



# The Genocide Education Project

## The Armenian Genocide

The greatest atrocity that took place against civilians during World War I was the Armenian Genocide. An estimated 1,500,000 Armenians, more than half of the Armenian population living on its historic homeland, were destroyed on the orders of the Turkish leaders of the Ottoman Empire. The vast murders were carried out through execution, death marches, drowning, burning and other means.



Armenian family, early 1900's

Known as the “Young Turks,” the rulers of the Ottoman Empire sought to create a new, homogeneous Turkish state. Some wanted to create a Turkish empire extending into Central Asia. Those promoting this ideology, known as “Pan Turkism,” saw the Armenian population as an obstacle to their goal.

For nearly 3,000 years, Armenians had inhabited the highland region between the Black, Caspian, and Mediterranean Seas. Armenia was at various times independent under a national dynasty; autonomous under native princes who paid tribute to foreign powers; or subject to direct foreign rule. The Armenians had developed a distinct language, alphabet, and national-religious culture,

and were the first people to adopt Christianity as a national religion. They lived in all the major cities of the Ottoman Empire and had made major contributions to Turkish commerce, industry, architecture and the arts.



Armenian alphabet

The Turkish invasion of Armenia began in the 11th century A.D. Most of the territories that had formed the Armenian kingdoms were incorporated into the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century. Although Armenians and other minorities, including Greeks, Assyrians, and Jews, were allowed some limited freedoms, they were not considered equals to Muslims, living as second-class citizens under the empire's Islamic legal system. There were restrictions on many aspects of their lives, including special taxes, a prohibition on bearing arms, riding horseback, providing testimony in court against Muslims, etc. Referred to in Turkish as “gavours,” a pejorative word meaning “infidels” or “unbelievers,” Armenians were treated with prejudice.

Turkish power began to decline in the 1800's. The empire faced steady losses of territory after revolts of subject peoples in the Balkans and wars with the Russians. Driven by a need to secure the remaining territories and to inhibit

Armenians' economic influence, Ottoman ruler Abdul Hamid II initiated the massacre of approximately 300,000 Armenians in numerous provinces in 1894-1896 and approximately 30,000 in the region of Cilicia in 1909.

On April 24th, 1915, with the "Young Turks" now heading the government, several hundred Armenian community leaders in Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul) were arrested, sent east, and put to death.

Armenian men who had been conscripted into the Ottoman armies, serving in segregated, unarmed labor battalions, were removed and murdered. Minister of the Interior, Talaat Pasha, ordered the deportation of the Armenian population to "relocation centers" – marching them into the barren Syrian Desert without food or water. Men and teenage boys were separated from the deportation caravans and killed under the direction of Young Turk officials. Women and children were driven for months over mountains and deserts. Some were kidnapped, some raped, some stripped naked and forced to walk under the scorching sun until they dropped dead.



Interior Minister Talaat Pasha

The Young Turks also created a "Special Organization," which organized "killing squads" often made up of murderers and other ex-convicts. They drowned people in rivers, threw them off cliffs, crucified them and burned them alive. Within months, Armenian corpses were strewn across the Turkish countryside.



Armenian "deportees," 1915

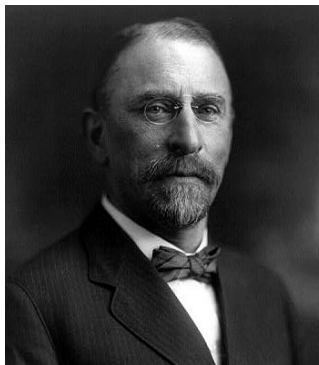
The deportees fell by the hundreds of thousands from exhaustion, exposure, and starvation. Ultimately, about 60 to 65 percent of the Armenian population was annihilated, about 1,500,000 people. Of the many thousands of orphans who survived, many were forcibly married or converted to Islam and raised as non-Armenians. Armenian community and private properties, including schools, churches, cultural institutions, businesses, and personal belongings were destroyed, or they were confiscated by the government and distributed to Turks.

Other Christians, including the Greeks and Assyrians, were similarly targeted, and hundreds of thousands were murdered. Large-scale massacres continued during the last years of the Ottoman Empire by Turks until the proclamation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923.

The American ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, Henry Morgenthau, wrote in his memoirs: “When the Turkish authorities gave the orders for these deportations, they were merely giving the death warrant to a whole race; they understood this well, and in their conversations with me, they made no particular attempt to conceal the fact.”

Another American diplomat in Turkey, U.S. Consul, Leslie Davis, described the condition of Armenians he saw on one of the “deportation” routes: “All of them were in rags and many . . . almost naked . . . emaciated, sick, diseased, filthy, covered with dirt and vermin . . . driven along for many weeks like herds of cattle, with little to eat . . . Most of the men having been killed by the Kurd before their arrival at Harpoot.

Many of the women and children also had been killed and very many others had died on the way . . . Of those who had started, only a small portion were still alive and they were rapidly dying . . . “ Davis reported to Ambassador Morgenthau, “Any doubt that may have been expressed in previous reports as to the Government’s intentions in sending away the Armenians have been removed and any hope that may have been expressed as to the possibility of some of them surviving have been destroyed. It has been no secret that the plan was to destroy the Armenian race as a race...”



**U.S. Ambassador  
Henry Morgenthau**

The Armenian Genocide was quite well documented at the time by Western diplomats, missionaries, and others. The *New York Times*, in particular, covered the events extensively.

Average citizens in the United States came to the aid of Armenians. The first international aid mission of the American Red Cross was to help Armenian victims of the 1896 massacres. In 1915, the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief was established, raising millions of dollars to save the “starving Armenians,” a term in common use at the time. Chartered by the U.S. Congress in 1919 as Near East Relief, it established refugee camps, hospitals, and orphanages, delivering food, clothing, shelter materials, and providing genocide survivors with job training. Overall, the Near East Relief cared for 132,000 Armenian orphans scattered across the region.



**Near East Relief poster**



Armenian child starved to death, 1916

At the urging of the Allies after the Ottoman Empire's defeat in WWI, the Ottoman government held investigations and military trials against the perpetrators of the Armenian Genocide. Although verdicts were handed down, confirming the state policy of extermination, the sentences were never carried out. By 1923, perhaps only ten to fifteen percent of the pre-war Armenian population remained in the historic Armenian territories, and survivors were forced into permanent exile in other countries.

In May 1915, the Allies characterized the extermination of the Armenians as a "crime against humanity." The word "genocide" did not yet exist. In 1944, Raphael Lemkin, a Polish-Jewish lawyer, who had been moved by the massacres of Armenians and was then witnessing the extermination of European Jewry, coined the term in order to define the intentional attempt to destroy an entire people.

The Armenian Genocide is considered the first "modern" genocide in the way it was systematically planned and implemented. Because the perpetrators were not punished and no restitution was made to the victims, Adolf Hitler saw it as a valid precedent for his plan to wipe out the Jews of Europe. In a speech before invading Poland in 1939, Hitler spoke proudly of his intention to kill "mercilessly," saying, "Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?"