

# ASSYRIAN UNIVERSAL ALLIANCE

## **Presentation On The Assyrian Genocide In Mesopotamia During 1914 - 1918 And Onward**

**At**

### **The Executive Meeting Of The Local Government Association of New South Wales on 2 August 02.**

Mr. Chairman,

When history speaks about a massacre or a genocidal crime against a nation, it speaks about one specific tragic event causing the death of thousands or hundreds of thousands of their people. When the subject is the Assyrians, history speaks about hundreds of such massacres and genocides throughout the last 2500 years.

Since the collapse of the Assyrian Empire in 612 BC, colonisation of their lands by various powers has been a common occurrence, with each wave of such colonisation causing more land losses, more human losses and more tragedies for the Assyrians.

However, it was the dominance of the Ottomans Empire from the Fifteenth Century to the first part of the twentieth century, which completely reshaped the destiny of the Assyrian people. Those few millions who had withstood the melting process of the millennia, and had remained homogeneous in their ancestral homeland, became the victims of one of the worst Assyrian genocides in the early part of the 20th century.

In 1842 Assyrians living in the mountains of Hakkari faced a massive attack, which resulted in the death of tens of thousands of Christian Assyrians.

1895-1896, witnessed the Assyrian massacres in Diyarbakir, Hasankeyef, Sivas and other parts of Anatolia, by Sultan Abdul Hamid II. These attacks caused the death of over 55,000 Assyrians and the forced Ottomanisation of a further 100,000 Assyrians - the inhabitants of 245 villages. A further 100,000 Assyrian women and children were forced into Turkish harems. The Turkish troops looted the remains of the Assyrian settlements. Assyrians were raped, tortured and murdered.

Although, as noted, in the nineteenth century several massacres against Assyrians took place none matched the brutality of the genocide of 1915. In 1911, the Young Turk "Committee for Unity and Progress" declared its goal to "Turkify" all Ottoman subjects. This implementation of the Pan-Turkic program and ideology can be described as the "Dark Period" of ethnic and religious "cleansing" of the Assyrians, Greeks and Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. According to admissions by the Ottoman Home Office Minister, the Young Turks' Committee and the Ottoman leaders, Enver, Talat and Jamal Pashas, the pretext of war was to be used to justify the Turkish drive towards ethnic cleansing, without fear of international condemnation and political reprisals. Consequently, the systematic extermination of the Assyrian people, which continues to this day, has caused the population in that region, previously numbering millions, to diminish to a mere few thousand. These few Assyrians today fight to remain free in their traditional homeland.

Persecution of the Assyrians on the Ottoman territory began as early as August 1914, reaching its first high point between January and April 1915. According to the German academic, Dr Gabriele Yonan it was several months before the start of the actual deportations from the Armenian provinces where Assyrian also resided. The Assyrian genocide was therefore the first genocide of the 20th century.

Prior to WWI Assyrians lived as one nation numbering millions and inhabiting about 750 villages across the Taurus mountains, Tur Abdin, Hakkari, Botan and Tigris areas. Assyrians also lived in the larger towns of Urhai, Diyarbakir, Mardin, Mosul Baghdad, Aleppo and Damascus.

When Turkey entered the war in November 1914, the Assyrians were filled with hope. Those that lived in Turkish Mesopotamia and Persia thought that liberation was imminent. It was a time of promises for an independent statehood in the sacred soil of their ancestors. To that end, Assyrians subjected to hundreds of years of continuous persecution and massacres, sided with the allies for protection, first

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with the Russians from May 1915 to October 1917, then with the British forces following the Bolshevik Revolution. Instead of liberation they were subjected to the genocide of their people, and the loss of more than two-thirds of their then estimated 1.5 million population.

Documents, historical materials and diaries of eye witness accounts convey of the bludgeoning of little children with stones, dismembered bodies of women and girls who refused to be raped, the beheading of men, those who refused to convert to Islam and the burning and skinning alive of priests, nuns and deacons.

In September 1914, the Baku newspaper reported the fiery destruction of some 30 Assyrian villages and the death of over 200 Assyrians who were burned alive.

In Tur-Abdin 12,000 Ottoman soldiers, looted the village of Aynvardo and killed all its inhabitants. The attack resulted in a struggle lasting 2 months and 6 days as the Assyrians fought back in defence.

Reports about the attack on Midyat tell of blood pouring down from the roof gutters of every house.

In Seyrd Assyrians were rounded up like cattle and made to march for days in the harsh climate. Women, children and the elderly, were subjected to beatings, rapes and constant abuse. Those that became too weak to walk were killed.

In the village of Gardienne, eye witnesses speak about the attack on the elderly with spears and swords, the burning of churches, the raping and taking of women, the slaughtering of those refusing conversion to Islam.

Eyewitnesses from the villages of the Tkhuma region tell of the brutal killings of Assyrians by the Turkish swords and the finding of killed loved ones along the way as they attempted to escape the swords and daggers.

Newspapers report about the attacks on the villages of Hakkari mountain and the murdering of every Assyrian villager in the 30 settlements of the Gjavar region.

Diyarbakir reports tell of piercing of priests' noses with rings used to be dragged chains in streets, the slashing of pregnant women wombs, the throwing of babies against walls and of women committing suicide so as to avoid brutal rapes by the soldiers. Properties and lands were confiscated and even graves were upturned.

Eye witness accounts about the Assyrian genocide are voluminous but restriction of time permits me to only provide selected examples to demonstrate the terrific and horrific ways by which the Ottoman soldiers attacked, killed and destroyed Assyrians. No mercy was spared on women children or the elderly. Killings of the clergy and community leaders were carried out publicly to instill fear and weakness into the Assyrian community before their slaughter, their forced conversion or their forced deportation from their ancestral homelands.

By October 1914, the daily number of refugees to Urmia and regions of Iran had begun. Ironically there was a very strong Turkish force presence in Urmia. Assyrians relying on the presence of the Russian troops in the same region took the unavoidable risk, only to soon learn of the sudden withdrawal of the Russian troops. Pleadings by, and on behalf of, Assyrians to the Russians for help went unanswered.

The result was the continued demolition of Assyrian settlements and further reports of murder of men women and children. Several hundred thousand Assyrian women and children took the desperate journey on the snowy mountains, which lasted a month. Countless numbers failed to get through.

Those Assyrians who were still alive began a long journey from Urmia to Russia. It is reported that 40,000 Assyrians were riddled with famine and disease and the constant sight of dead and dying refugees along the way.

The start of the Russian revolution in 1917 led to the disintegration and the withdrawal of the Russian army and the Turkish preparation for the taking of Azarbaijan. More Turks went to Urmia to exterminate more Christians, among them Assyrians. Assyrians had to leave again and this time to Hamadan. Along the way attacks and death continued. That journey records 50,000 people dead.

Despite the loss of more than two thirds of their population between 1914 and 1918 this dark event in Assyrian history has been inadequately termed as the "genocide of the Armenians." This is partly because the historical writings and the strands of journalistic and academic evidence about the Assyrian genocide have been ignored.

One of the most important documents is the work of the British Secretary for Foreign Affairs, James Bryce, who in his book *The Treatment of the Armenians and the Assyrians in the Ottoman Empire* (London 1916) includes 21 documents substantiating the crimes committed against the Assyrians as well as eye witness accounts of the genocide in Turkey and Persia during WW1. This was despite the fact that Bryce's assistant Arnold Toynbee, who compiled the documents, failed to include more than 100 pages of detailed reports on the Assyrians as well as documents presented to the Paris Peace Conference (1920).

A very significant number of documents exist in the German material archives relating to the Assyrian genocide which have hitherto remained unpublished even though Johannes Lepsius (the German theologian, missionary and founder of the German Mission to the Orient) had at his disposal all these documents, could have he chose to ignore Assyrians, making his focal point the Armenians, when he produced two publications containing material about the political links between Imperial Germany and the extermination policy of the Young Turks. Despite his neglect of a proper consideration of the Assyrian massacres Lepsius' reporting and documentation are adequate enough to support that Assyrians among Armenians suffered the same fate.

Further evidence of the Assyrian genocide is found in the writings including letters reports and dairy entries of the American Committee of Armenian and Syrian Relief (ACASR), a committee created in the wake of the news from the American missionaries who worked among the Assyrians in Northwest Persia.

Although Fridjof Nansen, High Commissioner for Refugees for the League of Nations, failed to mention the Assyrian tragedy in his well known book (*A People Deceived - a Study Trip through Georgia and Armenia*), his successor, John H Simpson in his extensive report on refugees (*The Refugee Problem: A Report of a Survey*, London 1939) devoted chapter IV of his report to the Assyrian refugees.

There are other documents and articles published during and following the First World War. Then there are the writings of the Archbishop of Canterbury whose mission it was to instill a sense of political responsibility in the consciousness of the English public regarding the Assyrian tragedy. Similarly Lord Curzon presented the Assyrian question to the British Parliament and to the Press, in a serious effort to ensure that Assyrian representatives would be admitted to the Paris Peace Conference.

There are also a number of books published by Assyrian writers in English and French which contain personal reports by eye witnesses (see inter alia J. Naayem, Paris 1920; Y.H. Shabaz, Philadelphia 1918; P. Shimmon, London 1916; Surma d' Bet Mar Shimun, London 1920; A. Yohannan, London 1916).

It is also important to mention the writings by the German Lutheran mission from Hermannsburg, as well as other small German aid societies, which had contact with the Assyrians between the turn of the century and First World War. These hitherto missing document have now been discovered in the archives of the Hermannsburg mission.

An Assyrian war diary discovered in Tehran in 1964 contains very detailed reports on the regional events in the Hakkari Highlands and the border of Turkey and Persia. Some parts of this diary have been used as a source for the book by Rudolf Macuch (*History of Late and Modern Syriac Literature*-Berlin, 1976). However, despite its title, its significance lies more on the subject of the Assyrian suffering during the First World War in the specific regions.

In the national archives of the United Kingdom, France and the U.S.A., there is a plethora of documents related to the genocide against Assyrians. The Diplomatic French archives alone include 45 volumes on the Assyro-Chaldean question from 1915 to 1940.

In addition to the above mentioned sources there are countless documentary material in the state archives of the former Soviet Union which until recently had remained inaccessible.

While such indisputable evidence does exist, academics and historians have only in the last two decades or so, undertaken research to write about the Assyrian genocide, and until the seminal book by Dr Gabriele Yonan, entitled "The Forgotten Holocaust", no systematic research was carried out. Assyrians being subjected to more massacres and genocides in the aftermath of WWI, and being stateless (unlike the Armenians and the Greeks), have not been able to conduct such extensive research themselves nor to lobby effectively for the acknowledgment and recognition of their genocide.

In the aftermath of the war, the Treaty of Sevres, signed by the allies in August 1920 and which granted some protection to the Assyrians was never ratified. Subsequently, the Treaty of Lausanne signed in July 1923, gave recognition to the nascent Turkish Republic, provided for some protection of minority rights but with no specific reference to the Assyrians.

By now the Mountains of Hakkari and all other towns and villages , the Assyrians had lived in for thousands of years were denuded of all Assyrian remnants. Left with no other alternative, Assyrians followed the British troops to Mesopotamia, only to realise by December 1925, that the League of Nations allocated the Province of Mosul to the new Iraqi Kingdom of Iraq. The British mandate was lifted in October 1932 and Iraq became independent.

With no effective guarantees for the protection of their rights, extermination followed. 7 August 1933 was the beginning of a systematic effort of the Iraqi authorities aiming to destroy this nation, be it by massacre, by forceful displacement from their ancient and only remaining homeland, by political assassinations, by genocide of the Assyrian identity, and its cultural and linguistic heritage. After all,

Assyrians are the erectors of that great civilisation, and the most legitimate claimants for autonomy and land.

Allow me to read one account which described the Simile massacre in the book titled "The Assyrian Tragedy":

"...The inoffensive population was indiscriminately massacred...with rifle revolver and machine gunfire. In one room alone eighty one men...were barbarously massacred...priests were tortured and their bodies mutilated. Those who showed their Iraqi Nationality papers were the first to be shot. Girls were raped and women made to march naked before the Arab army commander. Holy Books were used as fuel for burning girls. Children were run over by military cars. Pregnant women were bayoneted. Children were flung to the air and pierced on the points of bayonets. Those that survived in other villages were now exposed to constant raids... Forced conversion of men and women was the next process. Refusal was met with death. Sixty five out of ninety five Assyrian villages and settlements were either sacked, destroyed or burnt to the ground."

The Simile massacre was the price paid for the neglect of the Assyrian question following the genocide of the Assyrians during WWI. The present persecution and forced displacement of Assyrians by the Iraqi regime is the result of the continuing apathy of the international community towards the Assyrian question and the neglect of the genocide of Assyrians. So is the fact that whereas the Assyrian population in Turkey previously numbering millions has now diminished to a mere few thousand. So is the fact that Assyrians in the last few decades have increasingly sought refuge to the west and who today live predominantly in the Diaspora.

The international decree should not be to eliminate Assyrians from history. They should not be considered as a people who disappeared off the face of the earth at the time of the collapse of their empire. They are the original people of Mesopotamia and the legitimate remnants of the first recognised and documented civilisation that was responsible for the development of almost every initial component of the modern civilisation. Assyrians were also among the first people to adopt Christianity, to build the early churches and to go onto missions to Asia.

As a consequence of actions taken by powerful oppressors such as the Ottoman Turks and the Iraqi regimes, with their intention of race purification, Assyrians today have been forced to live as stateless people in the Diaspora. Assyrians hope that countries such as Turkey harbouring such a past will be compelled to evaluate their past with objectivity and humanitarianism so that future evils may be forestalled. The continuation of Turkey's denial demonstrated by the construction of the mausoleum in Ankara in honour of the principal architect of the genocide Talat Pasha, however, requires Assyrians to appeal to the world to treat this as an international question. It is the moral responsibility of the international community to recognise this historical injustice. On 17 April 1997 the Parliament of NSW passed an historic motion condemning the Armenian genocide, which commenced in 1915. To acknowledge such an evil act was a sacred decision, not only in commemorating the lives of the Armenians who perished in that same genocide but also to increase human awareness of the lasting effects that such tragedies cause upon the lives of the generations that follow.

In acknowledging the Armenian genocide the then member for Ermington, Mr Photios stated that "in the very least the Turkish Government should pause, remember and admit-in much the same way that Modern Germany has in large measure faced up to the reality of the Jewish genocide by Adolf Hitler. There is in the hearts and minds of fellow human beings a great void in the absence of that admission and that apology."

For the Assyrians the operation of that reality is contingent upon the international recognition of the Assyrian genocide during WWI and the consequences that flowed and continue to flow from its non-recognition.

Most Assyrians in Australia live in New South Wales, the majority residing in the Fairfield, Liverpool and Randwick areas. Assyrians have played a significant role in shaping the very cosmopolitan culture of these cities. The community has achieved much in the short time since its migration to Australia in the 1970s. They have built churches and a cathedral; they have built local community and sports clubs. They have set up various social academic and cultural organisations. They have now built the first Assyrian private school in Fairfield being the first also in the Western world. In less than 35 years, thousands have graduated from universities and colleges. Assyrian businesses employ thousands of workers and professionals. Assyrians appreciate the value of citizenship in Australia and consider themselves even more privileged to be living in what they recognise as being the best city of the world-Sydney. This vibrant community cannot however cease mourning its tragic past when its people remember that they are the children and grandchildren of those who even to date have vivid memories of the horrific events of a genocide that shaped their present status as a stateless nation. Today, Assyrians live in a multitude of countries in the Diaspora. They do not have a choice of living in an

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Assyrian homeland. There is no Assyria. For the Assyrians here home is Australia. It is in this context and in the context of universal human rights that the Assyrian community, as part of the Australian community pleads that this ethnic, religious and cultural genocide of their people be acknowledged and recognised.

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