

Abstract

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The recent discovery of a bundle of documents in the archives of the Royal Society for Asian Affairs has shed more light on the history of the Assyrian Christians of Iraq from the time of the First World War up to the Simele massacre in 1933. The documents are accounts and correspondence written primarily by a number of leading British players including Major-General Dunsterville, Sir Henry Dobbs, Colonel J.J. McCarthy, and also the Assyrian Patriarch Mar Shimun. They also shed further light on the role played by Leo Amery, Secretary of State for the Colonies. The documents appear to have been compiled by Sir Percy Sykes, the then Secretary of the Royal Central Asian Society (as the Royal Society for Asian Affairs then was) as part of an investigation into the situation of the Assyrians. This article introduces the newly-discovered collection of documents and discusses how they advance our understanding of this period.

Keywords: [Assyrians](#), [Christians](#), [Iraq](#), [First World War, 1933](#), [Simele massacre](#), [Genocide](#)

Introduction

Mention the Assyrians to anyone of a certain age and education, and the inevitable response will be ‘They came down like a wolf on the fold’ and this is as much as most people know. An exhibition last year (2018) at the British Museum showed some robust Assyrian sculpture, but reinforced the idea that it was the work of a long extinct tribe who had once ruled a substantial chunk of the Near East. In fact, some modern-day Assyrians still tenuously inhabit part of their ancestral territories, though they have long since lost their lupine qualities. Massacres by their neighbours, Kurds, Arabs and Turks have so reduced the population that the diaspora in Australia, the USA and the West is greater than the numbers remaining at home. While the Armenian genocide of the early 20th century is acknowledged today, the Assyrians are the forgotten victims of equal savagery.

Things were very different a century ago when the Royal Central Asian Society (as the Royal Society for Asian Affairs was previously called) was at the forefront of publicising both the bravery of the Assyrian Levies – volunteers recruited by the British to fight in World War One – and the Assyrians’ subsequent fate that culminated in the massacre at Simele in August 1933. It was after this event that the word ‘genocide’ was coined and first used. The Society’s involvement was not realised until a large bundle of papers, letters and pamphlets was discovered earlier this year in an archive cupboard. Wrapped in an unpromising plastic bag and labelled simply ‘Assyrians’ with no further explanation, this material has now been sorted and a preliminary catalogue made. There is no provenance for the bundle and its appearance in the Society’s archives can only be guessed at from internal evidence, which we will examine later.

Various themes emerge from the documents, including guilt, denial and betrayal at the highest level. ‘The Foreign Office has behaved disgracefully in attempting to hush matters up ... ’ thundered Sir Henry Dobbs, former High Commissioner in Iraq, to the RCAS Honorary Secretary Sir Percy Sykes. ‘The League of Nations at Work – a Study in Injustice’ was the title of an anonymous article published in 1927 after the League refused to redraw the boundary of Iraq to accommodate the Assyrians. And there was a rich cast of characters too, including Major General Dunsterville, ‘Rab’ Butler MP, Gertrude Bell and Mar Shimun, the hereditary Catholicos Patriarch of the Assyrian Church.

The background

The modern Assyrians were one among a number of near Eastern peoples who had converted to Christianity in the centuries following Christ's death and who were known collectively as the Church of the East. Groups within this Church split and reformed into new factions based on doctrinal differences, but the Assyrians remained a largely homogenous group of six tribes settled in the Ottoman empire between Lake Van in south eastern Turkey and Lake Urmia in western Persia, an area which had once been part of the larger kingdom of ancient Assyria. Hakkari, the mountainous Turkish district, was considered their western headquarters, and was a semi-autonomous region. Life here was hard and sometimes dangerous as non-Christian groups launched raids on the hill-side villages, whose inhabitants fought them off and developed a deserved reputation for bravery. The territory made farming difficult, so sheep and goats provided the staple diet of mutton. Across the border around Urmia, life was easier – here the people were primarily pastoral, with their villages surrounded by pleasant orchards, vineyards and cereal crops. Community life was centred around their curiously constructed stone churches, where worshippers had to stoop to enter the tiny door to the nave. (This was to prevent Muslim Kurds from using the churches as cattle pens, an indication that here on the plains the Assyrians had to remain alert too.) Unlike their Christian neighbours the Armenians, who travelled north to Russia and east to the Indian subcontinent where they set themselves up as traders and armaments manufacturers, the Assyrians remained where they were, with about two thirds of the population living in Ottoman Turkey and a third in Persia. Their numbers were estimated to range between 100,000 and 150,000.

Rumours of an ancient Christian tribe living among Muslim neighbours began to filter back to Britain in the early 19th century, perhaps building in part on the enduring legend of Prester John. A clergyman of the British and Foreign Bible Society living in Constantinople had met an Assyrian bishop there. Joseph Wolff, the colourful missionary, met some Assyrians in Persia in 1825. Following the grandly-named Euphrates Valley Expedition a decade later, it was decided to explore further. William Ainsworth, a British surgeon, geographer and geologist who had been on the Euphrates expedition, got the newly-formed Geographical Society of London (later the Royal Geographical Society) to fund a return visit. The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel agreed to match the £500 already raised. Ainsworth's ambitious plan was to explore the Assyrian homeland, scrutinise its people and to collect interesting ancient manuscripts that they might have lying around. It was not dissimilar to other archaeological expeditions of the time except that in this case the historic sites were still inhabited. Although his second visit was not a success and Ainsworth had to pay for his own passage back to England, it was to lay the foundations of a relationship between the Anglican Church in Britain and the Church of the East.

In 1886 following a number of requests from the eastern Church's officials, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Edward White Benson sent a 'Mission to the Assyrian Christians' led by Canon Maclean and the Revd. W.H. Browne. (It was Benson who popularised the name 'Assyrian' to describe the community, separated by geography, who had previously called themselves simply East Syrians and West Syrians.) The mission's task was to 'regenerate, reform and educate' the Assyrians, a project that continued until the start of World War One. The clergymen took with them two of the newly-invented cyclostyle machines so they could run off teaching materials. They quickly established a college for priests and deacons together with a boys' school at Urmia, with an initial 25 pupils. The priests were taught old Syriac, English, arithmetic and Persian, while the boys learnt theology, geography, dictation and English, the latter proving a popular subject. Village primary schools were established and by 1890 there were nearly 1,500 pupils in education. Numerous missions from other countries were now at work here too, including American Presbyterians and French Catholics, but it was the British mission that had the greatest impact. It was a High Victorian, well-meaning, gentle form of colonisation but the outcome was to prove disastrous. It encouraged the

Assyrians in their dream of a revived national life in their ancient homeland and it made them fatally dependent on Britain during the turmoil that was to come.

World War One

On 3 August 1914, on the verge of the outbreak of the war, a senior Turkish official, the Vali of Van, summoned the head of the Assyrian Church to a meeting and asked him for an assurance that his people would not assist the Russians, on whom the Turks were about to declare war. The prelate Mar Shimun replied that would depend on how the Ottoman Empire intended to treat its Christian subjects. Immediately after this exchange the Turkish garrisons in the Hakkari District were withdrawn 'and the province was left to the tender mercies of the marauding Kurds.'¹ 'Historical Article by Squadron Leader Reid dated 1944'. De Crespigny Folder Part 1, RSAA Archive Collection. View all notes Disorder, plunder and murder led to Assyrian deaths and by April 1915 the community leaders told the Vali that they were joining the Russians and their allies, including Britain, against the Ottomans. Now Turks and Kurds joined forces to destroy the Assyrians. Those who could fled over the mountains and the Persian border to Urmia, to unite with their kinsmen there. An estimated 60,000 people left their mountainous homeland, few of whom were ever to see it again.

Once in Urmia irregular units of Assyrian fighting men were formed and led by Russian officers to carry out raids into Turkish territory. This was not so surprising an alliance as it may have seemed. Russia was seen as the great Christian country to the north, and there were hopes that a united Anglo-Russian force, with the help of some 20,000 Assyrian soldiers, could liberate the lost homeland in Hakkari District. But the euphoria with which Russia had entered the war in 1914 had dispersed three years later, as old and new grievances surfaced. The October Revolution saw the sudden disintegration of the Russian army, so sudden that it simply abandoned its stocks of war materials in Persia and fled. The Assyrian units, abandoned by their Russian officers, but now a well-trained fighting force, seized the discarded weaponry and began their own campaign against their old enemy, the Turks. It is here that Britain enters the story again. With the collapse of the Russian army in the Caucasus, Britain and her allies faced the awful prospect of a joint German-Turkish push eastwards, towards the borders of Afghanistan, that perpetual bugbear on India's north west frontier. Help was needed and was at hand in the shape of the Assyrian units, brave armed men, in (almost) the right place at the right time.

Members of the RCAS played a leading part in the subsequent events as the Society's newly discovered archives show. What actually happened – what was said, or not said, what was promised, or not promised, what was understood, or misunderstood was to lead to recriminations and denials, publicly aired in lectures and the Journal, privately in letters to the Secretary, Sir Percy Sykes. Writing from the comfort of the liberal Devonshire Club in St. James's, London, Colonel J. J. McCarthy, made a lengthy statement about events in 1918:

It was either before or shortly after leaving Baghdad *en route* for Persia [that] General Dunsterville got in communication with the Assyrians at Lake Urmia with the idea of getting them to join forces with us against the Turk. This they willingly agreed to do provided we sent British officers to lead them, as they did not at that stage trust the Russians. It was decided to send a force of 75 British Officers and NCOs to Lake Urmia and I was appointed to command this special mission.

British headquarters were then at Hamadan in western Persia, with planes and pilots of the newly-formed Royal Air Force. Flying Officer Captain Pennington was detailed to fly to Urmia in advance of the British troops. McCarthy continues: 'Seeing the aeroplane arrive and receiving the news that a British Force was in Persia and on the way to join them, no doubt gave the Assyrians an exaggerated idea of our strength in Persia and a false idea of their own security. Had they not

depended so entirely on the assistance that they were to receive from us ... the Assyrians would have looked more to their own resources, and would not have depended so much on our help.'

The flight south

According to McCarthy, whose subsequent title was Commandant Assyrian Contingent, much of the promised British assistance did not arrive for logistical reasons, due to the lack of transport. Then, panicked by false reports and a perceived lack of support from their own religious leaders, the Assyrians fled towards Hamadan and the supposed safety of the British base there. McCarthy tried to turn them back, but it was impossible:

Had I been able to join them at Urmia I am sure the stampede would never have taken place, but it must be remembered we were a small force, living on the country and General Dunsterville had his hands full at the time preparing his landing at Baku. The whole Nation was in retreat ... the families on the main road, the men extended for miles on either side of the road.

It was estimated that out of the 70,000 who began the trek south through Persia, only 50,000 arrived. Christians who remained at Urmia, possibly as many as 15,000, were murdered by Turkish/Kurdish gangs. Every known disease seemed to attack, including typhus, dysentery and small-pox. Others died from exhaustion. 'It was a common thing to see children, still alive, abandoned on the roadside, the parents probably dead. Wherever they camped for the night the ground next morning was littered with dead and dying.' An estimated 10,000 were cut off by Turkish forces and never seen again. Nevertheless, McCarthy continued:

All those I met in the retreat had one idea, and one idea only, that they were going to Hamadan where they would join up with the British force promised them and return at once, drive out the Turk and reoccupy their country.

On arriving at Hamadan, an Assyrian Contingent was formed from among the men who had survived.

The men all thought they were returning home at once. Not only did they themselves think so, but they were definitely told by me that they would be taken back under British officers and that I was to command them. Surely there cannot be any doubt (and I am sure that nobody holding any responsible post and on the spot at the time would dispute the fact), that this is what was intended when the fighting men were formed into a contingent ... where they underwent strenuous training under British officers and were fed, and to a certain extent clothed by us.

By now the Armistice of 1918 had been signed, but the Contingent was not stood down. 'It was explained to them' added McCarthy

that the reason for their being trained as soldiers long after the war was over, was in order to make them more efficient, not only to escort their people back to their own country, but also to be better able to defend themselves when they got there.

Such was the explanation given to McCarthy at GHQ in Baghdad anyway, he added, somewhat defensively.

This is where things get murky. General Dunsterville, who was McCarthy's commanding officer, was furious when he read the Colonel's statement, published in the Journal fifteen years after the events. The General sent a hand-written letter of ten pages, dated 29 January 1934 to Sykes that began:

Opinions expressed in the Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society carry weight and in consequence must be carefully checked, and I feel it my duty to call attention to some very serious

misconceptions of the early stages of the Assyrian case. Both Dr Wigram [the Revd. Canon Wigram, a missionary] and Colonel McCarthy suggest that they were drawn into the war by us. This is the exact opposite of the facts. [They] had been, under Russian guidance, fighting for their lives against the Turks years before we came in touch with them in 1918.

Dunsterville claimed it was the Assyrians who had asked him for help, not the other way round, and that he had sent up 'a party to escort a small ammunition column'. This had been overtaken by events and when the Assyrians fled to the imagined safety of British HQ at Hamadan, the escort party acted as a 'rear guard & saved the greater number from massacre.'

The idea of our getting them to help us when they had been fighting the Turk for years and were at their last gasp appears to me farcical. Colonel McCarthy also appears not to have got the facts quite right. He served in Persia under my command in Dunsterforce and was sent up ... with the ammunition party. He speaks of matters of which he would not be cognisant. He may have thought that we wanted these people to join forces with us, but such an absurd idea could never have occurred to me.

The General also refuted the idea that the Assyrians were told by Flying Officer Captain Pennington, stepping out of his small aircraft at Urmia, that the British were coming to join them. 'The only message was congratulation on their bravery & a statement concerning the ammunition & arms supplied.' Captain Pennington had died in France in 1933 so could not be questioned.

A broken promise?

So far, it was one man's word against another about events that had occurred years earlier, in the confusion at the end of the war, and in a foreign country where translators had to be used. It was McCarthy, not Dunsterville, who was the officer on the frightful journey from Urmia to Hamadan where he saw Assyrians dying and children abandoned. Digging deeper into events that preceded Pennington's flight, we find Captain George Gracey, a Special Intelligence Officer stationed with the British Military Mission at Tiflis, who was sent to Urmia in December 1917. His role was ostensibly to mobilise the Assyrians, together with Armenian and Kurdish groups to defend the impossibly long Front between Baghdad and the Black Sea. Gracey had been a Christian missionary in south eastern Turkey for ten years before the outbreak of World War One, and it was his language skills and geographical knowledge that got him into British Intelligence. 'The precise nature of his [Gracey's] instructions is unclear; several versions having emerged subsequently' wrote Dr John Fisher, a specialist in Britain and the Near East, who devoted a long article to him, published in 2008.² John Fisher, 'Man on the Spot: Captain George Gracey and British Policy Towards the Assyrians, 1917–1945'. *Middle Eastern Studies* Vol. 44, Issue 2 (March 2008): 215–235. View all notes Gracey had arrived in uniform and later said his mission was to heal rifts which had broken out between the Assyrians and representatives of the allies, but this could not be proved one way or the other because, as he explained, his orders had been delivered orally and it had been necessary to destroy many of his earlier reports to prevent them falling into the hands of the Bolsheviks. Gracey was later vehemently to deny that he had guaranteed the Assyrians 'a common home established in their own country where they would be a free homogenous people'. What he did say was that by fighting with the Russians, they, the Assyrians, were 'defending themselves and working out their future welfare with the Russians, and that if they were successful, in all probability the Russians and the British Government would do something to see that justice would be given to them'.

This seems a curious statement to make in December 1917, when as we have seen, the Russian army was disintegrating in a chaotic retreat. The Assyrians thought, and still think today, that Gracey promised them 'the proclamation of the independence of the Assyrian nation', while promising at the same time to provide funds to pay the soldiers and their non-commissioned officers. Whatever the

truth of the matter, there was an expectation that the Assyrians could look to the British for help in their hour of need, and this was not just dependent on the arrival of a couple of uniformed officers, but I suggest had been fostered by almost 30 years of education by missionaries sent from Britain. It was this hope and reliance that drove the Assyrians towards Hamadan where McCarthy was able to select his Contingent of fighting men. About 45,000 people arrived, not only Assyrians, but Armenians too. However, this was not the final destination for the majority of the refugees. It was impossible to maintain or supply such a large number of people on what was essentially a British base on the forward line. So the weary travellers, with their animals, were sent another 250 miles south to Baqubah in Iraq, where a vast refugee camp was set up for them by the British, and opened in the summer of 1919. Conveniently the camp was near the Diyala river and a railway line, so food and other supplies could be brought in.

Meanwhile the Contingent had become part of the Iraq levies, an armed force of locally recruited men whose job was to relieve British and Indian troops in Mesopotamia. Here we are concerned only with the Assyrian Levies, who were picturesquely described by Gertrude Bell, Britain's 'Oriental Secretary' when she encountered them in November 1922.

The Levies are Imperial forces. 350 Assyrians ... saved from death by us and now guarding our furthest outpost. Smartly they came to the salute as we entered the camp; khaki clad, the meagrest of shorts revealing the finest pairs of mountaineers legs, broad hatted; the brims cocked up with a white or a scarlet feather, they look for all the world like large sized Gurkhas. And in fighting quality they are not inferior'.³³ Letter from Gertrude Bell to her father Sir Hugh Bell, dated 19 November 1922. From the Gertrude Bell Archive at the University of Newcastle. [View all notes](#)

Bell was not the only person to make the comparison between the Levies and the Gurkhas – gallant fighting men loyally working for the British Empire, of which they may well have felt a part.

It was difficult to deal with the remaining mass of Assyrians at the Baqubah camp, many of whom were women, children and elderly people. The majority were agriculturalists and without permanent land they could not be self-supporting. Cost was another factor too – 18 lakhs was being expended every month, that is nearly 2 million rupees.⁴⁴ See Rosie Llewellyn-Jones, 'The British Raj and the British Mandate in Iraq'. *Asian Affairs* Vol. 46, Issue 2 (2015): 270–279 for the use of Indian currency in Iraq during the British mandate. [View all notes](#) After a year efforts were made to relocate the refugees. The Armenians were sent south to Basra and the Assyrians were encouraged to return to, or settle around, Urmia. About 8,000 went back to Hakkari with British approval and support and it seemed for some time that the status quo had been re-established. But when a Turkish official attempted to tour the Hakkari District he was arrested and in retaliation, the Assyrians were expelled and forced back into Iraq.

The league of nations

The League of Nations, the first world-wide intergovernmental body was established in 1920 and among its many tasks after the upheavals of World War One, was to confirm the border between the new Turkish republic and Iraq. During the Ottoman period, the area known today as Iraq, had consisted of three provinces, or *vilayets*, including the Mosul vilayet in the north of the country, which Turkey now claimed. It was an attractive prize, the more so since oil had been discovered there and was being exploited. Britain, which had been awarded the mandate to govern Iraq by the new League of Nations, was reluctant to surrender the Mosul province, and Gertrude Bell was particularly against the idea. A suggestion that the Hakkari District in Turkey could be 'swapped' for the Mosul vilayet was rejected and after much argument and several appeals, the permanent border was drawn between

Turkey and Iraq, which left the Assyrians exiled from their old homeland and dependent on the goodwill of the British government's mandate in Iraq.

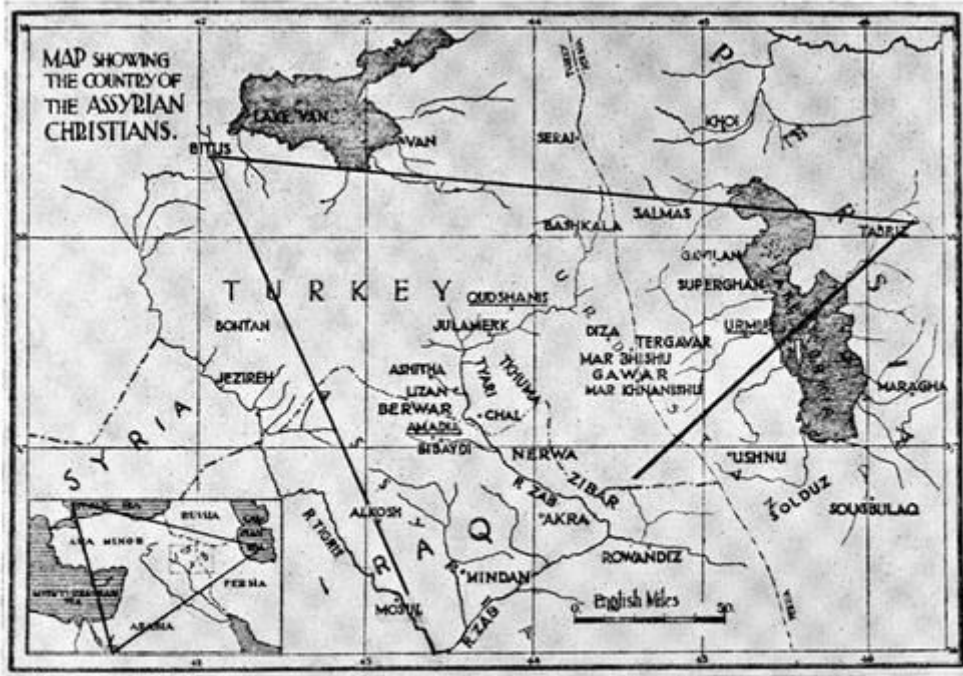
An angry article published in the Tory-leaning *National Review* in September 1927 berated the League of Nations' decision as 'A Study in Injustice'. Although the article is anonymous, someone has pencilled the word 'Amery' on the back cover, which leads us to suspect the author was Leo Amery, Secretary of State for the Colonies at the time, both a politician and a journalist who was strongly against appeasement, as he saw it, that could weaken the British Empire. The author draws a vivid picture of the plight of the Assyrians, now mainly gathered north of Mosul.

Sweltering in torrid heat, but in the sight of the snow-capped mountains which have been theirs since before the dawn of history – in isolated groups amongst their hereditary enemies – the Assyrians realise that they cannot continue to exist under present conditions. They regard the decision of the League as a cruel injustice – an execrable and unnecessary betrayal – that cries to Heaven for redress.

The League's commissioners were accused of anti-British bias and of being influenced by the fear that Turkey would retaliate if she were to lose Hakkari.

An aspect that has been played down in the collection of these pro-Assyrian archives is that the refugees were not themselves entirely blameless. 'The Assyrians are staunchly Anglophile and have identified themselves with our [British] interests' it was reported. They had fought with the British against the Turks, the Kurds and the Arabs. This did not make them popular in Iraq and they were of course a Christian minority among their Muslim neighbours. While Britain held the mandate in Iraq, the Assyrians were relatively safe, but this came to an end in October 1932, when Iraq joined the League of Nations and the mandate was surrendered. Britain had assured the League that minorities in Iraq would continue to be protected and British military bases and advisors were to remain in the country. The Assyrians were not reassured. There was talk of a mutiny among the Levies and though this was quashed, a number of officers and men resigned. The Patriarch was urged to press for an autonomous enclave for the Assyrians in the Mosul area, and he went to Europe to plead his case, but this came to nothing. In July 1933 about 500 armed Assyrians attempted to cross into Syria, then under French mandate. They were disarmed and interned. Between 11th and 13th of August massacres took place at Simele and Doluk, two districts north of Mosul. Nearly 1,000 men, women and children were killed by Iraqi armed forces – and their villages were looted by Kurdish tribesmen.

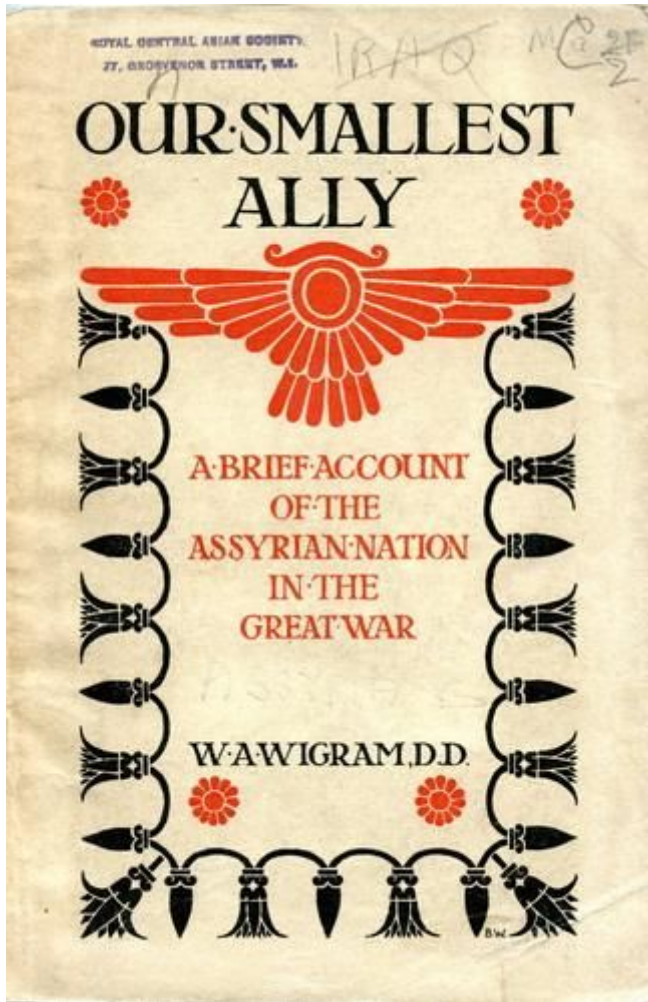
Figure 1 Map showing the country of the Assyrian Christians



THE COUNTRY OF THE ASSYRIANS. THE TRIANGLE IN THE LARGE MAP INDICATES ROUGHLY THE AREA OCCUPIED BY THE ASSYRIANS AT THE OUTBREAK OF THE GREAT WAR. THE TRIANGLE IN THE INSET MAP INDICATES DIAGRAMMATICALLY THE EXTENT OF THE ANCIENT ASSYRIAN EMPIRE.

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Figure 2 'Our Smallest Ally' – a pamphlet from the RSAA collection, pub. 1920



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Figure 3 Assyrian beehive-like brick houses in Khabur District c. 1937



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Figure 4 Assyrians making bricks in Khabur District c. 1937



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Figure 5 Assyrian Levies in south Kurdistan, 1928



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Figure 6 2nd Battalion Assyrians Levies, Iraq, 1925



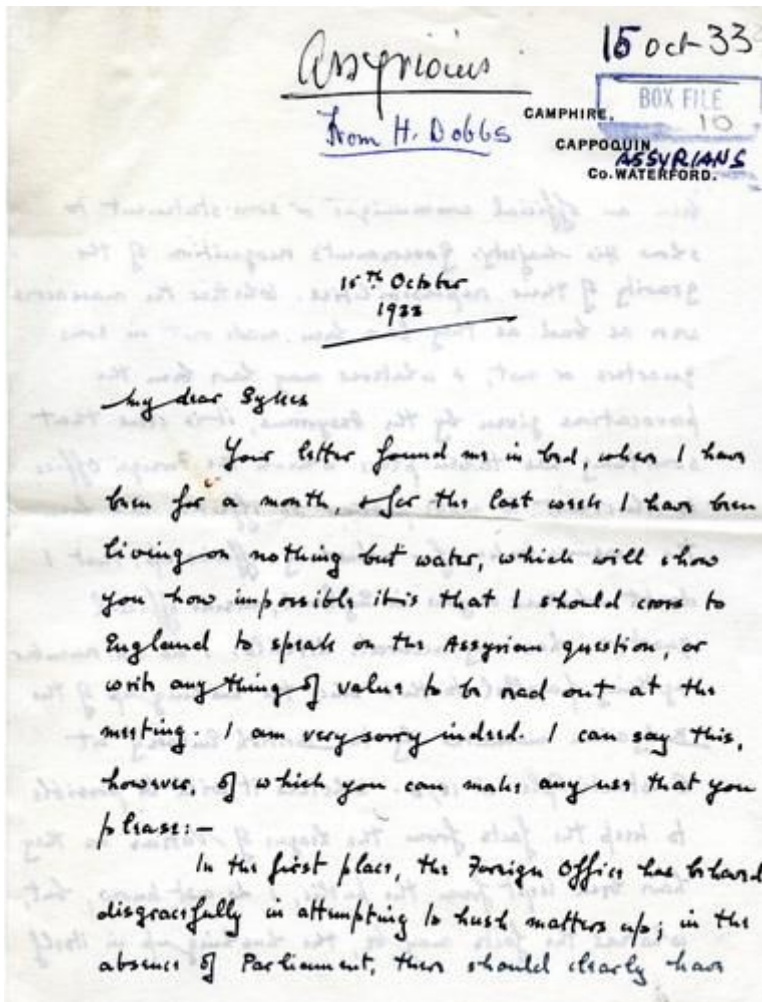
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Figure 7 Assyrians Levies in action at Rowandiz, 1925



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Figure 8 Sir Henry Dobbs to Sir Percy Sykes 15 October 1933



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'Disgraceful behaviour'

It was not a promising start for the new, independent kingdom of Iraq and news of the massacre spread quickly in certain quarters. The RCAS and Percy Sykes were deeply involved. The Mar Shimun joined the Society and Sir Percy was asked to look into the Assyrian problem and report his findings. He did so by gathering evidence from members with direct knowledge of the unfortunate people, including Major General Dunsterville and Captain McCarthy, whose reports are quoted above. He asked Henry Dobbs to travel from his home in Ireland to speak to the Society. Sir Henry was on his death bed but still had the strength to condemn the Foreign Office who, he said, had behaved disgracefully in attempting to hush matters up; 'in the absence of Parliament [on its summer recess], there should clearly have been an official communiqué or some statement to show His Majesty's Government's recognition of the gravity of their responsibilities.' He continued

Whether the massacres were as bad as they have been made out in some quarters or not, and whatever may have been the provocation given by the Assyrians, it is clear that something has taken place which the Foreign Office is reluctant to make public. So effective have been the measures taken for hushing affairs up, that I doubt whether anyone in England, outside official quarters, has any accurate details ... Whether it will be possible to keep the facts from the League of Nations as they have been kept from the public, I do not know, but, whatever the facts may be, the hushing up in itself is unspeakably bad. It has, I presume, been undertaken to save the face of our representative in Iraq on

whose assurance that the Assyrians would be safe the League of Nations so recently admitted Iraq as a member ...

Sykes published a long article in the Journal of 1934, entitled 'A Summary of the History of the Assyrians in Iraq, 1918–1933' based on material 'drawn from many sources, some of which have been published in [the] Journal, and giving references, where necessary to official documents.' In fact the Journal became a prominent mouthpiece for discussions on the Assyrian problem. Between 1923 and 1940 no less than twenty-four articles were published by authors who were familiar with the Near East and had a view on the Assyrians. Some of these articles were based on lectures and discussions held in various London locations and these in turn elicited letters to Society officers. The Patriarch, Mar Shimun, wrote warmly to 'Sir Sykes', as he called him in May 1934 thanking him for his support 'to the cause of my people'.

Following the August massacre, the League of Nations set up a Commission for the resettlement of the Assyrians remaining in Iraq. The Brazilian government offered to accommodate them and although Mar Shimun told Sykes that his people were keen to leave Iraq, they weren't *that* keen. Other suggested homes were British Guiana and French West Africa. Eastern Canada was favoured too because there was already a small Assyrian community there, and a larger one in neighbouring America. No-one of course suggested Britain. Sykes wrote on behalf of the Society to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Sir John Simon saying 'It is difficult to see how they can be secured the treatment they undoubtedly merit outside of the British Empire' and the Society's President Lord Lloyd summed up popular feeling in a speech at the Annual Dinner of 1934:

... I do not believe there is anyone in this country who is aught but ashamed and unhappy at the fate of a minority for whose welfare we are completely and admittedly responsible ... their very espousal of our cause in the war made it impossible for them to live in their homeland save under our guarantee – and we have failed them.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, as President of the Assyrian Settlement National Appeal, wrote in the Journal soliciting funds. Members of the Appeal committee included Leo Amery and several members of the RCAS. The executive secretary was Captain Gracey, the man who had denied promising the Assyrians a homeland back in 1917. By now the discussion on where to settle the Assyrians had moved on. Apart from the area north of Mosul where a considerable number had hung on in spite of the massacre, a temporary settlement had been established in the Khabur river area on the borders of Syria and Iraq. At this period Syria, together with the Lebanon under French mandate was considered to be reasonably secure. Large sums of money had already been promised by various governments to assist in the resettlement – £250,000 from Britain, the same amount from Iraq, more from the French and £80,000 from the League of Nations. The money was used to buy land, to compensate existing residents and to build accommodation for the new settlers.

With the agreement in 1937 of the Assyrian Committee attached to the League the Khabur settlement became permanent and 'Rab' Butler then in the Foreign Office was confident that it would become self-sufficient. Both the Khabur and the north Mosul settlements were extremely closely monitored by the British and Iraqi governments – we know exactly how many families were in each new village, which tribe they belonged to, how many sheep and goats they owned, whether the village was government or *waqf* owned, the gross kilo yield of the winter and summer crops, who was liable to pay land tax and how many males, females and children lived in each village and the date when it had been established.

The Second World War

The Assyrian Levies make a final appearance in the 1940s, when they helped defend the Royal Air Force base at Habbaniya near Baghdad against a German-inspired revolt by Rashid Ali, several times prime minister of the kingdom of Iraq.⁵⁵ Rosie Llewellyn-Jones, ed. *A Small Room in Clarges Street: Secret War-Time Lectures at the Royal Central Asian Society 1942–1944*. Sussex Academic Press. See Chapter One ‘Iraq 1942’ by J.R.A. Embling for details of Rashid Ali’s revolt and the defence of Habbaniya airfield. View all notes In a repeat of British tactics during World War One, the Levies were being used to release British forces for the forward areas, notably at the time in North Africa. Air Vice-Marshal Hugh Champion de Crespigny, commanding the British air force in Iraq, found time to lecture the Society in January 1944 with the title ‘The Assyrian Cause’. After relating their recent history he said that every able-bodied Assyrian male between 18 and 45 was required to ‘volunteer’ for service with the British, and this led to an increase of nearly 5,000 Levies.⁶⁶ The Assyrian Levies were finally disbanded in 1955. View all notes De Crespigny was told by the Assyrian leaders ‘We have nothing to give but our men and Great Britain can have them all as our only hope of future existence as a race depends upon her guardianship.’ It was a remarkable statement to make considering Britain’s denials and repudiations after World War One. De Crespigny foresaw what their future might be: ‘They were unpopular with the people of Iraq before Rashid Ali’s revolt and the large part they played in the discomfiture of the Iraq army at that time will no doubt rankle for years.’ He added ‘their chief desire is to settle somewhere under British protection and in view of their past and present services to this country, it would not only be unkind but immoral to disregard their wishes.’ A rough estimate was made in September 1943 for de Crespigny of the Assyrian diaspora:

Table

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Conclusion

And there the story ends, apart from a touching little footnote. How the large mass of papers came to be found in the Society’s archives now seems clearer. A number of members had personal knowledge of the Assyrian community and the areas in which they lived. There is no doubt that unease at their treatment played a large part in the Society’s almost obsessive interest during the period between 1917 and 1945. Whatever men like Dunsterville and Gracey said, there had been the expectation from the Assyrian side that something would be done for them. Britain owed them something. This was compounded by what seemed like a betrayal when the Iraq mandate was surrendered in 1932, leading to massacre the following year. Sykes, as the Society’s Secretary for thirteen years, made it his business to collect as much material as he could on the Assyrians, and he actively solicited reports from members and others with knowledge of relevant events. All of the papers recently discovered are stamped in the right-hand corner ‘Box File’ with the word ‘Assyrians’ written underneath in ink. This is a discrete collection and the fact that it was found together in one bundle re-inforces this. Sir Percy died suddenly on 11 June 1945 of a heart attack while crossing Trafalgar Square on his way to the Athenaeum. There are no letters or pamphlets after this date. His widow, Lady Evelyn Sykes subsequently presented a number of books from his library to the Society, and although there is no specific mention of the Assyrian papers, these may have arrived at the same time. It is also possible of course that they were already housed with the Society, although the idea of a box file seems rather foreign to an organisation that cheerfully kept valuable items stuffed into cupboards and disposed of most of its correspondence whenever it moved premises.

And the footnote? On Remembrance Sunday 11 November 2007 the late Hugh Leach, the Society’s historian, delivered a sermon at his local church, St George’s, at Hinton St George in Somerset. He spoke movingly about the plight of Christian churches in Iraq, and particularly those of the Assyrians during the recent invasion and the then on-going war. ‘Because of their fluent English,’ he reported

‘they are offering their services to the Coalition as interpreters. Several have been killed as a result.’ Hugh wrote a short prayer for them, which Assyrian friends translated into Aramaic: ‘O Lord, remember the Assyrian people, your earliest believers, at this time of danger in the land of their birth. Grant them peace and safety. Amen.’

Notes

1 ‘Historical Article by Squadron Leader Reid dated 1944’. De Crespigny Folder Part 1, RSAA Archive Collection.

2 John Fisher, ‘Man on the Spot: Captain George Gracey and British Policy Towards the Assyrians, 1917–1945’. *Middle Eastern Studies* Vol. 44, Issue 2 (March 2008): 215–235.

3 Letter from Gertrude Bell to her father Sir Hugh Bell, dated 19 November 1922. From the Gertrude Bell Archive at the University of Newcastle.

4 See Rosie Llewellyn-Jones, ‘The British Raj and the British Mandate in Iraq’. *Asian Affairs* Vol. 46, Issue 2 (2015): 270–279 for the use of Indian currency in Iraq during the British mandate.

5 Rosie Llewellyn-Jones, ed. *A Small Room in Clarges Street: Secret War-Time Lectures at the Royal Central Asian Society 1942–1944*. Sussex Academic Press. See Chapter One ‘Iraq 1942’ by J.R.A. Embling for details of Rashid Ali’s revolt and the defence of Habbaniya airfield.

6 The Assyrian Levies were finally disbanded in 1955.