

## WERE THE ASSYRIANS REALLY PERSECUTED?

### — A Critical Appraisal of a Study on the Assyrian Migration From Turkey to Sweden\*

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It must humbly be admitted on the part of the Turkish social scientist that very little is known in Turkey about the so-called Suryoyo (or Assyrian, or Suryani) question. The "question" has rarely been raised, if at all, in the past, and literature concerning this minority group and its problems is virtually non-existent. The average Turkish scholar then, is quite ignorant on the subject, let alone the "man on the street."

Ulf Björklund's study (**North To Another Country: The Formation of a Suryoyo Community in Sweden**, Stockholm, 1981), with its fairly rich historical data, sheds some light on many aspects of Suryoyo life, both within and outside their country of origin, providing the reader with a useful source of information. It may serve a further useful purpose—one which perhaps extends even beyond the author's own intentions—in that it can help the Turkish intellectual to a better understanding of the "Suryoyo case", if it ever reaches them.

The book provides some excellent "armchair reading" too, and, in part, gives the taste of reading a novelette.

Nevertheless, after careful reading, it must be conceded that the informative value of the book is somewhat diminished by the fact that it suffers from a number of deficiencies pertaining to the general approach and methodology used by the author. It is also disillusioning to a certain extent to discover some misinterpretations and errors relating to specific data.

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\* A slightly abridged version of the present article appeared in the January 1982 issue of *Invandrare och Minoriteter* (Scandinavian Migration and Ethnic Minority Review) in Swedish.

**North To Another Country** is inspired by the ambition to contribute, to use the author's own words, "to the understanding of the departure of the Suryoye from Tur 'abdin (their native village in Turkey), their migration and building up of a community in Sweden." (p. i). This primary concern is further emphasized by the introduction of a "key question" at the very beginning of the book which asks whether "the Assyrians should really be looked upon as refugees; were they really so much the victims of persecution, or was it rather a matter of the immigration of people in search of employment?" (p. 3, emphasis by the author).

Actually, what we have here is not one, but three interrelated questions, and all very aptly posed indeed! Unfortunately, the reader who plunges into the following chapters with the anticipation of getting some kind of an answer to these questions, which evidently constitute the main departure point, is bound to face disillusionment. His is a search in vain. For, throughout the book very little indeed has been said that would equip him with a solid insight as to the whys of the mass departure of the Suryoye from Turkey and/or immigration to Sweden.

By that, of course, I don't intend to say that Björklund's book (or any other study for that matter) should necessarily provide the reader with a simple, ready-to-handle set of answers or conclusions to any question; nevertheless, I feel inclined to state that the author comes up with rather ambivalent statements and conclusions throughout. This, in turn, generates a feeling of vagueness on the part of the reader.

For the purpose of clarification, let us dwell on the first basic question, for instance. That of "persecution." Was the Suryoyo community in Turkey subject to (or victimized by) persecution? Or, to put it in other words, was there a question of "persecution of a minority" in the first place? If the answer is in the positive, then it was only natural for the Swedish migration authorities to consider the Suryoyo as such, and treat them accordingly, i.e., by giving them the status of political refugees.

But, in order to be able to analyse such an intricate phenomenon one definitely has to have a more-or-less clear defin-

ition of the "key concepts" one is using, to begin with. Although, admittedly, it is usually a task of enormous difficulty to agree on any generally accepted definition in social science, it is still essential to give a somewhat general definition to pursue any study. (For, they are the indispensable "working-tools" of the researcher.) Basic notions must be used in an inambiguous context, to say the least.

Now, this "inambiguity" is precisely what is lacking in the study by Björklund. The above-mentioned terms, among many others, are used at random throughout, without any specific meaning attached to them at all.

By no means attempting to set forth a universally accepted definition of the notion of refugee and other related terms we can, for practical purposes, agree with Professor Grahl-Madsen that "international refugees' may be either stateless persons or nationals of a country to which they do not return for fear of being persecuted in that country." (Atle Grahl-Madsen, *The Status of Refugees in International Law*, vol. I, Leyden, Sijthoff, 1966, p. 3.) The term "persecution", in turn, can be generally defined as "acts or circumstances for which the government (or, in appropriate cases, the ruling party) is responsible, that is to say: acts committed by the government (or the party) or organs at its disposal, or behaviour tolerated by the government in such a way as to leave the victims virtually unprotected by the agencies of the State" (*Ibid.*, p. 189). These are definitions which are derived from various international instruments on the subject (Refugee Conventions etc.) which reflect the main trends in the "doctrine". A substantial body of case-law has also been developed along these lines. It might be added that common-sense is still another element pointing at the same direction. It is thus probably safe to accept as guidelines these definitions based on a general theoretical and practical foundation.

Now, Björklund, in his study, never clarifies these concepts as such nor in any other way. What he does instead is, first, to assume that some kind of a persecution took place some time which forced the Suryoye to leave their country of origin to seek another future for themselves elsewhere, and, secondly, to try to prove this basic assumption of his by resorting to

"history." Let me illustrate this point: In the chapter on the "Middle Eastern Christians in History" (which constitutes almost one-fourth of the whole book) constant reference is made to the "attacks on Christian lives and property by Kurdish landlords and their followers". Parallel to this, there is a lot of reference to the rather vague notion of "anti-Christian feelings and propaganda". Some account is made also of the system of political alliances by the Suryoye with Kurdish landlords and other non-Christian elements. Quite apart from the fact that the distinction between the attacker and the attacked becomes rather blurred from time to time, it must be pointed out that no mention whatsoever is made of any particular and systematic form of persecution, i.e., one that is in some way connected with the government or the ruling party.

But, perhaps we should not be so hasty and go on reading. In the following chapter which deals with "nearer history", the reader is faced with an ever-recurring theme: The threats of war (between Turkey and Cyprus) and military service. (See especially pp. 86, 89, 99-100). These "threats" are presented as decisive factors which either forced the Suryoye to leave Turkey or prevented those who had already departed from going back. (At a certain juncture, the way back to Turkey is described as "terrifying". See p. 86).

Further reading proves to be a fruitless effort. For, instead of producing concrete facts to prove such phenomena as "aggressions by Tayye [Muslims]" or "increased anti-Christian sentiments" or "threats", which remain rather hazy concepts at best, Björklund presents the reader with folk tales. (See the story of the "invincible warriors" on pp. 38-39, for instance.) And tale-telling can hardly be considered as evidence in a scientific context.

Strangely enough, the author himself appears to be in doubt—from time to time—as to the nature or even the existence of certain phenomena which form the backbone of his basic assumptions. For example, he writes (on page 99) that:

"the general reinforcement of anti-Christian sentiments in connection with the war in Cyprus, and the resurgence of mi-

litant Muslim and fascist political parties, and...the war itself and the military mobilization... these push factors in the different sender societies, considered individually or all together, yield no satisfactory explanation for the course of migration."

The element of doubt is still clearer when he adds (in a footnote on page 180) that:

"[I]t is naturally difficult or impossible to determine to what extent such acts increased during this period [of war in Cyprus], just as it is difficult or impossible to ascertain what significance the general political situation had for such an increase."

Maybe we can say that Ulf Björklund is perhaps trying to attain the "impossible" when he plunges into the labyrinths of history with the hope of extracting the roots of this "persecution" that he claims to have taken place sometime ago.

If he is talking about **political** persecution, that is. Now, if what he has in mind is repression of a different —say economic— nature, it is, of course, another matter. It may well be that he has acted along the lines of a totally different assumption: An assumption to the effect that economic pressure from outside was the main factor underlying the mass migration of the Suryoye. However, this is not the case. Another brief quotation from the book would serve as a strong argument which will help us dismiss this probability altogether:

"[A]dmittedly, both economically and politically [the Assyrians] were to a considerable extent integrated in their environment. Many were successful merchants, craftsmen and farmers, and comparatively few were landless." (p. 51).

Any assumption as to the Assyrians being impoverished because of attacks and pressure from outside, or their becoming landless peasants due to confiscation or other measures by government authorities, is irrelevant after having read the paragraph just quoted.

Further comment on "economic persecution" seems unnecessary, except that a particular "observation" by Björklund regarding Turkish legislation on the subject needs verification. According to Björklund "Turkish law seems to permit state expropriation of such property as can be regarded as 'abandoned'

as a result of the owner settling permanently outside the country." (p. 98). No source is mentioned by the author concerning this piece of information, and to my knowledge neither the Turkish Constitution, nor the Turkish Civil Code embody any articles to that effect. (There is, I believe, evidence to the contrary).

Concerning the topic of the persecution of the Suryoye and the author's approach to this question, two further comments need be made. The first remark concerns an oft-repeated assertion of the author to the effect that military service is a "terrifying" factor, and as such, plays a determining rôle in the Assyrians' resolution to stay in Europe and not go back. Expressed in such terms, it amounts to a "well-founded fear of being persecuted." Without going into any detail, however, it must be pointed out that, as a general rule, conscription for **normal** military service (i.e., service not involving longer periods, assignment of particularly dangerous missions for political reasons, etc.) does **not** amount to persecution. (For a detailed analysis, see Grahl-Madsen, *op. cit.*, pp. 216, 231 ff.)

Secondly, it may be quite interesting to draw attention to the fact that the Suryoye themselves did not raise the question of any past persecution until very recently. The turning point came about in 1976. It was only after 1976 (when it had become impossible for foreigners to enter Germany or Sweden because of the then newly imposed restrictions) that applications for political asylum and claims to be refugees started. This crucial turning-point can easily be observed from the book. (See pp. 4, 54, 92. See also David Schwarz's essay, "Sweden, An Immigrant Country - As I See It", *Current Sweden*, No. 208 (Jan. 1979, p. 6). The reasons? They can, of course, be explained—as the author himself aptly does—by the attempt "to legalize their status by claiming asylum." (p. 54).

Thus, all said and done, it is admittedly difficult for the reader to see how "the events described in the book played some part" in the wave of migration. And it is still with greater difficulty that we try to see how the Assyrians "risk [ed] being pushed aside to an increasing extent in the political system and finally of becoming its victims." (p. 48).

Unfortunately however, our difficulties do not come to an end at this point. For, as soon as the problem of tackling this "persecution" question is over, there appears yet another danger: The danger that the historical approach—upon which the whole book is based—losing whatever significance it might have had. Clearly, there seems to be no reason whatsoever why the historical background should be singled out as the determining factor of the whole migration process. Why ought we to "see this process as a continuation, as a **new phase** of the emigration from the region which has been going on for a long time."? (pp. 49-50, emphasis added).

If historical data are in themselves insufficient to prove the existence of "persecution" as a starting point, aren't we left with very little motivation to help us explain the mechanism of the migration? Why take history (the relevance of which really escapes me in this context) as the primary factor, and not economic and social conditions, for example? Would it be doing gross injustice to Björklund's study to say that it suffers from arbitrariness in the choosing of determining criteria in the explanation of a complex process?

If, on the other hand, we don't dismiss the possibility of there being other determining factors such as economic and social conditions, then we have to face yet another problem. For, at this juncture the need for a comparative analysis makes itself deeply felt. This is definitely lacking in the book. For my part, I feel that it is a very difficult undertaking, if not impossible, to make a complete study on the formation of a community in a foreign country, without even once having recourse to comparative analysis.

Comparison is a valuable instrument which helps us to discern the outstanding characteristics of the object we are trying to study. In policy analysis, for example, comparisons of countries, "help us to see what is unique and what is characteristic of several countries, and also to find points of reference for a systematic analysis." (See Tomas Hammar, "Swedish and European Immigration Policy", EIFO, Stockholm, 1981, pp. 7 ff.).

What is true for policy analysis must also be true for an anthropological study of the kind we are dealing with. The

said method of analysis could have been followed by Björklund in two main directions. First, the migration of the Suryoye to countries other than Sweden (i.e., Holland) could have been traced. The life-styles and attitudes of the Suryoye in each of these countries could be taken up and compared with life in Sweden. (To be fair, it must be admitted that the author has actually tried to do this in part.) Secondly, a comparison of the attitudes, living standards and value systems of the Suryoye to those of other communities in Sweden could have been made. (For this latter kind of analysis however, not a trace of attempt is to be found in the book).

In this context the importance of a comparison of the Suryoye with the Turkish community in Sweden can hardly be exaggerated. (I can think of a study by Şahin Alpay: **Turkar I Stockholm**, Stockholm, Liber, 1980, which would drastically reduce the "cost" of making such a comparison.) For, after all, the migrant Turks originate from a very similar background, and it could well be that the motivations which forced them to migrate and to behave in a certain manner in Sweden are identical with or similar to those of the Suryoye. Of course it is also quite possible to reach a totally different set of conclusion, but whatever the outcome may be, it is my contention that some kind of comparison remains essential for the completion of a scientific study such as Björklund's.

Talking of scientific research, it may not be inappropriate here to touch upon a few "minor" defects, in addition to the ones already dealt with. In the first place, the total number of persons interviewed for the whole study (25 out of a possible 10 000) does not appear to be of a very high representational value. Once more it is difficult to perceive how the author has reached so many significant conclusions on the Suryoye way of life and thinking with the aid of a survey conducted with so small a number of interviews. The point is best illustrated perhaps by drawing attention to the countless paragraphs which begin with sweeping generalizations like: "The Suryoye generally believed that...", or "From the Suryoye point of view then,..." (See, for example, pp. 143, 156, 163, 164.)

The second observation concerns an important issue that is left out: The Swedish Church. Although there is passing re-



ference to this issue, the all-important questions as to how big was the rôle played by the Church and other Christian organizations in the whole process of migration, or as to whether they supported the "Assyrian-case", etc., are missing. The reader would expect to find at least a few paragraphs devoted to the discussion of these questions in an anthropological study of this compass, which would indeed contribute to the comprehension of the general picture.

In short, **North to Another Country** runs the risk of being incomplete in the sense that it fails to come up with any real answers to the crucial questions it has itself posed.

Were the Assyrians refugees, or were they simply people in search of jobs? Why has this issue raised such a tumult in Sweden? Why was the problem exaggerated? Why was the Swedish government "contradictory" and "inconsistent" toward these people?

It is my belief that the answers to these "burning" questions, alongside with many others that are not even asked, could only have been looked for within the framework of a study much more comprehensive than the one we have at hand.\*

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\* The present article incited a small polemic in Sweden. For the response given to the author by Ulf Björklund and the answer by the present author to UB's response, See *Invandrare och Minoriteter* (Scandinavian Migration and Ethnic Minority Review), No. 3 (May 1982), pp. 20-21.