

THE ASSYRIAN GENOCIDE

SEYFO

When
Where
How



DAVID GAUNT

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DAVID GAUNT

Thank you!

We would like to express our sincere gratitude for your generous support of SEYFO Center's tireless efforts in creating awareness regarding our history and in strengthening our national identity. We are able to continue with our efforts because of your continuous support, without which this publication would not have been possible. Thank You!

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Preface

The Year of the Sword

Only one hundred and three years ago, unknown to most, the Ottoman Turks massacred two-thirds of the Assyrian population in the greater Middle East. This genocide, in which over a quarter of a million Assyrians were cruelly and deliberately put to death, was the 20th century's first genocide. While this genocide is recognized as historical fact by 26 countries, the Republic of Turkey persists in denying that it ever took place.

This genocide was more than the death of ten of thousands of innocent people; it was a defining historical event which changed the lives of the survivors, leaving generations with wounds that have yet to heal. These wounds, a profound sense of loss and break with their past, are made even more painful by Turkey's refusal to take responsibility for their horrible acts against the Assyrian people. Aided by the Kurds, Turkey carried out the 20th century's first genocide, its first holocaust. While a country cannot change the past, it must take responsibility for its actions in the present: Turkey and the Kurdish Regional Government must acknowledge their participation in this horrific crime and must be prepared to compensate the survivors for their loss, their pain and suffering.

Instead of taking responsibility for its action, present day Turkey strongly advocates and lobbies the world to adopt a "Just forget about it" and "Just move on" doctrine. Yet with generations displaced peoples, millions of dollars lost and futures uncertain, present-day Assyrians cannot simply "forget about it" and "just move on."

One of the great advances of the international community has been its willingness to strongly condemn the atrocities of murder, rape, and slavery, regardless of whether the crimes happening in the past or are going on in the present. It is just and fair, too, that victims of any such crimes be compensated for their losses, and on this matter the United Nations Security Council must lead the way. If the international community cannot condemn the genocides of the past, then we have no

hope of preventing more in the future.

Germany has acknowledged and condemned the Holocaust that was committed by the Nazi Party, and has emerged as a stronger and great democratic country. In 2016, Germany also recognized the Armenian, Assyrian, and Greek genocide, bringing the number of European countries to 15 that have likewise done so.

Turkey has repeatedly asked to be admitted into the European Union and yet refuses to acknowledge the Assyrian genocide, including and especially its role in it. Turkey's President Erdogan often talks of Turkey's emerging "democracy" yet continues to speak and act like a dictator. Concerning the Assyrian genocide, for example, Mr. Erdogan has said that "It's not possible for a Muslim to commit genocide." This is of course absurd. Any nation, any group of people, can commit terrible acts, whether they be Muslim, Christian or Jew. At the time of this writing, for example, the Islamic State, a thoroughly Muslim creation, is committing some of the most horrible acts of murder and genocide the world has ever seen. Despite this fact, Mr. Erdogan allows fighters from the Islamic State, Jabhat al Nusra and other Islamic extremists to cross Turkish borders, to murder and terrorize people in Iraq and Syria, to return safely to Turkey, even, at times, to be treated in Turkish hospitals.

The Young Turks, the high officials, the Pashas, of the new Turkish Republic were the masterminds of the Genocide of 1915. Names like Pashas Talaat, Pashas Jemal and Pashas Enver are as synonymous with terror and murder as are Hitler and Eichmann, yet throughout Turkey, streets and municipal builds are named for these "great" men. Could we imagine the outrage that would and should occur if streets in Berlin bore the name "Himmler Straße?" Would such a thing, such a callous refusal to acknowledge the faults of the Holocaust, be acceptable? Of course it would not, yet today thousands of places in Turkey still bear, and are still given, the names of the murderous architects of the Assyrian genocide. With its insistence on celebrating the guilty draftsmen of the 21st century's first Holocaust one marvels at the hubris of Turkey's insistence that it should be admitted to the democratic, European Union.

About This Book

This book aspires to presents a comprehensive account of the Assyrian Genocide, and is written in a comprehensible style. I hope it will as interesting as it is intended to be useful for the reader. At the end of the work I have included an extensive bibliography to aid those who might want to dig deeper into the topic.

In 1915, during the genocide, the sword was the weapon of choice used against the Assyrian peoples. Literally butchered with the sword, Assyrians called this event the Seyfo (Sword), and one is hard pressed to find an Assyrians from Turkey who does not know what this word means.

Where, how, and by whom was the Seyfo carried out? Who are those responsible? This book aims to provide answers to theses essential questions.

The author of this book, Professor David Gaunt, is no stranger to the topic of Assyrian genocide. His previous work, *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors: Muslim-Christian Relations in Eastern Anatolia during World War I* treated the subject extensively. As Professor Gaunt points out, there are many reasons why the Assyrian Genocide is neither sufficiently known nor properly commemorated. However, time has a way of changing things, and at present it is far easier for the handful of grandchildren of the survivors of the genocide in „current“ Turkey to talk about this subject freely. The migration of the Assyrians to the European countries and other continents only occurred in the last forty years, and their children, a new, young Assyrian generation is watching the world closely, and have established four federations and more than sixty associations, all dedicated to sorting out the past and telling the truth to the present.

These global, young Assyrians are butting heads with the official Turkish stance on the issue, a continuous re-hash of the “let’s just leave the past alone.” principle.

Over the past few years Assyrians have succeeded in making the Assyrian Genocide (Seyfo) known within the international arena. Many new books have been published on this subject and new documentaries pro-

duced. Numerous conferences have been organized, particularly in the European and other national parliaments. The Seyfo Center is actively involved in a group consisting of the three groups, Assyrians, Armenians and Greeks, who all suffered from the genocide. Under the motto, „three genocides, one strategy” it is carrying important strategic work to counter the last gasp of Turkish denial of the Genocide.

The Seyfo center for the Assyrian Genocide and Research has too been working diligently and tirelessly towards the international recognition of the genocide and ethnic cleansing committed against the Assyrians (also known as the Syriacs and Chaldeans).

In our attempt to raise awareness for the Assyrian genocide, we are active in several endeavors:

- The Center keeps large pool of sources and provides research assistance to scholars, writers, journalists, filmmakers, and government agencies.
- We document the Assyrian Genocide by collecting oral history and endorsing written evidence.
- We present the Assyrian Genocide in parliaments and government bodies.
- We educate non-Assyrians in political and academic forums.
- We participate in activism on behalf of the Assyrian people.
- We publish books, reports, and brochures, as well as appear on radio and TV when asked.
- The Assyrian Genocide and Research, SEYFO CENTER is an international center devoted to the research and documentation of contemporary issues related to the history, politics, society, and culture of the Assyrian around the world.
- Research is conducted to document past and current events, and to analyze their impact on individuals and institutions in Assyria and the Diaspora.
- The Assyrian Seyfo Center maintains its independence from political parties, religious beliefs, and churches.
- The Seyfo Center has published fourteen thousand copies of a small booklet, which was distributed free in many countries' parliaments and institutions.

On December 19th of 2007, the International Association of Genocide Scholars (IAGS) recognized the Assyrian Genocide and urged Turkey to do the same.

On March 13th of 2009, the Kurdish intellectual Berzan Boti transferred land his grandfather's captured in 1915 to the actual owners of the land, the Assyrians, and formally apologized to the victims during a ceremony held at the Swedish parliament, at which he condemned those who committed the genocide.


In 2010, the Swedish Parliament and City Council in Australia recognized the Assyrian Genocide: In 2015 the Republic of Armenia, the Netherlands, the Vatican, Austria and Germany, Syria and the Czech Republic have recognized the Assyrian genocide. Furthermore, two states of the United States of America, Iowa and Indiana, have also recognized the Assyrian genocide. There are more countries and states that will follow suit. But we have to work very hard to achieve this.

With each passing day global pressure is mounting on Turkey to admit the truth and acknowledge its role in the Year of the Sword, the Seyfo. Such an acknowledgement, though it would run counter to the current policy that „Turkey belongs to Turks,“ would certainly draw Turkey closer to democracy and the behavior one would expect from a free and civilized peoples. Our task then, everyone's task, is to question why Turkey persists in its denial the Year of the Sword.

About the Seyfo Center

The Seyfo Center is active in several countries, and our success depends on our volunteers and supporters. We have over fifteen monuments around the world, and we are working to erect more monuments to raise awareness of the Assyrian Genocide.

To keep moving forward in our mission we need more volunteers and financial support. While we are grateful to all those who have previously supported and funded this great cause, our struggle for recognition is unfortunately far from over. However, we know that with your financial and volunteer support we can continue, we can move forward and we will achieve the goal of bring universal recognition of the Year of the



Sword, even and especially from the Republic of Turkey.

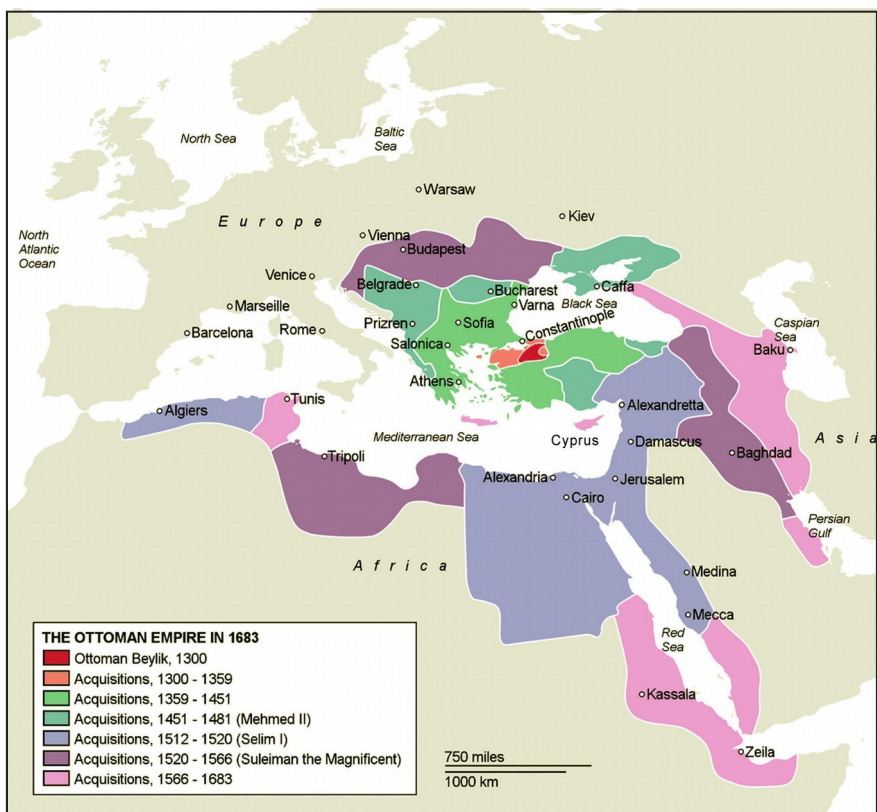
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September 7, 2019, Los Angeles



Before the genocide

The Ottoman Empire emerged from a Turkmen principality in western Turkey. The founder was Osman, and the town of Bursa was his capital. From the middle of the 14th century, the Ottoman Empire expanded very rapidly and comprised almost all the Balkans, including the old Byzantine capital Constantinople that was captured in 1453. The Ottomans were Muslims but due to their expansion they ruled over an empire with many different religions. It is likely there were initially more Christians than Muslims in the new empire, and there was need to find a new way to govern a multi-religious society. Since the days of Mohammed there was a custom to protect non-Muslims as long as their faith was based on the Bible and that they also paid a special tax and were subservient to the Muslims, dressed in a special manner, and so on. The protected peoples were allowed to follow their own laws in family matters, have their own schools and charitable institutions, and collect taxes. Initially, there were only three recognized non-Muslim religions: Judaism, Greek Orthodox and the Armenian Church. Each religious group (called millet which means nation in Turkish) was to be represented by their highest leader – the patriarch or chief rabbi. Despite official religious tolerance, non-Muslims were almost always treated as second-class citizens. They could not serve as public officials, not become officers or soldiers, not carry weapons, had to wear special clothes, and could not build new churches or renovate old ones without special permission from the sultan.

Few Assyrians lived in the Ottoman Empire before the 16th century, but Sultan Selim I (who ruled 1512-1520) conquered large parts of Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Syria and Egypt. From that time the Ottoman Empire also comprised Syria, Mesopotamia and Tur Abdin – areas where many Assyrians had lived since ancient times. Only one sizeable group of Assyrians lived outside the Ottoman Empire, namely in north-western Iran near the town of Urmia where the Shah of Persia ruled. It would take several centuries before a millet was created for the different Assyrian denominations. The aim was that the Armenian patriarch would represent the Assyrian churches, collect their taxes and convey their views at the sultan's court.

They lived far from the capital Constantinople and the sultan's government seldom had control over these remote areas until the end of the nineteenth century. Even then, the governors had to cooperate with local powers, large clans in the towns, minor princes (called emirs) who ruled over Kurdish and Arab tribes, large landowners (aghas) or respected religious leaders who were relied on to mediate in tribal conflicts (shaykhs).

The Ottoman Empire flourished between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries but began to fall apart at the turn of the nineteenth century, by which time it was known as the sick-man of Europe. Struggling with grave financial problems and anarchy in the remote parts of the empire, disagreements between the great powers over who would get what parts was the only reason that it did not disintegrate earlier. The Ottomans had stagnated and not kept pace with the great powers of Europe regarding the economy, state finances, political activity and above all military technology. The Ottomans could no longer defend their borders against their aggressive neighbours and ceded a lot of territory. Russia expanded in the Caucasus and Crimea, while Austria occupied the northern and western Balkans. During the first part of the nineteenth century Turkey had to cede Greece after a long war of independence 1821-32, while the territories of Serbia (1816) and Egypt (in practice as early as 1811) achieved self-rule with only token Ottoman rule. The great powers Britain and France would later take control over distant and difficult-to-control provinces like Algeria (1830), Tunisia (1881), Cyprus (1878) and Egypt (1882). Russia gained the eastern provinces of Ardahan, Batum and Kars in 1878 while in the same year Bulgaria got self-rule and Austria took over Bosnia and Herzegovina. Powerless to prevent these incursions, the Ottomans tried to introduce internal reforms to strengthen the empire economically, politically and militarily. A main policy was to try to unite the different ethnic and religious groups under a joint Ottoman citizenship. Therefore the privileges of some groups were abolished and the discrimination of other, mostly non-Muslim, groups was to be phased out. However, these measures proved to be too few, too slow, and too late.

One of the lines of reforms concerning the Christian minorities was introduced by several solemn proclamations to introduce equality between religions in 1839 and 1856. This reform movement, known in Turkish history as the Tanzimat period, culminated in a new constitution with an elected national assembly 1877. The government declared that the second-class

status of non-Muslims would cease, the special tax on them would be abolished, and they would be allowed (in principle) to become public officials, soldiers and army officers. The thought was that these non-Muslims would now feel more loyal to the sultan and the empire, and the continued existence of the state. Provincial councils were set up where prominent non-Muslim representatives could also become elected members. The main function of the local councils was to supervise the collection of taxes, but many local politicians used the opportunity to buy up the land of farmers who were unable to pay their taxes and who came into debt. Thereby many Assyrian and Armenian farmers lost the ownership of their land and became simple farm hands, serving an absentee landlord, or had to leave their villages.

The loss of land was only one background factor to the sizeable migration to new areas. Another factor was the rise in everyday violence in the wake of the Ottoman state's attempt to strengthen the power and control of the provincial governments. Previously, the provincial governors (titled *valis*) had been relatively isolated officials usually controlled by local, influential families. But from the mid-nineteenth century the number of local governors doubled, and they could also deploy soldiers. Their main aim was to crush all forms of provincial opposition. In eastern Anatolia this meant striking out at Kurdish and Arab emirs and their tribal warriors. New weapons were introduced — automatic rifles, cannon, artillery — crushing the emirs' power. A key event for the Assyrians was when the Emir of Bohtan, Badr Khan, was defeated 1846. His headquarters had been in the town of Jezire ibn-Omar (now Cizre) on the Tigris River. He had for several years tormented Assyrians in Hakkari and Tur Abdin. However, the fall of the emirs did not bring peace but rather created a power vacuum. Chaos ensued instead and violence surged when minor tribal leaders fought each other to take over the positions vacated by the emirs. The sultan's next move was to tie certain nomadic tribes to the central government by granting them special privileges. A few select tribes were offered to form cavalry regiments where the chief would become commander and tribal warriors were to serve as soldiers. They would be issued uniforms, modern weapons and given some training. These units, called *Hamidiye* regiments, were named after Sultan Abdulhamid II who ruled 1876-1909. The plan was that the *Hamidiye* forces would establish some kind of order by suppressing all of the other Kurdish tribes and the Christian minorities. However, due

to their arbitrary actions and lack of discipline they ended up terrorizing all their neighbours. They could seize control over Christian villages, steal livestock, abduct and rape women. The farmers were powerless and there was seldom redress if they complained to the authorities.

For ordinary Assyrian farmers, the negative trends mentioned above – the loss of land through heavier taxation and increased violence from the Hamadiye cavalry – could not offset the positive effect of the abolishment of official discrimination. This contributed to population movements as Assyrians and Armenians sought safer agricultural land, for instance in Arab-speaking districts in northern Syria and Iraq or moved into the cities. Others migrated long distances – whole teams of craftsmen left Hakkari for Russia to work on the railways or building construction. By the early 1900s many Assyrians settled in the New York and New Jersey area (particularly Paterson), eastern Massachusetts and central California (particularly Turlock).

Young Turks

Despite what looks like honest ambitions, the Ottoman government never succeeded in its attempts to integrate the non-Muslim minorities, modernize the administration or to catch up economically with the rest of Europe. On the contrary, the last part of the 1800s was characterized by reactions against the progressive ideas of the Tanzimat reform movement. In 1878 Sultan Abdulhamid revoked a newly drafted constitution and dissolved the National Assembly and ruled as an autocrat. But even a dictator needs popular support for a one-man rule, so Abdulhamid played on Islamist feelings and used his authority as caliph, claiming to lead Muslims worldwide. However, there was growing discontent mainly among Ottoman officers, bureaucrats, diplomats and those who had been educated abroad and who were secular in orientation. They noted the empire's continued poor performance and backwardness in relation to the rest of Europe. During the 1880s small committees of political dissenters were formed within the army and administration. The movement assembled many people with many different ideologies and strategies for modernization. After several name changes they decided on calling themselves the Young Turks and their most radical branch was a semi-secret organization called the Committee of Union and Progress (Ittihat ve terakki). Their primary goal was to restore the suspended constitution and recall the National Assembly, reduce the sultan's power to that of a constitutional monarch, re-organize the army and administration, conduct general elections, permit political parties, abolish press censorship, carry out all the unfulfilled promises of equality between religions, and so on. These ideals were similar to those shared by many liberal parties throughout Europe. The Young Turks came to power after a revolution in 1908 and immediately won whole-hearted (at least initially) support from Armenians, Assyrians and Greeks who hoped that this marked the dawn of a new era.

But in addition to the multicultural aims of the liberal-wing of the Young Turk movement, there were also dark ideological elements which fought against these ideas. Their roots could be traced to the branch of the Young

Turks' movement that consisted of radical Turkish nationalists. Their goals were different than just promoting general equality between ethnic and religious groups. Their policy was, instead, monocultural, and they were prepared to enforce this policy with violence. Above all they wanted unity and this meant the homogenization of all citizens so they would speak one language, Turkish, have one ethnic identity, Turkish, and finally have one religion, namely Islam. This meant that all forms of multiculturalism and self-rule must be crushed. A symbol of the new nationalism was the use of the word Turk, which earlier had a negative meaning and was mainly used to designate farmers but was henceforth to gain an enhanced meaning as a designation for the whole nation. It is interesting that many prominent Young Turks were assimilated Turks, and few were born in the Anatolia that they considered to be the Turkish homeland. Many leaders came from the Balkans: Talaat Pasha who became interior minister had Bulgarian heritage, Enver Pasha who became war minister was from Macedonia, while Kemal Pasha, who later became the first president of the Republic of Turkey under the name Atatürk, hailed from Saloniki. Other leading Young Turks were the sons of Chechen and other refugees from the Caucasus fleeing from wars with Russia. They shared the idea that everyone in the Ottoman Empire could and should be transformed into Turks, despite different ethnic origins. This idea would be conveyed to everyone. An important part of the plan, developed by Minister of Interior Talaat, was to move different ethnic non-Turkish groups – Muslims and non-Muslims alike – by force from their homelands. They would be dispersed in small groups all over the country. This would make it impossible for them to maintain their own separate culture and leave them no other alternative than become assimilated as Turks. One of the first minorities to be forcibly deported were the Greeks living in militarily strategic places on the Aegean Sea coast in the Summer of 1914. And in October 1914 the Nestorian Assyrians were ordered to leave the strategic border district of Hakkari to be resettled in central Anatolia.

The Young Turks seized power after troops marched on the palace in 1908. Sultan Abdulhamid II was allowed to stay on but with no power, the long suspended constitution was revived, political parties were formed and elections to the National Assembly were held. Among the elected deputies were several Armenians and one Assyrian, a Chaldean named David Yusufani from the city of Mosul. In the immediate aftermath of the revo-

lution the Young Turks and most of the Christian deputies cooperated as a political bloc. But in April 1909 the sultan's conservative supporters tried to stage a counter-revolution and there were riots in several cities, including Adana a growing industrial city with many Christian factory-owners and workers. The mob attacked and killed Armenians and Assyrians, who were both regarded as enemies of the sultan. The counter-revolution failed, but in order to soothe Muslim opinion the Young Turk politicians began to distance themselves from their non-Muslim backers and toned down religious equality and slowed down the pace of reform. Promises to Christian farmers about regaining the land that had been illegally seized were never fulfilled and the inter-religious political cooperation unravelled.

Despite the high expectations the Young Turks' revolution did not immediately result in a stronger state. On the contrary, the neighbouring countries seized the opportunity to grow at the expense of the Ottoman Empire. Austria quickly annexed Bosnia already in the wake of the 1908 revolution. Italy declared war and conquered Libya in 1911. Bulgaria, Romania, Greece and Serbia went to war in 1912 and captured almost all of Turkey's territory on European soil, while overwhelmingly Muslim Albania became independent. It seemed almost a miracle that the Young Turk general Enver was able to recapture the ancient Ottoman capital of Edirne, giving him a hero's status while Turkey retained a toe-hold in Europe. Turkish refugees from the Balkans poured into Anatolia and finding a solution to their plight was a high propriety. The many military disasters affected the opinion against the liberal wing of the Young Turk movement. After a bloody coup the extreme radical faction, the Committee of Union and Progress, seized power in 1913. From that date onwards the liberal-progressive policies were abandoned and the country became ruled by an authoritarian military regime with Talaat and Enver as leading figures. Both shared Turkish nationalist dreams, which gave non-Muslims and non-Turks bad premonitions about the future.

When World War I broke out in Europe in July 1914, most international observers believed Turkey would declare its complete neutrality. After losing three wars in a short time, the coffers of the treasury were empty; the army was in disarray and in need of new weapons and leadership. However, the government's strongman, War Minister Enver was pro-German and already during the first week of the Great War he secretly (even for the

rest of the government) agreed to join the war on Germany's side. Turkey mobilized all adult men and armed for war in August, and fighting broke out with Russia at the end of October 1914. The National Assembly was dissolved. Orders were later issued concerning forced evacuations, arrests and deportations of Armenians and Assyrians without the participation of the National Assembly.

It is impossible to state exactly how many Assyrians lived in the far-flung Ottoman Empire when the war broke out. At that time trustworthy statistics did not exist and the figures published in official census were manipulated. Many different independent estimates made on the eve of the war suggest somewhat more than 500,000 Assyrians but much less than one million. The Assyro-Chaldean delegation to the Paris peace talks estimated there were 563,000 in what can be seen as the Assyrian core area. The numbers mentioned were 117,000 for Diyarbakir province (called a vilayet), 61,000 in Siirt district (called a sancak), 165,000 in Hakkari district, and 16,000 combined in the districts of Urfa and Aleppo, 4,000 in Deyr-Zor district (now in Syria), 122,000 in Mosul province (now in Iraq), and 78,000 in Iran's Urmia district. In addition, mention should be made of Assyrians living in other, nearby provinces, which were not part of the delegation's plans for a future Assyria. These neglected Assyrians are actually listed in a table published by the Armenian Patriarchate: 56,000 Assyrians were said to be living in the northern parts of the provinces of Van, Bitlis, Diyarbakir, Sivas and Harput. Adding up the two figures gives a total of about 620,000 Assyrians. But this total is not based on a real count, but rather is a hopefully well-informed estimate.

There are several reasons why it is so hard for us today to give more exact statistics. Some problems are linked with the Ottoman Empire's inefficient administration. Specialized statisticians were not used to count the population. Instead orders were given from time to time to supply statistics of the various religious denominations. Officials at the provincial tax offices used their knowledge about taxpayers for that purpose. People who were exempt or avoided paying tax, like nomad tribes, were not always included. Young males wanted to avoid being drafted and benefited from not appearing on any lists. Another big problem was eastern Anatolia's mountainous geography. Many rural households lived in remote mountain villages with poor roads, and were difficult to access. While it was comparatively easy

to count city dwellers it was difficult to count mountain-dwellers. Not even Mar Shimun, leader of the Assyrian tribes in Hakkari knew their exact number.

If the lack of statistics and difficult terrain was not enough, there were other problems. The Ottoman Empire had the tradition of treating citizens differently because of religion, and divided the population according to denomination. This meant that when population statistics were compiled the population was divided according to religion. Assyrians are an ethnic category, but the term never appears in Ottoman official documents. Instead the Assyrian peoples were always referred to according to the different churches they belonged to: Syriac Orthodox (alternatively called Jacobites or Old Syrians), Nestorians, Chaldeans, and even Protestant and Catholic subgroups. In order to compile estimates for the whole Assyrian people it is necessary to add up several different columns from the statistics. This addition is complicated because provinces could use completely different terms for the same religious group. Comparing censuses from different years, but for the same province, it is surprising to see that numbers for Assyrian groups vary wildly and some denominations can even disappear completely and then reappear without any explanation.

The Assyrians made some efforts to count their population just before and after the war, but these also suffered from inaccuracy. But they did make lists over parishes and tried to reckon the number of households. These lists were also compiled according to religious affinity. When all the churches are added together the number comes close to 600,000 people and the tally includes Assyrians in north-western Iran. On the other hand it appears that some who lived in remote areas were forgotten even by their own church leadership.

The Assyrian homeland and main settlements were within or near northern Mesopotamia. Each church had its own core area where practically everyone was a member of the same church. But transitional regions existed and in them several Assyrian religious groups were mixed. The Nestorian homeland was in the remote Hakkari Mountains where they lived in a tribal community led by their Patriarch Mar Shimun. The Nestorians also had an enclave on the Iranian side of the frontier near the town of Urmia. The Chaldeans, who were Catholics, lived mainly in the province of Mosul

in what is Iraq with isolated groups in and near the small Turkish towns of Cizre and Siirt in Anatolia, and Salamas in Iran. The Syriac Orthodox Church and the Syriac Catholic Church were based in Diyarbekir province with a very strong presence in the district Tur Abdin in the small town of Midyat. Tur Abdin with its many farm villages formed the densest settlement. There were also large Assyrian concentrations in and near the cities of Mardin, Diyarbekir and Urfa. In addition, there were remote enclaves in and near the towns of Harput and Adiyaman. From the end of the nineteenth century foreign Catholic and Protestant missionaries were active in the area, running schools and hospitals. They won some converts – the Catholic and Russian Orthodox churches made strong gains among the Nestorians and a few Protestant congregations emerged throughout the Assyrian region.



Photo of a young Assyrian woman, Karima from Siirt during the genocide era.

Source: Joseph Naayem: *Shall This Nation Die?* Chaldean Rescue, New York, N.Y., 1921.

Living conditions before Seyfo

Insecurity and worsening economic concerns characterized the lives of the Assyrians. During several decades before Seyfo, there was growing uncertainty among the Assyrians about their lives and property. Daily life was marked by sudden outbreaks of violence, the peril of daughters being abducted, and a great risk of losing land due to tax debts or extortion from local bigwigs. Thefts of livestock were very common. In addition, the authorities were unwilling to defend the rights of Christians if an intervention would mean conflict with powerful tribal leaders. One way the Assyrians tackled their security was to join Kurdish tribal groups and secure their protection – this was normal in Tur Abdin where the Kurdish tribal confederations Heverkan and Dakshuri contained Assyrian sections. Safety, however, was an illusion. The Assyrians were pulled into many Kurdish tribal wars and violence was not reduced.

Another option was to move to safer areas, and people on the move characterized most of northern Mesopotamia. For some time the small town of Veranshehir was known for its tolerance of non-Muslims so a large number of Armenians and Assyrians moved there during the 1890s. Others moved south from Tur Abdin and built new villages east of the town of Nusaybin on the fringe of the desert. Traders sent their sons west to the growing industrial society that was emerging in the cotton-growing areas around Adana. New Kurdish and Arab nomadic tribes began to move to the region. This heightened tensions between settled farmers, who were often Christian, and nomadic tribes with large herds of cattle that needed grazing land. Many tribes did not refrain from stealing Assyrian livestock in raids known among the locals as “talan”.

In the soaring, three-thousand-metre high Hakkari Mountains conditions for normal farming were adverse. It became customary among Nestorian men to leave their homes and work abroad for several years before returning home. Some tribes specialized as construction workers in the Caucasus railways or in the oil fields of Baku, or the expanding cities of Tbilisi and Yerevan. Others wandered further away to Russia or America in the hope of returning wealthy. This labour migration drained the region of young adult men. When Seyfo occurred almost all the young men from the Jilu tribe in Hakkari were working abroad and therefore the tribe could not resist the attack.



The traditional Assyrian settlement area within the oval shape with some of the larger Assyrian towns.

Violence and massacres

The vulnerability of the Assyrians increased during the nineteenth century. They were an ethnic, religious minority that was easy to single out in a time of rising national and religious tensions. Daily life had elements of religiously motivated violence and the small Assyrian minority was defenceless. Systematic massacres took place now and again that can be seen as important steps on the way to full-scale genocide. The daily brutality accustomed the population to unpunished violence and helped to spread an atmosphere of hate-speech and dehumanizing non-Muslim neighbours.

The first time world opinion became aware of the plight of the Assyrians was during the 1840s. Badr Khan, the powerful emir of Bohtan, and Nurallah Bey, emir of Hakkari, began to carry out joint attacks on Assyrians in Hakkari, Bohtan and Tur Abdin during the summer of 1843. Many Assyrians in Hakkari were massacred in their villages. Converting to Islam was often the only way to escape. Many women and youths were captured and sold in the slave market in the town of Cizre. Villages were pillaged and livestock was stolen. Later, Badr Khan ordered the killing of the Syriac Orthodox bishop of Azakh in Tur Abdin. Western diplomats reported that Badr Khan had the backing of the Ottoman government and that the aim was to once and for all crush the the Nestorian Assyrian tribes. An estimated 10,000 of them were killed, while several hundred became slaves. In 1846 a new invasion targeted villages in the previously spared Tkhoma valley. These campaigns undermined the traditional autonomy of the Assyrians. The Assyrians could no longer defend themselves on their own but had to seek alliances with others who had greater power and influence – locally with Kurdish tribes, nationally with the sultan's government and internationally with foreign powers like Russia and England. Badr Khan's anti-Assyrian campaign was waged until 1847 when foreign

pressure forced the Ottoman government to intervene and he was sent to Cyprus. His successor continued the persecutions, but on a lesser scale. A few decades later the Assyrians mustered fighters when an Ottoman army was dispatched to evict the Kurdish tribes from Tur Abdin. At the time the sultan awarded Midyat's Christian headman, Hanne Safer, the title of pasha in return for loyalty.

The next major wave of massacres occurred in the 1890s. Political persecution at that time focused on Armenian Christians who had established an important nationalist movement. The Armenian movement demanded co-determination in political decision-making in eastern Anatolia, while a small section of the movement took up arms for total independence. At the same time Sultan Abdulhamid drew support from Islamist forces and created the Kurdish Hamidiye cavalry that was to be deployed against possible Armenian uprisings. In 1895 riots targeting Armenians broke out in most parts of the Ottoman Empire. Assyrians in south-eastern Anatolia were sucked into these events. In November and December 1895, Armenians and other Christians were attacked in the city of Diyarbakir. Leading Muslim officials including the mayor were named as instigators. A mob consisting of town-dwellers and nomadic tribes destroyed the homes and shops of many Christians, and over a thousand people died. Most of the victims were Armenians, but many Assyrians were also killed. Many Christian leaders were jailed. The bazaar burned down and many shop owners were ruined. The French consul estimated that in addition to 1,000 Armenians, some 150 Syriac Orthodox, three Syriac Catholics and 14 Chaldeans died. In addition, almost 90 Assyrian homes were plundered and 300 Assyrian shops were torched. Other places where Assyrians were massacred included Sa'diye, Katrabel, Karabash which were near Diyarbakir; Goliye (Kesor), Benebil and other villages near Mardin; as well as the towns of Nusaybin, Silvan and Siverek. The Syriac Orthodox patriarchate at the Zafaran monastery outside Mardin was shelled for a month. However, at times Ottoman soldiers protected the Assyrians. The Milli confederation's Kurdish leader Ibrahim Pasha gave asylum to Armenians and Assyrians in his hometown Veranshehir. The Kurdish agha of Derike prevented other Kurds from attacking his village. A planned attack

on Mardin's mainly Assyrian Christians was stopped by an alliance of several Kurdish leaders from the Mishkeviye, Dashiye and Mandalkaniye clans that defended the city against nomadic tribes that were already encircling it. Even in areas where Christians were protected grave charges were made against them, and many fanatic diatribes and threats were made. Religiously inspired animosity grew stronger in the wake of the massacres. The Christians strongly suspected that the sultan encouraged the violence and his government accused the Christians of provoking the attacks through their political demands.

A new big massacre occurred 1909. The most violent incidents took place in the town of Adana on the Mediterranean coast. The town and its surroundings were then likely the most industrialized region in all Anatolia. Cotton was grown in large scale and factories were built for spinning thread, weaving and dying cloth. Armenians or Assyrians often owned the factories and formed the working class. That massacre had a political background. The Young Turks' revolution of 1908 had introduced a constitution although the sultan remained in office. In April 1909, his supporters staged a failed coup. It is not clear if the sultan's men or the Young Turks perpetrated the violence against the Christians – perhaps both sides were involved. The political motive was the general view among conservatives that the Christians supported the Young Turks in the dispute with the sultan. More than 2,000 Armenians in Adana were killed in the unrest, and over 600 Assyrians from different denominations were murdered. An investigator dispatched by the National Assembly wrote that the anti-Christian violence had entered a new phase in which no difference was made between the various sects. Earlier, women and children were spared and Christians who were not Armenians had also been spared, he said. "In Adana no differentiation was made between Christians. Syriac Orthodox and Syriac Catholics who did not share a joint language with the Armenians – since they spoke Arabic – were killed."

Anti-Christian violence increased steadily during the period from Badr Khan's invasion in 1843 until the 1909 riots in Adana. Violence specifically targeting Assyrians occurred all the time, but

over time became more and more linked to the heightened hostility against the Armenians. The motives for the violence were complex, including a lethal mix of nomadic tribes' land hunger, Turkish political and cultural nationalism, and religious hate-speech. Contrary to the homogenous Armenians (most of them spoke Armenian and belonged to the same Orthodox Church) the Assyrians were terribly divided – into different denominations, various remote areas, and different languages. These divisions prevented the development of a unified political mass movement and the Assyrians as a whole appeared pretty weak when World War I broke out. Yet the government depicted them as potentially dangerous insurgents and traitors, capable of threatening the nation's existence.

The genocide period

The Young Turk government and particularly Minister of Interior Talaat wanted to unify the country by force. This included measures like forced deportations, ethnic cleansing, resettlement and new colonization. The targets of these policies were non-Turkish Muslims such as Kurds and Arabs, and non-Muslims such as Greeks, Armenians and Assyrians. These policies began as soon as Talaat came to power and preceeded, in small scale, the great disruption of the war period. The first group to suffer ethnic cleansing were Greeks in certain villages along the Aegean Sea coast of Anatolia in the spring of 1914. The reason for this was that they lived close to the Dardanelles and thus could be a security risk. This massive but limited deportation was carried out with considerable violence. For the same reason, even some Assyrian groups living on the Iranian frontier were ordered deported in the pre-war period. However, under the cover of the World War it was possible to step up the “resettlement” program into a program of genocide. This genocide was piecemeal and began with the Armenians, soon also targeted the Assyrians and finally returned to push out the Greeks in the troubled period after the World War was over, but before the Peace Treaty of Lausanne brought a halt to hostility. Indeed, that treaty even included an exchange of population that meant that Greeks living in Turkey and Turks living in Greece were deported and this resulted in even more killing. The Assyrian genocide is part of this greater genocide that encompassed all Christian groups.

Genocide is a term applied to the systematic massmurder of a target group that differs through religion, language or color of skin. The victims are thus easily identified. They are killed through the instigation or collusion of the authorities and the perpetrators are not brought to justice. Often the government itself orchestrates the murders and sanctions the violence. The aim is to destroy the group entirely or nearly entirely. People are murdered simply because they belong to the group and not because they are guilty of a serious crime. Genocides are systematic because they seldom leave any but a few lucky survivors. In order to accomplish this feat a government

usually acts quickly, devotes great resources to the hunting down of group members, and tries as much as possible to hide what it is doing. Although all genocides share common features, the details of the organisation, forms of massmurder and so on differ from place to place and time to time. Thus what happened to the Assyrians was somewhat different from what happened to the Armenians and Greeks.

The genocide of the Ottoman Christians is usually linked to the year 1915. But this was just the year when the killings were at their height. The violent persecution of the Assyrians began already from the outbreak of war in the autumn of 1914, and survivors said violence could strike at any time during the rest of the war (Turkey surrendered in November 1918) and acts of violence continued during the civil war of 1921-22. Assyrians in towns were arrested and deported. Many died during the brutal transports or death marches – usually only one in five survived. Farmers were attacked in their fields during their harvest or when they were working in the orchards. They rarely could defend themselves, but some were fortunate enough to run away or were elsewhere at the moment of attack. We are not certain how many died, but the Assyrian delegation at the Paris peace talks stated that there were 250,000 Assyrian victims and that this made up about half their total. Later at the Lausanne peace conference this number was raised to 275,000 killed. The number is perhaps too low (but not too much) since there were remote Assyrian villages that were out of touch. It is possible the Ottoman authorities made more precise figures but they have not yet been discovered in the archives. Because the anti-Assyrian campaign was done in secrecy, the few publicized details that stem from government sources only deal with the Armenians, and are anyway very incomplete.

Many Assyrians said the genocide began already in August 1914. World War I in Europe had then broken out between Germany and Austria-Hungary (the so-called Central Powers) on the one hand, and England, France and Russia (the so-called Entente Powers) on the other. For many reasons the Ottoman Empire was expected to stay out of the war. It had just lost three wars in a short period of time and the state finances were in no condition to support a new war. However, War Minister Enver signed a secret agreement to join the war with the Central Powers. Germany needed Turkey to confront Russia. But the Turkish army needed time to prepare. At roughly the same time, a general mobilization began, known as *seferberlik*

in Turkish. All adult men below the age of 45 years had to report for conscription. They were registered and a selection was made of those who were to be sent for military training. Both Muslims and non-Muslims were drafted, but they served in separate units. Armenians and Assyrians were in mixed all-Christian battalions, given arms and stationed at the front line, waiting for the fighting against Russia to begin. There were even a few Christian junior officers and medical personnel.

Seferberlik, which began in August 1914, is often mentioned as the first step towards genocide for several reasons. Villages were emptied of many of their strongest adult men. Therefore the remaining population had difficulties when some months later the government mounted attacks. Unless they deserted, the Assyrian soldiers rarely returned home. Life in the army was very tough and Christians were later not allowed to be part of combat units and had to serve in special unarmed labour battalions. Under slave-like conditions they would dig trenches, build fortifications, break rocks and build roads but above all carry on their backs heavy loads of supplies to the front line. Armed soldiers guarded them. Many died of exhaustion, malnourishment and disease. During the spring of 1915 systematic executions of Christian labour units, regardless of denomination, began. On rare occasions only Armenian soldiers were shot while Assyrian soldiers were spared. On such occasions the Assyrians tried to save some Armenian friends but did not always succeed.

Turkey entered the war at the end of October 1914 with fighting against Russia in the Caucasus Mountains and along the Iranian border. Minister of War Enver staked everything on a surprise winter attack over the mountains against Russia. In the middle of December about 100,000 Ottoman soldiers advanced towards the Russian railway junction of Sarikamish. The invasion was conducted in deep snow in freezing conditions. Most of Enver's army froze to death and he was almost captured but rescued by a Turkish-Armenian soldier. After the setback at Sarikamish, the Ottoman government and its officials panicked. The army looked for scapegoats and most often the blame was laid on Christian soldiers and deserters.

The first sign of the authorities' anti-Christian stance was a comprehensive hunt for Christian deserters in the towns. Assyrians had previously been harassed, but not in a systematic or official manner. A new phase





Assyrian refugees in front of the Russian consulate in Urmia during the genocide era. Foreign consulates and mission buildings were used as shelters during Seyfo.

Source: Mesopotamian Library, Södertörn University

had begun, but no one could foresee the consequences and Assyrian and Armenian leaders tried to appease the authorities and cooperated in the searches. Twelve Assyrian youths from Karabash, a large Christian village outside Diyarbekir, who had been hiding from conscription, were captured. They were falsely accused of desertion and sentenced to death. They were publicly hanged in Diyarbekir and other cities on February 18, 1915 and the government used this as a warning for others. In Mardin soldiers started to search Christian buildings (including churches) from mid-February 1915, and arrested some men. At the end of the same month more than 100 imprisoned soldiers were marched to Diyarbekir, some who had refused to surrender had been shot on the spot. The hunt for army deserters became more and more brutal. In the middle of April 1915 Turkish soldiers entered the Christian quarters in Diyarbekir to arrest youths that had barricaded themselves on the rooftops. The whole area was sealed off. Houses, schools and churches were searched for arms or deserters. Finally, 300 young men were jailed. The governor demanded that the Christians hand over all their weapons and when too few weapons were handed in, a growing number of Christian leaders were taken captive instead. By mid-May 1,600 prominent Christians were imprisoned in Diyarbekir's caravansary (which has now converted into a luxury hotel). Most were Armenians but there were also Chaldeans and Syriac Catholics. They were tortured and kept under guard, but not brought to trial. Instead, at the end of May most of them were sent on rafts down the Tigris River where they were killed by their guards. A week later their bodies were seen floating downstream in the city of Mosul.

In mountainous Hakkari there were no cities and the persecutions of Assyrians was somewhat different than in Diyarbekir province. The reason was that the Assyrian tribes lived on the Iranian frontier. The Ottoman army planned to invade Russia's oil field in Baku after marching through north-western Iran. They hoped for the support of the local Turkish population, but this was a region where many Assyrians and Armenians also lived. The Assyrians in Hakkari, weakened and divided since Badr Khan's campaigns in the 1840s, realized the importance of allying themselves with foreign powers and Mar Shimun established contacts with the British and the Russians. Through their spies the Ottoman government knew about these contacts. At the end of October 1914 an order was sent to the governor of Van province to expel Assyrians along the border and send them to Ankara and

Konya in central Anatolia. There they would disperse so that they only comprised a small group in each village. The reason for this punishment was that they were considered a potential danger since they could be used by foreign powers in the coming war. The Assyrians opposed the deportation. The army responded with arrests, executions and attacks. When the Assyrians defended themselves, the violence was stepped up.

A full-scale confrontation took place against the backdrop of the Ottoman army's siege and the shelling of Christian quarters in the nearby provincial capital Van. Van was the only larger city in Turkey with an Armenian majority but there were also some Assyrian villages in the area. The siege began on April 20, but the Armenians organized their defence and persevered for several weeks. Units from the Russian army were ordered to come to their rescue and in May marched into Turkish territory. Mar Shimun and some tribal chiefs decided to use this opportunity to cooperate with the Russians against the Turks. The Russians promised to send troops to rescue the Assyrians and give them modern weapons. The Assyrians took part in the Russian campaign and made an important contribution when they prevented a Turkish army from marching through Hakkari to attack the Russians in Van. To avenge this, the defeated Turkish General Halil, a close relative of War Minister Enver, turned his forces against unarmed Assyrian and Armenian civilians in Hakkari and Bohtan. The army massacred Chaldean Assyrians and Armenians in the major town of Siirt in early June 1915. Local Kurdish leaders tried to save the Chaldean Bishop of Siirt, the famous scholar Adday Sher, but he was discovered and killed and his protectors were punished.

To the disappointment of the Assyrians, the Russian troops were pulled back from Hakkari and Van after just a few weeks. The Ottoman army returned with renewed vigour in June 1915. Along with local Kurdish forces they encircled the Assyrians. The Assyrians defended themselves but were outnumbered and weaker in terms of weapons, ammunition, and supplies and were forced higher and higher up the craggy mountains. In August 1915, and very desperate, the Assyrian tribes left their homes and fled to Iran, seeking refuge with the Russians. There many fighters were recruited as volunteers in the Russian army. After the end of the war a serious attempt was launched to return to Hakkari by force, but the Turkish army managed to avert it and pushed out the few hidden survivors who had lasted out the war. The Assyrians of Hakkari have since lived in exile.

In June 1915 – this took place at the same time as the military invaded the Nestorian Hakkari and massacred Chaldeans in Siirt – the countryside of Tur Abdin was also destroyed. Christian villages were attacked everywhere. Hardly any villages were spared. Villagers were often on their fields when they were surrounded. A few managed to flee to other villages and report about what had happened. The attackers had limited forces – the special militia and a few Kurdish tribes – and therefore could not attack everywhere at the same time. The siege of Ayn-Wardo created notable problems since the village’s tough resistance tied down large forces for a long time. Therefore another large village, Anhel, which was next in line, avoided attack and became a safe haven for hundreds of refugees. It appears that the plan was to destroy the farm communities first and then go on to attack the towns. Midyat, a town with an Assyrian majority, fell after a week of bloody fighting in mid-July after most nearby villages were destroyed. The thousands of Christians of the town of Cizre managed to avoid massacre until the end of August 1915. When autumn drew to a close, most massacres had ceased. But by then most rural villages had been pillaged, the population either killed, forced to flee or been abducted.

During the summer of 1915, the Ottoman government refused to admit that the anti-Armenian policy had been extended to also comprise the Assyrians. On the contrary, in mid-July the governor of Diyarbekir received a warning from Interior Minister Talaat after several hundred of Mardin’s Assyrians had been killed one month earlier along with the city’s Armenian leaders. It is likely that the warning was just a symbolic gesture to placate German diplomats who feared a general massacre of all Christians. The Germans had information leaked to them by Ottoman officials who were opposed to the massacres. Talaat’s telegram resulted in a limited amnesty for Assyrians, which was soon violated anyway. The arrests and killings continued and the governor remained in office. The French monk Jacques Rhétoré tried to estimate the number victims in Mardin district, which includes Tur Abdin. (See the table)

It is common to call the Assyrian genocide the year of Seyfo, which means sword. “The year of the sword” is often used and seems to have a popular origin. Other terms were initially used and some of them are still common. Ishak Armale, a Syriac Catholic priest who hailed from Mardin, used the Arab word for catastrophe namely Nakba (Palestinians use the same word

for their expulsion in 1948). Other contemporary words were farman or firman which can either mean to cut off, or an order from the sultan, since many believed the sultan had ordered the liquidation. Some Assyrians use the term qafla d yasire, meaning the taking of captives, or the time of rdu-pya, that is the time of persecution. Foreign diplomats described it as a “general massacre.” At that time the term “genocide” was not even invented. When England, France and Russia in May 1915 warned the Young Turk government about the consequences of the extermination of Christians, it was labelled a crime “against humanity and civilization”.

Rhétoré’s estimates of missing Christians in Mardin’s sancak (district) during the persecutions 1915-1916.

Church	Number of people in Mardin 1914	Number of people in villages and little towns 1914	Number of people 1914	Missing	Remaining 1916
Gregorian Armenian	---	---	---	---	---
Armenian Catholics	6,500	4,000	10,500	10,200	300
Chaldean Catholics	1,100	6,770	7,870	6,800	1,070
Syriac Catholics	1,750	2,100	3,850	700	3,150
Syriac Orthodox	7,000	44,725	51,725	29,725	22,000
Protestants	125	400	525	250	275
Total	16,475	57,995	74,470	47,675	26,795

The reader should note that the government moved Rhétoré away from Mardin in 1916 and therefore his statistics lack the victims from the last years of the war. He does not offer any numbers for Gregorian Orthodox Armenians since he considered all resident Armenians in Mardin to be Catholic.

Mass violence aimed at religious and ethnic minorities can be either spontaneous or organized. Regarding genocide, the killing is extended and takes place everywhere. It is almost impossible for the individual to escape. Even though not always planned in all its details genocide is hardly ever spontaneous but has been organized over a period of time. Careful preparations are necessary at many levels. At the national level official statements are needed that depict the targeted group as a fiendish inhuman enemy that has to be put out of action; there have to be orders that give local authorities the right to arrest or discriminate the group. A steering committee has to be set up to coordinate when arrests, deportations etc should take place. A group of mobile activists should be recruited who can execute the killings at the spot. In Diyarbekir's case the authorities were aided by the national organization Teshkilat-i mahsusa (Ottoman Turkish for Special Organization) that before the war was used by the Young Turk leadership to liquidate political opponents. To carry out its actions, the special organization was expanded with prisoners who had been given amnesty in order to take part in the genocide. They were placed in small groups usually called chette (Turkish for gang) and they would escort the death caravans. The governor of Diyarbekir formed a committee of high officials, the police chief, military officers, local Young Turk politicians and businessmen to plan the attacks on Armenians and Assyrians. In turn, local militias or death squads were set up in the towns of Mardin, Nusaybin and Jezire – the Arabic-speaking Assyrians called the militia the al-Khamsin since they always numbered fifty men. An officer in the reserve led the militia groups; they had a kind of uniform or armband, were issued rifles and given some training.

The relatively small death squads could attack little villages. The usual approach was to encircle the village, demand that the villagers hand over their arms and then attack. If they expected resistance and the target was large, the militia would call for support. Kurdish nomadic tribes were asked to assemble at a certain time and place. Some brigands who had earlier been banished were granted amnesty in return for committing criminal acts against Christians. If it proved impossible to conquer a village, the next step was to ask for military assistance and it happened that troops on the way to the frontline were diverted to wipe out a pocket of resistance.

The Kurdish tribes were divided over the government's anti-Christian stance. Before the war there were different factions, some loyal to the government, some against. Generally the tribes that opposed the government kept that stance and did not take part in genocide. Some were even known to protect Christians. Especially noteworthy was the protection offered to refugees by Yezidis in the Sinjar Mountains of Iraq. The Dersim Kurds of central Anatolia also helped people to flee. Both the Yezidis and the Dersim Kurds were therefore punished later.

It is not completely clear just how the Assyrians were dragged into a genocide that mainly targeted Armenians. The Armenians had active political parties and actually had some factions that from time to time had resorted to violence. But that was not the case with the Assyrians. The Armenians formed a large population that was spread all over the empire and dominated some sectors of the economy, while the Assyrians were fewer in number and resided in a limited part of the empire. But as mentioned the anti-Armenian massacres during Abdulhamid's rule began to a great extent to also claim Assyrian victims. Religious fanatics seldom differentiated between different Christian denominations, attacking without discrimination what the mobs termed *gavur* that is infidels. There was an obvious geopolitical reason for the massive violence that targeted the Nestorian tribes in Hakkari. The authorities simply wanted to remove them from the strategic frontier, and succeeded with that goal after a bloody military operation. Concerning the Christians in Mardin and Tur Abdin, local issues seemed to have been the driving force. Local chiefs wanted to seize Assyrian land, livestock and houses – clearly economic targets. In order to seize their property they had to be forced to flee or killed outright. This succeeded in the shadow of the larger Armenian genocide. At times the local people pretended the Assyrians were Armenians as was the case for instance in Azakh, in order to get central government's permission to deploy troops.

Already when war broke out some Assyrians realized they would once again be facing grave danger, even if they hardly could imagine a full-scale genocide. The mood among their Muslim neighbours became more and more agitated, and fanatics were inciting them, while the authorities grew hostile. Testimony from the time records increasing anti-Christian tension throughout the early months of 1915. Acts of arson, looting, theft and assault became more and more common, and

the police remained passive if the victim was Christian. The Armenian genocide is said to have begun around April 20-24, 1914. But it is hard to give an exact day and place when the Assyrian genocide started as conditions differed. The Nestorians seem to have come under systematic attack already in November 1914, and the Syrian Orthodox villages outside Diyarbakir were attacked already in early April 1915. Fleeing survivors could inform the worried people of Tur Abdin about what was going on. It became important to get hold of arms and ammunition, and prepare barricades and fortifications. Farmers from small villages moved to larger villages like Azakh and Ayn-Wardo that were easier to defend. On rare occasions the farmers were assisted by their Kurdish agha to get to safety. Contacts were made with friendly Yezidis over smuggling of food and ammunition. In Midyat, the Yezidis asked the Assyrians if they wanted them to fight at their side.

Rural villages were attacked initially and were plucked one by one. Flames and smoke from plundered villages could be seen far and wide. This gave the towns time for some preparations. The government operations against small towns had to be carefully planned. Above all large groups of warriors had to be assembled, sometimes from afar. Muslim friends of the Assyrians could offer key information about when and where the next thrust was planned as these matters were openly discussed at the mosques on Fridays. Despite this information, several towns were conquered after bloody battles. Assyrians in Kerburan and Midyat were able to hold out for several days during July until they were finally defeated. The Christians of Cizre did not make any preparations but trusted government assurances that they would be spared. The inhabitants were therefore taken by surprise when several recurrent massacres took place in August and September, in which units of the regular army took part. The mixed Armenian and Assyrian populations of the towns of Nusaybin and Hasankeyf were also taken off-guard.

The likely most successful Assyrian defence was at the large village of Azakh on the plains, about forty kilometre west of Cizre. Sensing the growing hostility they began to organize for resistance in early June 1915. A committee was elected with several subgroups that had various tasks – making ammunition, building barriers, and collecting food and water. Villagers from nearby small villages moved in. An armed force

was set up and named Jesu fedai (fedai means self-sacrificing warrior). Cizre's militia together with a posse of nomadic tribes conducted the first attacks. Failing to capture Azakh, a long siege began. Finally the provincial governor sent a telegram to the government asking for military assistance to quell a rebellion by "Armenians" in a village. Permission was granted and a force comprising several hundred soldiers with field guns and other modern weapons were diverted in October 1915 to stage an attack. These new forces failed and suffered even greater losses of men and weapons. The siege was lifted, but the military promised to return with greater force at a later time.



Above: Photo of the Assyrian Joseph Naayem.
Below: A group of deportees.

Source: Joseph Naayem: *Shall This Nation Die? Chaldean Rescue*, New York, N.Y., 1921.

After the genocide

The Assyrian genocide took place in the shadow of the world war, which created chaos and made it impossible to get exact statistics about the number of dead or missing. But a group that was likely better informed than any other, the Assyro-Chaldean delegation at the Paris peace conference, presented their estimates of losses in order to gain sympathy for their cause. In 1919, the delegation estimated the losses to 250,000 people in both Turkey and the part of Iran that was invaded. This was roughly half of the original Assyrian population in the affected provinces. The geographical distribution of the victims is presented in the following table.

Iran	40,000
Van province	80,000
Diyarbakir province	63,000
Mamurat-ul-Aziz (Harput) province	15,000
Bitlis province	38,000
Province of Adana etc.	5,000
Urfa district	9,000
Total	250,000

A few years later (1923), new peace talks took place in the city of Lausanne. A new delegation was there to present Assyrian demands on Turkey. Then – probably on the basis of more complete information – the delegation arrived at the slightly higher number of 275,000 Assyrian victims.

Exactly how the delegation arrived at these numbers cannot be established. They are probably based on observations made by several different priests and missionaries during the war, but we are not certain how the data was compiled. In some provinces we know of the details, but often the statistics differ slightly from one observer to another. Three French Dominican monks who were held under house arrest in Mardin each compiled estimates over Christian victims in Mardin district but their reported tallies differ somewhat. Apparently, only the Syriac Orthodox Church conducted its own proper investigation into casualties. Bishop Mor Severius Afram Barsaum (who later became Patriarch Afram Barsaum) compiled a precise list in 1920 and sent it to the British government. He found that 90,313 faithful had been murdered including seven bishops and 154 priests. In addition, 156 churches were destroyed. The Syriac Orthodox Church's losses in Diyarbekir province were 77,963 faithful, in Bitlis province 8,510, in Harput province (the official name was Mamuret-ul- Aziz) 3,500, and finally 340 in Urfa district, according to Barsaum's ambitious investigation.

Estimates regarding the number of Armenian victims suffer from similar problems as those for the Assyrians. Most initiated estimates mention over one million murdered during the world war. Our knowledge about the fate of the Greek population is, at the moment, sketchy. On the whole, it seems that Greeks were not a continual target of genocide during World War I. But many Greeks who lived along the coast of the Aegean Sea were brutally deported in 1914 that is even before the war broke out. The large number of victims occurred 1922 when the Turk nationalist army overwhelmed a Greek occupation army and the Greek-dominated Christian population of Smyrna were expelled while the Christian quarters burned down. A subsequent peace between Greece and Turkey resulted in an exchange of populations. Pontic Greeks who lived along the Black Sea coast in Turkey were exchanged with Greece's Muslim population in Macedonia and Thrace. The deportation from Turkey spun out of control and became very chaotic resulting in many deaths. Greek activists claim that 350,000 Black Sea Greeks disappeared due to massacres, persecution and death marches. The Sinjar Yezidis were punished by a military campaign during the last years of the world war. Partially because of their support to Christians, the Der-sim Kurds were subjected to genocide in 1938 with tens of thousands of

deaths. It appears that the Jewish population of Kurdistan was not targeted for elimination. But in several towns Jews were commandeered out to bury the Christian victims. Many scattered Jewish communities in the villages simply ceased to exist during the course of the war, the population having fled from the fighting.

What happened to the Assyrian survivors? There were several categories of survivors. Several thousand remained in their homes in Azakh, Ayn-Wardo and Anhel when local cease-fires were agreed during the autumn of 1915. Many farmers had fled from nearby villages. Some villages in the Raite forest also survived. Groups of refugees, mostly women and children, found their way to churches in Diyarbakir and the Ottomans allowed them a fragile asylum. When the war finally ended most tried to return to their home villages. This was not easy since others had moved in, in some places the Ottoman ministry of refugees had seized the property and given it to Muslim refugees coming from other regions entirely. Kurdish leaders, especially Chelebi agha of the Heverkan confederation, sometimes could help Assyrians return. Widows and orphans formed a very vulnerable group if they were forcibly taken into Muslim households as sex-slaves, servants or concubines. Most had been forced to convert to Islam and adopt new Muslim names. After the war, relatives searched for them to reunite them with their families, but sometimes the children opted to stay. In some cases the Muslim families refused to release the children. Thanks to a British political officer, Major Edward Noel, we know how many survivors there were in Diyarbekir province. According to Noel there were 18,959 Christians remaining in that large province in June 1919. Of these, 12,981 (68 percent) were “widows and orphans in more or less destitute condition”.

What did the Assyrians do after Seyfo? After Seyfo the Assyrians were scattered and most turned up far away from their home areas. Tens of thousands of Nestorian Assyrians from Hakkari and Iran languished in refugee camps either in revolutionary Russia or in the new mandate Iraq that was administered by the British. Many refugees in Russia were later dispersed over the Soviet Union and worked as shoe-cleaners in Kiev, Moscow, Leningrad and other big cities. During Stalin’s terror many were sent to Siberia and others were liquidated by the secret poli-





The Assyrian orphanage in Adana (between 1919-1921) where mainly orphaned children stayed after the genocide.

Source: Modern Assyrian Research Archive, MARA

ce. But some refugees in the Caucasus were recruited by Malik Cambar, leader of the Jilu tribe to serve as soldiers in the Armée du Levant in the French mandate Syria. Here they mixed with refugees who had fled from nearby Tur Abdin to Jazire province in Syria. Many new completely Assyrian villages were established along the Khabur River. Generally each Nestorian tribe founded its own village. The newly founded towns of Qamishli and Hassake had a Christian majority. In the agricultural areas the Assyrians were successful in developing irrigation and made great economic progress. The French commissioner for Syria, General Gouraud, managed to get the Assyrians to collaborate by promising them an area of self-government in the province of Jazire but it never became reality.

In Iraq there were initially tens of thousands of Nestorian Assyrians in several refugee camps. The largest, by far, was Baquba, north-east of Baghdad. The British had great problems due to Arab and Kurdish revolts. The administration actively recruited Assyrians as soldiers to put down the rebellions. Their units were called levies, an abbreviation for “local volunteer yeoman” soldiers. They were mainly deployed to guard British posts and airbases, and unfortunately they were encouraged by the British to use their famous ferocity against the Kurds and Arabs. A force led by General Agha Petros invaded Turkey in the early 1920s to capture Hakkari and include it with an envisaged autonomous Assyrian state. If they had managed this then an independent Assyrian country would have become a fact and it would be easier to give it international recognition. However, a large Turkish army stopped the attempt. After Iraq became independent 1933 and the British left, the Assyrians were placed in grave danger since they had served as mercenaries. The League of Nations was responsible for international refugee issues and tried to find some other country that was willing to accept Assyrian settlers. Many proposals were discussed but all failed. During the first two weeks of August the Iraqi army attacked various Assyrians settlements and massacred the inhabitants. The most notorious was a massacre in the little town of Simele, and ceremonies marking the event are held by Assyrians throughout the world. After the massacres, thousands fled to nearby Syria where they joined other Assyrian refugees already established in Jazire province. Still many Assyrians remained in Iraq and formed part of the, until quite recently, sizeable Christian population.

In Turkey, the christian region of Tur Abdin was more or less empty when the war ended. Exceptions were pockets of resistance like Ayn-Wardo and Azakh, as well as some villages south of Midyat in Raite forest. Some refugees lived along the just completed railway to Baghdad, where they found work. Some tried to return to their home villages but with mixed results. The best chance of success was by those who were protected by Kurdish aghas. There they began arduous reconstruction within the new Turkish republic. The new Turkish Republican government took a negative stance vis-à-vis non-Turkish and non-Muslim minorities, and Assyrians were under great pressure to assimilate. Syriac Orthodox survivors in the Turkish town Urfa were deported to Syria in the mid-1920s and settled in Aleppo. The Syriac Orthodox patriarch was forced to move from Mardin to Homs in Syria and then on to the capital Damascus.

TIMELINE

1908

July: Young Turks' revolution

1909

April: Failed counter-revolution

April: Massacres in Adana

April: Sultan Abdulhamid deposed

1911

September-October 1912: Italy captures Libya

1912

October-May 1913: First Balkan war.

1913

January 23: Committee of Union and Progress stage military coup

1914

July 28: World War I begins in Europe

August 2: Secret Ottoman-German alliance

August 4: Seferberlik, general mobilization

October 24: Turkish vessels shell the Russian city of Odessa

October 26: Orders of deportation of Assyrians in Hakkari

October-November: Attacks on Assyrian villages in Hakkari

November 1: War begins officially between Russia and Turkey

November-December: Massacres in Assyrian villages in Hakkari

December-January 1915: Catastrophic Turkish defeat at the battle of Sarikamish

1915

January-May: Turkish occupation of Urmia

February: Turkish army depicts Christians as disloyal

February-March: Massacre of Assyrians at Haftevan

February 18: Executions of Assyrians who refuse to serve in the army

February: Assyrian refugees executed in Urmia

March 25: Reshid Bey named vali of Diyarbakir

April: early in the month adult Assyrian males in villages near Diyarbakir are arrested and executed.

April 23: Vali of Van says that Armenians have revolted.

April: General attacks on Assyrian and Armenian villages in the province of Van

April 22-24: Assyrians executed in Karabash

May: General massacres in Assyrian villages near Diyarbakir

May 20: Russians liberate Van

May 24: The allies warn of Turkish war crimes

May 24: Russians liberate Urmia

May 30: Hundreds of detained Christian leaders murdered in Diyarbekir

June 23 to September: Turkish army invades Hakkari

June 10: Death march – hundreds of Armenian and Assyrian leaders from Mardin murdered

June 10: Assyrians and Armenians arrested in Veranshehir murdered

Mid-June: Massacre of Assyrians in Siirt

June 1-15: Christian labour patrols slaughtered outside Diyarbekir

June 5: Massacre in Hasankeyf

June: General massacres in villages of Tur Abdin

June 28: Midyat's Protestant Assyrians executed

July: Massacre in Bote

July 5 to November 16: Siege of Azakh

July 12: German ambassador protests killings of Assyrians in Mardin

July 12: Talaat issues order to Diyarbekir not to kill Assyrians

July 15: Massacre in Pesh-Khabur

July 19: Week-long massacre in Midyat begins

July – October: Siege of Ayn-Wardo

August 16: Executions of Assyrians in Nusaybin

August-September: Three large massacres in Cizre

September: Assyrian survivors from Hakkari flee to Iran

November 7: Orders come that Muslim families should move into deserted villages in districts of Mardin and Tur Abdin

November 21: Ceasefire in Azakh, Ayn-Wardo and Hah

1916

March: Extermination at a concentration camp at Ras al'Ayn

March: Yezidis open Christian settlement Sinjar

March: Killings at concentration camp at Deyr-Zor

1917

February: Revolution in Russia

November: Bolsheviks seize power in Russia and pull out of the war. In Iran they leave their arms to the Assyrians and Armenians who set up their own government in Urmia.

1918

March 16: Mar Shimun killed in an ambush

March: Refugee settlement at Sinjar destroyed

July 31: Tens of thousands of Assyrians flee from Urmia while under bombardment from a new Turkish invasion

October 30: Armistice at Mudros

1919

January: Paris peace conference opens



Orphans at a Franciscan orphanage in Diyarbekir
after the genocide.

Source: Mesopotamian Library, Södertörn University

The world's forgetfulness

Why did the world forget about the Assyrian genocide? There are no simple explanations. Above all, the Assyrians themselves did not describe the massacres as genocide until the end of the 20th century. Prior to that, only the 1933 massacre in Simele was regularly commemorated as martyr's day in August – especially among Nestorians. Commemoration of the expulsion of Syriac Orthodox Assyrians from Urfa generated much attention in Syria and Lebanon. It was not until the 1980s that the first book on Seyfo was published, compiled by the priest Süleyman Hinno, and based on information from refugees from Tur Abdin. Scholarly research on the genocide began even later in the 21st century. As of yet, there is no specific day for Seyfo, but it is often held on the same day as the Armenian memorial day April 24 or the day signifying the Simele massacre.

Another reason Seyfo (and this also affects the remembrance of the Armenian and Greek genocides) was not given much attention was that the events of World War I were completely overshadowed by the even larger genocide that took place during World War II, namely the destruction of Jews and Roma. When scholarly research on genocides began, it focused mainly on the Holocaust of the Jews since it was by far the most evil, planned, brutal and total. Nowadays Sefyo is highlighted in both academic and political circles. The International Association of Genocide Scholars has since 2007 recognized the Assyrian genocide.



Patriarch Mar Benyamen Shimun together with members of the Assyrian National Council in Tbilisi, Georgia, in 1916.

Source: Mesopotamian Library, Södertörn University

How the world reacted

How did the world react to Seyfo? The genocide of Armenians and Assyrians differs from the genocide of Jews in that Seyfo was not conducted in secrecy. There were many witnesses who could report about the massacres and even some Ottoman officials leaked information to foreign diplomats. The Turkish army's slaughter of Armenians and Assyrians during the occupation of north-western Iran (the invasion was part of a larger operation to seize Russian oil fields in Baku), became a top news item throughout the world in March 1915. At Haftevan the Turkish occupation authority collected between 600 and 800 unarmed Iranian Armenians and Assyrians who were beheaded. Then there was a stream of news reports about war crimes in the area. Turkey's enemies – France, Russia and Britain – issued a public warning to the Ottoman government on May 24. They stated that massacres committed by the army were not just ordinary war crimes but they introduced a totally new concept: “crimes against humanity and civilisation”. They threatened that the Ottoman government and its responsible agents would be captured and put on trial for the massacres. The warning was ignored, the deportations and killings continued until the end of the war. When peace came several hundred top politicians, governors and army officers were arrested charged with organizing the genocide. Some trials were held and a few death sentences were handed down. But after the first hangings, street riots and protests grew among the Turkish general public so that trials could no longer be held on Turkish soil. The British moved the accused to the island of Malta, but the proceedings could not be carried out there either. After a while the prisoners were released without establishing the full extent of their guilt.

Many times during the war, foreign diplomats tried to end to the genocide, but all failed. Germany, the Ottoman government's most important ally, had the best chance of influencing the Ottoman government. Persistent German protests during the summer of 1915, however, did not sway the Ottoman policy. Interior Minister Talat Pasha replied that

the “deportations” were an internal affair that no foreign power had the right to interfere with. The same response was given the ambassador from neutral United States when he tried to prevent the genocide. The Roman Catholic Pope also wrote to the sultan to ask why so many innocent people were being killed. The sultan replied that it was impossible to differentiate between the guilty and the innocent. The failure to intervene against this ongoing genocide formed the background for Polish lawyer Rafael Lemkin’s campaign to get “genocide” classified as an international crime. In 1948 he succeeded when the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide was adopted.

When it became clear that the war would be lost, the highest Young Turk leaders fled the country. Interior Minister Talaat was granted asylum by Germany and settled in Berlin. An Armenian survivor, Soghomon Tehlirian, who wanted to avenge the massacres, gunned him down on a street in 1921. Tehlirian was put on trial in Germany, and charged with murder. Lemkin, who was then a young student, was struck by the contradiction that Talaat’s assassin was put on trial for killing just one person while Talaat who was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people could not be sentenced since there was no law against a government murdering part of its own population. Lemkin began to draft various proposals to outlaw such government orchestrated mass slaughter. Initially he used words like “vandalism” and “barbarism”, but later he created the concept “genocide”. He used the term to describe the Nazi destruction of the Jews during World War II. He proposed that genocide should be one of the charges against the German war criminals at the Nuremberg trials, but that did not happen.

He did score success when the United Nations was set up and on December 8, 1948, adopted a convention against genocide. Since then genocide has a legal definition in international law.

The genocide convention criminalizes the deliberate destruction (partly or completely) of people simply because they have a different religion, nationality or ethnicity. It spells out the following measures: murder of the group’s members; to subject the group to living conditions where they could not survive, for instance concentration camps; to sterilize adults so that they cannot have children; to separate children from their

parents; to subject the group to physical or psychological violence. The fate of the Assyrians during World War I fulfils some of these criteria. Above all, Assyrians were targetted simply for belonging to a different group with a different religion and language. In addition, large groups of Assyrians were killed or expelled. The fact that some Assyrians survived does not affect the definition since the convention mentions the intent of partial destruction of a group and it seems that the intent to slaughter the Assyrians centred on completely wiping out those who lived in rural areas. Assyrian villages were systematically pillaged and the few who survived were captured. Assyrians who were forced to death march towards Syria and Iraq were subjected to living conditions that few could survive. Talaat Pasha's deportation order concerning Nestorian Assyrians aimed at dispersing them over the whole empire and undermining their culture so that it would be easier to assimilate them as Turks. The fact that Assyrians at times defended themselves with arms and put up a struggle does not affect the use of the term genocide, since they were defending themselves against a powerful state that aimed to destroy them.

Research

Scientific research on Seyfo began only recently. Because of the psychological trauma that afflicts the victims, it is natural that it takes time before research can commence on genocide, but in the case of Seyfo it took over eighty years. There are several reasons. One is that comparative genocide research was not established at universities until the end of the 20th century. Another is that relevant documents were not previously available. Further, Seyfo was rarely discussed among the Assyrians themselves until Hinnó during the 1980s compiled the first book based on oral accounts from old refugees in Syria. It has been translated into several languages. Since then a manuscript written during the massacres by an Assyrian student at the Zafaran Monastery, ‘Bed-Mshiho Na‘man Qarabash, has been translated into several languages. After the first Gulf War a manuscript was found in Mosul written by a French Dominican friar, Jacques Rhétoré. It deals with Diyarbakir province and has chapters on many towns and districts and tries to estimate the number of victims.

Several books that were written during or just after World War I have been rediscovered. An older, grand chronicle written during the war by Ishak Armale, a Syriac Catholic priest in Mardin, was published 1919 in Lebanon. Other books that have been reprinted have been written by Yonan Shahbaz, an Assyrian Protestant missionary who worked in Iran; and Josef Nayeem, a Chaldean priest from Urfa, who has mixed personal experience and information collected after interviews with survivors. Most of the mentioned texts were written during the war and Seyfo. They are to a large extent based on personal experiences and information disseminated among the Assyrian population. They do not claim to be analytical and the authors have rarely had access to official Turkish documents. Therefore they say almost nothing about the government’s policies and ideology. Most of the authors were priests and tend to describe the genocide as a religious war between Muslims and Christian minorities. Economic, social and political motives were ignored.

The first academic work on Seyfo was written by the German researcher Gabriele Yonan. She focuses mainly on what happened to Assyrians in Hakkari and Iran, but also deals in part with Tur Abdin. Her documentation is mainly drawn from German state archives and newspapers as well as printed documents from England and the United States. French researcher Sébastien de Courtois's book "The Forgotten Genocide" (2004) is based on documents in the French Foreign Ministry archives. Citing extracts from the diplomat reports it shows how the conflict between Muslims and Assyrians, mainly in Diyarbekir, was stepped up between 1880 and 1914. The flow of information to France was completely halted when war broke out; references to Seyfo were therefore relatively brief. The Swedish historian David Gaunt's "Massacres, Resistance, Protectors" (2006) attempts to deal with all the locations where mass killings took place during Seyfo. The documentation is based on English, French, German, Russian and Turkish archives. He tries to compare Seyfo with other genocides, above all the Jewish and Roma holocausts. Themes include who the perpetrators were and what motivated them, which sections of the local population that tried to rescue Assyrians, and how Assyrians organized their resistance. The American legal historian Hannibal Travis has conducted a survey of almost all genocides that have taken place in the Middle East. He has a chapter that deals with Seyfo in his "Genocide in the Middle East" (2010).

Seyfo can be considered well-documented. But some regions are better covered than others. There was a lot of contemporary information about Hakkari and Turkish-occupied Iran. The information came from missionaries based in the Iranian city Urmia, Russian military intelligence and refugee assistance, and Mar Shimun's representatives. Events in Diyarbekir including Tur Abdin have been less well-documented. Documents in American missionary archives, the chronicles of Armale, Qarabash and Rhétoré, and material from Turkish Ottoman archives and military archives fill in the gaps. Arab-language manuscripts from Azakh and Midyat add further insights into how the Assyrians prepared themselves for the attacks as well as how the authorities deceived and divided them.

The Turkish Ottoman archives are located in Istanbul. State documents from the period before the republic was established in 1923 are kept

here. The coded telegrams from Interior Minister Talaat Pasha to various provincial governors, the refugee agency and the War Ministry are the sections of greatest importance for Seyfo. The telegrams are written in Osmanli – that is Turkish mixed with many Persian and Arabic words, and written in Arabic script – but the modern archive catalogue shows the content in modern Turkish. The catalogue sometimes has a translation of the brief telegrams. Talaat orders deportations, demands reports on how many have been deported, orders provincial governors to deploy troops against pockets of resistance, etc. Another part of the archives is called “Second Section” and contains reports and telegrams sent from the provinces to the Interior Ministry. The governors report statistics over the number of deportees and report on local events. Unfortunately a lot of material that should be in the Second Section, for instance lists over deportees and lists of seized property has disappeared, as have a lot of statistical records. The Turkish military archives are located in Ankara and are not as accessible for researchers as the Ottoman archives are. The War Ministry’s orders to army commanders and their reports are kept there. Regarding Seyfo, a file on the siege of Azakh has been studied. Other parts of the archives have been published in the military history journal published by the army.

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Explanations of words

Agha – owner of one or several villages, or leader of a Kurdish tribe.

Armée du Levant – An army deployed in Syria during the French mandate. Many Assyrians were part of it.

Assyro-Chaldean delegation – a committee that presented various Assyrian demands at the Paris peace conference (1919-20). Its members included Joel E Werda, a journalist from the United States, Afram Barsaum who in 1933 became patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox church, the military physician Captain Abraham K Yousuf (U.S.), Said Namik who represented the Chaldeans, Lazar Yocouboff from Transcaucasia, etc.

Bey – official title for a mid-ranking Ottoman official.

Bohtan – emirate in the southern part of the province of Bitlis.

Chette – Turkish for gang.

Dakshuri – a Kurdish tribal confederation in Tur Abdin that was loyal to the state and also had Assyrian members.

Chaldeans – members of a Catholic breakaway from the Nestorian Church.

Emir – prince, name used for rulers over smaller territories.

Fedai – means “one who is prepared to sacrifice himself”, i.e. martyr.

Hamidiye regiments – cavalry in the reserves comprising tribe members. Formed 1891 with Russian Cossack regiments as a model.

Old Syrians – alternative name for Syriac Orthodox.

Haftevan – village in north-western Iran where several hundred Armenian and Assyrian civilians were murdered in February or March 1915.

Haverkan – anti-government Kurdish tribal federation in Tur Abdin that also had Assyrian members.

Jacobites – alternative name for Syriac Orthodox.

Jazire – province in north-western Syria. After World War I many Assyrian refugees settled there.

Yezidi – non-Muslim minority whose religion has sometimes been branded as devil worship.

Jilu – name of an area and a Nestorian tribe in eastern Hakkari.

Caravansary – building with a square or rectangular walled exterior where caravans could spend the night.

The Committee of Union and Progress – Ittihat ve terakki in Turkish, emerged from the Young Turk movement as a semi-clandestine radical political organization that seized power after a bloody military coup January 23, 1913.

Levies – Assyrian military unit during the British mandate in Iraq.

Mandate – territories that were temporary colonies formed by the League of Nations after World War I. France had a mandate in Syria until 1943, and the British had a mandate in Iraq until 1932.

Mar Shimun – official title for spiritual leader of the Nestorian Church. During the Great War the leader was Mar Shimun XXI Benyamin (1887-1918).

Millet – an officially recognized religious denomination in the Ottoman Empire. Now the word means “nation”.

Milli – large Kurdish tribal confederation in south-western Diyarbekir province.

Nestorians – name of followers of the Assyrian Church of the East. The term derives from the theologian Nestorius.

Pasha – Ottoman title for the highest officials.

Sandjak – Ottoman administrative term for district under a province.

Sarikamish – a big battle in the Caucasus Mountains waged between December 1914 and January 1915. The Turkish army lost almost 100,000 troops.

Seferberlik – mobilization.

Shah – Persian word for king.

Shaykh – originally means old man, is used for religious leaders.

Simele – location in northern Iraq where Assyrians were massacred by the Iraqi army in August 1933.

Sultan – Ottoman word for emperor, from the Arabic word for power.

Talan – general looting, especially theft of livestock.

Teshkilat-i Mahsusa – Ottoman for Special Organization. A clandestine organization set up by the Committee of Union and Progress.

Tkhoma – name of a district and Nestorian tribe in Hakkari.

Tur Abdin – a district around the town of Midyat. Before Seyfo it had almost 100 villages where Christians lived.

Young Turks – opposition political movement that pushed for reforms in the Ottoman Empire.

Urmia – town and district in north-western Iran. Had a large Nestorian and Chaldean population before Seyfo.

Vali – governor of a province.

The Assyrian Genocide
SEYFO
When - Where - How
By David Gaunt

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About the author

Professor David Gaunt has through his pioneering research on Seyfo at Södertörn University contributed to highlighting one of the 20th century's cruelest and least known genocides. In 2006 his knowledge on Seyfo was compiled in the book "Massacres, Resistance, Protectors: Muslim-Christian Relations in Eastern Anatolia During World War I."

In a pedagogical way, the book analyzes the different phases of the Assyrian genocide. For a long time there has been little knowledge about Seyfo. The Assyrian genocide has often been overshadowed by the Armenian genocide that took place about the same time and in the same areas.