

A Commentary on Professor Zirinsky's Article:  
**American Presbyterian Missionaries at Urmia  
During the Great War**

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As Dr. Zirinsky states in his introductory note, the history of American Mission in Urmia cuts across the history of several nations and ethnic groups. This article is of particular interest to scholars of Assyrian studies because Assyrians were the main group among whom the American missionaries worked in Urmia.

Zirinsky states that he intends to shed light on modern Iranian and international history by primarily using data from the American Presbyterian Church archives. But he seems distrustful of Missionary accounts. Moreover, the manner in which data is handled, and the way sequences of events are presented, appear to advance a particular perspective, rather than to present an objective description of events. Some of these problems will be indicated in the following review. The article itself appears to be an attempt to exonerate the perpetrators of the genocide on the Christian minority during WWI.

Since Zirinsky divides his article into two major sections, a historical survey of events and the activities of the Presbyterian mission during those events, it is best to review each section separately.

### **Historical Survey:**

Six phases are marked out in the events which occurred between Oct. 1914-Nov.1919.

Phase one begins with Oct. 14, 1914 at which time Turkey declared war on Russia. At this stage, according to Zirinsky, local Assyrians "organized into a military force", attacked local Muslim villages at the same time that Russian authorities were hanging Iranians suspected of "corresponding" with the Ottoman Turks. "Thus, [according to Zirinsky] the quality of relations between Muslim and Christian communities sharply declined even before the Ottomans invaded".

The reader is introduced to the Assyrians as if the war events began with them being armed and on the offensive. Aside from the fact that Assyrians were not organized into an armed force until the Summer of 1916,<sup>1</sup> the Ottoman Turks, together with the Kurds, had already invaded Persia before the declaration of war--as early as 1907 and had left the countryside in the border area and on the plain of Urmia in ruins. The reports on pre-war events come from German sources attached to the Lutheran Mission, and therefore present a perspective sympathetic to Turks and Germans. The 1907 events described below are by Elizabeth Wendt, the daughter of a German pastor in a letter dated 2 Aug. 1907.

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1. John Joseph. *The Nestorians and Their Muslim Neighbors*. Princeton, 1961. P. 135.

She was married into the De Kelaita family from the Tergawar district, which was the location of numerous Christian villages and parishes:

*“Our village Charbash is now completely filled with people coming through, fleeing from Tergawar. Hundreds of people...arrive starving. ... I sewed a German flag which we intend to raise in case of emergency, as the Turks are friendly towards the Germans. Yesterday morning the Kurds came and every one who was not killed fled. They fled from there without bread, without clothes, with only their lives. Many hundreds have gone to the city to the Russian consul and more keep coming. The actual reason for the terribly rushed flight was that the Turks came up behind the Kurds with cannons...”*<sup>2</sup>

An estimated number of 2,000 Assyrians had fled into the town of Urmia seeking protection at the Russian Consul.<sup>3</sup> The Persian government was too weak to defend its borders and its citizens.

The events in 1908 are described in another report by pastor Karl Robbelen written in 1909:

*The Newspapers have reported about the terrible events which caused the political confusion in Persia. Havoc has also been wrought in the Northwest province of Azerbaijan. .. In August of last year (1908), the unrest and turmoil began in that province when the Turkish troops crossed the border, first occupying and plundering the region of Tergawar. Thousands of Syrian {Assyrian} Christians were robbed of all their possessions, expelled from their home and their land and left to their misery. This example incited the predatory Kurdish tribes in the mountainous districts. The confusion in the countryside and the government's powerlessness and inactivity encouraged them to stage ever bolder raids. Since spring the Kurds' looting has been constantly increasing in intensity. The rich Baranduz region was the first to be devastated in this manner, the Urmia region, where our brothers live, was next.*<sup>4</sup>

The Turkish troops occupied the whole region west of Urmia until 1912 (Joseph 127).

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2. E. Wendt. Source: Sonderdruck des Evangelischen Vereins Zur Forderung der nestorianischen Kirche in Kurdistan (Offprint from the evangelical Association to Sponsor the Nestorian church in Kurdistan). Lerbeck b. Porta W. 1907. in G. . Yonan *Ein Vergessener Holocaust (A Forgotten Holocaust)*. 1989. P. 67.

3. For more on these events see Kokhva (The Star) Nov. 1907.

4. Pastoren Pera Johannes und Luther Pera im Jahre 1909 an Hermannsburg (Circular Nr. 3). (Pastors P. Johannes and L. Pera to Hermannsburg in 1909 (Circular no. 3). in G. Yonan *Ein ....P.75*.

With respect to relations between local Muslims and the Christians, it is true they had deteriorated; but for different reasons and long before the WWI events.

In the 19th century both the local Muslim and Christian peasantry suffered under a despotic feudal order dominated by greedy landlords and overbearing government officials. But the Christian subjects suffered from additional handicaps: They were barred from all occupations related to the handling of foodstuff as their touch was considered religiously contaminating. In addition, they were denied basic legal rights.

For example, the testimony of a Christian against a Muslim was not accepted in the courts of law, and a Christian convert to Islam was entitled to all his/her family property. Cases of forceful abduction of Christian women for this purpose were not unknown. Being deprived of legal rights, the Christians were at the mercy of the local inhabitants. In 1881 through the mediation of the English ambassador, some of these discriminatory laws were lifted (Joseph 90-91). The local Muslim population which was conditioned to a privileged legal position compared to the Christians was infuriated to see foreign missionaries and consular agents turning a minority into a privileged class with equal rights and new occupational and educational possibilities. Therefore, they welcomed an opportunity to set the matters straight.

In November of 1914 Turkey declared "Jihad" (holy war) at the same time that it formed an alliance with Germany. The German authorities had instigated the call to Jihad in order to mobilize all Muslims, irrespective of denominational differences into action against the "Christian" allies. In doing so they were aware that it would put the civilian Christian population at risk (G. Yonan 87, 105).

A systematic deportation and massacre of Armenians and Assyrians in Ottoman Turkey ensued (G. Yonan: 212). The well-armed Kurds attacked the mountain Assyrians in Hakkari. The Assyrians, whose request for arms from Russia had not materialized, were forced to defend themselves with antiquated rifles and flintlocks. From a population of 160,000, only 35,000 were able to escape into Persia where they placed themselves under Russian protection in the summer of 1915.<sup>5</sup> P. Price, war correspondent for British and American newspapers reported:

*"...mountain Nestorians from the Tkhuma, Baz and Tiari regions, who had been fighting with the Kurds all summer and had had to flee for lack of ammunition, came pouring into the plain led by their Patriarch, Mar Shimun, and began to plant themselves down in the orchards and gardens round the villages. I did not observe on my return to Salamas after a journey to Van in November any real improvement in the health of the refugees. Every day a hundred or*

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5. Rev. E. T. Allen. Letter dated Nov. 8, 1915. Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.; J. Joseph 134.

*more Assyrians and Armenians were dying in the villages round Diliman, and the same thing is going on now."*<sup>6</sup>

Zirinsky introduces these refugees in phase three of his historical survey in the following terms: "as many as 50,000 armed Assyrians from Hakkari (Jilus, led by their primate, Mar Shimoun) and Armenians from Van descended on the Urmi plain as refugees." Note: the reason why the mountain Assyrians fled into Persia, was because they had run out of ammunition. In the Fall of 1916 when they were organized into an armed force, the number did not exceed 2,000 fighters. In 1917 they were organized into three battalions numbering 4,000 fighting men.<sup>7</sup> This is a far cry from the 50,000 figure provided by Zirinsky. These figures are followed by a derogatory description of the mountain Assyrians who he claims, "had little understanding of agriculture or urban life" which according to him, inclined them to graze their sheep on farmland and destroy the orchards. It is therefore necessary to inform the reader that the mountain Assyrians engaged partly in agriculture and partly in raising sheep and goats. They cultivated rice, tobacco and cereal crops on both sides of the valley of the Zab. Much ingenuity and labor was employed to make the utmost use of scarce land and to conduct the water uphill for irrigation. Orchards of apples, pomegranates, figs, and walnuts were also grown.<sup>8</sup>

So if they grazed their sheep on grain fields when they were refugees, it was not out of ignorance, but dislocation; so was the cutting of fruit trees and vines for firewood. Homeless people do not think of preserving fruit trees when they have no bedding to keep them warm.

Although Persia declared its neutrality during WWI, nevertheless the call for Jihad instigated the local Muslim population to take advantage of the chaotic wartime conditions and even up their scores with the local Christians. Thus during the period under analysis, the Christian communities in Persia came under attack from three fronts: the Ottoman Turks, the Kurds, and the local Muslims.

The first paragraph of phase six in the article is irrelevant to the events in Urmia, and it is not clear why it is placed there. The second paragraph deals with the return of Dr. Packard and the looting of the American mission and the murder of one third of the refugees. Zirinsky attempts to justify this event in the following way: "It was the result of growing popular Iranian perception that Americans were associated with Assyrian and Kurdish attacks on Iranian Muslims".

The Assyrians had already evacuated the region in August of 1918. By his own admission, neither the British, nor the Persian government would allow the refugees to return to Urmia (Zirinsky, phase 5). In 1919, when the massacre took place, there were no more than 900 refugees left in the American mission. Zirinsky does not provide evidence to show what was the basis for these

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6. Statement dated Tiflis, Feb.22, 1916. *Ararat* of London. March 1916.

7 G. Yonan *Ein*.....360-363.

8. Layard, A. *Nineveh And Its Remains*. 2nd ed. London: Spottiswoode & Shaw.

perceptions. Further down, he introduces yet another explanation for the 1919 attack on the American mission: "Iranian population may well have worried that his (Dr. Packard's) presence encouraged the Assyrians to establish an independent position in Urmia, under British protection." Again for reasons mentioned above, it is difficult to account for such "worries". We are not told why Dr. Packard decided, after his first visit, to return and stay with the refugees at the mission. Is it possible that Judith David, the Assyrian woman who had gathered refugees in the American Mission and organized their care after the expulsion of the American missionaries, was apprehensive of a foreboding massacre, and besought his protection? Faulting Dr. Packard--the lone missionary who took his family back into a war zone to be near the hapless refugees- for the massacre and looting that ensued, is poor historicism to say the least.

One of the points that Zirinsky dwells on is that "The American Mission encouraged secular national aspiration: Assyrian, Armenian, Kurdish, and Iranian, as well as American." The only evidence he provides is the career of two individuals: Howard Baskerville and Ahmad Kasravi, both of whom were teachers in the American Mission school. Actually, it was the British and Russian colonial expansion into the Ottoman Turkey and Persia which contributed to the disintegration of the archaic Islamic states, and resulted in their replacement by secular national states based upon the European model. The Young Turk revolution, and the Persian Constitutional revolution were both manifestations of the rise of nation states in the Middle East. Minority national aspirations were all part and parcel of this new ideology. But such trends need to be interpreted in an international socio-political context. Whatever role the missionaries played in this respect was dwarfed compared to other agents of change. Actually the first national organizations among the Assyrians and Armenians came into existence in the Ottoman territory rather than in Urmia.

To sum up: During WWI The Russian authorities in Urmia did punish local Muslim leaders in cahoots with the Kurdish and Ottoman officials, and they did supply the local Christians with weapons to defend themselves. Eventually the Assyrians fought on the side of the Allies in WWI. As power changed hands from one group to another, excesses were committed on all sides, at the same time heroic efforts were made by individuals of all creeds to save innocent lives. The civilian population, whether Muslim or Christian, suffered unspeakable horrors. But most of all the underdog Christian minorities in Ottoman Turkey and Persia became the victims of the first twentieth century genocide that has gone unrecognized in world history up till now (G. Yonan 1989).

### **The Presbyterian Mission During the War:**

From the perspective of a "secular historian, Zirinsky contends that "missionaries in Urmia seem to have had more worldly than religious impact".

How can religious or spiritual impact be assessed from a secular perspective? How can it be quantified, measured and compared in terms of more

and less? Certainly not by the number of converts particularly under conditions when church membership becomes a political protective measure (like the mass conversion of 20,000 Assyrians to the Russian Orthodox church for Russian protection).

The small group of missionaries who provided solace for thousands of traumatized, destitute refugees at the risk of their own lives, were the best witnesses for the Christian faith. Their healing hands, their nourishing touch, their prayers for people in constant mourning for the loss of loved ones, were the only rays of life and hope in the heart of darkness. We read from the diary of a missionary a revealing statement that says it all:

*"The poor, hunted creatures think that if they can only hold to the skirts of a missionary, they will be safe".<sup>9</sup>*

Whether some of the actions of the missionaries inadvertently worsened the condition of the Assyrians during WWI is a moot point. Chances are that without them, the call for "Jihad" would have resulted in the total extermination of the Assyrians of Urmia. What is certain is that a small group of missionaries chose to stay when they could have left and endangered their own lives to serve victims of genocide. The spiritual value of such devotion is incalculable for the survivors of the genocide and their descendants.

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9. Diary of A Missionary. S. Platt (ed.). BFM of the Presbyterian Church, U. S. A.