

American Presbyterian Missionaries at Urmia During the Great War

Michael Zirinsky, Ph.D.

Introduction

This paper focuses primarily on American Presbyterian missionary activity at Urmia, western Azerbaijan, during the years 1914-1919. Although American missionaries began as neutrals in the Great War, with good intentions toward all, they became embroiled in wartime public events and inadvertently roiled an already turbulent situation. The subject is fascinating in part because it marks the interaction of several separate histories which normally are considered only in isolation from each other. These topics include American social history, Christian Church history, and the history of twentieth century international politics, as well as modern Iranian history.

American Presbyterian Church archives, the most important source for this paper, detail the domestic and international history of Iran during the Great War because Presbyterian missionaries were interested observers and meticulous record keepers. At regular intervals, they were required by their Board of Foreign Missions in New York to report on local conditions and on their own activities. In addition, they wrote regular, formal letters to the churches and individuals in America who sponsored them and paid their expenses and salaries. The Presbyterian archive also contains collections of private papers (letters, diaries, photograph collections and other personal materials), which have been made a part of the historical record by retired missionaries and their families. All of these records are carefully preserved by a Church which understands the study of history to be one way human beings can try to know the will of God on earth.

From the perspective of this secular historian, Presbyterian missionaries at Urmia seem to have had more worldly than religious impact. They worked in the world, as doctors and nurses, as educators, even as agronomists. They themselves valued democratic self-government and patriotic love of community. Indeed, the government of the Presbyterian Church, which emphasizes democratic local control and election of higher authorities by individual self-governing congregations, is one of the Puritan origins of the secular American system of representative government.

Presbyterian missionaries in Iran consequently helped to stimulate the development of modern national feeling among Iranians, including several minority groups. An intriguing example of this is the brief career of Howard Baskerville, a young short-term teacher at the American Mission Boys' School in Tabriz. During the Constitutional Revolution Baskerville became so caught up in Iran's struggle for freedom that in 1908 he resigned from the Mission to join his

students in the Democratic armed forces. He died for Iranian Constitutional liberty.¹ Another example is the career of Ahmad Kasravi, arguably the first modern Iranian historian, both in his use of primary sources to recount the past "as it actually occurred" and in his Iranian secular nationalism. In this regard it is important to recall that Kasravi had been a teacher in the Mission's Tabriz Boys' School, where he also studied English.

Despite their beneficent and peaceful intentions, however, during the war their actions made worse existing conflicts among communities which were religion-based. They became involved in a struggle which came to take on some of the aspects of a Crusade against a Jihad. The Great War in Iran has been obscure in written history. In western Europe its dates are clear enough, from 28 July 1914 to 11 November 1918, but in Iran they are less precise. It began with Ottoman Turkish attacks on established Russian positions in Iranian Azerbaijan in October 1914. After years of chaos, the war ended only with the reestablishment of order by Reza Khan sometime after his February 1921 coup d'état. This new order was signaled most clearly by Reza's deposition of the Qajar dynasty in 1925.

Although these Iranian events have largely been ignored by western historians of the Great War, they were of vital importance to Iran itself. Russian, Ottoman, British, French, and German military forces ranged freely over the country despite Iran's nominal neutrality. The war destabilized Iran's already weak political structure and led directly to the establishment in 1926 of the Pahlavi dynasty which dominated the country until 1978. Destabilization took the form of the rise of minority autonomist movements, tribal, confessional, and national -- the Kurds and the Assyrians for example.²

One of the most powerful aspects of destabilization was the high mortality imposed by the war and resulting struggles for power among various groups in Iran. In addition to people killed by violence, the Great War interrupted food and energy supplies, ripped people from their homes, and spread epidemic disease. Perhaps one-quarter of the population died of starvation, exposure, dysentery, typhus, typhoid fever, cholera, smallpox, malaria, or influenza. All of Iran was affected by the war, but mortality was highest in the north, worst of all in western

¹USNA, RG 84, Tabriz Consulate, 1908; Rezadeh Shafaq, "Howard Baskerville," *The Tehran Journal*, 14 December 1959; PHS, H5 reveals that Baskerville applied to be a missionary as an undergraduate at Princeton, with a letter of recommendation from his history professor, Woodrow Wilson.

²Despite speculation about Azeri nationalism, reinforced by the recent independence of ex-Soviet Azerbaijan, there seems to be no evidence in Presbyterian archives of Great War-era Azeri separatism; American missionaries saw the Azeri-Turkish speaking Shia population of Azerbaijan as Iranian.

Azerbaijan, site of intense American Presbyterian missionary activity.³

The American Presbyterian Mission

American Protestant missionaries first came to Urmia in 1834 to work with Assyrian Christians.⁴ As elsewhere, these missionaries were responding to early nineteenth century evangelical revival, which called on American Protestants to preach the Gospel to all humankind. At first the work was supervised by the Congregational, Boston-based American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. In 1871 the mission was transferred to the New York-based Presbyterian Board, which sought to minister to Jews and Muslims as well as Armenian and Assyrian Christians. The Presbyterian Board also expanded the Mission throughout northern Iran: stations opened at Tehran in 1872, Tabriz in 1873, Hamadan in 1880, Rasht and Qazvin in 1906, Kermanshah in 1910, and Mashad in 1911. In 1883 the Presbyterian Board reorganized the Iranian field into two separate missions. Urmia and Tabriz constituted the "West Persia Mission" and the remaining Iranian stations were called the "East Persia Mission." The two jurisdictions were not reunited until 1931.⁵

After half a century of American Protestant missionary work in Iran, the growing numbers of missionaries created need for the United States to establish diplomatic relations with Iran. S.G.W. Benjamin, himself the child of Protestant missionaries in the Ottoman Empire, arrived in Tehran as the first US Minister in June 1883.⁶ US consulates were established at Tehran and Tabriz, but elsewhere American missionaries continued to depend on Great Britain for consular assistance. Until the expansion of US activity following the Second World War, the Presbyterian Mission remained the most important American interest in Iran.⁷

³Nikki R. Keddie and Yann Richard, *Roots of Revolution; an Interpretive History of Modern Iran* (New Haven, 1981), 79-93. See also Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton, 1982), 102-135; M. Reza Ghods, *Iran in the Twentieth Century, A Political History* (Boulder, Colorado, 1989), 45-92; and Richard Cottam, *Nationalism in Iran* (Pittsburgh, 1979).

⁴See John Joseph, *The Nestorians and Their Muslim Neighbors* (Princeton, 1959).

⁵See Frederick J. Heuser, Jr., *A Guide to Foreign Missionary Manuscripts in the Presbyterian Historical Society* (New York, 1988), 71.

⁶FRUS 1883, 702ff; James F. Goode, "Samuel Greene Wheeler Benjamin: Unorthodox Observer of the Middle East," Middle East Studies Association of North America, Washington, D.C., December 1995.

⁷See, for example, Department of State, INFO series #30, 28 August, 1934, "American interests in Persia today center largely around the activities of the Presbyterian Board of

Growth brought the American Mission into contact with many European missionary societies active in Iran. These included a large French Catholic Mission (the Congregation of the Mission, popularly known as the Lazarists, established first at Urmia in 1839), and several English groups, notably the Church Missionary Society (CMS, established at Isfahan in 1875, with other stations later created at Kerman [1897], Yazd [1898], and Shiraz [1900]) and the Archbishop of Canterbury's Assyrian Mission (AAM, established at Urmia, 1884-1914). There were also a small German Lutheran Orient Mission (established at Sauj Bulaq [Mahabad] in 1905 and transferred to American Lutheran control in 1911) and a highly political Russian Orthodox Mission.⁸

In order to avoid the twin dangers of unwanted duplication of missionary efforts and conflict between societies with similar aims, the Presbyterians negotiated a comity agreement with the English Church Missionary Society in 1895. The boundary between the two missions would be

*a line drawn from Khorramabad, Luristan, to Kashan, thence along parallel 34E N. to the Afghan frontier: Khorramabad to remain in the American sphere of influence & Kashan in that of the Church Missionary Society.*⁹

The phrasing of this agreement as well as the division itself foreshadowed the 1907 Anglo-Russian political partition of Iran.

This agreement and a similar one with the Lutheran Orient Mission aside¹⁰, American Presbyterian relations with other Christian missions in Iran remained in a state of rivalry until the outbreak of war in 1914. Despite the American Mission's original intention to improve the indigenous Assyrian Church, the development of an "American Church" as a schismatic off-shoot of the Assyrian "Old Church" provided a challenge to other missionary groups. The American Mission was seen as wealthy and powerful by its French and British rivals, who both marveled at American ability to build imposing schools and hospitals and criticized American work as tantamount to *buying* adherents.

The Lazarist mission was militantly Catholic; in the context of French history, this often meant hostility to Protestantism and secularism, and French

Foreign Missions," USNA, RG 59, 899.00/1596.

⁸Recently, we surveyed the educational work of some of these missionary groups, "Missionaries, Education, and Social Change in Iran, 1834-1941," Middle East Studies Association of North America, Providence, Rhode Island, November 1996.

⁹CMS PE G2 PE/O, 1895, 105.

¹⁰To date I have seen only US State Department records pertaining to this mission, USNA, RG 59, 391.1163 Lutheran Orient Mission.

Catholic rivalry with American Protestants is amply represented in the Lazarist archives. However, even after the formal separation of the French State from the Catholic Church in the early twentieth century, the French government saw the Catholic mission as an important French influence in Iran.¹¹

The Archbishop of Canterbury's Mission ostentatiously distanced itself from other missionary enterprises, denying any expansionist ambition and declaring a purpose to revive the Old Church "from within," i.e., by education. In the 1888 words of Archbishop E. W. Benson, the mission "will not proselytize - not baptize, communicate, or ordain any member of that Church into the Church of England."¹² This position brought the English mission into conflict with American, French, and Russian missions, which sought to build Presbyterian, Catholic, and Orthodox Churches among the Assyrians. The AAM focused its attention on the hierarchy of the Assyrian Church, trying to assure a good, English-style education to the priests and bishops. When the Iranian Assyrian Church nevertheless joined the Russian Orthodox communion following Russian military occupation of western Azerbaijan, the AAM withdrew from Iran in 1914. The impression is left, even more than with CMS in the south, that there was close connection between this mission and the British government.

American Presbyterians shared the disappointment of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Mission at Russian success in converting the Assyrian Church. However, the Presbyterians chose to remain at Urmia and to work with Russian civil and military authorities, as they had worked with Iranian authorities before the 1907 Russian occupation.¹³ The outbreak of war in 1914 effectively ended inter-mission rivalries. Under pressure of wartime hysteria, all Christians in Urmia came to perceive the war as a conflict between Ottoman-led Islam and Russian-led Christendom. Consequently American missionaries allied themselves with other Christian groups and saw the Russian Army, and its locally recruited Assyrian and Armenian levies, as "our army."

Who were the American missionaries, and what did they do? Analysis of personnel records indicates that they came from prosperous middle class families, mostly from the northeastern United States. They were highly educated. Two-thirds of them were female. They tended to be assigned in families (siblings serving in the same field, children assigned as missionaries to their parents' field, and so forth). Most missionaries declared a vocation for the missionary life as

¹¹*Le Journal de Teheran*, 17 May 1945, preserved in the Archives Lazaristes.

¹²J.F. Coakley, *The Church of the East and the Church of England; A History of The Archbishop of Canterbury's Mission* (Oxford, 1992), 119.

¹³To date, I have seen reference to Russian activity only in American, British, and French archives.

adolescents. Typically they stayed in Iran until retirement, only returning to America on furlough after every seven years on the field.¹⁴

In normal times the missionaries' work was of three sorts. Evangelists sought to preach the Gospel of Jesus to those who would listen. Medical missionaries tried to minister to medical needs, alleviating suffering and treating and preventing disease. Educators worked to inculcate a modern laity and clergy for the Iranian Church they sought to make. Educators also sought to bring modern science and technology to a "backward" land. The Presbyterian missionaries all sought to live lives of Christian service to Iranians. Implicitly, they also preached the "gospel" of the United States as a promised land. Thus the Church they established was known as the "American Church" and many of their schools' alumni sought further education -- and citizenship -- in the US.¹⁵

The West Persia Mission was large and wealthy. On the eve of the war there were 21 Presbyterian missionaries at Urmia, plus their children. In addition, there were perhaps a dozen missionaries in Tabriz. As early as 1895 the Mission had established 117 schools in the Urmia region, enrolling 2,410 mostly Assyrian or Armenian students. The Mission also maintained a teaching hospital in Urmia.¹⁶

The senior Presbyterian missionary at Urmia during the Great War was the Rev. William A. Shedd, D.D. He was born at Urmia in 1865 of missionary parents, John H. Shedd and Sarah Jane Dawes of Ohio; he returned to Urmia as a missionary himself in 1892, after his education at Marietta College (Ohio) and Princeton Seminary (New Jersey). He was well connected; his first cousin, Chicago banker Charles G. Dawes, later became Vice President of the United States. Before the outbreak of war, Shedd acted informally as US consular agent at

¹⁴See Michael P. Zirinsky, "Harbingers of Change: Presbyterian Women in Iran, 1883-1949," *American Presbyterians: Journal of Presbyterian History* (1992), 173-86.

¹⁵Yahya Armajani, "Sam Jordan and the Evangelical Ethic in Iran," *Religious Ferment in Asia*, Robert J. Miller, editor (Lawrence, Kansas, 1974), 23-36; Michael P. Zirinsky, "A Panacea for the Ills of the Country: American Presbyterian Education in Inter-War Iran," *Iranian Studies* (1993), 119-37. Armajani was the first Iranian ordained a minister in the Mission-founded Evangelical Church. The mission's Tehran cable address was "Inculcate."

In 1890 a man tried for the murder of an American stated, "My mother was an Assyrian ... my father ... was of the Armenian sect, ... but I myself belong to the sect of the Americans," FRUS, 1890, 681; pre-WWI Tabriz Consulate files are full of papers regarding problems associated with Iranian Christians' desire to acquire US citizenship, USNA, RG 84.

¹⁶John Elder, *History of the Iran Mission* (Np, nd), 19; Mary Lewis Shedd, *The Measure of a Man; the Life of William Ambrose Shedd Missionary to Persia* (New York, 1922), 136.

Urmia, registering births and deaths, renewing passports, etc., on behalf of US consul Gordon Paddock at Tabriz. In 1914 Paddock urged him to accept an official commission as honorary vice consul at Urmia, but Shedd demurred. "*Besides the work it might involve,*" he wrote, "*an objection to my being a regular agent here is the misunderstanding that might arise to our political position. People here are apt to consider missions as political agencies.*"¹⁷ The war, however, was to change Shedd's mind.

In times of crisis, missionaries tended to drop all normal activity and engage in "relief work." For medical workers this was a continuation of normal work, but under much more extreme conditions. Evangelists and educators were faced with new and unfamiliar tasks as buyers and distributors of food, financial agents, organizers of refugee camps, sanitation workers, and buriers of the dead. During the Great War in Iran, crisis loomed large. The Presbyterian Mission at Urmia rushed to meet it.

The Great War in Iranian Azerbaijan

From the viewpoint of Urmia, the Great War in Iran may be divided into six phases, briefly sketched below. This conflict came to have a religious-national structure, and it took on genocidal proportions. It came thoroughly to involve the American Presbyterian Mission.

1. Between the Ottoman Empire's entering the war against Russia in late October and the end of 1914, there was extensive skirmishing between Ottoman and Russian forces along the border west of Urmia. Much of this activity involved probing actions by irregular Kurdish forces operating from Ottoman territory, a prelude to the massive invasion which followed.

Russian forces, in occupation of Azerbaijan since the 1907 Anglo-Russian partition of Iran, reacted to Ottoman attacks by reinforcing their army, largely with Georgian and Armenian conscripts from the Caucasus. They also armed Iranian Assyrians and organized them into a military force. The newly armed Assyrians attacked Muslim villages near Urmia, even as Russian authorities hanged Iranians suspected of corresponding with the Turks, including members of the ulama. Thus the quality of relations between Muslim and Christian communities sharply declined even before the Ottomans invaded.¹⁸

¹⁷W. A. Shedd, Urmia, to G. Paddock, Tabriz, 2 Sept. 1914, DOS, RG 84, Tabriz Consulate; Charles G. Dawes to Secretary Bryan, 18 Jan. 1915, RG 59, 391.116/47; Shedd, *Measure*, 26-53; PHS, H 5.

¹⁸Laura McComb Muller, "Recollections of the Diary of Laura McComb Muller," 10-11; Hugo Muller to "Dear Ones at Home," 15 October 1914, PHS, RG 91-18-14.

2. During the winter of 1914-1915, the Ottomans launched a major offensive against the Russian Caucasus. In the final analysis, this attack was a disaster for the Ottomans, but in the short term they achieved local successes. Urmia fell to them on 2 January and remained under their control until 24 May. They took Tabriz on 8 January, holding it only three weeks.¹⁹

This brief Ottoman occupation of Iranian Azerbaijan led to horrors.²⁰ A large portion of the Christian population fled as refugees to the Caucasus, along with the Russian army. Most of the Christians who remained took refuge in the American and French mission yards. Kurdish irregular forces preceding the Ottoman army sacked Urmia and its villages, taking food, money, rugs, clothing, and jewelry where they found it, killing or wounding those who resisted their plundering. American missionary sources also record extensive "massacring," "outraging of women" and abduction of women and children to Muslim "harems" for the purpose of forced conversions to Islam. Once the Ottomans were firmly in occupation of Urmia, however, their officers ended these depredations. Although the Ottomans honored Mission sanctuaries, where 15,000 sheltered under American and 10,000 under French protection, the first five months of 1915 were horrible. About twenty percent of all refugees died from disease. The American Mission alone buried 3,000 of the 15,000 people in its care.

3. From late May 1915 until 1917, Azerbaijan again was under Russian control. The Ottomans remained on the defensive, even as Russia disintegrated. Before its collapse, however, Russia carried a genocidal war into eastern Anatolia, killing as many as eighty percent of the Kurdish population.²¹ Revolution ended Russian army discipline, and soldiers looted civilian property. By late 1917 the Russian army in Azerbaijan virtually ceased to exist.

During this time too, perhaps as many as 50,000 armed Assyrians from Hakkari (*Jilus*, led by their primate, Mar Shimoun) and Armenians from Van descended on the Urmia plain as refugees. Because of their wartime experiences

¹⁹Robert M. Labaree, Tabriz, to Robert E. Speer, New York, 8 Feb. 1915, PHS, RG 91-5-18; G. Y. Holliday, Tabriz, to H. Wilson Allinson, Isfahan, 16 Feb. 1915, copied to Lambeth, 11 Mar. 15, CMS, 1915, 27. Stanford J. Shaw and Ezel Kural Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, volume 2, *Reform, Revolution, and Republic: The Rise of Modern Turkey, 1808-1975* (Cambridge, 1977), 310 ff.; David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace; Creating the Modern Middle East, 1914-1922* (New York, 1989), 119-21; George Lenczowski, *The Middle East in World Affairs* (Ithaca, New York, 1980), 54-56; also see Shedd, *Measure* 138-88.

²⁰See Hugo Muller, "1915 Diary," and Shedd, *Measure*.

²¹Joseph, 136.

they were wretchedly poor and bitterly anti-Muslim. By culture they were pastoralists, and they had little understanding of agriculture or urban life. Thus they destabilized life in the plain, taking food without payment, pasturing animals in grain fields before harvest, and cutting fruit trees and vines for firewood, thereby destroying the local economy and causing famine. Also, local Assyrians encouraged the Jilus to shift their destruction to Muslim properties, adding to inter-communal tensions.²²

4. The situation in Azerbaijan grew worse as revolution broke out in Russia and its army disintegrated. As the Rev. Frederick N. Jessup wrote in his annual report for 1917, "*The troops feel compelled to live off the country, and ... [consequently] in some places actual famine conditions prevail.*"²³ As the Russian army disintegrated and withdrew from Iran, responsibility for Allied defensive positions on the Azerbaijan front came to fall increasingly on Assyrian and Armenian Christian forces, originally established and armed by Russia but now under tenuous direction by Great Britain. The British had no significant armed forces near Urmia, however. Therefore they sought to use the American Mission there as their agency, as leaders of the Assyrian-Armenian Army. This stage of the war lasted until the Urmia front collapsed, at the end of July 1918.²⁴

In February 1918 civil violence erupted among Iranians, Assyrians, and Kurds. A Muslim effort to seize control of Urmia was suppressed by the Assyrian army. The subsequent assassination of Mar Shimoun by Ismail Agha, Simko, chief of the Shikkak confederation of Kurds,²⁵ further bloodied the already nasty situation. Assyrians believed that Simko had been induced to act as he did by Iranian government officials, and in reprisal they carried out a "reign of terror" against Muslims. Iranian nationalist historian Ahmad Kasravi claimed that "nearly ten thousand innocent people were killed...." Nothing seen in missionary or

²²W.S. Vanneman, Tabriz, to Scott, New York, 16 Aug. 1915, PHS, RG 91-4-18; F.G. Coan, Urmia, to Robert Speer, New York, 11 July 1916, PHS, RG 91-5-19; Shedd, *Measure*, 205; c.f., Kasravi, *Eighteen Year History*, chapter XII.

²³Jessup, Tabriz, to BFM, New York, December, 1917, PHS, RG 91-5-20.

²⁴Shedd, *Measure*, 224 et passim.

²⁵Martin van Bruinessen, "Kurdish Tribes and the State of Iran: The Case of Simko's Revolt," in Richard Tapper, editor, *The Conflict of Tribe and State in Iran and Afghanistan* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), pp. 364-400; Robert Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1989). Unlike most Kurdish leaders, Simko supported the Russians during the war, not the Turks; USNA, RG 84, Shedd to Paddock, 30 Sept. 1914.

diplomatic archives suggests Kasravi exaggerated.²⁶

5. From 1 August 1918 until the signing of the Mudros armistice at the end of October 1918, Azerbaijan remained under Ottoman control. The presence of their army did nothing to alleviate the famine and epidemic disease stalking the land. Missionary sources for this time are chaotic, but the broad outlines of what occurred seem clear.

The bulk of the Assyrian and Armenian Christian fighting force was drawn away in a bungled attempt to link up with British forces at Sain Kala. When the Ottomans pushed into Urmia during the night of 31 July - 1 August 1918, the vast majority of the Christian population fled in panic, accompanied by senior American missionary William Shedd and his wife. Along with thousands of others, Dr. Shedd died along the way, of cholera.²⁷

Those Christians who remained at Urmia again sought refuge in the walled mission compounds. Again the Ottomans honored US neutrality and the American Mission was able to provide sanctuary. The French Mission, however, fell to a crowd of looters. Six hundred people were murdered there, and the French mission was stripped of all its valuables.²⁸

After the worst damage was done at Urmia, the Ottomans interned the American missionaries and took them to Tabriz. There they were held under relatively luxurious conditions until the war ended, when they were all released.

6. After Ottoman forces withdrew from Azerbaijan, Iran sank further into anarchy. The British Army's North Persia Force sought to bolster anti-Bolshevik elements in the Caucasus. It faced Iranian opposition, notably in Gilan from Mirza Kuchik Khan's *Jangalis*. In the mountains tribal forces such as Simko's Shikkak Kurds expanded their authority. In Tehran, British officials made and unmade governments at will. They obtained the appointment of Vosuq al-Dowleh as Prime Minister in hope that he would support an agreement transforming Iran into a British protectorate. In February 1919, Vosuq sent the Cossack Brigade, under the command of Russian Colonel Starosselsky, against the *Jangalis*. Britain supported this action, carrying out "purely coercive measures to further political ends," in

²⁶Kasravi, *Eighteen Year History*, chapters XIV-XV; Shedd, *Measure*, 213-236; PHS, RG 91-25-2; AAM 1919, 311-330; USNA, RG 84, Tabriz Consulate, 1919. Missionary Ned Richards described the Christian army, largely made up of Jilus, being "as wild and untamed as any bunch of savages you ever saw," circular letter, Urmia, 26 February 1918.

²⁷Shedd, *Measure*, 255-271.

²⁸USNA, RG 84, Tabriz Consulate, 1919; Pierre Franssen, C.M., "Memoires d'un missionnaire en Perse," 94-105.

support of "Starosselski's reign of terror in Gilan."²⁹

Despite the unsettled conditions at Urmia, the American mission nonetheless sought to re-establish itself there. In early 1919 Dr. Harry P. Packard visited twice, the second time bringing his family and intending to stay. Soon afterwards, a riot broke out. Although initial fighting seems to have involved an Iranian government attack on Simko and a Kurdish reprisal attack on Urmia, Iranian rioters attacked the American mission grounds, looting it as thoroughly as the French mission had been stripped the summer before, murdering some 270 people. Packard and his family survived, rescued from the crowd by Iranian government forces.³⁰

This riot was the climax of the American Mission's experience of war in western Azerbaijan. In some ways it was the result of growing popular Iranian perception that Americans were associated with Assyrian and Kurdish attacks on Iranian Muslims. This riot ended the Presbyterian presence at Urmia until 1923. It also was a prelude to the end of the Mission at Urmia, imposed by Reza Shah in 1933.³¹

The Presbyterian Mission During the War

Having surveyed the war from the viewpoint of Urmia, let us now look specifically at American Presbyterian missionary involvement during the six phases of the conflict outlined above.

1. **1914.** During the opening months of the Great War, American missionaries sought to be neutral and even-handed. At the onset of hostilities, Germans took refuge from the Russians with neutral Americans. As best they could, the missionaries maintained amicable relations with Russians, Iranians, Assyrians, Armenians, and Kurds. Because these groups fought each other, however, American neutrality became increasingly difficult to maintain. Faced with inter-communal conflict, the Mission was forced to take sides.

As from before the war, the Rev. William Shedd, senior American missionary at Urmia, acted unofficially as US consular agent. In this capacity he reported on political and military conditions, knowing that US Consul Paddock in Tabriz shared his information with British, French, and Russian colleagues. While the indigenous Christian population of Urmia panicked on hearing of Russian withdrawal on 2 January 1915, many thousands fleeing to the Caucasus, the

²⁹Houshang Sabahi, *British Policy in Persia 1918-1925*, 43.

³⁰USNA, RG 84, Tabriz Consulate, 1919; Franssen, "Memoires," 119-139 (the bulk of these pages are an eye-witness account by Fr. Antoine Clarys of the French mission).

³¹Michael P. Zirinsky, "Render Therefore unto Caesar the Things Which Are Caesar's: American Presbyterian Educators and Reza Shah," *Iranian Studies*, 1993, 340-342.

American missionaries remained. They trusted in their neutrality, gave sanctuary to fifteen thousand Christians, and tried to protect their property.

2. January-May 1915. With the coming of the Ottomans to Azerbaijan in January, the American Mission was plunged into the heart of the war's darkness. At first the Mission simply sought to alleviate distress. A vivid example of this was Dr. Harry P. Packard's dramatic ride to the village of Goegtapa. Dr. Packard was born in Illinois in 1874, and he graduated from high school in Pueblo, Colorado, and took degrees from Colorado College (AB, 1898) and the University of Denver (M.D., 1901). Before becoming a missionary at Urmia in 1906, he served with the Colorado Militia during the Cripple Creek mining troubles. In Hugo Muller's words, "Dr. Packard was a big man with a big voice, and on horseback he looked like a general."³² Displaying a US flag to emphasize his neutral and extra-territorial status, Packard rescued hundreds of besieged Assyrian Christians at Goegtapa from what he characterized as imminent massacre by invading Kurds. Packard knew the Kurdish leaders as their physician, and he was able to persuade them to let the Assyrians walk away from Goegtapa to refuge in Urmia, if they would give up their arms. Equally important to the peaceful outcome of this incident, Packard was able to persuade the Assyrians that they would be safe under American protection at Urmia.³³

The American Mission made its yards at Urmia a refuge for Assyrian and Armenian Christians who feared massacre at the hands of the Ottoman Turks and their Kurdish allies. To make room for this mass of people, ultimately numbering some 15,000, the Mission annexed to its own compounds adjacent Christian properties. These properties included the yard of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Mission, which had been left in charge of the Rev. Y.M. Neeson, an Assyrian priest who had taken Episcopalian holy orders in America, where he also acquired US citizenship. Order was maintained in the mission yards by an unarmed Assyrian police force under the command of the Rev. Hugo A. Muller, who also was in charge of mission finances during the occupation.³⁴

To signify the neutral, extraterritorial, status of the Mission under the Capitulations, the Presbyterians flew the Stars and Stripes, the flag of their neutral nation. However, missionary faith in the flag appears to have been curiously naive,

³²PHS, H 5; Hugo Muller, "1915 Diary," 5.

³³H. P. Packard, "The Relief of Goegtapa," October 1915, 9 pp. typescript, PHS, RG 91-5-18; letter from John Mooshie et al., Tiflis, to the Archbishop of Canterbury, AAM 19/16-17; Shedd, *Measure*, 143.

³⁴Hugo Muller "1915 Diary"; AAM, 19/12-13, J.D. Barnard to Archbishop, 2 February 1915.

as if Old Glory were a talisman to ward off evil. As Hugo Muller wrote about this time, "*The person who has never been far away from his country cannot well realize the emotions that steal over one at the sight of the Stars and Stripes in a strange land. It is like a rose in a desert.*" The flag, he continued, "*symbolized two great causes, and united them, the cause of Christ and the cause of America ... very many of the persons who came within the influence of this flag regarded it the symbol of Protestant Christianity quite as much as they did [as] the symbol of America.*"³⁵

The mission also protected Christian property, including the entire cash assets of the Urmia branch of the English-owned Imperial Bank of Persia. American missionaries acquired and doled out food and clothing for Christian refugees, using the property deposited with them for safe-keeping to this end. They also withstood Ottoman efforts to confiscate from them the assets of the English Bank and to impose a war levy on them. However, they did pay ransom for individuals held hostage by the Ottoman authorities.³⁶

In the course of the five months' occupation of Urmia by the Ottomans, Presbyterian missionaries acted as caretakers for 15,000 Christian refugees, sheltered within their walls. They obtained food and water from the Muslim-dominated city and countryside, and did their best to maintain sanitation. Despite their best efforts, approximately 3,000 people under American care died, mostly of filth-bred epidemic diseases (dysentery, typhus, typhoid fever, and cholera). Virtually all the missionaries themselves became ill. Several Americans died, including Dr. Shedd's wife, Louise Wilber Shedd, and the Rev. Hugo Muller's newborn baby boy.³⁷

These experiences politicized the Mission and made it explicitly pro-Entente. In the course of the suffering they endured and witnessed, American missionaries came to see "pan-Islam," i.e. the Ottomans and their allies and sympathizers, as their foe. Embittered by their own experiences, they were more willing than in 1914 to commit themselves to the Entente cause, which they now saw as "Christian."

3. **May 1915-December 1917.** During the period of renewed Russian

³⁵Hugo A. Muller, "Faith in the Flag" (New York, 1918); this pamphlet seems to have been intended as part of a fund-raising effort for the Presbyterian Mission and its relief activities; its hyperbole should be seen in the context of irrational, war-related transformations in American language, when the "Pennsylvania Dutch" ceased speaking German and *sauerkraut* became "liberty cabbage."

³⁶Hugo Muller, "1915 Diary."

³⁷Hugo Muller, "1915 Diary."

occupation from late May 1915 through 1917, the American Mission worked increasingly closely with Allied military authorities and their local, Christian clients. The Mission had always worked well with Britain, as the historic reliance on British consular assistance and the comity agreement with CMS demonstrate. Under pressure of war and in the context of a common Protestant Christian faith and language, the American Mission found it natural to work even more closely with Great Britain and its allies.

During this period, too, the Mission came to see the war more clearly as a crusade.³⁸ They had worked intimately with the Assyrians for 80 years, and also with the Armenians. More often than not they tended to accept at face value the horror stories of Turkish massacres. Perhaps more to the point, they sympathized deeply with the suffering of the refugees from eastern Anatolia, and sought to alleviate their distress as well as that imposed by them on the peoples of the Urmia plain.

The American Mission enthusiastically embraced the April 1917 US entry into the war against Germany and Austria-Hungary. Although the US did not declare war on the Ottoman Empire, missionary cooperation with British, Russian, and French officials in Azerbaijan grew even closer. Especially as discipline began to break down in the Russian army, the Mission became ever more closely involved with the administration of Christian defense. The leading role in this action was taken by the Rev. William Shedd.

4. **January-July 1918.** In order to protect the community at Urmia, in January 1918 Shedd accepted an official commission as US consul there. Many of his missionary colleagues were dubious about thus breaking down the separation between their church and the US government, but they accepted his advice that this was the best course of action in a difficult time. Shedd was an active consul, conferring regularly with Allied leaders as well as Iranian Muslims. To the Christians defending Urmia he was a sage whose advice was always sought -- perhaps in part because of the relief funds he controlled.

One aspect of the Mission's work is that "relief" provided by New York came as money, not as food, thus obliging purchase of food locally. American Relief consequently added inflationary pressure to local food prices. When obtaining food became difficult for the mission, it doled out money instead; the Mission thereby came to subsidize men of the Assyrian and Armenian Christian fighting forces as well as local Muslims, women, and children. Although intended for food, some of

³⁸See, for example, the words of Jessie Ellis, who described in 1919 how the previous July she had destroyed "the records of the expenditures for the crusade the Syrian forces had been engaged in for months against the Turks..."; reproduced by her son, Robert B. Ellis, in "See Naples and Die: a World War II Memoir of a United States Army Ski Trooper in the Mountains of Italy," ms. provided me by Mary Cochran Moulton.

this money may well have been spent on arms.³⁹

Shedd was quite aware of what he was doing. Writing to the Armenian and Syrian Relief Committee in New York on 21 July 1918, Shedd claimed,

*that the safety of the whole community and the possibility of doing relief work at all depended on the defeat of the Turkish attempt to take this place and that we were not only justified in aiding the Syrian and Armenian military forces but were compelled to do so. Accordingly we have done so and the amount of help given is large amounting to forty or fifty thousand dollars. We have reason to believe that this will be refunded by the British Military authorities, although we have no guarantee that this will be the case. However that may be, there was no other source from which money could be had to supply the men who were fighting with food and we did so. The reasons for it were the same as those that led me as honorary American Vice Consul to abandon a position of neutrality for one of active participation in military affairs.*⁴⁰

Because of his unneutral action, Shedd came to be seen by Ottomans and Iranians as a belligerent, even as leader of the enemy, Allied, Christian army.

Shedd's second in command during this conflict was Dr. Harry Packard, who acted as head of the armed Assyrian police. Together with other missionaries, Packard arranged for the maintenance of order by buying food and distributing it or money to the needy. His police also arrested thieves and murderers and punished them, although not frequently or harshly enough for Shedd's taste.⁴¹

The American Mission clearly supported the "Assyrian-Armenian Army" on behalf of the Allied war effort and at explicit request of the British army. After the war, the British Foreign Office tried to avoid repaying funds thus expended on behalf of Great Britain. However, on being given documentary evidence of the assurances made by Captain Gracey (who had come to Urmia during the siege as an official representative of the Allied high command in the Caucasus), the British government paid. As one British Legation official in Tehran put it in a June 1919

³⁹Ellis, "Memoir."

⁴⁰William Shedd, Urmia, 21 July, 1918, to C.V. Vickery, Armenian and Syrian Relief Committee, 1 Madison Ave., New York, PHS, RG 91.

⁴¹In his last letter from Urmia, 23 July 1918, Shedd wrote Robert Speer in New York, "We have ... prevented the massacre of the Christian population. It has been with great loss to the Moslems and with many crimes that one would like to have punished summarily. I believe most fully in capital punishment under these circumstances, when the way to save life is to take the life of murderers," PHS, RG 91.

memorandum to British Minister Sir Percy Cox, "*Capt. Gracey doubtless talked rather big in the hopes of putting heart into the Syrians and holding up this front against the Turks. [Consequently,] We have met all the orders issued by the late Dr. Shedd which have been presented to us and a very large number of Assyrian refugees are being maintained at Baquba, chiefly at H.M.G.'s expense.*"⁴²

5. **August-October 1918.** During the second Ottoman occupation of Azerbaijan, the American mission was interned and had little opportunity to undertake war-related activity. Nevertheless, they cared for about 450 Christians in their yard. Half of these refugees, including almost all of the children, died in the few weeks before the Ottomans evacuated the missionaries to Tabriz.⁴³

On 8 October, on two hours' notice and over protests of missionaries who wished to stay, the eighteen remaining Americans were deported from Urmia to Tabriz. The American Mission was thus separated from its remaining proteges at Urmia. At Tabriz they were kept in "*the splendid garden of the Russian Bank people where we stayed til our release. We were quite comfortable and could get good food.... In ten days [on 22 October] we were informed that we were free....*" Ottoman negotiations with the Allies for an armistice, signed on board **H.M.S. Agamemnon** at Mudros on 30 October, already had begun.⁴⁴

6. **1919.** Some of the worst mortality and atrocities occurred during this period. Starvation and epidemic disease stalked the land, and American missionaries participated in relief efforts along with other members of the foreign community in Tabriz, including consular and British military officials and French missionaries. At Urmia the small remaining Assyrian population were without American leadership, but Mrs. Judith David, an Assyrian leader in the "American" Church, gathered refugees in the American Mission and organized their care.⁴⁵

In Spring 1919, contact was established between the American Mission at

⁴²E.S.S., 26 June 1919, FO 248, 1919, Assyrians, 9, 15, 137, 138; and 18 Jan. 1919 Baghdad telegram, Political, no. 710, and the Legation's minute on it seem to confirm that American missionary Robert McDowell served as Gracey's assistant ["Gracey & McDowell interviewed Simko together"].

⁴³Ellis, Tabriz, 4 Nov. 1918, to Speer, New York, PHS, RG 91; Dodd, Urmia station report, Tabriz, 1 Nov. 1918, PHS, RG 91-5-21.

⁴⁴Ellis, Tabriz, 4 Nov. 1918, to Speer, New York, PHS, RG 91; Dodd, Urmia station report, Tabriz, 1 Nov. 1918, PHS, RG 91-5-21; Fromkin, *Peace*, 366-73.

⁴⁵Judith David, Treasurer and Director, American Persian Relief Committee, Urmia, "Urmia after the Evacuation by the Christians," copied by W. P. Ellis to Paddock, Tabriz, 13 Sept. 1919, Tabriz, Near East Relief papers, v. 2, USNA, RG 84.

Tabriz and Assyrian refugees at Urmia. The bulk of the surviving Assyrian community was under British supervision near Baghdad and wanted to return to their pre-war homes as soon as possible. Because of unsettled political conditions in the vicinity of Urmia -- this phrase also covers British indecision as to whether or not they intended to establish an autonomous Kurdistan -- British authorities refused permission for Assyrians to return home.⁴⁶ Iranian government authorities also sought to keep Assyrians, and perhaps their American protectors as well, away from Urmia.

In February 1919 Dr. Packard nevertheless made a brief inspection tour and argued it was essential for him to return to Urmia, in order to encourage Assyrians to get on with spring planting. In April he went to Urmia with his family. After a few weeks of apparent peace, all hell broke loose.

On 24 May 1919 a riot destroyed the American Mission at Urmia. Amidst a famine so severe that highwaymen were reported to be laying in wait for travelers to cook and eat, a crowd of Iranians overwhelmed the Mission's Kurdish guards and looted the food, gold, guns, and other valuables stored there. The crowd hacked to death some 270 of almost 900 Christian refugees sheltered in the mission yard, beneath the Stars and Stripes.⁴⁷

In retrospect, Dr. Packard's return to Urmia seems to have made the situation worse. The Iranian population may well have worried that his presence encouraged Assyrians to establish an independent position in Urmia, under British protection. Also, Iranians may well have been alarmed by Packard's hiring of Kurds as guards for the mission, by his paying caution money to other Kurds, and by his doling out food to needy refugees in the town. Indeed, under the conditions of privation then existing -- Iranians believed Kurds had turned to cannibalism in order to survive -- one might speculate that doling out food to Kurds seemed likely to attract many more refugees from the surrounding mountains to the American mission yards.

Packard was aware of the dimensions of the problem, if not of the threat it posed. On 10 April he wrote to US Consul Paddock that, "Some of the Kurds have come to visit me ... [and] avow that they are ready to do just as I command them." Packard expressed hope that there would soon be a permanent British representative at Urmia, and that Ernest Bristow, British Consul at Tabriz, would soon come "to see some of his new subjects, as they call themselves."⁴⁸ Packard was especially critical of Iranian government relations with Kurdish chief Ismail Agha, Simko. "A great farce this," he wrote, "but it is very hell for the subjects that

⁴⁶FO 369, 1195 (1919); FO 248, 1233 (1919).

⁴⁷USNA, RG 84, Tabriz Consulate, 1919-1920.

⁴⁸Packard, Urmia, 10 April 1919, to Paddock, Tabriz, USNA, RG 84, Tabriz, 1919, file 800.

have to live under such a government."⁴⁹ A few days later, Packard wrote specifically about Iranian concerns.

*The Governor complains of our helping Kurds. Moslems of city complain also. The Moslems are afraid of the Kurds and have been opposed by them. They say the Kurds have taken everything and they need nothing. Neither side has any idea of fairness to the other, and in this sea of confusion we cannot please anyone. The net result will be dissatisfaction on all sides. The first requisite here is some force, but the relief need is so great that we shall with greatest difficulty compass only a small part of it.*⁵⁰

Four days after Packard verbalized these concerns, violence again erupted. The crisis began with a bungled effort to assassinate Simko by means of a bomb disguised as a present to him from the Iranian governor of Urmia. Simko escaped without harm, but his brother was killed by the device. In retaliation, enraged Kurds attacked Urmia on the morning of the 24th but were repulsed by the town's defenders and a hastily assembled militia. After the Kurds were driven off, the crowd turned on the American mission, looted its valuables, and killed almost three hundred refugees. This riot of 24 May 1919 essentially ended the Presbyterian presence in Urmia until after Reza Khan had reestablished central government authority.

Conclusions

Since its beginning in the 1830s, the American Mission at Urmia had inadvertently mingled religion and secular matters, preaching the good news of America as well as the gospel of Christ. As Hugo Muller noted in his wartime pamphlet, to the missionaries and their clients the Stars and Stripes symbolized and united two great causes, "the cause of Christ and the cause of America..." Muller claimed that many of those who saw the flag "regarded it the symbol of Protestant Christianity quite as much as they did [as] the symbol of America." Mixing of religion and government, confounding Christian religion with American nationalism, affected the Mission's work in Iran. Thus from the start, and without being conscious it was doing so, the American Mission encouraged secular national aspirations: Assyrian, Armenian, Kurdish, and Iranian.

The Great War in the Middle East came to take on the aspect of religious nationalism, of a Crusade in the face of a Jihad. Despite sincere and repeated

⁴⁹Packard, Urmia, 10 May 1919, to Paddock, Tabriz, USNA, RG 84, Tabriz, 1919, file 800.

⁵⁰Packard, Urmia, 20 May 1919, to Paddock, Tabriz, USNA, RG 84, Tabriz, 1919, file 800.

statements of beneficent intentions toward people of all creeds, Muslims included, under the pressures of war American Presbyterian missionaries came to see the Allied cause as Christian. They believed pan-Islam to be their foe. On the other side, there seems little doubt that the Ottoman government sought to use Islam as a political weapon, proclaiming Jihad and seeking to mobilize all Muslims against the Russians and their allies. Iran, of course, was at an early stage of its 20th century political development, but we can see beneath the secular nationalism of many Iranians, such as the pro-German Democrats, a popular nationalism which did not distinguish between Iran and Islam. This reality is echoed in the American missionaries' own phraseology, where "Persian" meant "Muslim" as well as "Iranian," as in one missionary's statement about his early days in Azerbaijan, "*Before I learned Turkish, I needed a translator to talk to the Persians.*"

It is not just Iranian nationalism which is involved here; there is a broader context. The Great War exacerbated many sorts of modern national feeling, often with exceptionally nasty consequences. In the Russian Empire, for example, the rise of Bolshevism obscured the rise of many competing nationalisms. Today, these national conflicts seem more durable than Communism itself. Similarly, in central Europe the war encouraged the rise of German racial nationalism, which in turn provoked the Second World War. This in turn helped to create the Cold War. In the Middle East, the rise of Turkism, Arabism, and Zionism all are partly consequences of the vast upheaval of the Great War. Awful as the Great War was, in many places it led to even worse consequences. Any discussion of Iran at this time must take this broader context into account.

The Great War in northwestern Iran set off waves of mass murder of civilians, carried out by ill-disciplined combatant forces and by civilians angry at what had been done to them in the past and fearful of what might be done in the future. Overall mortality from starvation, exposure, and disease as well as violence was awful. For Assyrians and Kurds it reached the proportions of the Holocaust: 80% died. In 1997, this might well be called "confessional cleansing."

American missionaries at Urmia were caught in the crossfire. They believed they could not stand aside passively and let events occur. They believed they had a moral duty to alleviate suffering and to work for justice. Consequently, they took sides in the struggle, on the side of right as they saw it. In this context it is important to remember that the metaphor of the Church was often military, as in the words of the popular hymn, "Onward Christian Soldiers, Marching as to War, with the Cross of Jesus, Going on Before." It is impossible to know what might have happened had American missionaries not worked so hard for the Allies, but one wonders if it could have been worse for the population of western Azerbaijan than what actually did occur. Inaction, however, was not the Presbyterian way.

The American Mission's role in the post-armistice chaos seems mixed. It is hard to fault their desire to feed the starving. However, efforts by Dr. Packard to resume an American presence at Urmia in May 1919 seem to have inadvertently contributed to a renewed outbreak of violence. Because of his wartime activity in

Urmia on behalf of Assyrians, Packard was not well-regarded by the Muslim population. His renewed subsidy of Kurdish refugees in May 1919 and his hiring of Kurdish guards for the mission was politically naive. In the context of a famine so severe that episodes of cannibalism were being reported, in the minds of the "Persian" population Packard's presence and actions at Urmia may well have seemed to foreshadow a renewed terror. He had only beneficent and peaceful intentions, of course, but it seems clear that his presence in Urmia helped to cause a riot which killed 270 Christian refugees and destroyed the Presbyterian mission.

How to assess the role of American Presbyterian missionaries at Urmia during the Great War? Their purpose for being there was to minister to the physical and spiritual needs of individual human beings. They sought to preach the Good News of Christ, they sought to bring enlightenment to those who hungered for western knowledge, and they sought to alleviate human pain and suffering. What is wrong with that? Given who they were, what else could they have done? Whatever their intentions, however, what they experienced, and in some measure caused, could well be described as hell on earth.

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