TWICE-TOLD STORY 800 YEARS APART

Posted on August 9, 2013 by Keghart



Category: Opinions

Collected By Jirair Tutunjian, Toronto, 7 August 2013

The furtive, night-time disappearance of the French Army from Armenian Cilicia in 1921 was an eerie echo of what the Frankish Crusaders had done 800 years earlier in Urfa (Edessa). Urfa Armenians had supported the Crusaders against the Turks, just as their descendants supported the French against the Turks in the First World World. In both instances, the Armenians had been promised the protection of their European "Christian brothers".

Here's Russian-French historian and novelist Zoe Oldenburg's description of the Urfa massacre in her magisterial "The Crusades").

"What finally happened was one of the greatest disasters in the history of the Crusades. The responsibility for this catastrophe belongs to the Franks, to the two Baldwins in particular and also indirectly to Tancred and his somewhat equivocal attitude. The massacre of the inhabitants of the region of Edessa surpassed in horror that of Jerusalem and the massacres of the Crusading armies in Anatolia.

Collected By Jirair Tutunjian, Toronto, 7 August 2013

The furtive, night-time disappearance of the French Army from Armenian Cilicia in 1921 was an eerie echo of what the Frankish Crusaders had done 800 years earlier in Urfa (Edessa). Urfa Armenians had supported the Crusaders against the Turks, just as their descendants supported the French against the Turks in the First World World. In both instances, the Armenians had been promised the protection of their European "Christian brothers".

Here's Russian-French historian and novelist Zoe Oldenburg's description of the Urfa massacre in her magisterial "The Crusades").

"What finally happened was one of the greatest disasters in the history of the Crusades. The responsibility for this catastrophe belongs to the Franks, to the two Baldwins in particular and also indirectly to Tancred and his somewhat equivocal attitude. The massacre of the inhabitants of the region of Edessa surpassed in horror that of Jerusalem and the massacres of the Crusading armies in Anatolia.

This time it was literally a case of genocide.

"The Franks had had the unfortunate idea of evacuating the entire civilian population of the region (including that of the fortified cities) to the right bank of the Euphrates, in order to protect the Armenians against the incursions of the Turkish armies and so they would be better able to defend the strongholds. It hadn't occurred to them to consider the unwisdom of this mass exodus a moment when the great Turkish army was in the neighborhood. So hopeless were they at directing and organizing the county's hoards of peasants and townspeople, and so badly organized the transport

by boat to the other side of the river, that Mawdud's army found it child's play to fall upon the wretched people gathered on the plain beside the Euphrates. The Armenians were slaughtered in their tens of thousands before the very eyes of the Franks who, having already crossed river, watched powerless while the hideous butchery took place.

"'The Franks,' wrote Matthew of Edessa , 'shed bitter tears as they contemplated this scene of desolation. After this signal success, Mawdud returned to Harran with masses of captives and incalculable booty.' The captives were young women and children, whom the Turks generally spared. The men were killed. Those who flung themselves into the boats were drowned, because the boats were overloaded, and the majority of those who tried cross the river by swimming did not reach the further bank. The carnage, says Matthew of Edessa, was such that 'the waves of the Euphrates ran red with blood… This day saw the depopulation of the whole province of Edessa.' This is no exaggeration. A whole rich and fertile province was transformed overnight into a ruined and wasted land—a desert. It never recovered.

"Clearly the Franks cannot be held responsible for atrocities committed by the Turks, but it must be admitted that the great exodus undertaken at their suggestion constituted a direct provocation to atrocities which, but for that, the Turks would never have committed on such a vast scale. It is also fair to say that the whole operation must have been very badly conducted and that the least the Franks could have done was to use their army to cover the retreat of the civilian population. Yet the Franks had crossed the river first, knowing full well that the Turkish army was on the other side. Lastly, the flight of the local Christians from the Turks, like the Turks' anger against the Christians, was the direct consequence of the Crusades themselves, which had led the Moslems to regard Christians as enemies by definition.

"Although the history of the Armenian people has produced more in tragic episodes of this kind than any other, on this occasion it can reasonably be said that massacre might easily have been avoided. With the best of intentions, the Franks had brought disaster on the heads of their subjects.

"After this disaster, from which the Franks emerged intact, having lost neither men nor arms, it is understandable that the already faltering confidence of the Armenians of Edessa in their new lords was badly shaken. Indeed, their cherished wish was to have a prince of their own race again. On the other bank of the Euphrates, the Armenian Kogh Vasil, lord of Raban and Kaisum, commanded a strong army, dependent on neither Greeks nor Turks, still less of the Franks in Cilicia. Oshin and Thoros I ruled at Lampron and Vahgah as distant vassals of Byzantium but in practice virtually independent. The Armenians' want of 'loyalty' to Baldwin of Le Bourg is therefore quite understandable."