

## A Brief History of the Armenians through 1895

The Armenian homeland is an area bordered by the Caucasus and Pontus mountains in what is now eastern Turkey and the Armenian Republic see Map 1. Its people trace their roots to early Urartu, near Mt. Ararat and Van.

Located as they were on an important route for trade and conquest, Armenians look back on a long history of domination by stronger neighbors: Syria, Egypt, Greece, Rome, Persia and Turkey, among others. Those conquerors often allowed Armenia self rule; however, it has been a fully independent nation only during the reign of King Tigran the Great from about 95 to 55 BCE; under Bagratid kings from 886 to 1045 CE; and from 1198 to 1375 as the Armenian kingdom of Cilicia in an area along the Mediterranean to the southwest, populated by Armenians who fled repeated invasions of the eastern plateau. Armenian Cilicia provided essential help to the European crusaders.

Armenia became the first Christian state in 301, after its ruler Tiridates III, newly converted by Saint Gregory the Illuminator, proclaimed Christianity the official state religion. When Armenia adopted its own alphabet a century later, a golden age of Armenian literature followed. The Armenian Apostolic Church was established in the sixth century and still exists independently of both the Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox churches. During its later political eclipses, Armenia has depended on the church to preserve its unique identity.

The Armenian people remained Christian during centuries of Turkic-Muslim dominance and Ottoman rule that extended from about 1520, or 1639 for the eastern plateau, until WWI. Ottoman rulers allowed non-believing religious minorities self government, providing their religious leaders maintained order within their *millets* (*religious groups*, primarily Armenian, Greek Orthodox and Jewish) and collected required levies. Each millet saw to the schooling of its own and settled internal disputes.

The subject minorities were not allowed to testify in Muslim proceedings and this fact meant special difficulties for minority members -- and special opportunities for criminals. Although millet members were restricted from military service and forbidden to own firearms, Armenians could and did serve as government officials and advisers. Many Armenians were merchants; they were also disproportionately represented in the practice of medicine and law and in the business of banking and finance because they tended to be well educated.

By the 1850s, some 2.5 million\* Armenians were Ottoman subjects, living predominantly in Turkey's eastern provinces. The number dropped after the Russo-Turkish War of

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\*Ubicini and Dulaurier, cited by Hovanissian, Richard G., Armenia on the Road to Independence, 1967, p36.

1877-1878, when thousands of eastern Armenians emigrated to Russia in expectation of a better life – and protection from Kurdish raids and discriminatory rule.

A nationalist fever spread through Europe during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, sparking the creation of three nationalist Armenian organizations (Armenakan, 1885, Hunchagist, 1887, and Dashnakstutsiun, 1890). This added to the suspicions of Sultan Abdul Hamid and his advisers as to the loyalty of Turkish Armenians. With some justification, Turkish Armenian subjects were already seen as preferring Russian to Ottoman rule; some numbers had cheered the Tsar's soldiers as they marched into eastern Armenia in 1877 and some 25,000 Armenians had followed the retreat across the border at war's end in 1878.\*

Although the Ottomans had adopted a liberal constitution to satisfy foreign objections in 1876, it was not implemented. In fact, Sultan Abdul Hamid II, who came to power the same year, imposed further restrictions on the minorities. He rankled at ongoing pressure from foreign diplomats to grant Christian subjects equal rights with the empire's Muslim majority, including protection from Kurdish raids on their farms and villages.

Ottoman leaders had long feared Russian expansion. Sultan Abdul Hamid II felt especially threatened when the treaty of Berlin (1878) gave Russia control of Kars and other formerly Ottoman territory on the eastern plateau. He was angered by diplomatic efforts on behalf of religious minorities and was aware that three secret Armenian parties were trying to advance nationalist goals.

The autumn of 1895 was fraught with anxiety for Armenians living in eastern Turkey, their historic homeland. In 1894, the Armenians of Sassun had been slaughtered by military forces for refusing to pay taxes (see note). \*\* Intervening months had seen an increase in assaults on Armenian villages by Kurdish tribesmen and militia (hamidieh) armed and encouraged by the Sultan.

In late September 1895, Armenian demonstrators\*\*\* in Constantinople were routed by police. For several days following, mobs wreaked violence on Armenians and in the Armenian quarter of the capital. Anti-Armenian violence erupted soon after as the Fourth Army moved south through the eastern provinces where Armenians were concentrated,: on October 8, Trabizond and neighboring Armenian villages, then Erzincan on October 21, Bitlis and Gemush-khan and surrounding villages on October 25, Baiburt on October

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\* *Hovannisian, Richard G., Armenia on the Toad to Independence, 1918, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1967, p. 12.*

\*\**The Kurds collected extortionary "protection" taxes while increasing their depredations on Armenian farms and villages. Dashnak organizers encouraged the Sassunlis' protest.*

\*\*\**Led by Hunchaks.*

27 and Urfa on October 27- 28.\* After Erzerum's "incident" on October 30, violence came to Diyarbekir and Arabkir on November 1-3, Malatia on Nov. 4-9, Kharpout on November 10-11, Sivas on November 12, followed by Amasia, Aintab and Marsovan. Kayseri suffered on November 30,\*\* and more violence struck Urfa in late December, with many Armenians killed. Nor is this list complete.

Again, foreign diplomats and missionaries decried these events, pressed for an end to the depredations and to secure equal rights for the Empire's Christian subjects. Again, they heard promises which were not implemented. It did not serve the national interests of the European powers (Britain, France and Russia participated in diplomatic protests in 1895) to confront the Sultan with military force.

An estimated 100,000 Armenians fled to Russia, Greece and other countries following the "incidents" in 1895-96.

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*\*Urfa now endured a siege without food or water, culminating in extended massacre during the final days of November.*

*\*\*as chronicled by Walker, C.J., Armenia, 1980. He relates that a bugle call began and ended each period of violence.*