



Case Study: The Armenian Genocide, 1915-17



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Summary

The Armenian genocide was one of the most massive "root-and-branch" exterminations ever carried out against a defenseless people. In 1915, as World War I raged, the Turkish government (ruler of the Ottoman Empire) decided upon the systematic extermination of most of the male Armenian population, and the forced deportation of the remainder, mostly women, children, and the elderly. The deportation became a death march, with extreme violence and deprivation leading to the death of most of the survivors of the initial gendercide -- as was intended. By the time the exhausted and traumatized survivors reached refuge in neighbouring countries, up to three-quarters of the entire Ottoman Armenian population had been exterminated.

The background

Armenians are one of the most ancient peoples of the Near East, having lived in the southern Caucasus region for as long as 3,000 years. Christianized early in the first millennium, they formed by the 19th century the largest non-Muslim population in the Ottoman Empire. Peaceful relations between Armenians and Ottoman Muslims had long been the norm: despite acts of discrimination, Armenians were referred to as "the loyal millet." This changed in the 19th century, as the forces of nationalism swept both the Ottoman realm and Armenians themselves, and as the Ottoman Empire -- "the sick man of Europe" -- began to crumble in the face of regional revolts. Calls by European powers for protection of the Armenian population had the opposite effect: the regime of Sultan Abdul Hamid II viewed such outside "intervention" as a threat to its sovereignty, and responded in 1896 with a massive campaign of killing, in which at least 200,000 Armenians died. Though one of the

most atrocious imperial acts of the 19th century, it was merely a harbinger of the full scale genocide that was to descend two decades later.

In 1908, a group of modernization-minded officers -- "the Young Turks" -- toppled the Ottoman Sultan. Armenians generally welcomed the new regime, viewing it as a progressive alternative to Ottoman despotism. But the "Young Turk" movement (with its political party, the Committee of Union and Progress [CUP]) was rapidly taken over by a small group of fanatical nationalists, headed by the triumvirate of Enver Pasha, Cemal Pasha, and Talat Pasha. The trio began to plot the extermination of the Armenian population, seen as a potentially traitorous "fifth column."

The events of World War I, which saw Turkey allied with Germany and Austria-Hungary against Britain, France, and Russia, gave these architects of genocide the opportunity they sought to implement their plan. One of the movement's leading ideologues, Dr. Nazim, told a closed session of the CUP Central Committee in February 1915 that "if this purge is not general and final, it will inevitably lead to problems. Therefore it is absolutely necessary to eliminate the Armenian people in its entirety, so that there is no further Armenian on this earth and the very concept of Armenia is extinguished. We are now at war. We shall never have a more suitable opportunity than this." (Quoted in G.S. Graber, *Caravans to Oblivion: The Armenian Genocide, 1915*, pp. 87-88.)

The slaughter began on April 24, 1915, with a classic act of "elitocide": some 600 Armenian notables, all male, were rounded up in Istanbul and murdered. Today, April 24 is commemorated by Armenians worldwide as "Genocide Memorial Day." Much worse was to come.

Armenian notables assembled for a photograph immediately prior to their execution in 1915.



The gendercide against Armenian men

*Henry Morgenthau:
Witness to genocide*



Like the Jewish holocaust, the Armenian genocide represents a case of a clear-cut, "pre-emptive" targeting of the male population, followed by a "root-and-branch" extermination of as many of the survivors as could be killed outright or driven to death. The two gendercidal strategies followed at the outset were 1) the mobilization of "battle-age" Armenian men for service in the Turkish army, followed by the execution or death through overwork of some hundreds of thousands of them; and 2) the concomitant rounding-up and mass slaughter of remaining community males. The U.S. Ambassador to Turkey, Henry Morgenthau, provided one of the most gut-wrenching descriptions of ["The Murder of a Nation"](#) in a report to his superiors, published after the war (the U.S. was at the time neutral in the conflict).

He summarized the first strategy as follows:

In the early part of 1915, the Armenian soldiers in the Turkish army were reduced to a new status. Up to that time most of them had been combatants, but now they were all stripped of their arms and transformed into workmen. Instead of serving their country as artillerymen and cavalrymen, these former soldiers now discovered that they had been transformed into road labourers and pack animals. Army supplies of all kinds were loaded on their backs, and, stumbling under the burdens and driven by the whips and bayonets of the Turks, they were forced to drag their weary bodies into the mountains of the Caucasus. Sometimes they would have to plough their way, burdened in this fashion, almost waist high through snow. They had to spend practically all their time in the open, sleeping on the bare ground -- whenever the ceaseless prodding of their taskmasters gave them an occasional opportunity to sleep. They were given only scraps of food; if they fell sick they were left where they had dropped, their Turkish oppressors perhaps stopping long enough to rob them of all their possessions -- even of their clothes. If any stragglers succeeded in reaching their destinations, they were not infrequently massacred. In many instances Armenian soldiers were disposed of in even more summary fashion, for it now became almost the general practice to shoot them in cold blood. In almost all cases the procedure was the same. Here and there squads of 50 or 100 men would be taken, bound together in groups of four, and then marched out to a secluded spot a short distance from the village. Suddenly the sound of rifle shots would fill the air, and the Turkish soldiers who had acted as the escort would sullenly return to camp. Those sent to bury the bodies would find them almost invariably stark naked, for, as usual, the Turks had stolen all their clothes. In cases that came to my attention, the murderers had added a refinement to their victims' sufferings by compelling them to dig their graves before being shot.

Morgenthau describes one such episode in July 1915, in which some 2,000 Armenian "amélés" ("such is the Turkish word for soldiers who have been reduced to workmen") were dispatched from the city of Harpoot, ostensibly for a road-construction project:

The Armenians in that town understood what this meant and pleaded with the Governor for mercy. But this official insisted that the men were not to be harmed, and he even called upon the German missionary, Mr. Ehemann, to quiet the panic, giving that gentleman his word of honour that the ex-soldiers would be protected. Mr. Ehemann believed the Governor and assuaged the popular fear. Yet practically every man of these 2,000 was massacred, and his body thrown into a cave. A few escaped, and it was from these that news of the massacre reached the world. A few days afterward another 2,000 soldiers were sent to Diarbekir. The only purpose of sending these men out in the open country was that they might be massacred. In order that they might have no strength to resist or to escape by flight, these poor creatures were systematically starved. Government agents went ahead on the road, notifying the Kurds that the caravan was approaching and ordering them to do their congenial duty. Not only did the Kurdish tribesmen pour down from the mountains upon this starved and weakened regiment, but the Kurdish women came with butcher's knives in order that they might gain that merit in Allah's eyes that comes from killing a Christian. These massacres were not isolated happenings; I could detail many more episodes just as horrible as the one related above ...

Decapitated heads of Armenian men are put on display by the Turks.



Like the opening "eliticide," this strategy was designed to strip the Armenian community of those who might effectively mobilize and defend it, as Morgenthau notes: "Throughout the Turkish Empire a systematic attempt was made to kill all able-bodied men, not only for the purpose of removing all males who might propagate a new generation of Armenians, but for the purpose of rendering the weaker part of the population an easy prey."

A prominent modern scholar of the genocide, Vahakn Dadrian, concurs: "Though [the] mobilization had many other objectives, it served a major purpose for the swift execution of the plan of genocide. By removing all able-bodied Armenian males from their cities, villages, hamlets, and by isolating them in conditions in which they virtually became trapped, the Armenian community was reduced to a condition of near-total helplessness, thus an easy prey for destruction. It was a masterful stroke as it attained with one blow the three objectives of the operation of trapping the victim population: a) dislocation through forcible removal; b) isolation; c) concentration for easy targeting." (Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide* [Berghahn Books, 1995], p. 226.)

With this "conscription-as-gendercide" thus accomplished, the Turkish authorities turned their attention to the remaining male population. The authorities were now free to turn to the destruction of the remainder of the Armenian population. Armenians were told they were to be deported to "safe havens" in third countries. The deportation process, was seen as simply another tool of genocide, as Morgenthau notes: "The real purpose of the deportation was robbery and destruction; it really represented a new method of massacre. 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."

Before the caravans were dispatched, however, a final assault was made on the few Armenian males remaining. Morgenthau again:

The systematic extermination of the men continued; such males as the persecutions which I have already described had left were now violently dealt with. Before the caravans were started, it became the regular practice to separate the young men from the families, tie them together in groups of four, lead them to the outskirts, and shoot them. Public hangings without trial -- the only offense being that the victims were [male] Armenians -- were taking place constantly. The gendarmes showed a particular desire to annihilate the educated and the influential. From American consuls and missionaries I was constantly receiving reports of such executions, and many of the events which they described will never fade from my memory. At Angora all Armenian men from fifteen to seventy were arrested, bound together in groups of four, and sent on the road in the direction of Caesarea. When they had traveled five or six hours and had reached a secluded valley, a mob of Turkish peasants fell upon them with clubs, hammers, axes, scythes, spades, and saws. Such instruments not only caused more agonizing deaths than guns and pistols, but, as the Turks themselves boasted, they were more economical, since they did not involve the waste of powder and shell. In this way they exterminated the whole male population of Angora, including all its men of wealth and breeding, and their bodies, horribly mutilated, were left in the valley, where they were devoured by wild beasts. After completing this destruction, the

peasants and gendarmes gathered in the local tavern, comparing notes and boasting of the number of "giaours" that each had slain. In Trebizond the men were placed in boats and sent out

on the Black Sea; gendarmes would follow them in boats, shoot them down, and throw their bodies into the water. When the signal was given for the caravans to move, therefore, they almost invariably consisted of women, children, and old men. Any one who could possibly have protected them from the fate that awaited them had been destroyed.

The genocide against Armenian women

An artist's depiction of the atrocities unleashed on Armenian women during the forced deportations



The forced deportation of the women, children, and elderly left alive after the genocide against Armenian men gave rise to some of the most hellish scenes in recorded history. Some Armenian women and children were offered the alternative of conversion to Islam and subsequent slavery in Turkish homes, but it is generally held that only a thousand or so accepted. The rest were driven from their homeland at bayonet-point, and forced to run a vicious gauntlet of soldiers and marauding tribes people. "Women who lagged behind were bayoneted on the road, or

pushed over precipices, or over bridges," writes the historian Arnold Toynbee (quoted in Leo Kuper, *Genocide*, p. 111). Morgenthau offers an unforgettable description of their torment:

The whole course of the journey became a perpetual struggle with the Moslem inhabitants. Detachments of gendarmes would go ahead, notifying the Kurdish tribes that their victims were approaching, and Turkish peasants were also informed that their long-awaited opportunity had arrived. The Government even opened the prisons and set free the convicts, on the understanding that they should behave



like good Moslems to the approaching Armenians. Thus every caravan had a continuous battle for existence with several classes of enemies -- their accompanying gendarmes, the Turkish peasants and villagers, the Kurdish tribes and bands of Chétés or brigands. And we must always keep in mind that the men who might have defended these wayfarers had nearly all been killed or forced into the army as workmen, and that the exiles themselves had been systematically deprived of all weapons before the journey began. ... Such as escaped ... attacks in the open would find new terrors awaiting them in the Moslem villages. Here the Turkish roughs would fall upon the women, leaving them sometimes dead from their experiences or sometimes ravingly insane. After spending a night in a hideous encampment of this kind, the exiles, or such as had survived, would start again the next morning. The ferocity of the gendarmes apparently increased as the journey lengthened, for they seemed almost to resent the fact that part of their charges continued to live. Frequently any one who dropped on the road was bayoneted on the spot. The Armenians began to die by hundreds from hunger

and thirst. Even when they came to rivers, the gendarmes, merely to torment them, would sometimes not let them drink. The hot sun of the desert burned their scantily clothed bodies, and their bare feet, treading the hot sand of the desert, became so sore that thousands fell and died or were killed where they lay. Thus, in a few days, what had been a procession of normal human beings became a stumbling horde of dust-covered skeletons, ravenously looking for scraps of food, eating any offal that came their way, crazed by the hideous sights that filled every hour of their existence, sick with all the diseases that accompany such hardships and privations, but still prodded on and on by the whips and clubs and bayonets of their executioners.

The passage of rivers, and especially of the Euphrates, was always an occasion of wholesale murder," writes Toynbee. Morgenthau notes that "In a loop of the river near Erzinghan ... the thousands of dead bodies created such a barrage that the Euphrates changed its course for about a hundred yards.

Starving Armenian woman and child after reaching "refuge."



The end result of these torments was standardly near-total extermination. Morgenthau describes a typical convoy consisting of "18,000 souls," of whom "just 150 women and children reached their destination. A few of the rest, the most attractive, were still living as captives of the Kurds and Turks; all the rest were dead." "The last survivors often staggered into Aleppo [Syria] naked," writes Toynbee; "every shred of their clothing had been torn from them on the way. Witnesses who saw their arrival remark that there was not one young or pretty face to be seen among them, and there was assuredly none surviving that was truly old ..."

Their suffering was not over: many who had survived the earlier rampage starved to death or died of disease in the squalid camps established in Syria and Mesopotamia (Iraq). Massacres of Armenians by Turks continued even after the final defeat of the empire in 1918-19, with the Turkish invasion of the independent Republic of Armenia (see below).

Whatever crimes the most perverted instincts of the human mind can devise, and whatever refinements of persecution and injustice the most debased imagination can conceive, became the daily misfortunes of this devoted people," Morgenthau summarized. "I am confident that the whole history of the human race contains no such horrible episode as this. The great massacres of the past seem almost insignificant when compared with the sufferings of the Armenian race in 1915.

Although the bulk of the slaughter was carried out in 1915, large scale massacres of Armenians continued until the end of World War I and even afterward. "In the last months of the war between 50,000 and 100,000 Armenians were massacred by Turkish troops in the various Caucasus campaigns. To this figure must be added the results of genocidal actions taken by Turkish nationalist forces in Cilicia [the Mediterranean region of southeastern Turkey] ... after the Mudros Armistice (October 30, 1918)." (Graber, *Caravans to Oblivion*, p. 148.)

How many died?

Morgenthau, working with limited information, claimed that "at least 600,000 people" had been killed in the genocide, "and perhaps as many as 1,000,000." Modern estimates tend to be higher, ranging from 1.1 to 1.8 million killed out of about 2.5 million Armenians alive in the Ottoman lands at the onset of the slaughter in 1915. As a proportion of population, it is believed that between half and three-quarters of all Ottoman Armenians died in the genocide. This is a death rate comparable to the Jewish holocaust, in which some two-thirds of European Jews were killed.

Who was responsible?

Primary responsibility for the genocide must rest with the trio of Enver Pasha, Cemal Pasha, and Talat Pasha, who dominated the Central Committee of the "Young Turk" government and planned the systematic extermination and expulsion of the Armenian population. At the ground-level, however, the genocide was carried out by many thousands of Turkish officers and soldiers, along with ordinary citizens (including Kurdish tribespeople) who saw the persecution of the Armenians as an ideal opportunity for plunder, rape, and kidnapping. The Armenians' status as a religious minority, and their reputation for higher levels of education and wealth than many other groups in the Ottoman Empire, made them the target of popular hatred and envy. The comparison with the position and fate of Jews in Germany and the Nazi-occupied territories is inescapable. As the [Knights of Vartan Armenian Research Center](#) has pointed out, there are in fact profound similarities between the Armenian and Jewish genocides. "Both people adhere to an ancient religion. Both were religious minorities of their respective states. Both have a history of persecution. ... Both are talented and creative minorities who have been persecuted out of envy and obscurantism."

The aftermath

Turkey's defeat in World War I, and the consequent collapse of the Ottoman Empire, offered surviving Armenians an opportunity for national self-realization. In 1918, an independent Republic of Armenia was declared. U.S. President Woodrow Wilson was granted the right to draw up the boundaries of a new Armenian nation, formalized at the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920. However, the Turkish government, under nationalist leader Kemal Ataturk, rapidly renounced the Treaty. In collusion with the newly-created Soviet Union, the Turks invaded Armenia and reconquered six of the former western Ottoman provinces granted to Armenia under the Treaty, along with the Armenian provinces of Kars and Ardahan. What remained of Armenia was swallowed up by the invading Soviet armies. After a brief period of cooperation with Armenian nationalist forces, the Soviets took complete control in 1921, and Armenia was incorporated into the Transcaucasian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (SFSR) in 1922. A separate Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic was created in 1936. The Armenian Communist Party was the only political party permitted to function under Soviet rule, which remained in place until 1991, when Armenians overwhelmingly voted for secession from the collapsing USSR. In the late 1980s, the boundary established between Armenia and Soviet Azerbaijan became the subject of bitter conflict, as Armenians fought to unite the predominantly Armenian enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh with the new Armenian republic. A cease fire was signed in 1994, but the enclave remains one of the "hot spots" of the volatile Caucasus region.



For many decades, the horrors inflicted upon the Armenian people were little-known in the outside world. Indeed, the Nazis' genocide against [the Jews](#), the Poles, and others may have been facilitated by the "memory hole" into which the Armenians had fallen. "Who today remembers the extermination of the Armenians?" mused Adolf Hitler in 1939, as he ordered a merciless assault on the civilian population of occupied Poland.

In recent decades, fortunately, the lie has been put to Hitler's rhetorical question. Armenian scholars and activists, joined by numerous sympathizers around the world, have worked to research and publicize the genocide, and to gather the testimony of survivors before they pass from the earth. Gradually, much of the outside world has acknowledged the scale and character of the slaughter. The European Parliament in 1987 voted in favour of recognizing the Armenian Genocide, as did the Russian parliament in 1994. Also in 1994, Israel, after decades of state-sponsored suppression of the facts of the genocide (which was felt to distract from the "exceptional" character of the Jewish holocaust), informally recognized that the fate of the Armenians "was not war," but "certainly massacre and genocide, something the world must remember," in the words of Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin.

The major exception to the rule, predictably, is Turkey. In the brief interim (1918-20) between the Ottoman collapse and the ascendancy of the nationalist Ataturk regime, the Turkish government did hold trials for dozens of accused war-criminals, but only fifteen death sentences were passed, and only three insignificant actors actually executed. (The three main organizers of the genocide were subsequently killed -- Enver Pasha while leading an anti-Bolshevik revolt in Turkestan in 1922, and Cemal Pasha and Talat Pasha by Armenian assassination squads, who tracked them down to deliver summary justice.) The Ataturk government effectively cancelled the court-martial process (Ataturk himself claiming that the Armenians killed were "victims of foreign intrigues" and guilty of abusing "the privileges granted them"). (For more on the trials, see Vahakn Dadrian, ["The Turkish Military Tribunal's Prosecution of the Authors of the Armenian Genocide"](#), *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 11: 1 [Spring 1997].)

Since the early 1920s, successive Turkish governments have maintained an ostentatious silence on the subject, broken only to issue denials that the genocide ever occurred, and denunciations of those who assert that it did. In 1990, for example, the Turkish ambassador to the U.S. dismissed the holocaust as resulting from "a tragic civil war initiated by Armenian nationalists." The Turkish government has also devoted millions of dollars to a propaganda campaign aimed at western universities and a handful of compliant scholars. (See Amy Magaro Rubin, ["Critics Accuse Turkish Government of Manipulating Scholarship"](#), *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 27 October 1995.) They have had support from NATO and other western countries, which view Turkey as a linchpin of "stability" in the Near East. In the United States, for example, "conforming to Turkey's wishes, all congressional resolutions to recognize the Armenian Genocide have been opposed by the Reagan, Bush and Clinton administrations, and all such resolutions have thus far been defeated." (Levon Chorbajian, "Introduction," in Levon Chorbajian and George Shirinian, eds., *Studies in Comparative Genocide*, p. xxvi.)

As **Stanley Cohen** of Hebrew University in Jerusalem puts it:

The nearest successful example [of "collective denial"] in the modern era is the 80 years of official denial by successive Turkish governments of the 1915-17 genocide against the Armenians in which some 1.5 million people lost their lives. This denial has been sustained by deliberate propaganda, lying and cover-ups, forging documents, suppression of

archives, and bribing scholars. The West, especially the United States, has colluded by not referring to the massacres in the United Nations, ignoring memorial ceremonies, and surrendering to Turkish pressure in NATO and other strategic arenas of cooperation.

http://www.gendercide.org/case_armenia.html

Selected Recent and Forthcoming Publications by Adam Jones

Web posted 12/19/02

Books

Beyond the Barricades: Nicaragua and the Struggle for the Sandinista Press, 1979-1998.

Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2002.

The Press in Transition: A Comparative Study of Nicaragua, South Africa, Jordan, and Russia.

Hamburg: German Overseas Institute, 2002.

Genocide, War Crimes, and the West: Ending the Culture of Impunity. (Editor),

Forthcoming from Zed Books, London, 2003.

The Gendercide Papers. (Editor), Currently under review by Vanderbilt University Press.

Privatizing Violence: Paramilitaries, Death Squads, and Warlords in Latin America. Under provisional contract to Ohio University Press for publication in 2005.

Articles, Book Chapters, and Reviews

"*The Politics of Genocide*" (Review Article). *International Studies Review*, 4: 1 (Spring 2002), pp.129-39.

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