

British Government Report on the Armenian Massacres of April-December 1915

by Lord Bryce

I am grieved to say that such information as has reached me from several quarters goes to show that the number of those who have perished in Armenia is very large. It has been estimated at the figure of 800,000.

Though hoping that figure to be beyond the mark, I cannot venture to pronounce it incredible, for there has been an unparalleled destruction of life all over the country from the frontiers of Persia to the Sea of Marmora, only a very few of the cities of the Aegean coast having escaped.

This is so, because the proceedings taken have been so carefully premeditated and systematically carried out, with a ruthless efficiency previously unknown among the Turks. The massacres are the result of a policy which, as far as can be ascertained, has been entertained for some considerable time by the gang of unscrupulous adventurers in possession of the Government of the Turkish Empire.

They hesitated to put it in practice until they thought the favourable moment had come, and that moment seems to have arrived about the month of April, 1915. That was the time when these orders were issued, orders which came down in every case from Constantinople, and which the officials found themselves obliged to carry out on pain of dismissal.

There was no Moslem passion against the Armenian Christians. All was done by the will of the Government, and done not from any religious fanaticism, but simply because they wished, for reasons purely political, to get rid of a non-Moslem element which impaired the homogeneity of the Empire, and constituted an element that might not always submit to oppression.

All that I have learned confirms what has already been said elsewhere, that there is no reason to believe that in this case Musulman fanaticism came into play at all. So far as can be made out, though of course the baser natures have welcomed and used the opportunities for plunder which slaughter and deportations afford, these massacres have been viewed by the better sort of religious Moslems with horror rather than with sympathy. It would be too much to say that they have often attempted to interfere, but at any rate they do not seem to have shown approval of the conduct of the Turkish Government.

There is nothing in the precepts of Islam which justifies the slaughter which has been perpetrated. I am told on good authority that high Moslem religious authorities condemned the massacres ordered by Abdul Hamid, and these are far more atrocious. In some cases the governors, being pious and humane men, refused to execute the orders that had reached them, and endeavoured to give what protection they could to the unfortunate Armenians. In two cases I have heard of the governors being immediately dismissed for refusing to obey the orders. Others more pliant were substituted, and the massacres were carried out.

As I have said, the procedure was exceedingly systematic. The whole Armenian population of each town or village was cleared out, by a house-to-house search. Every inmate was driven into the street. Some of the men were thrown into prison, where they were put to death, sometimes with torture; the rest of the men, with the women and children, were marched

out of the town. When they had got some little distance they were separated, the men being taken to some place among the hills, where the soldiers, or the Kurdish tribes who were called in to help in the work of slaughter, dispatched them by shooting or bayoneting.

The women and children and old men were sent off under convoy of the lowest kinds of soldiers - many of them just drawn from gaols - to their distant destination, which was sometimes one of the unhealthy districts in the centre of Asia Minor, but more frequently the large desert in the province of Der el Zor, which lies east of Aleppo, in the direction of the Euphrates. They were driven along by the soldiers day after day, all on foot, beaten or left behind to perish if they could not keep up with the caravan; many fell by the way, and many died of hunger.

No provisions were given them by the Turkish Government, and they had already been robbed of everything they possessed. Not a few of the women were stripped naked and made to travel in that condition beneath a burning sun. Some of the mothers went mad and threw away their children, being unable to carry them further.

The caravan route was marked by a line of corpses, and comparatively few seem to have arrived at the destinations which had been prescribed for them - chosen, no doubt, because return was impossible and because there was little prospect that any would survive their hardships. I have had circumstantial accounts of these deportations which bear internal evidence of being veracious, and I was told by an American friend who has lately returned from Constantinople that he had heard accounts at Constantinople confirming fully those which had come to me, and that what had struck him was the comparative calmness with which these atrocities were detailed by those who had first-hand knowledge of them.

Things which we find scarcely credible excite little surprise in Turkey. Massacre was the order of the day as in Eastern Rumelia in 1876, and, in 1895-6, in Asiatic Turkey. When the Armenian population was driven from its homes, many of the women were not killed, but reserved for a more humiliating fate. They were mostly seized by Turkish officers or civilian officials, and consigned to their harems. Others were sold in the market, but only to a Moslem purchaser, for they were to be made Moslems by force.

Never again would they see parents or husbands these Christian women condemned at one stroke to slavery, shame and apostasy.

The boys and girls were also very largely sold into slavery, at prices sometimes of only ten to twelve shillings, while other boys of tender age were delivered to dervishes, to be carried off to a sort of dervish monastery, and there forced to become Musulmans.

To give one instance of the thorough and remorseless way in which the massacres were carried out, it may suffice to refer to the case of Trebizond, a case vouched for by the Italian Consul who was present when the slaughter was carried out, his country not having then declared war against Turkey.

Orders came from Constantinople that all the Armenian Christians in Trebizond were to be killed. Many of the Moslems tried to save their Christian neighbours, and offered them shelter in their houses, but the Turkish authorities were implacable.

Obeying the orders which they had received, they hunted out all the Christians, gathered them together, and drove a great crowd of them down the streets of Trebizond, past the fortress,

to the edge of the sea. There they were all put on board sailing boats, carried out some distance on the Black Sea, and there thrown overboard and drowned.

Nearly the whole Armenian population of from 8,000 to 10,000 were destroyed - some in this way, some by slaughter, some by being sent to death elsewhere. After that, any other story becomes credible; and I am sorry to say that all the stories that I have received contain similar elements of horror, intensified in some cases by stories of shocking torture.

But the most pitiable case is not that of those whose misery was ended by swift death, but of those unfortunate women who, after their husbands had been killed and their daughters violated, were driven out with their young children to perish in the desert where they have no sustenance, and where they are the victims of the wild Arab tribes around them.

It would seem that three-fourths or four-fifths of the whole nation has been wiped out, and there is no case in history, certainly not since the time of Tamerlane, in which any crime so hideous and upon so large a scale has been recorded.

Let me add, because this is of some importance in view of the excuses which the German Government put forward, and which their Ambassador in Washington is stated to have given, when he talked about "the suppression of riots," for the conduct of those who were their allies, that there is no ground for the suggestion that there had been any rising on the part of the Armenians.

A certain number of Armenian volunteers fought on the side of the Russians in the Caucasian Army, but they came from the Armenian population of Trans-Caucasia. It may be that some few Armenians crossed the frontier in order to fight alongside their Armenian brethren in Trans-Caucasia for Russia, but at any rate, the volunteer corps which rendered such brilliant service to the Russian Army in the first part of the war was composed of Russian Armenians living in the Caucasus.

Wherever the Armenians, almost wholly unarmed as they were, have fought, they have fought in self-defence to defend their families and themselves from the cruelty of the ruffians who constitute what is called the Government of the country. There is no excuse whatever upon any such ground as some German authorities and newspapers allege, for the conduct of the Turkish Government.

Their policy of slaughter and deportation has been wanton and unprovoked. It appears to be simply an application of the maxim once enunciated by Sultan Abdul Ilamid: "The way to get rid of the Armenian question is to get rid of the Armenians"; and the policy of extermination has been carried out with far more thoroughness and with far more bloodthirsty completeness by the present heads of the Turkish Administration-they describe themselves as the Committee of Union and Progress - than it was in the time of Abdul Hamid.

Even if the statistics were more abundant and more eloquent still, they might fail to convey to our imagination the actuality of what has happened. A nation blotted out! It is easy to say it with the lips, more difficult to realize what it means, for it is something totally beyond our experience.

Perhaps nothing brings it home more crushingly than the record which we have of one little community of sensitive, refined Armenian people, and of the terrible fates by which they were individually overtaken. They were the members of an educational establishment in a certain Anatolian town, which was endowed and directed by a society of foreign missionaries;

and the following is taken directly from a letter which was written by the President of the College after the blow had fallen.

I shall try to banish from my mind for the time the sense of great personal sorrow because of losing hundreds of my friends here, and also my sense of utter defeat in being so unable to stop the awful tragedy or even mitigate to any degree its severity, and compel myself to give you concisely some of the cold facts of the past months as they relate themselves to the College. I do so with the hope that the possession of these concrete facts may help you to do something there for the handful of dependents still left to us here.

- (i) Constituency: Approximately two-thirds of the girl pupils and six-sevenths of the boys have been taken away to death, exile or Moslem homes.
- (ii) Professors: Four gone, three left, as follows:

Professor A., served College 35 years. Professor of Turkish and History. Besides previous trouble arrested May 1st without charge, hair of head, moustache and beard pulled out in vain effort to secure damaging confessions. Starved and hung by arms for a day and a night and severely beaten several times. Taken out towards Diyarbekir about June 10th and murdered in general massacre on the road.

Professor B., served College 33 years, studied at Ann Arbor. Professor of Mathematics, arrested about June 5th and shared Professor A.'s fate on the road.

Professor C., taken to witness a man beaten almost to death, became mentally deranged. Started with his family about July 5th into exile under guard and murdered beyond the first big town on the road. (Principal of Preparatory Department, studied at Princeton.) Served the College 20 years.

Professor D., served College 16 years, studied at Edinburgh, Professor of Mental and Moral Science. Arrested with Professor A. and suffered same tortures, also had three finger nails pulled out by the roots; killed in same massacre.

Professor E., served College 25 years, arrested May 1st, not tortured but sick in prison. Sent to Red Crescent Hospital and after paying large bribes is now free.

Professor F., served the College for over 15 years, studied in Stuttgart and Berlin, Professor of Music, escaped arrest and torture, and thus far escaped exile and death because of favour with the Kaim-makam secured by personal services rendered.

Professor G., served the College about 15 years, studied at Cornell and Yale (M.S.), Professor of Biology, arrested about June 5th, beaten about the hands, body and head with a stick by the Kaim-makam himself, who, when tired, called on all who loved religion and the nation to continue the beating; after a period of insensibility in a dark closet, taken to the Red Crescent Hospital with a broken finger and serious bruises.

(iii) Instructors, Male: Four reported killed on the road in various massacres, whose average term of service is eight years. Three not heard from, probably killed on the road, average term of service in the College four years.

Two sick in Missionary Hospital.

One in exile.

One engaged in cabinet work for the Kaim-makam, free.

One, owner of house occupied by the Kaim-makam, free.

(iv) Instructors, Female:

One reported killed in Chunkoosh, served the College over twenty years.

One reported taken to a Turkish harem.

Three not heard from.

Four started out as exiles.

Ten free.

Of the Armenian people as a whole we may put an estimate that three-fourths are gone, and this three-fourths includes the leaders in every walk of life, merchants, professional men, preachers, bishops and government officials.

I have said enough. Our hearts are sick with the sights and stories of abject terror and suffering. The extermination of the race seems to be the objective, and the means employed are more fiendish than could be concocted locally. The orders are from headquarters, and any reprieve must be from the same source.