

THOSE 'CRINGING' ARMENIANS

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 **Keghart.com Team** Editorial, 16 June 2010

Following Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in the late 18th century, Europeans representing various nations, trades, disciplines, and sects elbowed their way to the Middle East. Diplomats, traders, archaeologists, authors, journalists, artists, explorers, adventurers, and missionaries seemed to be fascinated by the "Orient," then ruled by the Ottoman Empire. During their sojourn in Ottoman Turkey, these Europeans inevitably came across Armenians—from Constantinople to Cilicia to Erzurum. And they often wrote about the Armenians they met.

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Armenian Family, names unknown, Aintab, Ottoman Empire c 1905

Some of what they said about Armenians was positive (hard-working, better educated than Turks); other comments were uncomplimentary (wily, haggling merchants). However, a word that again and again comes up in their description of Armenians is 'cringing'. Referring to Armenians, British travelers Georgina Mackenzie and Adelina Paulina Irby said, "...the hereditary cringing of the rayah," while in 'The Times' of London, British diplomat Valentine Chirol wrote of "the beaten Oriental is abject."

Describing the Armenians of Constantinople, William Goodell wrote, "Four centuries of torture, of oppression, and of suspense have stamped its impress upon an entire community... constant fear, constant agony, constant humiliation have so crushed out every trace of manhood, that they are still cringing, fawning, and abject race."

Noel Buxton and Rev. Harold Buxton in the "Travels & Politics in Armenia" (Times Literary Supplement, 1914) said that the 'cringing' descriptive was most frequently reserved for Armenians and Jews, both in Imperial Russia and in the Ottoman Empire. The famous English novelist William

Makepeace Thackeray, writing about his travels in the Levant in 1846, depicted an Armenian in Rhodes as 'cringing and wheedling."

In 1910, Captain A.F. Townsend ("A Military Consult in Turkey: The Experience & Impression of a British Representative in Asia Minor") remarked, "If a European were to strike an impertinent Moslem, he would be paid back in kind, but an Armenian would become cringing; his spirit is broken by centuries of oppression."

Jean Victor Bates ("Our Allies & Enemies in the Near East") wrote about what he called 'poor, cringing, unmanly Armenians even after the terrible tragedy that befell the community in 1915, perhaps representing a peculiar orientalist version of the tendency to blame victims for whatever happens to them."

Historian Cathie Carmichael, in her recent and exhaustive "Genocide Before the Holocaust" (Yale University Press), says that for Ottoman Armenians fear was a way of life. One survival strategy for ethnic minorities, says Carmichael, was "fatalism and increased piety (a phenomenon which was happening among Jews, Muslims and Armenians, subjected to frequent missionary work at a time when they were most vulnerable."

Missionary Helen Davenport Gibbons recalled ("Red Rugs of Tarsus; A Woman's Record of the Armenian Massacre of 1909, 1917") that the fear and fatalism of "Armenians was very vivid. When we first came to Cilicia and went to church up in the Tarsus Mountain summer place, I remember how queer these people looked to me. They belong to another world I was an outsider. I had difficulty in understanding some traits of their characters. I was hasty in my judgment of them—hasty through ignorance. I was impatient with their constant fear of 'what might happen anytime' to Christians under Moslem rule.

Carmichael points out that another strong mechanism of coping was denial. "...they may be developed a 'pogrom mentality' expecting violence and waiting for it to pass like a storm." For example, Dorothea Chambers Blais ("Missionary Daughter") recalled in Cilicia in 1909 that an Armenian mother "had been through massacres before, she knew one must treat it as an episode and not a final tragedy."

Describing the 1896 massacres of Armenians in Constantinople, Chalmers Roberts ("A Mother of Martyrs," Atlantic Monthly, 1899) wrote, "One came to expect that venerable Ulemas and ascetic young Softas, on their way from the mosque to mosque, would kick the mangled bodies, which blocked their paths, and curse them for dogs of Armenian traitors. The pools of blood in the streets in some places actually dripping and trickling downhill came in time, after you had stepped over and around a hundred of them, to remind you of some early visit to a slaughter house."

Talking about the long bondage of Armenians and Greeks, Margaret Lavinia Anderson ("Down in Turkey, Far Away") argued that the discourse 'essentialized' the Christian in the Near East, who was thus "the born victim, whose cries for help we have become tired of hearing."

While the litany of the Western narratives about Ottoman Armenian life—the permanent anxiety, insecurity and dread-- is certainly a worthwhile addition to our knowledge of Ottoman Armenian history, we would like to pose here a single question to the government in Ankara: "How can you continue to insist that such a powerless, harassed, fatalist, over-taxed, impoverished, and abject minority could have been a fifth column threatening to dismantle the Ottoman Empire?"

