

[REPORT FROM PERSIA]*

Urumia, Persia

June 23, 1915.

The Honorable J. L. Caldwell,
American Minister, Teheran,

Dear Sir,

Your letter of May 31st came a few days ago. In it you ask that I should send you “a complete account of atrocities, massacres etc., that you can vouch for personally, if any such occurred. Also, an account based on ‘hearsay, information, and belief.’” A letter sent you by Herr Neumann has partially met this request, in case he reached Teheran in safety. I shall try in this to reply comprehensively and as fully as time permits.

The Russian army left Urumia on January 2nd, and returned here May 24th. The Turkish troops arrived on January 4th, and left on May 20th. During this period the loss of life in the Christian population here has been about 1,000 persons killed and about 4,000 persons who have died of disease. These, while round numbers, are not guesses but are on careful investigation and record. I have kept lists of the dead compiled from inquiries made with care, and we have records of about 3,600 burials in the city of Urumia and at our College compound, while others are known to have taken place. The total Christian population here on January 1st, on the basis of estimates made last year, was some 5,600 families living in the city and villages of the plain and 800 to 1,000 families, who had fled here from the mountains, from the regions of Tergawar, Mergawar, Nochia, Marbishu and Gawar, partly in Persia and partly in Turkey. On the basis of five souls to a family, the number of souls was 32,000 to 33,000. When the Russians left there was a large exodus of Christians and the number remaining here was probably about 25,000, so that the loss in life in less than five months was about 20% of the total number. Of the 6,500 families, certainly not over a thousand families escaped without being totally robbed of all their possessions and many of these were partially robbed. The result is that the bulk of the surviving population has lost everything except real estate. Not a thousand houses are left with doors and windows and half or more of them have had the roof timbers removed. The property loss of our Mission is as much as \$10,000, partly incurred in the attack here in October. The property loss to the Christian population is estimated variously, the lowest estimate being at \$2,500,000, while others estimate it at ten times that amount. In order to make a complete estimate of the losses of the past year

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one should add large losses of property of Moslems and the loss of probably some hundreds of lives. By actual record considerably over one hundred Christian girls and women became Moslem during this period, in the large majority of cases because of fear and violence. Hundreds of women and girls were violated.

About the first of last October, a month before the beginning of war between Russia and Turkey the Urumia region was invaded, ostensibly by Kurds, and fighting took place in the immediate vicinity of the city. At the time the Turkish consul here denied not only to the Russians and Persians but in conversation with me any share in this invasion on the part of Turkey; but it was clear at the time and has since become absolutely certain by direct statements of Turkish soldiers and others engaged in the raid that the operations were directed by Turkish officers and that the fighting was done by Turkish soldiers, rather than by Kurds. The 'Charkash' battle and the 'Mawana' battle were freely referred to by the Turks and Persian fidais in the Turkish service and they complained that they left the fighting to the Turkish regulars. During this raid some eight or ten Christian villages were destroyed. As a result of it the Russians expelled the Kurds from the districts of Somai, Baradost, Tergawar and Mergawar, between Urumia and Turkish border, and also expelled Sunni Moslems from several villages in the Urumia plain, hanging some eight or ten persons for complicity in the raid. Subsequent events make one believe that the charge was well founded. The Russians also gave arms to some 3,000 Christians. For these measures there was much justification, but the later results were very unfortunate, as the revenge taken was terrible. In return for the expulsion of Kurds the Turks expelled the bulk of the Christian population in the region of Nochia.

Returning again to the period referred to above, the agents of destruction were Kurds, Persian villagers and Turks.

The largest number of lives lost was during the first week from January 2nd and the largest loss of property was during the same time. When the Russians left, Kurds were ready to enter from three directions and fighting had already begun. Immediately the Kurds pressed in and simultaneously the Moslem villagers began to plunder and kill. It is difficult to say positively whether this wholesale plundering by Kurds and Persian Moslems was preconcerted. Of the 750 persons killed during this week I should say that the majority were killed by Kurds, while the larger part of the property loss was due to Moslem villagers, who were also guilty of the majority of the crimes against women. In any case the coming of the Kurds was the occasion and opportunity for this orgy of rapine. The use of the Kurdish tribes was a part of the Turkish plan of campaign, and they were urged and sent by responsible Turkish officers, military, civil and consular. It was made more dangerous to Christians by the cry of Jihad (or holy war), which was deliberately made use of by responsible Turkish officials. These statements I make on the basis of what I myself, or other missionaries, saw and heard at the time and later. Dr. Packard saved over a thousand people in the village of Geogtapa from massacre by Kurds, who afterwards told the story to me and to others and definitely said that but for Dr. Packard's intervention all would have

been killed. The use of barbarous troops under little or no control against people who were non-combatants is absolutely unjustifiable and of this crime the Turks were certainly guilty. In passing it may be noted that, while in October as already noted Russian troops were engaged with Kurds and Turks and also in December there were engagements between Russians and Kurds, after January 1st, no Russian troops were engaged in the Urumiah region and the loss of life and property was in no way incidental to the ordinary operations of war. It is said and has been said to me by Turkish officials that the reason that the Christians were killed was that they had been armed by the Russians and resisted the Kurds. I fancy that an American would have been ashamed not to resist under such circumstances. It is true that the Christians had been armed; but the Kurds were the assailants and Christians were killed where, acting under my advice, they surrendered their arms (at Kala Ismail Aga) and where they made no resistance (at Ada). I have been told by Turkish sympathizers in a position to know the facts that in case the Kurds and Turks had taken Urumia in October the certain expectation was that plunder and massacre would follow. This was before guns had been given to the Christians and before war had begun. Further, except in the city itself on the part of Rashid Beg, the commander of the small Turkish force that first entered it, and in the village of Gulpashan, after being urged by us to act, no effort was made to prevent or restrain murder and pillage and no one was ever punished by the Turks for the crimes of the week of violence or for subsequent crimes against Christians. In some cases the Persian authorities punished offenders. No investigation was made by the Turks and my experience was that Turkish officials showed very little desire to be told the facts.

The end of the first week left the mass of the Christians refugees in the reach and American Missions, not far from 20,000 souls. The rest were scattered and hidden in Moslem villages. The Turks immediately proclaimed a general amnesty and promised security of life and property. The commander also took vigorous steps to secure order in the city, shooting himself a number of looters. But with the going to the front of the higher officers things changed for the worse; and we lived in constant alarm. Murders were frequent and it was very difficult to get protection for Christians outside our premises even within the city walls, while movement about the country was impossible. From the city to our College premises, less than two miles distance, we never ventured to go without guards, and Christians who ventured to do so were robbed. Twice a Christian was enticed to leave the College premises and was shot by the Kurds within a half mile of our walls. The houses in the Christian quarter of the city were wrecked while occupied by Kurds and Turkish regulars. Three Christian villages, Gulpashan, Charigushi and Rahwa escaped the plunder of the first week. They were later plundered, though not completely, while under the protection of Turkish soldiers, placed there by the Turkish authorities. During the last days of February two massacres were perpetrated by the Turks. Turkish soldiers under command of an officer entered the premises of the French Mission and collected all the men they found, 160 odd persons. These were taken to the Turkish headquarters

and held as prisoners. After a few days about a hundred were released in a hap-hazard sort of way. Later others were released and then a day or two after the arrival of Raghیب Beg, the Turkish Consul-General to Tabriz and former Consul to Urumia, forty eight persons were taken out at midnight, told that they were to be transported to Turkey, and, tied together, were shot at a place about two miles from the city. The dead and wounded were left piled up, after an attempt to kill all not killed by the first shots. I was awakened by the shots and the next day we saw survivors, who had crawled out from under the dead, their clothes soaked with blood. It is absolutely certain that these men were taken out from the Turkish consulate and military headquarters and practically certain that the actual murderers were partly Persian fidais quartered in the building occupied by the Turks and under their orders and partly by men in Turkish uniform. We had been repeatedly assured that these men would be examined and if innocent, would be released. Among them were a Nestorian bishop and an aged Catholic priest. The same night five men, three of them Christians, were hung without trial. Two days later in the village of Gulpashan, while under guard of Turkish soldiers, the same band of Persian fidais under charge of Bakhsh Ali Sultan with Turkish nizams and Sunnis in Turkish uniforms killed in a similar way about fifty men and deliberately and systematically raped all the women and girls who had not fled or did not succeed in hiding themselves. These facts we heard from persons present, including survivors of the massacre. Mr. Allen visited the village very shortly after the affair and buried the dead in Gulpashan as well as those of the previous massacre.

Another form of outrage was seizing persons without any special regard to guilt or any specific charge and holding them for ransom. Acting as intermediaries we paid in this way some 12,000 tomans directly to the Turkish military or consular authorities. Prisoners thus held were beaten, threatened, tied up, held in solitary confinement, and several persons were taken out and hung or shot. Those for whom we paid were all Christians, but a number of Mussulmans were held and ransomed in the same way. The most astable [?] instance was Mar Elia, a bishop of the Russian Orthodox Church, who was taken from our Mission premises and for whom the Turks demanded a ransom of 15,000 tomans, 10,000 tomans, 8,000 tomans and finally accepted 5,000, after having announced that he had been taken away, while he was really tied and kept in solitary confinement, and after having threatened at various times to hang him, if the money was not paid by a certain hour. Herr Neumann, a German subject, assured me that these threats were likely to be carried out.

Perhaps a more plausible excuse might be alleged for the exaction of 6,000 tomans to prevent the confiscations of Christian shops and stores, which had already been sealed by the Turks. The owners of these shops were Persian subjects present in the country. Even after the payment of this sum by us and the taking of a formal document sealed by the Turkish consulate, we had to be watchful every moment and there [were] a number of instances of bad faith in confiscating property guaranteed

in this document. One shop that was not confiscated openly and was included in this document was that of the agent of the Waltham Watch Co., and it was secretly rifled, the evidence going to show that this was done by men connected with the Turks.

Another barbarity was the shooting of Armenian soldiers in the Turkish army. This was done according to reports in other places in this region and was certainly done here. One night a refugee came to our compound. He was a soldier escaped from the massacre of eight others, having been covered over hastily with earth along with the others and then having escaped unhurt. Our men went with the police from the city to re-bury these dead. With the coming of the Turkish army under Khalil Beg on April 16 affairs in general showed improvement, but one dastardly massacre took place after this. Some sixty Christians, who had been employed to bring telegraph wire from Gawar, a district about sixty miles distant across the border. They were kept here in confinement with very little food. On the way back they were taken into a mountain valley, fifteen or twenty miles from the city and massacred in cold blood. Here again four escaped, after pretending to be dead, and reached us wounded and bloody. The worst of all these massacres took place in Salmas in March, when about 750 Christian men and boys were killed in the village of Haftdiwan, many of them tortured and hacked to pieces. This was done by order of Jevdad Pasha, commander of the Turkish forces in that region. The facts in this case were verified by the Rev. R. M. Labaree of our mission in Tabriz, who visited Salmas about two weeks after it occurred. At that time the bloody marks of the massacre still remained. In the joining regions of Turkey, according to reports confirmed by many persons from there and by the fact that the refugees from Gawar are almost all women and children and almost no men, similar massacres took place.

The responsibility for these events cannot be shifted on to the Persians. As already indicated, Persian villagers were guilty of outrages of various sorts and they must bear their share of the responsibility; but in everything the Turks made the opportunity. Moreover, when they were here in force they made no efficient and sustained attempt to restrain disorder. In the worst cases they were directly the agents of massacre and outrage. The Persian authorities did something to restrain and punish crimes; but they had no efficient police or military force and were constantly overborne by the Turks. Possibly it is a question whether they might not have done more than they did to secure order: the Turks certainly might have done a great deal more than they did. After the first two days of disorder the Turks were in military occupation of the country.

The facts given above are only fragments of the whole story. The Turks did not give security to life and in consequence the Christians were forced to live in crowded quarters and to depend on charity for food. They were consequently the victims of epidemics that resulted in the terrible mortality already mentioned. The Turks expressed horror at the misery and disease they saw; but with a very few exceptions all that was done to alleviate distress or to remedy conditions was done by the Persians or by ourselves.

I hope that I will not be suspected of any unfairness in these statements. Of the facts I am certain. The experiences we have had and the sights we have seen make it difficult to write without indignation; but this feeling is due to facts and not to prejudice.

I have the honor to remain,
Yours sincerely,

[Signed] W. A. Shedd