

# THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE, 1915-1923



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## Introduction

From 1915- 1923, an estimated 1-1,500,000 Armenians were murdered or died through mass executions, deportation marches, forced starvation, and other brutalities by order of a nationalist elite party ruling the Ottoman Empire. This genocide nearly ended a culture that had existed on the territory for centuries. Before the First World War, about two million Armenians lived throughout the Ottoman Empire. By the war's end, only a fraction of the Armenian population remained. Today, Armenians make up a small percentage of Turkey's minority population.

## Historical Context

The Armenian people can trace their historic homeland, for thousands of years, to the Armenian Plateau (currently eastern Turkey). They had established independent kingdoms, but the region experienced conquest by many major empires throughout history. The Armenian people were distinct from their conquerors. In 301 CE, Armenians became the first nation to adopt Christianity as their national religion, and by 405 CE they had their own written language. By the 17th Century, the majority of Armenians in the region would become subject to the Ottoman Empire, which expanded to over three continents, including the European Balkans, the Middle East in Asia and North Africa. The Ottoman Empire was a multinational state, Islam was the state religion, and the Sultan was the primary ruler. The empire's governing system did not consider non-Muslim subjects as equal to Muslims, and they lived as second-class citizens. Non-Muslims faced discrimination in the empire's legal, social, and political matters. For example, laws forbade them the right to bear arms or testify in court against Muslims. In exchange for protection against violence and religious tolerance, non-Muslims were also required to pay a special tax under Islamic civil law.

By the 19th Century, the Ottoman Empire began its gradual decline. With territorial losses and a diminishing economic role in world trade, the Ottoman government realized the necessity to modernize. In response, Ottoman sultans began a process of reforms in 1839 and 1856, called *Tanzimat*, which promised equality among all citizens. These gradual reforms benefitted Ottoman Armenians and other minorities economically. However, this led to growing resentment between Muslims and non-Muslims, especially toward Ottoman Armenians. By 1878, further civil rights were granted to non-Muslims, however Sultan Abdul Hamid II would not enforce these reforms. Instead he enacted repressive policies and violence towards Ottoman Armenians, resulting in massacres, killing between 100,000 - 300,000 Ottoman Armenians. These systematic violent episodes, known as the Hamidian Massacres, took place between 1894-1896. News of the massacres spread throughout Europe and the United States. As a result, the international community led some of its first humanitarian aid missions to help Armenian victims.

By the 20th Century, the Young Turk movement emerged to bring about improvement to Ottoman society. In 1908, the Young Turks led a revolution that succeeded in reinstating the earlier Ottoman reforms that favored equality between Muslims and non-Muslims. However, this period was short-lived. In 1909, some 30,000 Armenians were killed in the region of Adana in a counter-coup against the Young Turk revolution. Supporters of supreme rule by Sultan Abdul Hamid II were blamed for the massacre. The Young Turks suppressed this counter-coup, while views within the movement divided. Meanwhile, the Committee for Union and Progress (CUP), the leading Turkish nationalist party of the Young Turks, was gradually gaining power. They spread an ideology of "Pan-Turkism," a radical form of nationalism, which supported a centralized Turkish state

that would eventually expand eastward toward Central Asia. By 1913, the CUP gained absolute control of the Ottoman government. They set up a new political ideology, moving away from a common Ottoman identity for all citizens to one focused exclusively Turkish identity for all citizens. They believed that Armenians and other minorities were in the way of this goal.

## Genocide

In 1914, the Ottoman Empire entered the First World War, joining the Central Powers. The Young Turks believed that entering the war would solve the problems of the Empire. However, serious losses in the war with Russia resulted in the Ottoman authorities blaming the Armenians for their ethnic kin in Russia fighting against them. By the winter of 1914-1915, measures to destroy the entire Armenian population, including men, women, and children were being prepared.

On April 24, 1915, the CUP arrested over 200 Armenian representatives in government, teachers, writers, religious leaders, and other intellectuals in Constantinople (Istanbul) and executed most of them. Ottoman Armenian men who had previously been conscripted into the Ottoman armies were disarmed and murdered. This date is often considered the day in which the intentions of the Armenian Genocide were realized and is commemorated annually by Armenians worldwide.

Beginning in 1915, coded telegraph messages, sent by leading CUP officials, ordered the deportation of the Armenian people from all over the empire to “relocation centers.” Most men and teenage boys were separated from these deportation caravans and killed soon after. The women and children were forced to walk for weeks on difficult terrain away from major roads without any food or shelter. During the deportations, many died or were killed, while others were kidnapped or raped. Their final destination was the Syrian Desert where Armenian deportees were massacred or eventually died due to starvation and fatigue. In certain areas, Armenians took up desperate armed resistance to protect themselves from massacre and deportation. While the owners were absent, Armenian homes, businesses, churches, along with private properties were looted, legally confiscated or destroyed by the local population and government.

Those who survived had different fates. Conversion to Islam was generally not an option, but there were many cases of Armenian women and children becoming Islamized through adoption or kidnapping by Turks, Kurds or Arabs. Some survivors took refuge in orphanages set up by American and European missionaries; those who survived the deportations ended up in refugee camps throughout the Middle East, others saved by their neighbors made it further West, or managed to take refuge among Armenians in Istanbul and Izmir, where, because of the presence of foreign diplomats, no mass killings had taken place. As a result, the Armenian community spread around the world.

## Aftermath

At the end of World War I, the CUP functionaries and government officials were tried in military tribunals. Though the main perpetrators were found to be guilty and sentenced to death, their sentence was never carried out. At the time, the annihilation of the Armenians was known as a “crime against humanity.” In 1944, Raphael Lemkin, who had studied the 20th Century massacres of Armenians and witnessed the extermination of the European Jewish population, would coin the term “genocide” in order to define the attempt to destroy an entire people. The Armenian Genocide is denied by the Turkish government today, and is illegal to be spoken about as such in Turkey.