

This was written for the NEW YORK TIMES, but not used, so we asked the author if we might send it to TIMES OF LONDON and other places. He agreed, with pleasure. In any event, I thought you would like to read this.

THE LIONS OF MARASH Personal Experiences with American Near East Relief, 1919-1922, by Stanley E Kerr, State University of New York Press \$15.00

War in our time has become generally acknowledged to be total, its actions involving an entire population^s, its horrors falling on soldiers and civilians, combatants and otherwise, guilty and innocent alike. This was not yet so in World War I - with the possible exception of the Turkish front, where in a sense total warfare was a recurrent historical experience. Here now the innocent victims were the Armenians, a large Christian minority seen by the declining Ottoman Turks as potential agents of internal subversion, a "Fifth Column" supported, with fellow-Armenians across a common frontier, by Turkey's hereditary enemy, Russia. Subjected before the war to two full-scale massacres by the Turks, the Armenians had endured in the course of it mass deportations, when more than a million perished from starvation, exhaustion, disease, or once again massacre.

Many of them came from the ancient Christian settlement of Cilicia and from the historic district of Marash, adjoining it. What happened, in the aftermath of the war, to their homing survivors, is the subject of "The Lions of Marash", whose author Dr Stanley E Kerr saw it happen, as a worker with the stalwart American Near East Relief organization, and who now records it, to make a haunting contribution to history.

After the Armistice, when the Allies started to carve up the defeated Ottoman Empire between them, Cilicia was allotted to the French, and its Armenians surviving in exile were encouraged to return to their homes there. Sixteen thousand returned to Marash, among them the troops of an Armenian Legion which had fought for France. An Armenian civilian described their arrival:

There were two companies of the Armenian Legion with pointed caps and shining eyes, happy to greet the native Armenians on Cilician soil. Our joy and enthusiasm reached a peak, and the souls of our martyred brothers and sisters were flickering around us. There were happy days, to end too soon!



They ended because of the outbreak, throughout Anatolia, of an organized Turkish Nationalist resistance inspired by the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, a "total warrior" if ever there was one. The aim of his movement was to snatch Turkey, at this eleventh hour, from the jaws of defeat, overthrowing the Sultan's discredited regime to create a new nation, free at once from foreign military occupation and from the political hazards of foreign minorities. Its first major blow was struck in 1920, with an insurrection here in Marash, aimed at the expulsion of the French from Cilicia. This launched the War of Independence, which was to end three years later with the expulsion of Greeks from the region of Smyrna. It soon dawned on the American relief workers that here was "the first step of a national movement to oust all foreign powers" - in fact total war, waged deliberately and ruthlessly as such by a patriotic national leader for his country's salvation.

The French army of occupation proved quite inadequate to the more active task now required of it, that of fighting the Turkish Nationalist troops on the one hand and protecting the Armenian civilians on the other. The ranks of the Nationalists, in the absence at this stage of a regular revolutionary army, were recruited - but for a few senior officers - from various local sources. First there were the chété, hardened guerilla bands roving the mountains, which had for long been a thorn in the side of declining Ottoman governments. Experienced in methods of warfare still unfamiliar to the French, they easily outwitted them by the ambush of convoys bringing much-needed ammunition and supplies for their garrison, and by the interruption of its communications with French forces elsewhere. Within the city there were units from the wilder and more primitive Turkish irregular forces, "holy warriors" from time immemorial, with a traditional hatred of Christians, who responded fanatically to the orders proclaimed to them:

Comrades, war has begun. With the grace of God, in the spirit of the Prophet, and with the self-sacrifice of believers, be resigned to everything. Our country shall not be surrendered to the foe as long as a single person survives. From us, perseverance; from God, help.

There followed a systematic reign of terror, as they set fire to large quarters of the city to clear the way for an attack on the French strongholds, slaughtering in the process such Armenians as remained in their homes and burning the churches and other buildings in which they sought sanctuary. Dr Kerr tells his story in commendably restrained but none the less harrowing terms, quoting the separate versions of individual survivors:

The first massacre took place in the Christian quarter of Sheker Dere.... The Armenian Church of St George and all houses in that quarter were set on fire. One company of the French, aided by courageous Armenians, was able to take refuge in another quarter. The women, children and old men, obliged to remain, fell under the cutlass of the Turk.

The burning of Sourp Asdvadzin was a horrible sight. Two days ago the Turks set fire to the orphanage and burned the three-hundred-and-fifty orphans in it. Their cries still pierce my heart.... It reminded me of the massacre of the two thousand children by Herod.... This morning the Turks succeeded in opening two holes in the roof of the church, poured kerosene inside and set the church on fire. Those who tried to escape were shot by the Turks.

Still searching for his family after the end of the siege, an Armenian doctor is coolly told of its fate by a Turkish patient:

A group of people - fifty or more - were huddled together in one room. Your father asked to read from a book and to pray before surrendering. We let him do so. He stood up, read and prayed, and then we slaughtered them all - men, women and children. We didn't waste any bullets on them! We killed them with axes and picks.

Starvation became rife: there was nothing left to feed ¹⁶ the multitude, not even the meat of starving French mules, which they had been eating raw. "Do you know what hunger is?" a woman asked Dr Kerr. "It is when you want to grab a crust from your dying child."

Eventually French reinforcements got through to the lion-hearted defenders of Marash. After fierce fighting the resistance of the Nationalists was crushed, and they showed readiness to negotiate. Then came the last terrible act of this drama, justly entitled by the author, "The Betrayal of a Trust". The French forces received orders to evacuate Marash in secret. They did so, by night, trying stealthily to conceal

from the abandoned Armenians the news of their retreat. None the less they were followed by a panic-stricken refugee exodus, following in their wake, across the snow-covered mountains, in Arctic conditions. A young Armenian pastor, who had just lost his wife and children, confessed to Dr Kerr: "If I knew for certain that I would freeze to death, I would go rather than stay here!" A thousand froze to death. Those who stayed behind awaited their doom at the hands of the returning Turks, their defeat turned to victory.

But when the Nationalist leader Kuluj Ali arrived, to hear news of the evacuation, the Rev. James K Lyman, of the American mission, turned to him:

"You have a custom that one who brings good news has the right to ask a favour."

"Whatever you demand I shall grant it," replied Kuluj Ali

"I ask you to stop the killing of the Christians!"

Kuluj Ali turned to the junior officers and commanded that the order should be taken to all units: there was to be no more killing of civilians. "Show us where the Armenians are, and we shall post guards to protect them", he said and gave orders to place four squads of gendarmes at the disposal of the Americans.

Here perhaps, from the lips of "Sword Ali", reputed to be one of Atatürk's most ruthless henchmen, was an act of humanity which, for all the miseries still in store for this hapless minority may have shed a ray of hope for more civilized principles in the new Republican Turkey of the future.