

HOOSHARAR

Vol. 61, No. 3 (February 1/1974)

## The Lions Of Marash

### THE LAMBS WERE LEFT BEHIND

Reprinted from "Ararat Quarterly"

The prospects for solving the insoluble Armenian Question had never seemed as bright as they did at the end of World War I. The crushing victory of Armenia's great Allied friends, however, far from ending the woes of a people already bled white resulted in a new series of betrayals and disasters. The siege of Marash and the massacre of the Armenians of the city (and of the Armenian villages in the area) about a year after the Armistice is of special concern: it was there that the post-war ordeals of the Armenian people began and it was there that the Turkish Nationalists openly challenged the French army of occupation in Cilicia.

Long before the end of the war the Sykes-Picot agreement between England and France had assigned to the latter certain parts of the Ottoman Empire, including Cilicia. However, the armies which had fought and bled for four years at Gallipoli and on the Bagdad front, and eventually had overwhelmed the Ottoman army in Palestine under Mustafa Kemal, had been preponderantly British, even though the French Legion d'Orient (composed of three battalions of Armenian, one of Syrian volunteers, and some Franco-African units) had taken part in the rout of the Turkish army in Palestine. Having put forth the major effort in subduing the Turks, the British government felt entitled to a reconsideration in the division of the spoils. The ensuing long drawn out dispute between the two allies, however provided ample time for Mustafa Kemal's Turkish Nationalist movement to gather sufficient strength to unfurl the flag of insurrection in Marash, challenging, for the first time, the French army of occupation, before it had time to consolidate, after having replaced the British garrisons in Cilicia. In this unholy conflict of interests, the greatest losers were not the British or the French, but the Armenians.

The survivors of the Armenian deportations of 1915 — an estimated 200,000 souls — had reason to

believe that they had gained a new lease on life and liberty under the protection of their Allied friends, who encouraged them to return to their ancestral homes in Cilicia, where a number of cities were under Allied military control. Moreover, France had made promises of Armenian independence, on the basis of which several thousand Armenian volunteers had fought under the French flag on the Palestine front and continued to serve in Cilicia along with other French units.

*The Lions of Marash* is a detailed and well documented account of these developments. The author, Stanley E. Kerr, was then a member of that small but remarkable little band of Near East Relief workers in Marash which played a role worthy of the highest commendation, at a time when French military prestige suffered the humiliation of a hasty withdrawal and French chivalry the indignity of a desertion.

Fairly enough, Stanley Kerr describes the extenuating circumstances behind this costly failure, such as Emir Feisal's refusal to allow his section of the Berlin-Bagdad Railway to be used for transporting men and supplies to Cilicia, necessitating the use of the time-consuming sea route, the ambush and capture by Turkish guerillas of large quantities of supplies destined for Marash; the failure to provide the garrison with wireless communication with Adana and Beirut, Colonel Normand's failure to tarry a little longer in Marash after his relief column had virtually put the Turkish guerillas to flight.

When all is said and done, however, one wonders why French diplomacy, on the one hand, fought tooth and nail for the exclusive right to occupy Cilicia, while, on the other, French representatives almost concurrently carried on conversations with Mustafa Kemal, even though the Allies had agreed to deal directly with Constantinople and to refrain from recognizing Kemal's insurrectionist move-





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The outcome of the conflict in Marash might have been different had the occupying forces moved sooner and had acted with greater determination, if Armenians had been armed for self-defense, since whenever given half a chance, they did remarkably well, if a stupid Armenian, more concerned with vengeance than with the safety of thousands, had not withheld, for a whole day, the Turkish message suggesting a cessation of hostilities, since its prompt delivery might have stopped the withdrawal before it was too late.

*The Lions of Marash* has the virtue of being an objective, eye-witness account by an American observer, amplified by a wealth of material from French, Turkish and Armenian sources as well as by scores of personal accounts of men and women whose misfortune it was to live in Marash during those fearful three weeks in 1920 (January 20 to February 9).

Kerr describes a number of kindly, even altruistic, acts by individual Turks, some of whom were savagely punished by fellow Turks for having responded to their better human instinct. Even though Turkish sadism and rapacity has a long history, one cannot maintain, as many Armenians do, that Turks endowed with a conscience do not exist. Though a minority, they exist, and their acts of kindness to Armenians should form as much a part of our national history as the acts of our own heroes or traitors.

Stanley Kerr's book, moreover, provides considerable background material for understanding events which significantly influenced the life and fate of the Armenians in Turkey before the war. The heroic struggles and eventual demise of Zeiton, the formation of Armenian political parties, the deposition of Hamid, the "Red" Sultan, and the declaration of a constitutional monarch by Young Turks, the rivalry between the Turkish Ittihad and Ittihad parties, the massacres of 1895-96 and of the Adana vilayet, and finally the genocide of 1915. While not justifying excesses committed by Armenian revolutionaries, Stanley Kerr does not find, as some light-headed Western historians do, that they justified the massacre of innocent hundreds of thousands.

*The Lions of Marash* also abounds with many moving accounts of individual tragedies. Thousands, having sought security in their churches,

became fuel for massive funeral pyres. Especially touching is one entry in YMCA secretary Crathern's diary which may be quoted only as one example of the incredible Turkish cruelty: The Diary appears in the book as Appendix B.

We had a pitiful case this morning in the hospital. It was the Rev. Solakian's wife, pastor of the Third Church. When she reached the hospital she was suffering and bleeding from three bullets and three dagger or knife wounds, while a child of 18 months had been taken from her breast and slain with a knife and an older girl killed with an ax. To add to the sorrow, the woman was pregnant and had a miscarriage as soon as she reached the hospital... she will not recover.

According to the Mutasarif (mayor) of Marash some 6-7500 Armenians and 4,500 Turks were killed in the course of the siege. Others more favorably located were able to defend themselves to the very end, or were saved by managing to reach the relative security provided by French, American, and German institutions in the city.

The enigma presented by the withdrawal of the French garrison and relief column almost at the hour of victory and other questions related to the French government's policy in Cilicia, as Richard Hovannisian states in his excellent introduction to *The Lions of Marash*, will not be conclusively understood until the official papers dealing with these events are made available to scholars.

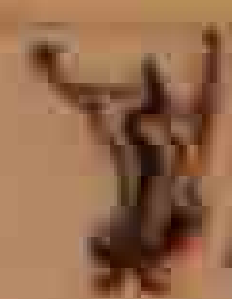
When Raphael Kerlekian, the Armenian leader, had suggested, before the hostilities, that Armenians be armed, Gen. Querrette had responded that the maintenance of order and the security of Armenians was a function of the French army. But subsequent developments did not vindicate this assurance.

Despite all precautions to keep Armenians ignorant of the planned withdrawal, however, a large number of them somehow got wind of what was afoot and chose to brave all the hardships and especially the snow and extreme cold — the coldest February in memory — to follow the retreating army all the way to Islahie. No one knows how many people followed the army. It proved another tragic Golgotha in which many persons froze to death.

"These unhappy people," wrote Lieutenant Colonel Thibault, "worn out by the first two stages of the journey and numbed with cold, sank down a prey to an irresistible desire to sleep and never stirred again. The snow formed their shroud. It was truly a hecatomb! The road from Bel Pounar to Islahiye was staked out by clusters of corpses."

Col. Normand, who withdrew his relief column, while the guerillas themselves were in flight, defended his action on basis of Gen. Dufleux's instruction to withdraw if order could not be restored by February 9. But the enemy already had been ask-





ing for a cessation of hostilities and he was informed of that fact. "The decision for the retreat remains a mystery," wrote Colonel (later General) Bremond, French High Commissioner of Cilicia. "It was not made in Beirut, nor in Adana, but in Marash. There seems to be no doubt that the order to leave would not have been given if a wireless outfit had been available in Marash, permitting unbroken communication with Adana."

At the same time back in Marash where, until the French retreat, some 7,500 Armenians had been shot, butchered, and burned alive, another 9,500 souls, crowded in American, French, and German institutions, awaited the final act of carnage. But the dreaded hour never came, because of the courage and dedication of a handful of Americans, including the author, who at considerable personal risk, chose to remain in Marash despite the departure of the French garrison.

Remarkable was the Rev. James Lyman's role at a moment when the fate of 9,700 men, women and children hung by a thread. Rev. Lyman, an old missionary who appears to have studied the Turkish psychology well, made a desperate gamble that might make many a diplomat envious. Realizing that the Turks were not yet aware of the French army's retreat, he assumed the role of a bearer of tidings. Along with Dr. Marion Wilson, at some personal risk, he went to see the chief of the Turkish Nationalist forces, a Kurd named Kluj Ali Bey. The Turkish leader was incredulous when told of the enemy's departure, for he had been laboring under the delusion that the unusual activities behind the French lines were but part of a maneuver of encirclement. But when the accuracy of Rev. Lyman's report was established, taking advantage of the opportunity, Rev. Lyman turned to Kluj Ali, "You have a custom," he said, "that one who brings good news has the right to ask a favor."

"Whatever you demand I shall grant it," replied Kluj Ali, to which Lyman's response was, "I ask that you stop killing the Christians."

Kluj 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.

During the succeeding long months of uncertainty, fear, and ever present intimidation, the American staff of NRA used all its facilities and Yankee ingenuity to keep their Armenian charges from the threat of fresh reprisals and starvation. The final exodus took place upon the signing of the treaty between Franklin Bouillon and Kemalist Turks, which assured, but did not guarantee, the security of the Christians, and of course, it could not be accomplished without the denial of property rights to Armenians who were forbidden to sell their homes, and were relieved at every turn of whatever little they had.

## A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

By Richard Hovannisian

Among the scores of men and women who responded to the ACRNE call for volunteers in 1919 was Stanley E. Kerr, a slender, be-spectacled junior officer in the United States Army Sanitary Corps. First serving in Aleppo in a multiplicity of positions, including clinical biochemist, photographer, and gatherer of Armenian waifs from Bedouin and Kurdish chieftains, Kerr transferred in the Autumn of 1919 to Marash, where he took charge of American relief operations after the French withdrawal. In view of the fact many Turkish notables regarded the Americans as collaborators with the French and Armenians, it was at no small risk that Kerr and his courageous colleagues stayed at their posts to help the thousands of Armenians whom the French had deserted. Indeed the uncertainties of a hostage-like existence did not end until Kerr departed for Beirut with the last caravan of Armenian orphans in 1922.

Three years after his separation from the Near East Relief, Kerr earned his Doctor of Philosophy degree at the University of Pennsylvania and returned to Beirut in 1925 as chairman of the Department of Biochemistry at the American University. During their four decades in Lebanon Professor Kerr and his wife, Elsa Reckman Kerr, a former teacher at the Marash College for Girls and later at the Beirut College for Women and the American University, counseled hundreds of students whose parents had been the refugees from Marash and other Cilician cities. In recognition of his service, the American University conferred upon Dr. Kerr the rank of Distinguished Professor, and the Lebanese government honored him with the Order of Merit.

With the departure of the last group of orphans and the second mass exile of the people of Marash within five years, as well as the cruel liquidation of a few Turks who had become Christian, Marash, the ancient Hittite city, had become, *el-hamd-ul-illah*, one hundred per cent Moslem!

Out of an Armenian population of 85,000 which had existed before World War I in Marash and surrounding villages, there had survived or managed to return to their homes only 22,000 in the city and 2,000 in the villages. Very few villagers survived the second holocaust. The city fared comparatively better, thanks to the presence of the French garrison, part of the time, and of the Americans to the very end. According to Kerr, some 11,900 died in the city, the villages, and on the road to Islahie. The number of those who finally left the city body and soul intact was about 9,700.





"At the gate of the old Hittite citadel," writes Stanley Kerr, there once stood a stone lion. No people whether Turk, Armenian, or French can claim that it stands for their bravery . . ."

However, I would suggest that, that stone lion, which is now on display in the Ankara Museum, stand as a reminder of the courageous little group of Americans—Rev. James Lyman, Dr. Marion Wilson, and Stanley Kerr and their dedicated col-

leagues of the Near East Relief—who chose, at much personal risk to remain at Marash with the seemingly impossible hope of proving helpful to some 9,700 people who had been deserted by their military protectors. Their success in achieving what had appeared totally impossible, makes their action so much more impressive. It was an incredible performance beyond the call of duty.

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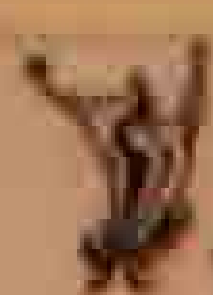


CHOICE (January/1974)

KERR, Stanley Elphinstone. *The lions of Marash; personal experiences with American Near East Relief, 1919-1922.* State University of New York, 1973. 318p. il map. bibl. 73-38001. 15.00. ISBN 0-87395-200-6. C.I.P.

Often the best history comes from eyewitnesses of events, especially if they have had the time and curiosity to verify their recollections. Kerr was in charge of American relief operations among the Armenians at the end of World War I and has spent more than 50 years, while a professor of biochemistry at the American University of Beirut, in assembling the facts surrounding that sorry chapter in world history. His book is impeccable in its scholarship and fascinating in its wealth of detail and confirmed reminiscences. The focus on Marash and the true nature of the Kemalist nationalist aims against the Armenians provides an important contribution to the understanding of the Near East since 1920 and deserves to be available in most college libraries. It will certainly be consulted by graduate students and professors with a variety of interests. The photographs are rare and magnificent. The only thing bad about it, in fact, is the inherent horror of its subject matter.





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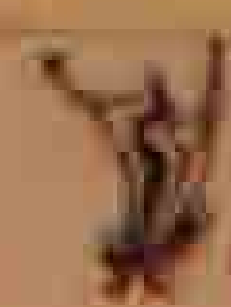
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