

INTRODUCTION

DISCOVERY

The regular trips I have taken to Turkey and the Middle East over the last few years have inspired in me an interest in the various Christian communities still remaining there. During the summer of 1999, I had set out from Erzurum in Eastern Turkey to visit the ancient churches of Armenia, passing through Kars and the old Armenian city of Ani, and finally arriving at Lake Van, with its beautiful Aghtamar Church. A little further south towards Syria, my map showed a series of monasteries whose strange sounding names whet my curiosity: Mar Gabriel, Mar Yakup, Mar Malke, where “Mar” in Syriac means “Saint”. Huddled together within a few dozen square miles around the cities of Mardin and Midyat in the Tur Abdin hills, these were, I was to discover, the last survivors of one of the holiest sites in Eastern Christendom.

Situated in southeast Turkey, this region is bounded by the Syrian border on one side, and the tall mountains of Kurdistan on the other. The war against the PKK Kurds that had been going on for several decades prevented journalists and tourists from reaching there easily. I jumped into the first bus I could find, thinking I would discover yet another pile of monastic ruins, at best deserted, if not transformed into mosques. This had been the case for many of the region’s Christian churches, such as the Armenian church of the Holy Apostles, built in the first half of the 10th century and converted into a mosque in the summer of 1998.

Much to my surprise, I discovered that the monasteries were still inhabited and carefully maintained by monks! *I had thought* there were no longer any Christians left in that part of Turkey. In the course of my long conversations with these monks, I found out that they were the last representatives of the Syriac Orthodox Church. Heir to the glorious patriarchal see of Antioch, *it was known* to our history books as the “Jacobite” church. Before me stood the most authentic descendants of the 1st century universal Church. How had they been able to survive into our time, these people who still spoke the language of Christ, a form of Aramaic? How had this nearly two thousand year old tradition been able to weather the storms of time? In the chance of our accidental meeting, these people with the faces of patriarchs personified the memory of our origins.

Back in Paris, my curiosity aroused. I looked everywhere for a book that could shed some light on these last Christians, both recent and ancient, but was able to find almost nothing besides foreboding encyclopedia entries on Eastern Christians rife with theological details telling of the first schisms of the 5th century Church. Nothing on their recent history, nothing on their suffering in 1915, which was nonetheless widely discussed among the Syrians of the diaspora, be they in Aleppo, Syria or Europe.

No book, no study except for the phenomenal memoir undertaken by Joseph Yacoub, who since his arrival in the west twenty years ago, has indefatigably defended their cause, the cause of memory, the cause of Justice, the cause of History.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

To what degree did the Syrians suffer from the violence that accompanied the decline and fall of the Ottoman Empire? This is the question that the research presented in this book will endeavor to answer. The “Syriac question”, if raised, was always considered part of the “Armenian question”, which in turn was considered part of the “Middle Eastern question”. The situation was exacerbated by the moribund Ottoman regime, which since the year Sultan Abdul Hamid had suspended the constitution, had relied on a blend of ever greater authoritarianism and bureaucracy. Starting at the 1878 Congress of Berlin, these “questions” offered the perfect framework for British, French, German, Austro-Hungarian and Russian expansionist schemes throughout the Middle East.

On the diplomatic level, the Ottoman regime sought the support of new, strong countries such as Japan, which had emerged victorious from its war with Russia, and the new Germany. Within the country, the Sultan, aided by the Caliphate’s prestige, wooed Muslim minorities: the Kurds, the Bedouins, the Albanians and the Circassians.

In this new context, the Empire’s Christian minorities became suspect. Since France’s intervention at Mount Lebanon in 1861 and the Western powers’ repeated incursions into the region, the Christians had slowly become outcasts within Ottoman society.

Until the beginning of the 20th century, 90% of the Empire’s Christian minorities (mostly Armenians) in the six eastern provinces lived in farming communities. The various Syriac

communities that had survived were but a minority of a minority: even the most generous statistics estimate only 250,000 individuals in the entire Ottoman Empire. The Syrian Orthodox community, called “Jacobite”, was essentially contained within the limits of Diyarbakir province. Their social organization, which had remained very traditional, stood firm on three pillars: the family, the patriarchate and the Church.

RESEARCH

My review of primary sources led me along two distinct paths. First, towards western sources in French and English, easy to obtain, for the period between 1850 and 1919. Rummaging through the diplomatic archives at the Quai d’Orsay as well as those of the Dominican Fathers, who had been brought back to France from Mosul, Iraq after the Gulf War, I gathered all information directly or indirectly pertaining to the “Jacobites” with the aim of forming a clear picture of their situation at the end of the 19th century.

As I advanced in this work, I realized that the tragic events which occurred during the First World War had been the result of a long process of rejecting Eastern Christianity that had begun in the 1880’s. Never could the genocide of 1915, at least in Diyarbakir province, have reached such immense proportions, and never could it even be understood, without the successive waves of massacres begun several decades earlier. The Syriacs were the forgotten, even despised victims of that horrible bloodbath, itself the precursor to all the genocides of the 20th century. Our collective memory cannot afford to ignore those events.

Thanks to the eyewitness testimony that diplomats and missionaries present on the scene up to the 1914 declaration of war left in telegrams, letters, and reports to their superiors, we have a gold mine of information on this period.

The second path of research led me to Eastern sources. I had the luck to come across extremely rare testimony of Syriac origin, never before used, and thus priceless. These include the writings of Father Isaac Armalet and Jean Naayem, as well as complaints lodged by the Syriac patriarchs, both Orthodox and Catholic, at the peace conference of 1919.

I then systematically combined these two categories of information to bring out similarities between them, wherever

possible. In this work, I have only repeated facts known to be true and confirmed by at least two sources, one western, the other eastern. Whenever there was a doubt as to a particular point, I have chosen to indicate so in the body of the text, while offering both versions.

The structure of this book revolves chronologically around three long periods spanning the years from 1880 to 1919. First, I shall offer the information necessary to place the Syriac Orthodox communities in their geographical, social and human context.

The second block of information concerns the period of the first organized massacre in 1895-1896. Finally, the last section directly relates to events tied to the First World War, up to the debates at the peace conference of 1919-1920.

NOTE TO THE READER

The facts related in this book are the testimony of those who played a role in these events. Under no circumstances can the author be held responsible for the quotes taken from documents that belong to the public domain.

This work concentrates on the destiny of the Syriac communities known as Western, Orthodox and Catholic. I shall not speak of the massacres of the Nestorian Syriac communities that took place in Hakkari and near Mosul at the same time, for several works on those massacres, including Joseph Yacoub's and Joseph Alichoran's, already exist.

The goal of this work is to recreate in a lively manner a tragedy experienced by a forgotten people.

TRANSCRIPTION OF PLACE NAMES

The difficulty of transcribing place names in this region of the Ottoman Empire renders any attempt at standardization impossible. Any one village can have a Syriac, Kurdish, Arabic, Armenian or Turkish name. All the Syriac names for villages were replaced by Turkish ones when the young Turkish Republic was founded. The names of large cities such as "Diyarbakir" have been altered to reflect modern Turkish spelling. In order to follow this evolution, the reader may turn to the chart "Modern Equivalents of Cited Place Names" at the end of the book.