

"Forgotten Genocide": The Destruction of the Armenians During World War I

The first attempt in the 20th century to destroy an entire people occurred when the government of Turkey ordered executions and mass deportations of about 1 million Armenians during World War I.

As early as 1000 B.C., the Armenian people began to develop a distinctive culture in southwestern Asia. Today, the historic Armenian homeland includes eastern Turkey, northern Iran, and the small country of Armenia recently formed out of the old Soviet Union.

In A.D. 301, St. Gregory the Illuminator converted the Armenians to Christianity, making them the first Christian nation in the world. Despite being conquered by Muslim Arabs in A.D. 645 and absorbed by the Muslim Ottoman Empire in the 1500s, the Armenians remained a Christian people.

At its height, the Ottoman Empire was vast. It included all of modern Turkey, surrounded the Black Sea, went east to the Persian Gulf, extended along the southern Mediterranean to Algiers, and traveled west to include modern-day Greece, Bulgaria, and much of Yugoslavia.

Along with other religious minorities such as the Jews, the Christian Armenians became second-class subjects within the Ottoman Empire. They were tolerated, but only Muslims enjoyed full equality under Islamic law. The Armenians and other religious minorities paid special taxes, could not give testimony in Islamic courts, and were not allowed to carry weapons. These and other forms of discrimination denied the equal protection of the law to non-Muslims in the Ottoman Empire.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, the power of the Ottoman Empire declined. Its government tried to reform the system to prop up the empire. In 1856, the emperor decreed that all subjects, regardless of religion, had equal rights.



According to a U.N. report, at least 1 million Armenians died when they were forced to leave Turkey during the First World War. (© Armenian National Institute (www.armenian-genocide.org). Elder Photo Collection.)

Yet the empire continued to shrink. Revolutions and wars caused it to lose Greece and other possessions in Europe. In 1876, Sultan Abdul Hamid II ascended the Ottoman throne. Sultan Hamid was determined to restore the power and glory of his empire. To do so, he believed he had to deal with religious minorities such as the Armenians, who were making increasing demands for legal reforms and even independence.

Hamid attempted to undermine the Christian Armenians' power by directing Muslim refugees, fleeing from Bulgaria and other former Ottoman possessions in Europe, to settle in the Armenian homeland. The sultan also encouraged the nomadic Muslim Kurds to settle in Armenian areas.

The large migration of Muslims into traditional Christian Armenian lands resulted in widespread conflict. The new Muslim immigrants, backed by the government, confiscated huge amounts of Armenian land.

In 1894, Sultan Hamid falsely charged the Armenians with rebelling against his authority. He then allowed attacks against the Armenian people by local Muslims backed up the Ottoman army. Over a two-year period up to 200,000 Armenians were massacred or died of starvation.

Apparently, the sultan's purpose was not to exterminate the Christian Armenian minority, but to permanently end its demands for equal rights. Even so, many historians have noted that the massacres of 1894-

provided a precedent for the genocide that took place 20 years later.

The Rise of the "Young Turks"

In 1908, a group of intellectuals and military leaders overthrew Sultan Hamid II and took power. Representing the Turkish-speaking core of the old Ottoman Empire, the rebels became known as the "Young Turks."

The top Young Turk leaders, Mehmet Talaat, Ismail Enver, and Ahmed Jemal, pushed a policy of "Pan-Turkism." The old multi-cultural Ottoman Empire had wanted only to dominate religious and other minorities. The new regime sought to achieve an exclusively Muslim and Turkish-speaking nation.

The Armenians, with their different religion and language, occupied much of eastern Turkey and numbered over 2 million persons. Clearly, they were an obstacle to the nation that the Young Turks intended to build. In 1910, the Young Turk political party labeled the Armenians as enemies of the Muslims of Turkey.

In 1914, Turkey entered World War I on the side of Germany. The Young Turks hoped the Germans would help them defeat the Russians in Central Asia, enabling Turkey to acquire new areas of Turkish-speaking peoples. But a Turkish military offensive against Russia in 1914-15 ended in disaster for the Turks, who accused the Armenians in Turkey of aiding the Russians.

Turkey drafted tens of thousands of young Armenian men into its army, but soon segregated them into "work brigades." Then, in an ominous sign of what was to come, the Young Turk government ordered their mass execution by fellow Muslim soldiers.

On April 24, 1915, Turkish authorities arrested several hundred Armenian political, cultural, and religious leaders in Constantinople, the capital of Turkey. The government imprisoned and then executed this elite group of Armenians. Each year, Armenians around the world commemorate April 24 as the beginning of the Armenian Genocide.

The Armenian Genocide

In June 1915, the Turkish government ordered the deportation of all remaining Armenians from Turkey into the deserts of Syria and Iraq to the south. During the deportation, some Turks, Kurds, Arabs, and government officials aided and even hid Armenian fami-

lies. But most of the Muslim population cheered the expulsion of Turkey's largest Christian minority group.

When the Turkish authorities assembled Armenian lagers for deportation, they often immediately shot to death any able-bodied adult males. The women, children, and elderly men were then forced to travel hundreds of miles, mainly on foot, into the southern deserts. The Turkish government provided them with little food, water, shelter, or protection.

Along the way, outlaws, local people, and even the police guarding the deportees attacked, robbed, raped, and murdered them at will. Minister of War Enver created a paramilitary unit called the "Special Organization," made up mainly of convicted criminals released from prison. Their mission was simply to attack and kill Armenians.

Kurdish horsemen also raided the Armenians, robbing them and sometimes taking women and children as slaves. The Turkish government did little to discourage such acts.

The Reverend F. H. Leslie, an American missionary in Urfa, a city in southeast Turkey, wrote:

For six weeks we have witnessed the most horrible cruelties inflicted upon the thousands . . . daily passing through our city from the northern cities. All tell the same story . . . : their men were all killed on the first day's march from their cities, after which the women and girls were constantly robbed . . . and beaten, criminally abused and abducted along the way. Their guards . . . were their worst abusers but also allowed the baser element in every village . . . to abduct the girls and women and abuse them. We not only were told these things but the same things occurred right here in our own city before our very eyes and openly on the streets.

The forced deportation of hundreds of thousands of Armenians led to their mass destruction by murder, starvation, and disease. At most, 25 percent of those who were forced to leave Turkey reached Syria and Iraq. But most of these people were finally massacred or left to die of thirst in the desert.

At times, the Armenians resisted. In 1915 on a mountain called Musa Dagh (Mt. Moses), located Turkey's southern Mediterranean coast, Armenian villagers defied the government's deportation order and

took up defensive positions on the mountain slopes. For 53 days, they fiercely fought against the Turkish army. Finally, more than 4,000 Armenian men, women, and children escaped by ships to Egypt where they lived in refugee camps until the end of the war.

Many foreigners witnessed the destruction of the Armenians, including diplomats and missionaries. In May 1915, Great Britain, France, and Russia jointly issued this warning to the Young Turk government:

In view of these new crimes of Turkey against humanity and civilization, the Allied governments announce publicly . . . that they will hold personally responsible [for] these crimes all members of the . . . government and those of their agents who are implicated in such massacres.

On July 16, U.S. Ambassador to Turkey Henry Morgenthau cabled the State Department that the deportations were increasing and "a campaign of race extermination is in progress."

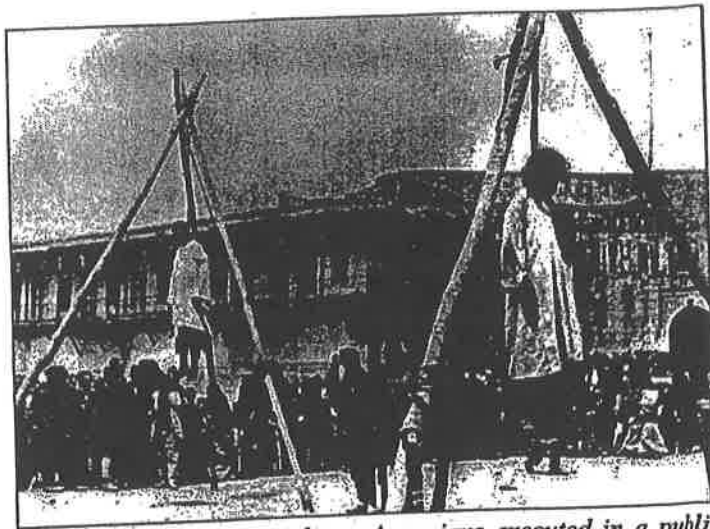
Abandoned After the War

On the losing side at the end of World War I, Young Turk leaders Talaat, Enver, and Jemal fled the country. A new sultan, hostile to the Young Turk regime, formed a temporary government. He set up military courts to try members of the Young Turk government for war crimes. Talaat, Enver, and Jemal were prosecuted even though they had escaped the country and were absent at their trials.

The Turkish war crimes trials of 1919 documented "the massacre and destruction of the Armenians." The defense attempted to show that the Armenian minority was disloyal and a threat to Turkey during the war. The prosecution, however, showed that most Armenians remained loyal to Turkey and did not threaten its war effort. The prosecution also presented evidence that the executions, deportations, and massacres had been part of a premeditated "centrally directed plan" to get rid of the Christian Armenians in Turkey once and for all.

The Turkish war crimes courts found the defendants guilty of planning and carrying out the destruction of the Armenian people, a crime against humanity that would later be called "genocide." Talaat, Enver, and Jemal were sentenced to death while lesser officials received prison terms.

World War I ended the Ottoman Empire. Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, a war hero, formed a Turkish republic in



A crowd swarmed around two Armenians executed in a public square in Constantinople (now Istanbul, Turkey), c. 1915. (© Armenian National Institute (www.armenian-genocide.org), photo by Armin T. Wegner, courtesy of Sybil Stevens)

1923. He ordered the release of all those held for war crimes. Armenians seeking vengeance later assassinated Talaat and Jemal who were living in exile in Europe.

The peace treaty between Turkey and the victors of World War I called for the creation of an independent Armenian republic formed out of Turkish territory. U.S. President Woodrow Wilson pushed this idea and even asked Congress to authorize an American trusteeship to oversee the newborn nation, but this never happened. The short-lived Armenian Republic collapsed when Ataturk attacked it and confiscated "abandoned properties" that had been owned by the Armenians before the deportations.

In 1923, the final peace agreements that formally ended World War I abandoned any support for an independent Armenia. The agreements also ignored the right of Armenian survivors to return to their homes in Turkey and be compensated for the loss of their property. The Soviet Union carved out a small area for its Armenian citizens.

The "Forgotten Genocide"

According to a report of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in 1985, at least 1 million Armenians died in the harsh deportation during World War I. About half of the pre-war Armenian population of Turkey had been destroyed. Many of the Armenians who survived managed to escape to Russia and other countries before the executions and deportations began.

Today, relatively few Armenians live in Turkey. About 3.3 million populate the nearby country of Armenia, 1

small Christian nation that was once part of the Soviet Union. Another 2–3 million Armenians are scattered around the world.

Since World War I, Turkey has officially denied that any premeditated genocide ever took place. Turkey argues that the relocation of Armenians took place for their own protection. According to this view, those Armenians who died were caught up in the chaos of war like everybody else at that time. Recently, the acting consul general for Turkey in Los Angeles, Ozgur Kivanc Altan, stated:

What we are saying is, yes, a terrible tragedy took place and, yes, many Armenians lost their lives terribly. But also in that war, more than 2.5 million Turks and Muslims lost their lives.

The Armenian Genocide faded from memory after World War I. Then, the horror of more than 6 million Jews and others who were murdered during the Nazi Holocaust of World War II further pushed the destruction of the Armenians into obscurity.

The recent mass killings of peoples in places like Cambodia, Bosnia, and Rwanda have revived interest in the “forgotten genocide” of the Armenians. Tragically, the first genocide of the 20th century provided a blueprint for the extermination of entire religious, ethnic, and other groups in our own time.

For Discussion and Writing

1. Why did the Armenian Genocide occur?
2. What actions do you think the nations of the world could have taken after World War I to achieve justice for the victims of the Armenian Genocide?
3. How would you answer the claim of the Turkish government today that Turkey had no intention in 1915 to destroy the Christian Armenian minority?

For Further Reading

Dadrian, Vahagn N. *Warrant for Genocide, Key Elements of the Turko-Armenian Conflict*. New Brunswick, N. J.: Transaction Publishers, 1999.

Melson, Robert. *Revolution and Genocide, On the Origins of the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

A C T I V I T Y

What Is Genocide?

In 1948, following the Nazi Holocaust of World War II and more than 30 years after the Armenian Genocide of World War I, the United Nations adopted the “Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.” This document makes it a crime under international law for government leaders, public officials, or private individuals to commit *any* of the following acts “with the intent to destroy, in whole or part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group”:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

1. Form the class into small study groups. Each group should use the article to investigate whether the treatment of the Armenians in Turkey during World War I fits the definition and acts of genocide included in the UN Genocide Convention.
2. The study groups should then share their conclusions and evidence.
3. In an extended research activity, divide students into eight study groups. Each group will investigate and report what evidence exists for genocide in one of the following cases:

Ukraine (1932–33)
Nazi Holocaust (1933–45)
Indonesia (1965–66)
East Timor (1975)
Cambodia (1975–79)
Bosnia (1992–95)
Rwanda (1994)
Burma (1996–present)