
The controversy over what occurred in southeastern Anatolia ninety years ago continues to draw interest even as the events themselves recede further into the past. The question remains relevant as parliaments in Europe and the Congress in the USA debate whether the historically undeniable destruction of most of the Armenian communities of the Ottoman Empire during World War I constituted a case of genocide. A surge in new scholarly studies, published since 2000 on this issue, attest to the fact that the historical debate is not dead. David Gaunt is unequivocal in his certainty that it was genocide but he wants readers of this book to be aware that as many as 250,000 non-Armenian Christians in the same region also perished in the war. In the debates on the Armenian Massacres/Genocide, Gaunt believes that historians have too often overlooked the almost total destruction of the Suryani (alternatively Jacobite or Syrian Orthodox) and the Nestorian Christian communities of the Empire, carried out by the Ottoman army. This work seeks to document that fact for the historical record.

Gaunt begins with an all-too-brief historical overview of the two religious communities and their relations with their more numerous Muslim Kurdish neighbors. The Nestorians, who appropriated the name Assyrians for themselves in the nineteenth century, lived in the mountains straddling the Ottoman-Persian frontier. The majority of the community remained loyal to the ancient rite of the Church; but Latin Catholic missionaries, active in the region from the seventeenth century, influenced a substantial portion of the community to enter into communion with the Pope in Rome. Today, their descendants call themselves the Chaldean Catholics. To confuse things further, the Ottoman authorities used the labels Nestorian (Nesturi) and Chaldean (Kildani) almost interchangeably and European visitors often conflated the Nestorians with the more numerous Suryanis, calling them both “Syrians”.

Many of the Nestorians were tribally organized and armed; they had historically enjoyed a relatively peaceful and often symbiotic relationship with the Kurdish tribes. That cordiality broke down with the rise of the Kurdish tribal confederation led by Bedir Khan of Bohtan in the 1830s. Gaunt provides little explanation for this collapse in inter-communal relations. There is no doubt about the result, however. Bedir Khan’s attacks on
the community caused the deaths of thousands of Nestorians and inaugurated a period of increasing polarization between them and the Kurdish tribes that lasted for the rest of the century. Relations worsened further still at the end of the nineteenth century when the Ottoman authorities began to view the Kurds as a potentially effective counterweight, both to Armenian nationalist aspirations and Russian intrigue, and armed them.

Ottoman troops moved into Persian territory at the start of the World War I. In the region around Lake Urumia in Iranian Azerbaijan, Ottoman troops and their Kurdish allies instituted a reign of terror against the Nestorian villagers that only ended with the arrival of Russian troops. The Russians, with their Nestorian allies, then drove the Ottomans back over their frontier; in revenge, the Ottoman forces conducted a campaign against the Nestorians in the Hakkâri region, on the Ottoman side of the border, under the pretext of disarming them. In the process, the Ottoman army and their Kurdish allies killed thousands of innocent Nestorians and Chaldeans. While Gaunt acknowledges that Assyrian auxiliaries were indeed aiding the Russians, he dismisses the possibility that the Ottomans might have had cause in moving against Christian villages that he acknowledges were often well armed.

The causes of the destruction of the Suryani community were completely separate from that of the Nestorians. They had neither arms nor a tradition of warring with their Kurdish neighbors. It is not clear why Gaunt links their fates, because the only factors common between the two communities were that they were both Christian and spoke differing dialects of Syriac as their mother tongue. The tragedy that befell the Nestorians, unlike that of the Suryanis, occurred independently of the Armenian deportations and actually started before actions against the Armenians began. The fate of the Suryanis, by contrast, was inextricably tied to the larger human disaster that befell the Armenians.

The Suryanis were located in the hill country along what is today the border region of Turkey, Syria, and Iraq, stretching from Diyarbakır and Urfa in the west to Mosul in the east. It was their unfortunate fate that they shared the northern part of this region with the Armenians. As the Ottoman authorities began to order the deportation of Armenians from the province of Diyarbakır in the spring of 1915, Suryanis were deported as well. This occurred, despite the explicit orders that only the Armenians were subjects of the deportation orders. Nevertheless, in the deportations that followed, the Ottoman army indiscriminately killed thousands of Armenians and Suryanis, including most of the Christian population of