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KURDS AND CHRISTIANS

Some of the Oppressions and Cruelties in Times of Peace.

CHRISTIANS WERE BOUGHT AND SOLD¹

In Some Districts They Were Forced to Work Without Recompense — Constant Raids on Villages.

In this week's number of *The Independent* will appear an article on "The Kurds and Christians Before the Massacres," showing to what kind of life these Armenian, Jacobite, and Nestorian Christians are condemned in times of peace.

These facts, from trustworthy sources, are given in this article.

As showing the exactions made on the common people by the Government, it is stated that Mustapha Pasha, a nomad chief in 1893 collected 4,000 piasters (4.4 cents each) from the village of Mansurieh of Bohtan, and claimed 5,000 more, although the villagers acknowledged owing only 2,000 piasters. Fourteen persons in this village were assessed a double tax for several years amounting to 4,000 piasters. Bashibazouks took 2,000 piasters worth of barley and other produce from the village without payment.

Mustapha Pasha bought the tithes of the villages from the Government for 7,500 piasters and collected 9,000. When the villagers complained to the Government they were not redressed, but Mustapha Pasha sent flocks of sheep which devoured 2,000 piasters worth of growing crops.

The legitimate taxes of the village for 1893 were 14,600 piasters, but, in addition, 12,500 piasters were collected. Mansurieh is only one hour from Jezireh, the Government headquarters. Nothing was done to protect it.

Hassana of Bohtan is a village of 60 houses. The Aghas of Shernakh exacted from the villagers of Hassana 1,160 piasters in 1891, 1,739 piasters in 1892, and 8,074 piasters in 1893, as noted at the time of the occurrences by a village priest. The total for the three years, 1891-3 was 10,873 piasters, as against 5, 376 for the three years 1880-82, showing that the exactions are increasing.

A Christian of the District of Berwer has put in writing what he has seen of the oppressions of Christians by Kurds. He saw numerous murders and mentions the names of eight victims, three robberies of considerable amounts, and many smaller ones.

Mohammed Bey of Berwer is responsible for these and other crimes. In the same district the Kurds made the Christians build their castles, sow and harvest their fields, and do much other labor, without recompense.

Not only this, but cursings and beatings were showered on Christians as they worked. Sundays were special days of oppression.

Besides all this, the Kurds of other districts raided the villages of Berwer, killed the inhabitants like dogs, burned their houses, and carried away their goods. Duree, My, Eyrt, Ina, and D'Noony suffered in the greatest degree.

The village of Mar Yokhanan has been raided several times during the last two years. So has Maragha, only a short distance away. A number of Christian villages further back in the mountains were even more severely oppressed. The people were bought and sold as slaves. In other districts the buying and selling of Christians by Kurds is common.

The people of Shakh were forced, to live in caves in the mountains in Winter, because of extortionate taxes which necessitated their giving up their homes. The priest's house was forcibly entered, his life threatened, and his goods carried away.

Nahrwan, near Jezireh, is on the plain within easy reach of the Government. It is visited daily by the Kurds from the mountains, who exact the 'usual tribute of produce and money. This last Summer the demands were so excessive that, rendered desperate, the villagers seized one of the Kurds who stopped overnight in a neighboring village, recovered some of their goods, and took possession of his guns. They did this without violence to him.

A few days after, this Kurd, with his followers, waylaid two of the men of this village, one of whom escaped. The other was carried some miles to a river, where he was stabbed to death, and his body flung into the river. The murderers were well known, but nothing was done toward apprehending them.

The writer was in Nahrwan when the Kaimakam of Jezireh came, several weeks after the affair, to examine into it. The examination was rendered so oppressive to the Christians that the people were glad to declare that nothing had happened, in order to escape any further inquisition. Even the old mother of the murdered man was frightened until she, declared that she did not know of any such occurrence, and had no complaints to make against anybody.

Other villages which were raided and the cattle stolen, the inhabitants murdered, or forced, to flee to the mountains, or at least to send their women and children away, are Kannybalaver, Dihi of Supna,, Bebab, Dart, Kumani, and Mosul.

Four years ago a Christian priest of Dari, who had secured an education and acquired some influence was appointed by the Nestorian Patriarch, agent for the Christians of that district. In his efforts to secure redress for his people and to protect them from the exactions of the Kurds, he incurred the hostility of those who had been living off their villages.

The New York Times

JANUARY 16, 1895 (cont'd)

One evening, on his way to Dari, only half an hour from the city, he was shot down by these Kurds.

There were two companions with him who saw the Kurds who did the killing and recognized them as well-known men. They were so intimidated, however, by the Kurds that they have never dared to make accusation or give testimony against them. Nothing was done by the Government.

Last Spring two Christians who had sold their sheep in Mosul and were on their way home were attacked by Kurds just outside of the city. They left their animals and fled. The Kurds pursued them, overtook one of them, and shot him down. The sum of money taken was considerable. The wounded man was brought to the house of one of the missionaries, where he lay for several months before he recovered, sufficiently to return to his home -

Through the influence of the missionaries the Government was induced to take action; two men were arrested against whom there seemed to be strong evidence. The case was allowed to drag along from month to month, until finally the prisoners were released, and nothing further was done.

The district of Zabur, adjoining the District of Amadia, not many years ago was well populated with Christians, there being a number of Christian villages. Today there is not a single Christian village, they all having been taken by the Kurds. The few families left live in practical slavery to the Kurds.

An old missionary, who has been familiar with the region from Bohtan to Amadia, for years, says these oppressions are increasing, and unless something is done speedily all the Christian villages of these various districts will soon fall into the hands of the Kurds, just as they have in Zabur.

The villages of Mansured, Shakh, and Hassana have been given as examples of such oppression; but as the evil is general, affecting all Christians in Turkey, or at least in Eastern Turkey, it is proper to summarize these abuses as generally practiced. The legitimate taxes are exceedingly heavy, but additional burdens are laid upon the people through the following abuses, which are merely mentioned and classified Abuses through unjust and corrupt assessment.

Villages are compelled to give Assessors presents of money to prevent them from overestimating the taxable persons and property in the village.

Assessors, to secure additional bribes, signify their willingness, for a consideration, to make an underestimate. The ignorant villagers gladly avail themselves of the opportunity, in order to recover what they have given the assessors in presents and bribes. This, however, affords an opportunity for blackmail, which is used by succeeding officials. It also afterward involves them in trouble with the Government, in which they suffer loss.

Injustice and severity in collecting.

The collectors, as a rule, go to the villages on Sunday, as on that day they find the people in the village. They frequently interrupt the Christian services and show disrespect to their churches or places of prayer.

The collection of the taxes is accompanied with unnecessary abuse and reviling, some times even with wanton destruction of property.

Even after several failures of crops in succession, when famine was so severe that many of the people were being fed by foreign charity, the taxes were collected in full and with severity.

Their food supply, beds, household utensils, and farming implements were seized by the Collectors in lieu of taxes. Many were compelled to borrow money at enormous rates of interest, mortgaging their fields and future crops. Unscrupulous officials and other Kurds, in whose interests such opportunities are created, thus became possessed of Christian villages, the people of which henceforth becoming practically slaves to them.

These collectors make false returns of taxes received. The official in the city is secured by a bribe, and the matter is kept quiet until a succeeding set of officials comes into office. They send their officers to the villages to present claims for back taxes. The villagers in vain contend that they have paid them. They have no receipts. They do not dare to ask for them. Or the headman of the village who keeps the accounts has been bribed to falsify his accounts. These taxes are collected again, entailing much suffering upon the people.

The books in the Government offices at the Kalmakamlik are often incorrect through mistakes or dishonesty, and in consequence taxes are paid on fictitious names or on persons who have been dead for years.

Taxes are often farmed out to the highest bidder, who usually is some powerful Kurdish chief. Either in consequence of his power, or by means of bribes, he is secure from interference on the part of the Government. He collects the amount due the Government and then takes for himself as much as he chooses, his own will or an exhausted thrashing floor being the only limit to his rapacity.

While he is collector for these villages they are considered as belonging to him.

All the assessors and collectors - and they are many, a different one for each kind of tax, personal, house and land, sheep, tobacco, etc - on their visits to the villages, take with them a retinue of servants and soldiers, who, with their horses, must be kept at the expense of the village, thus entailing a very heavy additional burden upon them.

The New York Times

JANUARY 16, 1895 (cont'd)

Soldiers and servants sent to the villagers to make collections very naturally take something for themselves.

The Government has recently established a system of loans on mortgages to the farmers, ostensibly for their relief, but undoubtedly for the purpose of securing their land, as the farmers will never be able to pay even the interest on the loans.

The Yezidis are a remnant of a heathen sect, who have never been converted to the Moslem faith.

Their holy place is not far from the City of Mosul, one day's journey, and their principal villages are also close by. In the Summer of 1892 the Sultan sent a special officer, called Farik Pasha, to Mosul to correct certain abuses in the Government, to collect all back taxes, and to convert the Yezidis. His authority was absolute, the Vali Pasha of the city being subject to his orders.

In reference to his work among the Yezidis, he, it was generally reported, was to get a certain sum per capita for every convert made.

He first sent priests among them to convert them to the "true faith." They not succeeding, he very soon gave them the old alternative of the Koran or the sword. Still not submitting, he sent his soldiers, under command of his son, who put to the sword all who, not able to escape, refused to accept Mohammed. Their villages were burned, many were killed in cold blood, some were tortured, women and young girls were outraged or carried off to harems, and other atrocities, too horrible to relate, were perpetrated.

Those who escaped made their way to the mountains of Sinjar, where, together with their brethren of the mountains, they in-trenched themselves and successfully de-fended themselves until the Spring of 1893 against the Government troops which had been sent against them.

This massacre was reported to the French Government by M. Siouffi, Consul at that time in Mosul, and to the English Government by Mr. Parry, who was in that region under the instructions of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

The Yezidis who remained in their villages on the plain had Moslem priests set over them to instruct them in the Moslem faith. They were compelled to attend prayers and nominally become Mohammedans; but in secret they practiced their own rites and declared that they were still Yezidis.

Notes:

¹ That Armenians were bought and sold like slaves is described by M. S. Lazarev, a Russian historian:

"The Kurdish feudal Beys ruthlessly exploited and oppressed the Armenian peasants, who were completely devoid of rights... 'In the *kaza* [district] of Sasun,' wrote the Russian vice-consul Tumanski at the turn of the twentieth century, 'there is an almost serf-like dependence of Armenians on Kurds, with all its legal consequences: each Armenian is attached to some Kurd or other and obliged to pay him rent; when in need of money the Kurds sell their serfs; should a Kurd kill a serf, the latter's master avenges himself by killing a serf belonging to the murderer.' Some Beys even kept, in Armenian villages, the "right of the first night." * * *"

*M. S. Lazarev, *Kurdistan i Kurds kaya Problema* (Moscow, 1964) as quoted in Charles Issawi, *The Economic History of Turkey, 1800-1914* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 66.

[Referenced in "The Armenian Genocide, An Interpretation," by S. Astourian, *The History Teacher*, February 1990. volume 23, number 2]

