

THE PATRIARCHATE
OF THE EAST

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PETITION IN BEHALF OF ASSYRIAN NATION*

To the Hon. Alger Hiss
Secretary-General
Veterans Building
San Francisco, California

Excellency:

THE ASSYRIAN NATION of today is the remnant of the once great Assyrian Empire, and the greatest missionary Church the world has ever known. Their status as a *millet*, "nation", under the leadership of their Patriarch, known as the PATRIARCH OF THE EAST, was recognized and tolerated under the Parthians, the Sassanides, the Arab Khalifs, the Mogul Kahns, and the Ottoman Sultans.

Until World War I, the Assyrian nation lived in the mountains of Kurdistan to the North of Beth-Nahreen (Mesopotamia) and around Lake Urumia, in Persia, under the spiritual and temporal leadership of their Patriarchs.

The Assyrians in Kurdistan, although nominally subjects to the Turkish Government, enjoyed a great measure of autonomy. The Turkish Government satisfied itself with a tribute paid through the agency of the Patriarch, His Holiness the Mar Shimun, a title used by the successive Patriarchs to signify the foundation of the CHURCH OF THE EAST by Saint Peter.

ASSYRIAN NATION IN WORLD WAR I

This was the state in which the Assyrian nation lived prior to the outbreak of the First World War. The respective European powers—England, Russia, and France—had for many years been interested in the Assyrian nation in view of the strategic position which they held, and their undeniable quality as soldiers. The representatives of these Powers made regular tours among the Assyrians, disseminating the propaganda of their respective governments—an act which the Assyrians were unable to avoid and the Turkish Government (equally) powerless to prevent.

This naturally increased the suspicions of the old Turkish *Régime* against the Assyrians, suspicions which were for the most part unwarranted and grossly exaggerated; but the fact is that these suspicions did exist, and when the tragic hour struck in 1914, the small Assyrian Nation was among the first to suffer the tragic consequences over which

*But for few minor typographical corrections and other slight matters, the text of the original Petition has been kept intact. The Appendices and the footnotes were no part of that Petition. They are added to this edition only for elucidation and corroboration of the text of the Petition.

it had no control. In a document such as this, it is not possible to go into detail of the series of happenings which have already been documented by various writers.

However, whether with the knowledge of the central government or through instigation of local Turkish officials, the Mohammedan Kurds carried out a wholesale massacre of the Assyrians of the district of Albag Gawar; men, women, and children alike were slaughtered, only young women being spared to suffer the worst fate of Harem life. The then Patriarch, MAR BENYAMIN SHIMUN, alarmed by the tragedy, called a general meeting of all the leaders of the nation, composed of both the bishops and the *Maliks* who met in Diz on the 18th of April, 1915. After lengthy deliberations it was unanimously decided that—in view of the fact that the Turkish Government had failed to observe its solemn obligation to safeguard the lives and property of the Assyrians—the Assyrian nation accept the invitation of the Allies and particularly that of England, France, and Russia to join the common cause and to fight to the victorious end as their *smallest Ally*. In reply to the ultimatum of the Assyrian nation, the Turkish Government informed the Patriarch *Mar Benyamin Shimun* that if the Assyrians joined the Allies, his brother Hormizd, then a student at Constantinople (and held as hostage) would be put to death. The Patriarch who had hitherto exhorted his people to be patient in suffering, remained unmoved by the threat. Hormizd was accordingly put to death most cruelly.

In the meantime, the Patriarch made a personal contact with Chernosoboff, Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Eastern armies, who was then in Salmas in Northwest Persia and who informed him that due to pressure on the Western front, the Russian armies were then actually withdrawing from Persia, and therefore, the help promised to the Assyrians was not forthcoming. It was at this time that the Assyrians around Lake Urumia suffered a terrible fate at the hands of the incoming Turkish armies and the Kurdish and Persian irregulars. The Assyrians in Kurdistan, in the meantime, had set a line of resistance west to the Vilayet of Mosul and northwest on the Persian border. They were attacked incessantly by powerful units of the Turkish army and swarms of Kurdish irregulars, yet they held on tenaciously for about four months, but being vastly outnumbered both in men and material, they finally had to retreat, and join the Russian Forces who had by now returned to Salmas and Urumia. Here they were organized into regular units and armed by the Russians, and they distinguished themselves in many an engagement against the common foe.

However, the Russian Revolution of October, 1917, left the Assyrian nation stranded, and had from now on to fight alone against the Turks, the Persians, and the Kurds. In fourteen major battles the Assyrians were victorious, but the incessant pressure of the Turkish Regulars and the Kurdish irregulars necessitated a shortening of the line. This action on the part of the Turkish army was motivated by the fact that the Assyrian army was threatening seriously the northern flank of their armies that

were engaged in a deadly combat with the British armies in Mesopotamia and Southern Persia.

In the meantime, our supplies were getting exhausted; the Assyrians were being persistently attacked from the north by Ali Ehsan Pasha's 5th and 7th divisions, from the south by the 6th division under Haji Ebrahim Beg, from the west by the 12th division under Haidar Beg, while in the east we had our backs to Lake Urumia. Indeed, the situation was growing desperate.

It was at this juncture that the British Government through the agency of Captain George F. Gracey (D.S.O.), who was acting under the orders of the Intelligence Service, came especially for the purpose from Van—his headquarters—to encourage the Assyrians to organize their resistance against the Turks. At a conference held in December, 1917, or early January, 1918, in the name of England, Capt. Gracey undertook to furnish immediately the funds necessary for the payment of the troops and non-commissioned officers. For the future he promised the proclamation of the independence of the Assyrian nation. Colonel Nikitine, the Russian Vice Consul, and Monsieur Paul Coujole, a French Medical Officer, Chef De L'Ambulance Francaise du Caucase, were present on the occasion and have testified to the fact.

It was also on this occasion that, on the advise of Captain Gracey, the Patriarch Mar Shimun Benyamin, accepted an invitation to a meeting with Simko Agha, a Kurdish Chief, at which the Patriarch, along with about a hundred leaders who accompanied him, were murdered treacherously. This was the greatest blow the nation could have suffered.

Soon after this, K. M. Pennington, a British Flight Officer, who, at a great risk to his life, landed on a grazing ground with a message from the British General in Hamadan, urging us to make contact in Sainkala with the British unit under the command of J. J. McCarthy, one hundred miles south of Tabriz and about half way between Urumia and Hamadan.

At the command of the Patriarch, Polos Mar Shimun XXII, who succeeded the Patriarch Mar Benyamin, an Assyrian force under the leadership of General Petros Elia (one of the Assyrian Commanders) along with the bishop Mar Yosip¹ effected a junction with McCarthy's unit.

However, the help thus promised and which was sorely needed never reached the Assyrians, now concentrated in the Urumia district. The Turkish forces in the meantime increased the pressure, and then it was found that the British Forces, which were already locked in a deadly combat with the Turks and harassed by swarms of Arab irregulars, would not be able to help the Assyrians effectively.

Thereupon, it was decided to make contact with the British forces in Hamadan. A general retreat took place; forcing their way through a hostile territory, the Assyrians finally reached the British Forces in

1. And Zaya d'Beth Mar Shimun, brother of the Patriarch.

Hamadan. It was during this—the worst Odyssey in the history of the nation—that thousands of men, women, and children alike died of starvation and disease. Thus ended the first Assyrian chapter of the horrors of World War I, little revealing that a worse fate was yet in store for this gallant remnant of the most ancient Christian church and nation.

ASSYRIAN NATION UNDER THE BRITISH

IN THE MEANTIME, thousands of Assyrian refugees were moved to Baquba, near Baghdad, where the British military authorities had established a great camp for their reception, and very good care was taken of them. Their able-bodied men at the same time, however, were formed into a military force, or otherwise employed for other useful purposes connected with the war.

The first Assyrian force under the British command—and headed by Rab Khaila David d'Mar Shimun, father of the present Patriarch—were from now on employed with telling effect against the successive Kurdish and Arab uprisings.

Under the command of General Knightingale, the Assyrian Army went into action in July, 1918, against the Kurds of Amadia district, who had murdered a number of British officers. The revolt was broken, and thereafter the Assyrians were used by the British to police Mesopotamia and Kurdistan in order to smash the successive rebellions by the Arabs and the Kurds. By the admission of the then Civil Commissioner² in Iraq:

It was the Assyrian force that saved the swamping of our rule in the Arab revolt and it was they who (as the C.O. in the field, Colonel Cameron, declared) rolled back the Turkish invasion of Iraq in 1922 and 1923 at a time when the Iraqi troops were utterly unfit to take the field themselves.

The following letter was received by the present Patriarch from Colonel J. J. McCarthy, who headed the British military Mission to Persia during the World War I:

I have sent a copy of a memorandum I have written on the Assyrian question from the time your people joined forces with us against the Turks in 1918 up till six months after the Armistice was signed. I have made a strong point of the fact that your people were definitely promised by me (acting under orders from headquarters, of course) that they would have their country restored to them, and that my orders and only reason for raising the Assyrian contingent in Hamadan in 1918 was to drive the Turk out and re-occupy the country.

I do hope the Foreign Office will do something and do it now and before it is too late. No good can come out of delaying matters and the British Government should face the position and do the right thing. It is all very difficult I know, but surely not impossible. After all, England is a big nation and we did, I suppose win the war? However, we didn't lose it, and if we had, there would have been a different story to tell.

It is clearly our duty to fulfill promises made to people who stood by us when we were in urgent need of all the help forthcoming.

2. Lt.-Col. Sir Arnold Wilson (K.C.I.E., C.M.G., D.S.O., M.P.), *Mesopotamia: A Clash of Loyalties*. London: Oxford University Press, 1929, p. 291.

