

The Armenian Genocide: Context and Legacy

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Between 1915 and 1918 the Ottoman Empire, ruled by Muslim Turks, carried out a policy to eliminate its Christian Armenian minority. This genocide was preceded by a series of massacres in 1894-96 and in 1909, and was followed by another series of massacres beginning in 1920. By 1922 Armenians had been eradicated from their historic homeland.



There are at least two ways of looking at the Armenian experience in the final days of the Ottoman Empire. Some scholars regard the series of wholesale killings from the 1890s to the 1920s as evidence of a continuity in the deteriorating status of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. They maintain that, once initiated, the policy of exposing the Armenians to physical harm acquired its own momentum. Victimization escalated because it was not countermanded by prevailing outside pressure or attenuated by internal improvement and reconciliation. They argue that the process of alienation was embedded in the inequalities of the Ottoman system of government and that the massacres prepared Ottoman society for genocide.

Other scholars point out that the brutalization of disaffected elements by despotic (tyrannical) regimes is a practice seen across the world. The repressive measures these governments use have the limited function of controlling social change and maintaining the system. In this frame of reference, genocide is viewed as a radical policy because it reaches for a profound alteration of the very nature of the state and society. These scholars emphasize the decisive character of the Armenian genocide and differentiate between the periodic exploitation and occasional terrorization of the Armenians and the finality of the deliberate policy to exterminate them and eliminate them from their homeland.

Like all empires, the Ottoman Empire was a multinational state. At one time it stretched from the gates of Vienna in the north to Mecca in the south. From the sixteenth century to its collapse following World War I, the Ottoman Empire included areas of historic Armenia. By the early part of the twentieth century, it was a much shrunken state confined mostly to the Middle East. Yet its rulers still governed over a heterogeneous society and maintained in situations that favored the Muslims, particularly those of Turkish background, and subordinated Christians and Jews as second-class citizens subject to a range of discriminatory laws and regulations imposed both by the state and its official religion, Islam.

The failure of the Ottoman system to prevent the further decline of the empire led to the overthrow of the government in 1908 by a group of reformists known as the Young Turks. Formally organized as the Committee of Union and Progress, the Young Turks decided to Turkify the multiethnic Ottoman society in order to preserve the Ottoman state from further disintegration and to obstruct the national aspirations of the various minorities. Resistance to this measure convinced them that the Christians, and especially the Armenians, could not be assimilated. When World War I broke out in 1914, the Young Turks saw it as an opportunity to rid the country of its Armenian population. They also envisioned the simultaneous conquest of an empire in the east, incorporating Turkish-speaking peoples in Iran, Russia, and Central Asia.

The defeat of the Ottomans in World War I and the discrediting of the Committee of Union and Progress led to the rise of the Turkish Nationalists. Their objective was to found a new and independent Turkish state. The Nationalists distanced themselves from the Ottoman government and rejected virtually all its policies, with the exception of the policy toward the Armenians.

This essay focuses on three aspects of the Armenian genocide that have broader applicability to any study of genocide:

- (1) Distinctions between massacres and genocide**
- (2) Use of technology in facilitating mass murder**
- (3) The legacy of genocide.**

1) Distinguishing between the Massacres and the Genocide

From 1894 to 1896, Sultan Abdul-Hamid II carried out a series of massacres of the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire. The worst of the massacres occurred in 1895, resulting in the death of thousands of civilians (estimates run from 100,000 to 300,000) and leaving tens of thousands destitute. Most of those killed were men. In many towns, the central marketplace and other Armenian-owned businesses were destroyed, usually by conflagration (fire). The killings were done during the day and were witnessed by the general public (Bliss 1982).



This kind of organized and systematic brutalization of the Armenian population pointed to the coordinating hand of the central authorities. Widespread violence erupted in towns and cities hundreds of miles apart over a matter of weeks in a country devoid of mass media. At a time when the sultan ruled absolutely (Divine Right), the evidence strongly implicated the head of state.

Intent of Massacres

The massacres were meant to undermine the growth of Armenian nationalism by frightening the Armenians with the terrible consequences of dissent. The furor of the state was directed at the behavior and the aspirations of the Armenians. The sultan was alarmed by the increasing activity of Armenian political groups and wanted to curb their growth before they gained any more influence by spreading ideas about civil rights and autonomy. Abdul-Hamid took no account, however of the great variation in Armenian political outlook, which ranged from reformism and constitutionalism to separatism. He hoped to wipe away the Armenians' increasing sense of national awareness. He also continued to exclude the Armenians, as he did most of his other subjects, from having a role in their own government, whether individually or communally. The sultan, however, did not contemplate depriving the Armenians of their existence as a people.

Although there are similarities between Abdul-Hamid's policies and the measures taken by the Young Turks against the Armenians, there are also major distinctions.

The 1915 Measures



The measures implemented in 1915 affected the entire Armenian population, men, women, and children. They included massacres and deportations. As under the sultan, they targeted the able-bodied men for annihilation. The thousands of Armenian men conscripted into the Ottoman army were eliminated first. The rest of the adult population was then placed under arrest, taken out of town, and killed in remote locations.

The treatment of women was quite different. The bulk of the deported population consisted of women, children, and older men. Countless Armenian women lost their lives in transit. Before their tragic deaths, many suffered unspeakable cruelties, most often in the form of sexual abuse. Many girls and younger women were seized from their families and taken as slave-brides (Sanasarian 1989).

During the time of the sultan, Armenians were often given the choice of converting to Islam in order to save themselves from massacre. However, during the genocide years, this choice was usually not available. Few were given the opportunity to accept Islam as a way of avoiding deportation. Most Armenians were deported. Some lives were spared during deportation by random selection for involuntary conversion through abduction, enslavement, or the adoption of kidnapped and orphaned children.

The Cover of War

A second distinguishing feature of the genocide was the killing of the Armenians in places out of sight of the general population. The deportations made resistance or escape difficult. Most important, the removal of Armenians from their native towns was a necessary condition for maintaining as much secrecy about the genocide as possible. The Allies had warned the Ottoman government about taking arbitrary measures against the Christian minorities. The transfer of the Armenian population, therefore, was, in appearance, a more justifiable response in a time of war.



When the Ottomans entered World War I, they confined journalists to Istanbul, and since the main communications system, the telegraph, was under government control, news from the interior was censored (Sachar 1969). Nonetheless, the deportations made news as soon as they occurred, but news of the massacres was delayed because they were done in desolate regions away from places of habitation. Basically, this provided cover for the ultimate objective of destroying the Armenian population. Inevitably the massacres followed the deportations.

State Confiscation of Armenian Goods and Property

A third feature of the genocide was the state confiscation of Armenian goods and property. Apart from the killing, the massacres in 1895 and 1909 involved the looting and burning of Armenian neighborhoods and businesses. The objective was to strike at the financial strength of the Armenian community which controlled a significant part of the Ottoman commerce. In 1915 the objective

of the Young Turks was to plunder and confiscate all Armenian means of sustenance, thereby increasing the probability of extinction.



Unlike the looting associated with the massacres under Sultan Abdul-Hamid II, the assault against the Armenians in 1915 was marked by comparatively little property damage. Thus, the genocide effortlessly transferred the goods and assets - homes, farms, bank accounts, buildings, land, and personal wealth - of the Armenians to the Turks. Since the Young Turk Party controlled the government, the seizure of the property of the Armenians by the state placed local party chiefs in powerful positions as financial brokers. This measure escalated the incentive for government officials to proceed thoroughly with the deportation of the Armenians.

The Young Turks did not rely as much on mob violence as the sultan had. They implemented the genocide as another military operation during wartime. The agencies of government were put to use, and where they did not exist, they were created. The Young Turk Party functionaries issued the instructions. The army and local gendarmerie carried out the deportations. An agency was organized to impound the properties of the Armenians and to redistribute the goods. "Butcher battalions" of convicts released from prisons were organized into killer units. The Young Turks tapped into the full capacity of the state to organize operations against all 2 million Armenian inhabitants of the Ottoman Empire, and did it swiftly and effectively (Bryce 1916; Trumpener [1989], 200-270).

(2) The Use of Technology for Mass Killings

The Armenian genocide occurred at a time when the Ottoman Empire was undergoing a process of modernization. Apart from the new weapons of war, the telegraph and the railroad were being put to expanded use. Introduced in the second half of the nineteenth century, the networks of transport and communication reached the areas of heavy Armenian concentration by the early part of the twentieth century. Whereas the telephone system was largely confined to the capital city of Istanbul, telegraph lines extended throughout the empire. The rail system connected many of the largest towns in the Ottoman Empire, but it was less extensive than the rail networks in the European countries.

The Telegraph

Coordination of the massacres during the reign of Abdul-Hamid II, and of the deportations under the Young Turks, was made possible by the telegraph. Of all the instruments of state government, the telegraph dramatically increased the power of key decision-makers over the rest of the population. The telegraph system allowed for the kind of centralization that heretofore was impossible.

During the 1895 massacres, the telegraph in the Ottoman Empire was a government service. It was managed by a separate ministry. Therefore, all the communicating during the massacres was done by the Ottoman government (Walker 1980, 156-173). During the genocide of 1915, the telegraph was controlled by the Minister of Interior, Talat, who was in charge of the government agencies that implemented the genocide. Talat began his government career as a telegrapher, and he had a telegraph machine installed in his office so that he could personally send messages across the Ottoman Empire. This gave Talat immediate connection, literally and technologically, with the enforcement of mass death. His ability to use the telegraph gave him unsurpassed access to subordinates and allowed him to circumvent other government officials and agencies in Istanbul. For the most part a telegram from Talat was sufficient authorization to proceed with the decimation of the Armenians (Dadrian 1986, 326-328).



Modern states rely on their bureaucracies in order to handle the paperwork involved in carrying out a policy affecting vast portions of their population. The same applies to the policy of genocide. The more modernized the state, the greater the mountain of paper generated. If not destroyed, a monumental record is left behind. In the case of the Armenians, it might be said that their genocide was carried out not so much bureaucratically as much as telegraphically, thus minimizing the record keeping and leaving behind a great deal of confusion about the degree of individual responsibility.

The Trains

To expedite the transfer of Armenians living in proximity of the railways, orders were issued instructing regional authorities to transport Armenian deportees by train. Instructions were explicit to the point of ordering the Armenians to be packed to the maximum capacity in the cattle cars which were used for their transport (Sonyel 1978, 8). The determination of the government to

complete this task is demonstrated by the deportation of the Armenians in European Turkey who were ferried across the Sea of Marmara to Anatolia and then placed on trains for transport to Syria.

The removal of Armenians from Anatolia and historic Armenia was carried out mostly through forced caravan marches or by the use of trains. Although a large portion of the Armenians survived the horrific conditions of the packed cattle cars, they were not able to endure the Syrian desert where they were to die of hunger and thirst. In contrast, the majority of Armenians in the caravans never reached the killing centers in the Syrian desert; many were murdered by raiding groups of bandits or died from exposure to the scorching days and cold nights. Most of those who were able to endure the "death marches" could not survive the starvation, exhaustion, or the epidemics that spread death in the concentration camps of the Syrian desert.

(3) Legacy of the Armenian Genocide

All too often the discussion of genocide centers on the numbers killed and fails to consider the wider implications of uprooting entire populations. Genocides are cataclysmic for those who survive because they carry the memory of suffering and the realization of the unmitigated disaster of genocide. Genocides often produce results and create conditions that make it impossible to recover anything tangible from the society that was destroyed, let alone permit the subsequent repair of that society. From this standpoint, it can be argued that the ultimate objective of genocide is a permanent alteration of the course of a people's history.

Losing a Heritage

In a single year, 1915, the Armenians were robbed of their 3,000-year-old heritage. The desecration of churches, the burning of libraries, the ruination of towns and villages—all erased an ancient civilization. With the disappearance of the Armenians from their homeland, most of the symbols of their culture—schools, monasteries, artistic monuments, historical sites—were destroyed by the Ottoman government. The Armenians saved only that which formed part of their collective memory. Their language, their songs, their poetry, and now their tragic destiny remained as part of their culture.



The Scattering of a People

Beyond the terrible loss of life (1,500,000), and the severing of the connection between the Armenian people and their historic homeland, the Armenian genocide also resulted in the dispersion of the survivors. Disallowed from resettling in their former homes, as well as stateless and penniless, Armenians moved to any country that afforded refuge. Within a matter of a few decades Armenians were dispersed to every continent on the globe. The largest Armenian community is now found in the United States.

The Absence of Justice and Protection in the Postwar Period

During the genocide, the leaders of the world were preoccupied with World War I. Some Armenians were rescued, some leaders decried what was happening, but the overall response was too little too late.

After the war, ample documentation of the genocide was made available and became the source of debate during postwar negotiations by the Allied Powers (Harbord 1920; Blair 1989). It was during these negotiations for a peace treaty that the Western leaders had an opportunity to develop humanitarian policies and strategies that could have protected the Armenians from further persecution. Instead of creating conditions for the prevention of additional massacres, the Allies retreated to positions that only validated the success of ideological racialism. The failure at this juncture was catastrophic. Its consequences persist to this day.

Silence and Denial

For the Allies, their failure to protect the Armenians had been a major embarrassment, one worth forgetting. For the Turks, their secure resumption of sovereignty over Anatolia precluded any responsibility toward the Armenians in the form of reparations. All the preconditions were created for the cover-up of the Armenian genocide. The readiness of people on the whole to believe the position of legitimate governments meant that the suggestion that a genocide had occurred in the far reaches of Asia Minor would be made the object of historical revisionism and, soon enough, complete denial.



Conclusion

It is helpful to distinguish between the attitudes and policies of the Ottoman imperial government, the Young Turks, and the Nationalist movement. The Ottoman government, based on the principle of sectarian inequality, tapped into the forces of class antagonism and promoted the superiority of the dominant group over a disaffected minority. It made rudimentary use of technology in the implementation of its more lethal policies.



The Young Turks, based on protototalitarian principles and subscribing to expansionism and chauvinism, justified their policies on ideological grounds. They marshaled the organizational and technological resources of the state to inflict death and trauma with sudden impact. When the Young Turks deported the Armenians from Anatolia and Armenia to Syria, the result was more than simply transferring part of the population from one area of the Ottoman Empire to another. The policy of exclusion placed Armenians outside the protection of the law. Yet, strangely, because they were still technically in the Ottoman Empire, there was the possibility of repatriation for the survivors given a change in government.

The Nationalists tapped the popular forces of Turkish society to fill the vacuum of power after World War I. Their policy vis-à-vis the Armenians was formulated on the basis of racial exclusivity. They made the decision that even the remaining Armenians were undesirable. Many unsuspecting Armenians returned home at the conclusion of the war in 1918. They had nowhere else to go. With the expulsion from Nationalist Turkey an impenetrable political boundary finally descended between the Armenians and their former homes. The possibility of return was canceled.

Genocide contains the portents of the kind of destruction that can erase past and present. For the Armenian population of the former Ottoman Empire, it meant the loss of homeland and heritage, and a dispersion to the four corners of the earth. It also meant bearing the stigma of statelessness.



At a time when global issues dominate the political agenda of most nations, the Armenian genocide underlines the grave risks of overlooking the problems of small peoples. We cannot ignore the cumulative effect of allowing state after state to resort to the brutal resolution of disagreements with their ethnic minorities. That the world chose to forget the Armenian genocide is also evidence of a serious defect in the system of nation-states which needs to be rectified. In this respect, the continued effort to cover up the Armenian genocide may hold the most important lesson of all. With the passage of time, memory fades. Because of a campaign of denial, distortion, and cover-up, the seeds of doubt are planted, and the meaning of the past is questioned and its lessons for the present are lost.