian nation bled both from the Europe's incitements and from the slaughters and oppressions organized by Turkish, Kurdish, Iranian and Arabic tyrants.

So, as we could see

The Assyrian Genocide was an alleged genocide against the Assyrian population of the former Ottoman Empire and Ottoman Turkey. Those supporting the genocide theses claim that the Assyrian population of the Eastern parts of Ottoman Turkey were forcibly relocated and massacred by Turkish and Kurdish forces during the years 1895-1896 under the regime of Sulat Abdul Hamid II and during WWI (1914-1918) under the regime of the Young Turks.

Reasons for the genocide vary. Since Armenians and Greeks also claim they were the subject of forced relocations and barbaric executions, some cite religious persecution against the Christian community of Anatolia as the cause. Others, including the Turkish government, claim that the Assyrians and Armenians sought autonomy from the Ottoman Turkey and joined the invading Russian army in the east. The Assyrian and Armenian communities, as Turkey claims, were seen as a threat and as a result were relocated to the Syrian Desert. Many deaths occurred on the "Death Marches" from starvation and dehydration, which Turkey claims was an accident.

The total death toll of Assyrians is unknown, but some estimates claim that 500,000-750,000 of them were killed.

The Assyrian question needs an international solution. This problem has so far been out of the limelight of the world community. For the reestablishment of justice, recognition of the national identities and cultural development it is essential that Turkey be condemned, as :

Since the proclamation of the Turkish Republic international laws have been ignored in this country.

A member of the UNO, Turkey implements decisions incompatible with the criteria it had accepted.

Turkey does not fulfill the obligations placed on it by international agreements. Not recognizing the principle of "equality of rights and freedom of self-determination of nations and peoples" Turkey violates the rights of local Assyrians. "Genocide" considered the greatest crime against the humanity by the UNO, is even now consistently implemented by Turkey towards the Assyrians. Exiling Assyrians, qualified as a crime by the UNO, is still the case in Turkey. The UNO condemns national discrimination. Turkey continues the policy of assimilation adopted by its forerunners under the slogan "One nation, one language, one religion, one flag and one country". The UNO condemns terrorism, but Turkey still continues to carry out a policy of terror against Assyrians destroying their spiritual and material values. The Articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations General Assembly do not reach the territory of Turkey.

Notes:

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