

## A Brief History of the Armenian Genocide

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“I am confident that the whole history of the human race contains no such horrible episode as this. The great massacres and persecutions of the past seem almost insignificant when compared with the sufferings of the Armenian race in 1915.”

*Henry Morgenthau, American ambassador  
to the Ottoman Empire, 1913–1916.*

### Who Are the Armenians?

The Armenians are an ancient people who have existed since before the first century C.E. Armenia has gained and lost a tremendous amount of territory throughout its long and turbulent history. Boundaries of the past have extended from that of the present-day Republic of Armenia and through most of modern day Turkey. The name “Armenia” was actually given to the country by its neighbors; inhabitants of Armenia refer to it as “Hayastan” derived from the name Haik, a descendent of Noah (from the Bible), and “stan” which means “land” in Persian. The Armenian language is unique from other Indo-European languages, with its own distinct letters and grammar.

Christianity is a deeply rooted aspect of Armenian history and culture. Armenia was the first nation to adopt Christianity as a state religion, in 301 C.E. This early Christian identity has greatly influenced Armenian culture, setting it apart from most of its neighboring peoples. The majority of Armenians belong to the Eastern or Western dioceses of the Armenian Apostolic Church, an orthodox form of Christianity.



**King Tigranes II. 95-96 C.E.**

Although Armenia was at times a kingdom, in modern times, Armenia has been an independent country for only a few years. It first gained independence in 1918, after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, but this ended when Armenia was invaded by the Red Army and became a Soviet state in 1920. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Armenia was the first state to declare its independence, and remains an independent republic today. Armenia is a democracy and its borders only include a very small portion of the land that was historic Armenia.

## Early Massacres

The Seljuk Turks began to inhabit Anatolia as early as the eleventh century and by 1453 their descendants, the Ottoman Turks, had captured Constantinople (now Istanbul), firmly establishing the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Empire was a multinational state that incorporated several ethnic groups including the Armenians. The Armenians were second-class citizens of the Ottoman Empire and while they were granted some freedoms, including the ability to practice Christianity, they were faced with extra taxes and discriminatory laws extending to their participation in the justice system, government, and their civil and property rights.



**Current Map of Armenia**

By the mid-1800s, as the idea of constitutionalism swept through Europe, some Armenians began to demand more rights, such as protection from corrupt government officials and biased taxation.

While most Armenians saw themselves as members of the Ottoman Empire, organized groups of intellectuals protested the discriminatory laws, seeking reform from the government, though not an independent sovereign state.

During the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire experienced a period of decline, during which it lost territories to Russia, Great Britain, and new states created by nationalities that had once been part of the Ottoman Empire, such as Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania.

Early in the century, Russia had gained some of the eastern Armenian provinces, including Tiflis, which became a cultural center for Russian Armenians. Russian Armenians became increasingly interested in supporting Armenians within the Ottoman Empire in their quest for human rights.

The newly created Ottoman Armenian political organizations received some support from Russian Armenians and Russia in their quest to gain equal rights under Ottoman law. The Treaty of Berlin (1878) included a clause that would provide more rights for Ottoman Armenians, including fair taxation practices, protections from tribal attacks, and the right to give evidence in Ottoman courts of law.

Unfortunately these rights were never granted as the Sultan was empowered by the treaty to serve as the protector of the Armenians. This was in contrast to the terms of the earlier Treaty of San Stefano, which the Treaty of Berlin replaced, and which had assigned the Russians the responsibility of ensuring that the Armenians in Ottoman territory would gain more rights. The reason for the change was that the presence of Russian troops in the region was of concern to Great Britain and the other “Great Powers” of Europe who wanted to deter the expansion of Russia.

After the Treaty of Berlin, Ottoman Armenians continued to protest discriminatory laws and eventually the Sultan responded to these protests with massacres. Massacres of the Armenians began in the late nineteenth century under Abdul-Hamid II, the last of the Ottoman Sultans actually to rule

the empire. The worst massacres during this time occurred from 1894-1896 after a tax protest by Armenians. They are now known as the Hamidian Massacres and some believe represented a foreshadowing of the Genocide to come.

During the Hamidian Massacres, 100,000 to 300,000 Armenians were killed in towns and villages throughout areas of the Ottoman Empire.

Thousands of Armenians fled and found refuge in Europe and the United States. Some who stayed converted to Islam in order to save their own lives.

The massacres caught the world's attention because of their unique nature. Armenians were unarmed and adhered to the perimeters set forth by the Ottoman government. The massacres were publicized in newspapers throughout the world. The U.S. media paid particular attention to the events. *The New York Times* as well as other news sources regularly published articles about the brutal killings, coverage that would continue through the Armenian Genocide.

Many American missionaries and diplomats who worked throughout the Ottoman Empire witnessed the atrocities firsthand and helped mobilize relief efforts. Aid for Armenian victims became the first international mission of the American Red Cross.

Later during the Genocide, a society known as the Near East Relief would raise more than \$100 million in assistance to Armenians; the funds collected saved countless Armenian lives in the 1890s and during the Genocide, which at the time represented more money than all the aid raised to help tsunami victims in 2005. While the funds collected saved countless victims' lives, it was the only aid Armenians would see.

## Hope to Despair

In 1908, Armenians and other minorities of the Ottoman Empire began to rejoice in what promised to be a new era of tolerance and the establishment of a participatory government in the Ottoman Empire.

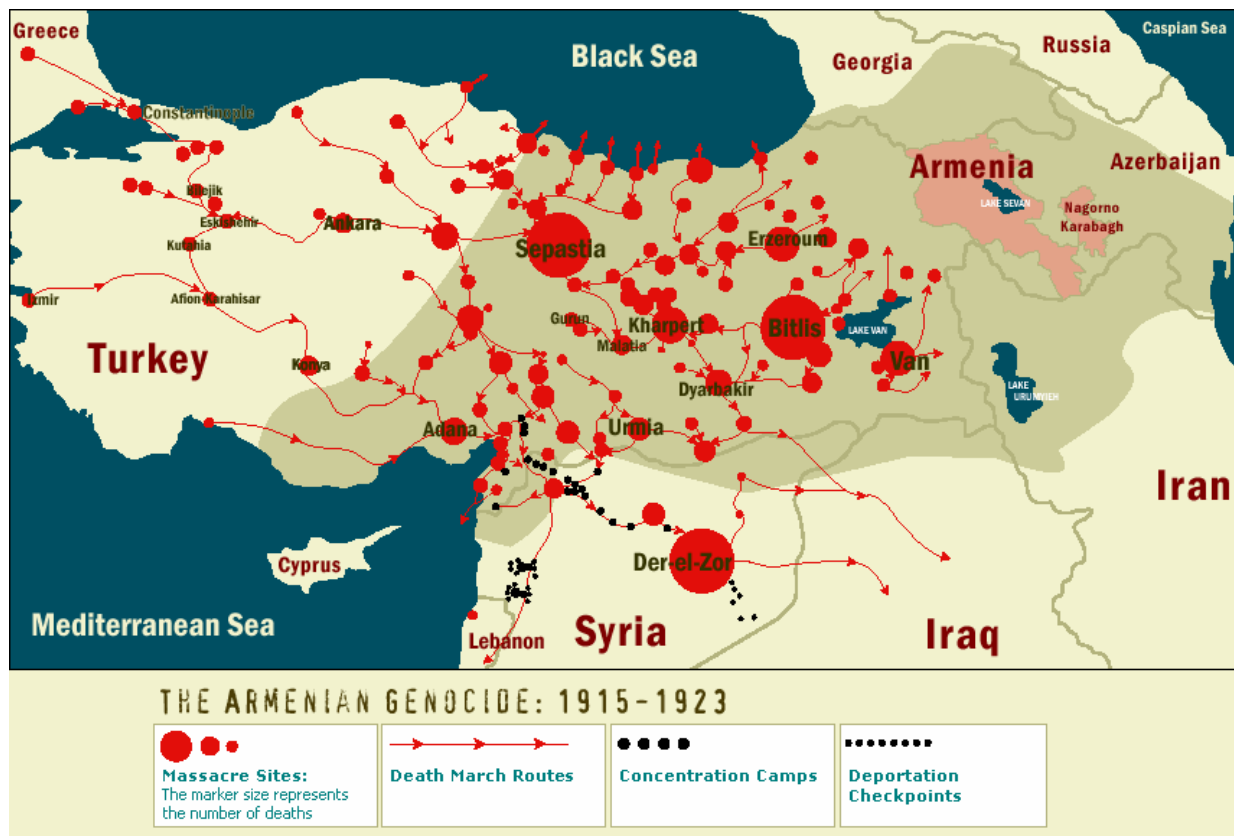
Armenians, Arabs, Greeks, Jews, and Kurds had begun working with a group of Turks to challenge the authority of the Sultan. This group was known as the Ottoman Liberals and the Turkish coalition of the group adopted the name "Young Turks." They wanted to create a modern state that represented inhabitants of the Ottoman Empire more equally and render the Sultan politically powerless. In 1908, one of the Young Turk groups, the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), marched on Constantinople, and overthrew Sultan Abdul-Hamid.

Over the next year, the Ottoman Empire developed a constitutional government providing equal rights for all of its citizens. Ottoman Armenians hoped that the new constitution would protect them from the violence they endured under the Sultan. However, as time passed, advocates of liberalism in the government lost out to a group promoting authoritarian rule and a radical policy of Turkification.

In April 1909, Armenian hopes were dashed as Hamidian supporters in the city of Adana carried out

a massacre of Armenians as part of an attempt to reestablish the power of the Sultan. Adana was heavily populated by Armenians and had at one time been part of Armenian territory. Despite attempts at resistance, in the end almost 30,000 Armenians were killed and nearly half the city destroyed.

## The Armenian Genocide



The culprits of the Adana Massacre were never punished and after 1909, an extreme nationalist political movement promoting a policy of Pan-Turkism (“Turkey for the Turks”) gained backing from Turkish populations throughout the Ottoman Empire. In addition, the Ottoman Empire, now known as the “sick man of Europe,” was weakened by the loss of its lands in southeastern Europe in the Balkan Wars of 1912-13. One of the Ottoman Empire’s greatest enemies was Russia, as Russia was constantly threatening the security of the Ottoman borders and controlled parts of the eastern edge of the Ottoman Empire that was populated by Armenians. Since the Russians had advocated for Armenian reforms in the past and because the Russian army did have Armenians serving as soldiers, the Ottoman government was concerned that Ottoman Armenians might commit traitorous acts. This fear helped to fuel Turkish public sentiment against Armenians.

The Ottoman Empire entered World War I in 1914, fighting against Russia in campaigns that straddled territory inhabited by Armenians on both sides of the border. The Ottoman Empire was badly defeated by Russia in a campaign in the winter of 1914-15, and the government then made the Armenian community a scapegoat for the military losses that had occurred at the hands of the Russians.

By the spring of 1915, leaders of the ruling party, the CUP, seized the opportunity of a world preoccupied by war to erase the Armenian presence from almost all Ottoman lands. The CUP was a triumvirate led by Mehmet Talaat, Ismail Enver, and Ahmed Jemal.

Beginning on April 24, 1915 (now commemorated as the beginning of the Armenian Genocide), Armenian civil leaders, intellectuals, doctors, businessmen, and artists were rounded up and killed. Once these leaders of the Armenian communities were killed, the Genocide plan was put into motion throughout the empire. Many Armenian men were quickly executed.

Using new technologies, such as the telegraph and the railroads, CUP leaders sent orders to province leaders to gather women and children and either load them onto trains headed for the Syrian Desert or lead them on forced marches into the desert. Embarking with little food and few supplies, women and children had little hope of survival.

On these journeys, Turkish gendarmes regularly subjected Armenian women to sexual violence. Special militias were created by the government to carry out the deportations and murders; and Turkish and Kurdish convicts who had been set free from jails brutalized and plundered the deportation caravans winding through the severe terrain.

Some women and children were abducted and sold, or children were raised as Turks by Turkish families. Some Armenians were rescued by Bedouins and other Arabs who sympathized with the Armenian situation. Sympathetic Turkish families also risked their own lives to help their Armenian neighbors escape.

Within months, the Euphrates and Tigris rivers became clogged with the bodies of Armenian women and children, polluting the water supply for those who had not yet perished. Dysentery and other diseases were rampant and those who managed to survive the march found themselves in concentration camps.

By 1918, most of the Armenians who had resided in this historic land were dead or in the Diaspora. Under the orders of Turkey's new leader, Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk), the remaining Armenians in western Cilicia (the region of the Ottoman Empire originally inhabited by Armenians) were expelled, as were the Greek and Assyrian populations.

By 1923, a 3,000-year-old civilization virtually ceased to exist. One and a half million Armenians, more than half of the Armenian population on its historic homeland, were dead, and the Armenian community and personal properties were lost, appropriated by the government, stolen by others or deliberately destroyed. Only a small number of Armenians remained in the former Ottoman capital of Constantinople.

## **The Denial**

The term "genocide" was not created until 1944. It was devised by a legal scholar, Raphael Lemkin, who had been strongly influenced by his study of the Armenian case and the persecution of Jews under Nazi rule. In 1946, the United Nations adopted the language and two years later the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide was passed. Despite the

affirmation of the Armenian Genocide by the overwhelming majority of historians, academic institutions on Holocaust and Genocide Studies, and governments around the world, the Turkish government still actively denies the Armenian Genocide.

Among a series of actions enacted to counter Armenian Genocide recognition and education, the Turkish government even passed a law in 2004 known as Article 305 which makes it a criminal offense, punishable by up to 10 years in prison, to discuss the Armenian Genocide.

Most of the survivors of the Armenian Genocide have now passed away. Their families still continue to demand recognition for the suffering inflicted upon their beloved ancestors more than 90 years ago.

## ***Key Terms for A Brief History of the Armenian Genocide***

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**Anatolia:** It is a peninsula that forms the western edge of Asia. It falls between the Black Sea to the north, the Mediterranean Sea to the south, the Aegean Sea to the west and the Taurus Mountains to the east. Today, most of Anatolia falls within Turkey.

**Armenian Apostolic Church:** The earliest accounts of the introduction of Christianity into Armenia date from the 1st century A.D. when it was first preached by two Apostles of Jesus, St. Bartholomew and St. Thaddeus. Armenia was the first country to adopt Christianity as its official religion, in 301.

**Diaspora:** The dispersion or “breaking up” of a group of people, causing them to settle far from their ancestral home or lands they have inhabited for a period of time.

**Genocide:** The deliberate and systematic destruction of a racial, political, or cultural group.\*

**Ottoman Empire:** An empire which lasted from 1453-1922 ruled by Seljuk Turks in South East Asia. At its height, the Empire stretched from Eastern Europe to North Africa. The Empire ended with the formation of modern Turkey.

**Pan-Turkism:** An ideology seeking the creation of a new Turkish empire stretching from Anatolia into Central Asia whose population would be exclusively Turkic.\*

**Scapegoat:** One that bears the blame for others.\*

**Ambassador Henry Morgenthau:** (1856-1946) The U.S. Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire during the Armenian Genocide. Morgenthau sent reports to Washington, DC that “a carefully planned scheme to thoroughly extinguish the Armenian race... a campaign of race extermination is in progress.” (p. 419\*)

**Nationalism:** Loyalty and devotion to a nation, especially a sense of national consciousness exalting one nation above all others and placing primary emphasis on promotion of its culture and interests as opposed to those of other nations or supranational groups.\*

**Sultan:** The title of a ruler or king of a Muslim state. It was the title used for the leaders of the Ottoman Empire.

**Talaat Pasha:** (1847- 1921) The principal architect of the Armenian Genocide. In 1909 he was appointed Minister of the Interior, and then by 1913, Secretary General. After the Genocide, Talaat fled to Germany and in 1921 was gunned down by an Armenian who had lost his family to the genocide. (p. 531\*)

**Turkification:** The process of destroying cultures of non-Turkic origin within the Ottoman Empire during the final years of the Ottoman Empire and the early years of modern Turkey.

\* Source: Israel W. Charney (editor) Encyclopedia of Genocide (ABC-CLIO, Inc., 1999)

- (1) Christianity became the official religion of Armenia in around \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. 50 BCE
  - b. 301 CE
  - c. 405 BCE
  - d. 1198 CE
- (2) The original boundaries of Historic Armenia extended through modern day \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. France
  - b. Turkey
  - c. Austria
  - d. India
- (3) The Ottoman Turks captured Constantinople in \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. 153 CE
  - b. 452 BCE
  - c. 1453 CE
  - d. 1753 CE
- (4) The \_\_\_\_\_ aided the Armenians during and after the Hamidian Massacres.
  - a. American Red Cross
  - b. United Way
  - c. United Nations
  - d. The Ottoman Sultan
- (5) The Armenian Genocide occurred under the cover of \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Russian Revolution
  - b. The Civil War
  - c. World War II
  - d. World War I
- (6) \_\_\_\_\_ was the U.S. ambassador who fought to save the Armenians from genocide.
  - a. Teddy Roosevelt
  - b. Henry Morgenthau
  - c. Clara Barton
  - d. Abul Hamid II
- (7) The \_\_\_\_\_ was the political party that organized the Armenian Genocide.
  - a. The CUP (Young Turks)
  - b. Turkish Power
  - c. Socialists
  - d. Ottoman Liberals
- (8) The policy promoting “Turkey for the Turks” was known as \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Young Turks
  - b. Turkish Power
  - c. Pan-Turkism
  - d. Committee of Union and Progress
- (8) After the Hamidian Massacres another major massacre occurred prior to the Genocide which was in the city of \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Istanbul
  - b. Paris
  - c. Moscow
  - d. Adana



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