

Armenian Genocide (1915-1923)

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In April 1915, the Ottoman government embarked upon the systematic decimation of its civilian Armenian population. The persecutions continued with varying intensity until 1923 when the Ottoman Empire ceased to exist and was replaced by the Republic of Turkey. The Armenian population of the Ottoman state was reported at about two million in 1915. An estimated one million had perished by 1918, while hundreds of thousands had become homeless and stateless refugees. By 1923, virtually the entire Armenian population of Anatolian Turkey had disappeared.

The Ottoman Empire was ruled by the Turks who had conquered lands extending across West Asia, North Africa and Southeast Europe. The Ottoman government was centered in Istanbul (Constantinople) and was headed by a sultan who was vested with absolute power. The Turks practiced Islam and were a martial people. The Armenians, a Christian minority, lived as second-class citizens subject to legal restrictions, which denied them normal safeguards. Neither their lives nor their properties were guaranteed security. As non-Muslims, they were also obligated to pay discriminatory taxes and denied participation in government. Scattered across the empire, the status of the Armenians was further complicated by the fact that the territory of historic Armenia was divided between the Ottomans and the Russians.

In its heyday in the sixteenth century, the Ottoman Empire was a powerful state. Its minority populations prospered with the growth of its economy. By the nineteenth century, the empire was in serious decline. It had been reduced in size and by 1914 had lost virtually all its lands in Europe and Africa. This decline created enormous internal political and economic pressures, which contributed to the intensification of ethnic tensions. Armenian aspirations for representation and participation in government aroused suspicions among the Muslim Turks who had never shared power in their country with any minority and who also saw nationalist movements in the Balkans result in the secession of former Ottoman territories. Demands by Armenian political organizations for administrative reforms in the Armenian-inhabited provinces and better police protection from predatory tribes among the Kurds only invited further repression. The government was determined to avoid resolving the so-called Armenian Question in any way that altered the traditional system of administration. During the reign of the Sultan Abdul Hamid (Abdulhamit) II (1876-1909), a series of massacres throughout the empire meant to frighten Armenians and so dampen their expectations, cost up to three hundred thousand lives by some estimates and inflicted enormous material losses on a majority of Armenians.

In response to the crisis in the Ottoman Empire, a new political group called the Young Turks seized power by revolution in 1908. From the Young Turks, the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), Ittihad ve Terakki Jemiyeti, emerged at the head of the government in a coup staged in 1913. It was led by a triumvirate: Enver, Minister of War; Talaat, Minister of the Interior (Grand Vizier in 1917); and Jemal, Minister of the Marine. The CUP espoused an ultra-nationalistic ideology, which advocated the formation of an exclusively Turkish state. It also subscribed to an ideology of aggrandizement through conquest directed eastward toward other regions inhabited by Turkic peoples, at that time subject to the Russian Empire. The CUP also steered Istanbul toward closer diplomatic and military relations with Imperial Germany. When World War I broke out in August 1914, the Ottoman Empire formed part of the Triple Alliance

with the other Central Powers, Germany and Austria-Hungary, and it declared war on Russia and its Western allies, Great Britain and France.

The Ottoman armies initially suffered a string of defeats, which they made up with a series of easy military victories in the Caucasus in 1918 before the Central Powers capitulated later that same year. Whether retreating or advancing, the Ottoman army used the occasion of war to wage a collateral campaign of massacre against the civilian Armenian population in the regions in which warfare was being conducted. These measures were part of the genocidal program secretly adopted by the CUP and implemented under the cover of war. They coincided with the CUP's larger program to eradicate the Armenians from Turkey and neighboring countries for the purpose of creating a new Pan-Turanian empire. Through the spring and summer of 1915, in all areas outside the war zones, the Armenian population was ordered deported from their homes. Convoys consisting of tens of thousands including men, women, and children were driven hundreds of miles toward the Syrian Desert.

The deportations were disguised as a resettlement program. The brutal treatment of the deportees, most of whom were made to walk to their destinations, made it apparent that the deportations were mainly intended as death marches. Moreover, the policy of deportation surgically removed the Armenians from the rest of society and disposed of great masses of people with little or no destruction of property. The displacement process, therefore, also served as a major opportunity orchestrated by the CUP for the plundering of the material wealth of the Armenians and proved an effortless method of expropriating all of their immovable properties.

The genocidal intent of the CUP measures was also evidenced by the mass killings that accompanied the deportations. Earlier, Armenian soldiers in the Ottoman forces had been disarmed and either worked to death in labor battalions or outright executed in small batches. With the elimination of the able-bodied men from the Armenian population, the deportations proceeded with little resistance. The convoys were frequently attacked by bands of killers specifically organized for the purpose of slaughtering the Armenians. As its instrument of extermination, the government had authorized the formation of gangs of butchers—mostly convicts released from prison expressly enlisted in the units of the so-called Special Organization, Teshkilâti Mahsusa. This secret outfit was headed by the most ferocious partisans of the CUP who took it upon themselves to carry out the orders of the central government with the covert instructions of their party leaders. A sizable portion of the deportees, including women and children, were indiscriminately killed in massacres along the deportation routes. The cruelty characterizing the killing process was heightened by the fact that it was frequently carried out by the sword in terrifying episodes of bloodshed. Furthermore, for the survivors, their witnessing of the murder of friends and relatives with the mass of innocent persons was the source of serious trauma. Many younger women and some orphaned children were also abducted and placed in bondage in Turkish and Muslim homes resulting in another type of trauma characterized by the shock of losing both family and one's sense of identity. These women and children were frequently forbidden to grieve, were employed as unpaid laborers, and were required to assimilate the language and religion of their captors.

The government had made no provisions for the feeding of the deported population. Starvation took an enormous toll much as exhaustion felled the elderly, the weaker and the infirm. Deportees were denied food and water in a deliberate effort to hasten death. The survivors who reached northern Syria were collected at a number of concentration camps whence they were sent further south to die under the scorching sun of the desert. Through methodically organized deportation, systematic massacre, deliberate starvation and dehydration, and continuous

brutalization, the Ottoman government reduced its Armenian population to a frightened mass of famished individuals whose families and communities had been destroyed in a single stroke.

Resistance to the deportations was infrequent. Only in one instance did the entire population of an Armenian settlement manage to evade death. The mountaineers of Musa Dagh defended themselves in the heights above their villages until French naval vessels in the eastern Mediterranean detected them and transported them to safety. The inhabitants of the city of Van in eastern Armenia defended themselves until relieved by advancing Russian forces. They abandoned the city in May 1915, a month after the siege was lifted, when the Russian Army withdrew. The fleeing population was hunted down mercilessly by Turkish irregular forces. Inland towns that resisted, such as Urfa (Edessa), were reduced to rubble by artillery. The survival of the Armenians in large part is credited not to acts of resistance, but to the humanitarian intervention led by American Ambassador Henry Morgenthau. Although the Allied Powers expressly warned the Ottoman government about its policy of genocide, ultimately it was through Morgenthau's efforts that the plight of the Armenians was publicized in the United States. The U.S. Congress authorized the formation of a relief committee, which raised funds to feed "the starving Armenians." Near East Relief, as the committee was eventually known, saved tens of thousands of lives. After the war, it headed a large-scale effort to rehabilitate the survivors who were mostly left to their own devices in their places of deportation. By setting up refugee camps, orphanages, medical clinics and educational facilities, Near East Relief rescued the surviving Armenian population.

In the post-war period, nearly four hundred of the key CUP officials implicated in the atrocities committed against the Armenians were arrested. A number of domestic military tribunals were convened which brought charges ranging from the unconstitutional seizure of power and subversion of the legal government, the conduct of a war of aggression, and conspiring the liquidation of the Armenian population, to more explicit capital crimes, including massacre. Some of the accused were found guilty of the charges. Most significantly, the ruling triumvirate was condemned to death. They, however, eluded justice by fleeing abroad. Their escape left the matter of avenging the countless victims to a clandestine group of survivors that tracked down the CUP arch conspirators. Talaat, the principal architect of the Armenian genocide, was killed in 1921 in Berlin where he had gone into hiding. His assassin was arrested and tried in a German court, which acquitted him.

Most of those implicated in war crimes evaded justice and many joined the new Nationalist Turkish movement led by Mustafa Kemal. In a series of military campaigns against Russian Armenia in 1920, against the refugee Armenians who had returned to Cilicia in southern Turkey in 1921, and against the Greek army that had occupied Izmir (Smyrna) where the last intact Armenian community in Anatolia still existed in 1922, the Nationalist forces completed the process of eradicating the Armenians through further expulsions and massacres. When Turkey was declared a republic in 1923 and received international recognition, the Armenian Question and all related matters of resettlement and restitution were swept aside and soon forgotten.

In all, it is estimated that up to a million and a half Armenians perished at the hands of Ottoman and Turkish military and paramilitary forces and through atrocities intentionally inflicted to eliminate the Armenian demographic presence in Turkey. In the process, the population of historic Armenia at the eastern extremity of Anatolia was wiped off the map. With their disappearance, an ancient people, which had inhabited the Armenian highlands for three thousand years, lost its historic homeland and was forced into exile and a new diaspora. The surviving refugees spread around the world and eventually settled in some two dozen countries on all continents of the globe. Triumphant in its total annihilation of the Armenians and relieved

of any obligations to the victims and survivors, the Turkish Republic adopted a policy of dismissing the charge of genocide and denying that the deportations and atrocities had constituted part of a deliberate plan to exterminate the Armenians. When the Red Army sovietized what remained of Russian Armenia in 1920, the Armenians had been compressed into an area amounting to no more than ten percent of the territories of their historic homeland. Armenians annually commemorate the Genocide on April 24 at the site of memorials raised by the survivors in all their communities around the world.

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