

Medz Yeghern

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Medz Yeghern is an Armenian term meaning “great calamity.” It is synonymous with the deaths of several hundred thousand Armenians in Anatolia¹ and Syria during the period of the Great War. For the Seventh-day Adventist Church, this same event caused the greatest proportional losses of an Adventist community in the church’s history. The great calamity came about due to a confluence of geopolitical, religious, and historical factors that overtook the most promising Adventist mission field in the Middle East and left behind a shattered and scattered population. The Adventist Church in Anatolia has never recovered.

An Old Christian Minority in the Middle East

As a Christian minority group within the Muslim-majority Middle East, the Armenian people had always been distinct within the larger populations that they lived among, whether in the great cities of western Anatolia among Christian Greeks and Muslim Turks or in the ancestral rural landscapes of eastern Anatolia among Muslims of Turkish and Kurdish ancestry. From the fifteenth century, Armenians were among the diverse populations in the Middle East, North Africa, and Eastern Europe ruled by Muslim Turks—the polity subsequently known as the Ottoman Empire. For centuries the Armenians enjoyed significant religious and cultural autonomy as part of the structure of the Ottoman government, with the head of the Armenian Church enjoying a cabinet-level position, while the Armenian people were generally free to practice their Armenian Christian faith and live



Serapi and her brother, 1920. She was a survivor of the Medz Yeghern, and eventually rescued by her brother in Tacoma Park, Maryland.

Shared by Hyosu Jung. Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

under their own Armenian law. This multicultural government arrangement for other religions in an officially Islamic state was known as the *millet* system and provided basic autonomy for Jews and various Orthodox, other Eastern, and Catholic Christians. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim populations lived in relative peace alongside each other, under their own creedal laws, but distinct and separate. All knew better than to challenge the power of the central government in Constantinople (renamed Istanbul after World War I).

By the late 1800s, however, centralized authority in the Ottoman Empire was collapsing. Ideas of European nationalism had spread eastwards from the French Revolution onwards and took root among subject Christian populations living within the empire. This ultimately led to successful national independence movements in Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Romania, which in turn altered the demographic profile of the Ottoman Empire to, for the first time, an overwhelming Muslim majority. Meanwhile, Ottoman political, technological, and military weakness vis-à-vis major European states, such as Austria-Hungary, and especially Imperial Russia, meant that the Ottoman Empire was consistently losing wars and territory to Christian states during the two hundred years leading up to the pivotal period of the Great War and *Medz Yeghern*.

For the remaining Christian groups within the Ottoman Empire, life became increasingly precarious. Anatolian Greek Christians, predominantly in the western parts of the empire, and Assyrian and Syrian Orthodox Christians in eastern parts of the empire, all faced sporadic outbreaks of communal persecution from the more conservative elements of their Muslim neighbors. The Armenian Christians, however, were the most widespread across the empire by the close of the century. Armenian populations existed in distinct pockets from Constantinople in the west to the ancestral Armenian lands in the east and in every major city in between. In Ottoman society, Armenians often functioned as a favored middle class, the ideal middlemen in business and banking between Christian European states and the Ottoman market. In the 1890s the Ottoman Sultan, Abdul Hamid II, encouraged a campaign of persecution against the empire's Armenian population, targeting this visible Christian minority group to solidify his control over his now Muslim-majority population. These Hamidian Massacres led to the destruction and/or confiscations of thousands of Armenian churches, businesses, and homes, and sadly to the death of tens of thousands of Armenians across the Ottoman Empire.² There was an unexpected side-benefit to Adventist mission, when a few Armenian Adventists, fleeing Ottoman massacres, found refuge in Cairo and Alexandria. One began "active[ly] proclaiming the truth" and won two converts within two years.³ However, tragically, the Hamidian massacres were only a foretaste of what was coming.

Adventism Comes to Anatolia

Between the Hamidian Massacres and the "great calamity," the Seventh-day Adventist Church intensified its missionary activities in the Middle East, in general, and Anatolia, in particular. The first missionary to Anatolia had been Theodore Anthony, an Anatolian Greek shoemaker, who discovered Adventism while traveling in the United States. On his return trip to his homeland in 1889, Anthony encountered a difficult situation that was

largely the same as had been confronting Protestant missionaries to the Middle East for the entirety of the nineteenth century.⁴ Evangelizing Muslims was forbidden within the Ottoman Empire. For approved Protestant denominations, known collectively as the Protestant Mission, evangelizing Eastern Christians was permissible. Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and Assyrian Christians, among many other groups, had proud legacies going back over a thousand years and did not look kindly on European or American Protestant missionaries seeking to change the identity, heritage, and political status of their church members. The Protestant Mission was similarly opposed to the message that Anthony brought, and his activities resulted in temporary imprisonment and restrictions upon his freedom of movement. Despite this imposing situation, Anthony achieved one notable success with the conversion of Z. G. Baharian.

Zadour G. Baharian was an Armenian who had attended the Protestant College of Aintab, one of the many educational institutions in the region established by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. Already a bridge between Protestantism and Greek and Armenian Orthodoxy, Baharian became a committed Seventh-day Adventist with a driving passion to create Adventist congregations and institutions in Anatolia. To begin his work, Baharian moved to the European Adventist headquarters in Basel, Switzerland, for two years, translating Adventist literature at the Polyglott Press and sending tracts to people he knew in Anatolia. Upon returning to Anatolia, Baharian achieved success among both Greeks and Armenians, of both Orthodox and Protestant backgrounds. When H. P. Holser, the president of the Seventh-day Adventist European Mission, visited Anatolia in 1894, just five years after Anthony's arrival, he found the work well underway.⁵

Thanks to Baharian's efforts, Armenians, in particular, began joining the still young Adventist Church. While similar missions in Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt were measuring converts in twos and threes, in Anatolia there were over two hundred Adventists by 1909. In September of 1910, delegates from fourteen churches and groups met in Istanbul and organized Anatolia into Greek, Armenian, and Turkish mission fields. These were regional in nature and not exclusively ethnic in target group, but rather reflected predominant populations, with the assumption that Adventism could appeal across ethnic lines. Baharian became the president of the Armenian Mission, and most of the Adventists across all three mission fields were Armenian. Following this organization, mainly relying on local leaders, by 1912 there were 350 Adventists in Anatolia, and by 1914 the number was 450.⁶ These numbers bely the significant obstacles to evangelism faced by the early Adventists in Anatolia and the tremendous political and geopolitical uncertainty of these years.

During the same years that evangelizing Adventist leaders like Z. G. Baharian were converting hundreds to Adventism, the very social and political fabric of the Ottoman Empire was going through a transformation that set up the future *Medz Yeghern*. In 1908 elements of the Ottoman military, known as the Young Turks, carried out a successful coup against the absolute rule of the sultan. At this point the Young Turk leaders were of diverse ages, ethnicities, and religious backgrounds.⁷ In terms of the criterion of religious identity, they were, as a group, secularists, while politically, they wanted to modernize the empire. The initial coup leadership sought to establish a government based on the rule of law and various borrowed European concepts, such as citizenship,

equality, and national identity. Their goal was to transform the old Ottoman Empire into a modern nation state, whose citizens would be Ottomans, loyal to the Ottoman state. Where the old system had for centuries divided its diverse populations into religious *millets*, the new approach was for full equality of rights and obligations. While that sounded fair and progressive for Ottoman Christians, it meant an end to many elements of local autonomy and self-rule, and most immediately to the end of exemption from military service.

As this new Ottoman government tried to consolidate its position, while simultaneously embarking on sweeping internal reforms, there was no break in crisis requiring military service. In the aftermath of the 1908 coup, Bulgaria broke away from the empire in war, Crete rebelled, Italy invaded Ottoman Tripolitania in North Africa, and then the Balkan Wars began, which lasted until 1914. Indeed, in a preview of the simmering religious, ethnic, and nationalistic rivalries present within Anatolia's diverse populations, in 1909, during the political instability of an Islamist countercoup against the new secular government, mobs of angry Muslims in Adana in southeastern Anatolia killed tens of thousands of Armenians, including several Armenian Adventists during the Adana Massacre.⁸ Although the Ottoman government in Istanbul was dismayed at these killings, and ultimately restored order, the Ottoman state itself remained in flux. Meanwhile, a number of Armenian Adventists fled; two took refuge on British-ruled Cyprus. They were the first Adventist believers on the island, where they gradually built up a small body of believers.⁹

The Great Calamity

As the original liberal-minded Ottomanist agenda foundered amid external military defeats to foreign powers, territorial loss, and internal revolts, by 1913 a new coup brought to power a military triumvirate known as the Three Pashas.¹⁰ The primary ideology of the Three Pashas was pan-Turkism. This final Ottoman government pursued educational and language reforms that sought to impose Turkishness on the ethnic and religious minority groups of the empire. Rather than an Ottoman state that protected its diverse populations and treated them equally to ensure their loyalty, the vision of the Three Pashas was an Ottoman Empire grounded in a single Turkish identity to which its citizens would conform. It is worth noting that this Pan-Turkism equally threatened Christian Greeks and Armenians, and to a lesser degree extend Muslim Arabs and Kurds, though Armenian Christians were the most widespread "other" across the territory of the empire where the most Turks lived. In the zero-sum game of radical Turkish nationalism that the Three Pashas quietly espoused, Armenians were the clearest potential rival.

As the two great coalitions formed that would fight each other in what would become a world war, the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire, living almost entirely within the region of Anatolia, found themselves trapped in a volatile geographic, political, and religious situation. Roughly half the Armenian population in Eastern Anatolia lived in the Orthodox Christian Russian Empire, while the other half lived in the Muslim Ottoman Empire. By the eve of the Great War, the Russian military was openly arming and training its

Armenians into volunteer units and preparing them for war against the Ottoman Empire. Similarly, the Ottoman Empire began conscripting its Armenians into the Ottoman military. As the Ottomans prepared for war, they began passing laws removing guns from Armenian households and ordered most Armenian soldiers into unarmed labor battalions.¹¹

Once the Ottoman Empire joined World War I in October 1914, the government of the Three Pashas took more direct action. Under their direction the Ottoman Congress passed further laws, first, ordering the forced relocation of seditious elements of the population, and second, ordering the confiscation of the property of those deemed seditious.¹² With these simple tools, Ottoman authorities began the forced relocation of nearly the entire Armenian population of Anatolia and attempted to make it permanent. Once the government confiscated churches, businesses, and homes, it then sold them off. Government police marched Armenians in Western Anatolia east and then south, while forcing those in Eastern Anatolia to move southwest. The final destination of those who survived the journey was Deir ez-Zor, where the Euphrates River cuts through the Syrian Desert. According to the accounts of survivors, backed by more than one hundred non-Armenian eye witness accounts, Ottoman authorities and local mobs of Turks and Kurds robbed, raped, and murdered Armenians throughout the relocation process. Ottoman authorities did not provide adequate protection, transport, food, or medical services, causing extensive mortality from starvation, disease, and exposure. The non-Armenian eyewitnesses who wrote down the accounts of these events were Muslims, Christians, and Jews, of diverse ethnicities and citizenship. Some were Turks, Kurds, Arabs, and Persians, while many others were Americans, and from various European countries. Their documented accounts paint a consistent picture. All of this evidence is especially significant because the ongoing national narrative does not recognize these atrocities. As a result of concerted national denial and of the poor condition of record-keeping and record-protecting as the Ottoman Empire broke up, every facet of the scope, scale, numbers, motivation, and events of *Medz Yeghern* has been and will most likely remain, hotly disputed. The end result, however, was clear: an Anatolia that was mostly empty of Armenians and the replacement of Ottoman rule with a Turkish state.

The end result was also emphatically clear for the Seventh-day Adventist Church. For Anatolian Adventists, who were mostly Armenians, the onset of the Great War and *Medz Yeghern* was catastrophic. Freedom of movement and communication became almost impossible. Military conscription removed the young men. The *1916 Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, documenting all church activities and personnel, in its "Survey of the Field 1915" section included a brief report on the three Anatolian missions. Alongside the number of baptisms from 1914 were chilling clues of calamity: "Serious times have befallen (these missions)... from the last scant news, we gather that the Armenian settlements where our churches were located have been scattered, and our brethren in Constantinople describe their situation by quoting Romans 11:3."¹³

Using a Bible verse as a coded message, the surviving Adventists at the periphery of the Anatolian missions conveyed the following, "Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me."¹⁴ Like all international organizations at the time, the church had almost no

capacity to intervene.

A memory of the events that unfolded endures more in popular Adventist literature, which comes from the accounts of survivors than in detailed records, which the church was not in a position to keep and which Ottoman authorities did not generate. According to the church's best records, more than half of the 450 Seventh-day Adventists in Anatolia died during the great calamity, while most of the remainder faced expulsion or fled.¹⁵ Of the twelve Adventist colporteurs in Anatolia in 1914, only two survived.¹⁶ Even Zadour Baharian, the father of Adventist mission in Anatolia, was among the slain. According to accounts collected by Mildred Olson, Baharian died outside of Sivas in 1915, executed for refusing to recant his Christianity.¹⁷

Like parts of the general Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire, there were Adventists who survived. Two of the best-known Adventist survivors were Serpouhi Tavoukdjian and Diamondola Keanides. Both of these brave women wrote or dictated their stories years after the events that scared them emotionally and physically.¹⁸ Their stories, *Exiled: Story of an Armenian Girl* and *Diamondola* became staples of Adventist homes and helped shape the church's collective memory of this event. For the more than two hundred Adventists who died, many of whose names did not survive in church records, and for the generations of their unborn descendants, we need to add the following list, though incomplete, to our collective memory of *Medz Yeghern*: E. Eyvazian—36 years old, 14 years a pastor, died of hunger and typhus at Sivas, 1915; B. Tousdjian—40 years old, five years a pastor, his wife, his father, and two children murdered with him in Malatia, 1915; G. Aressian—24 years old, five years a missionary, died of exhaustion in Thessaloniki, 1917; M. Ashikian—30 years old, four years assistant pastor, murdered with his wife in Malatia, 1915; H. Apovian—30 years old, assistant pastor for four years, murdered 1915, his family went missing; H. Shadarifian—32 years old, four years a pastor, murdered 1915, as were his family later; D. Tcherakian—46 years old, university professor, famous Armenian poet, painter, and Adventist evangelist, survived a 600-mile death march, but died of exhaustion in Diyarbakir, 1921.¹⁹

For the Adventist Church in Turkey, the blood of the martyrs was not the seed of the church. The *Medz Yeghern* was a blow from which numerically the church has only just recovered (see Figure 1 in More Photos). However, many Armenian Adventists avoided death by fleeing—some to Greece and the United States, but some to Lebanon, where they strengthened the Adventist presence, and where in many cases their descendants are still church members. The events of more than a hundred years ago thus continue to influence the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Turkey and the Middle East.

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NOTES

1. Anatolia is the geographic name for the peninsula that is today's country of Turkey. Historically, Anatolia was a mosaic of diverse population groups.
2. Unfortunately, most scholars dispute all the numbers involving minority groups in the Ottoman Empire in its twilight years. From the number who died in any massacre to the number who were simply alive at a given point in time, scholars dispute the validity of the base numbers and any subsequently reported numbers. Ottoman record-keeping was poor before, during, and after both the Hamidian Massacres and *Medz Yeghern*. Most scholarly estimates, utilizing non-Armenian eyewitness accounts and existent but incomplete census data, place the number of deaths from the Hamidian Massacres between 80,000 and 300,000, with many more becoming homeless and destitute. Estimates for *Metz Yeghern* range from a few hundred thousand to nearly two million.
3. H. P. Holser, "Southern European mission fields," *General Conference Daily Bulletin* 8 (February 17, 1899), 22

4. Michael Oren, *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East: 1776 to the Present* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 124-25, 128.
5. Baldur E. Pfeiffer, *The European Seventh-day Adventist Mission in the Middle East 1879-1939* European University Studies, Series XXII 161 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1996), 28-30.
6. Pfeiffer, 40. For the sake of perspective, when Theodore Anthony began sharing Adventist ideas in Istanbul in 1889 the total number of Adventists in the world was 29,711 in 1890 according to SDA *General Conference Annual Statistical Reports*. In 1914 the 450 Anatolian Adventists were a significant concentration of population for Middle East missions within a global church body that was just over 100,000 in total strength. <https://ronaldlawson.net/2019/01/15/comparing-the-geographic-distributions-and-growth-of-mormons-adventists-and-witnesses/>.
7. Hasan Kayali, *Ottomanism, Arabism, and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908-1918* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 4.
8. Pfeiffer, 55.
9. *Historical Dictionary of the Seventh-day Adventists*, ed. Gary Land (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2005), 75.
10. Minister of the Interior Talaat Pasha, Minister of War Enver Pasha, and Minister of the Navy Djemal Pasha.
11. Efraim Karsh and Inari Karsh, *Empires of the Sand: The Struggle for Mastery in the Middle East 1789-1923* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 154-155.
12. Kurt Umit, "The Armenian Genocide and the Law," *Open Democracy* April 24, 2015. Accessed on Jan. 9, 2020. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/armenian-genocide-and-law/>.
13. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1916), 248-249.
14. Romans 11:3, NIV.
15. Pfeiffer, 42.
16. Daniel Heinz, "While Justice Lingers: A nearly forgotten story of Armenian Adventists," *Adventist Review*, December 9, 2015. Accessed on January 16, 2020. <https://www.adventistreview.org/1527-26>.
17. Mildred Thompson Olson, "In Search of People: How the Adventist Message Entered Turkey," *Adventist Review*, July 22, 2004. Accessed on January 16, 2020. <https://www.adventistreview.org/archives/2004-1530/story3.html>.

18. Serpouhi Tavoukdjian, *Exiled: Story of an Armenian Girl* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1933) and Mildred Thompson Olson, *Diamondola* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1966).
 19. Daniel Heinz, director of the Historical Archives of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Europe, compiled this list. "Remembering the Armenian Genocide: 250 Adventists died as martyrs because they kept their Christian faith," *EUD News* Oct. 16, 2015. Accessed on January 9, 2020. <https://news.eud.adventist.org/en/all-news/news/go/2015-10-16/remembering-the-armenian-genocide/>.
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