
The Armenian Genocide, 1915

Uğur Ümit Üngör

‘Either the Armenians would eliminate the Turks or the Turks would eliminate the Armenians. I didn’t hesitate for one moment when confronted with this dilemma. My Turkish identity won out over my profession. I thought: we must destroy them before they destroy us. If you ask me how I as a doctor could commit murder, my answer is simple: the Armenians had become dangerous microbes in the body of this country. And surely it is a doctor’s duty to kill bacteria?’¹

Dr Mehmed Reshid (1873-1919), Governor of Diyarbekir during the genocide

‘The Turkish government began deporting the Armenian community in Sivas in convoys. Each neighbourhood was given a certain date for leaving. On the first day I watched in amazement at the crowds waiting to be deported, an endless throng of people stretching from one end of the street to the other. The pushing and shoving of the mules and the creaking of the carts made an ear-deafening noise. Men wearing hats to protect them from the sun walked alongside the carts, followed by women wearing white head scarves. Each had a task: one person was holding the cart, another the reins of the mule and yet another was watching over the family possessions. The children walked on either side of their parents as if they were setting off on a pleasant journey. At each end of the caravan rode mounted Turkish policemen, leading and controlling the convoy. The Turkish neighbours watched the spectacle from their windows. The streets were packed with Turkish children who ran alongside the caravan calling us names, giving the occasional prod to a mule or throwing stones at us.’²

Shahen Derderian (1907-1984), Sivas genocide survivor

Introduction

In the early 20th century, the Ottoman Empire stretched across three continents. It was largely an agricultural society, the Sultan's reign was far from absolute and in some remote regions local rulers enjoyed a comparatively large degree of autonomy. At the height of its power the empire counted 29 provinces, each subdivided into towns and cities, districts and villages. Ottoman society included a huge diversity of ethnic and religious groups, who based their identity largely on their religious convictions: people were viewed first and foremost as Muslim, Jew or Christian.

The Ottoman Armenians formed a mixed community: a rich Armenian trader in Istanbul may have spoken several languages and travelled abroad frequently, whereas a poor Armenian peasant from one of the villages in Eastern Anatolia may only have spoken Armenian and barely travelled at all. Most Armenians were Apostolic Christians, although in some cities they were Protestant or Catholic. Armenians lived mainly in the eastern provinces, in a huge area stretching from Sivas in the west to Van in the east, and from Trabzon in the north to Aleppo in the south. In this territory they lived side by side with Kurds, Turks, Arabs and others.

Just before the First World War there were around two million Christian Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire. In the spring of 1915, the Ottoman government initiated measures which signalled the start of the persecution of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. By the end of the First World War only a fraction of the pre-war Armenian community was left in the region and today there are hardly any Armenians living in the Anatolian interior. These bare facts sum up the complex history of the Armenian genocide in a nutshell.

1. Historical background

The Ottoman Empire reached the height of its power in the 16th and 17th centuries, when it grew from a small principedom to become the single most important state in the Mediterranean and the Near East. However, external pressure from Western imperialism combined with internal turmoil caused by separatist movements put an end to the empire's growth. Technological innovation and economic development allowed Western Europe to surpass the Ottoman Empire both economically and in terms of military power. The most significant Western concept to find its way into the Ottoman Empire was undoubtedly that of nationalism. The number of nationalist parties in the empire grew rapidly and nationalism went on to become the most serious problem in Ottoman domestic politics.

The decline of the Ottoman Empire

The Ottoman Empire began to lose territory rapidly. In 1821 Greece unilaterally declared independence from the Empire, followed in 1875 by Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia, and Moldavia. After the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878, the Ottoman Empire was forced to grant independence to Serbia, Romania and Montenegro as well as some degree of autonomy to Bulgaria. In 1882, Great Britain occupied first Cyprus and then Egypt. The remainder of

Ottoman North Africa was lost between 1830 and 1912, as France occupied Algeria in 1830 and Tunisia in 1881, and Italy invaded Libya in 1912.³

The Ottoman Armenians made considerable economic progress throughout the 19th century. The Armenian financial and industrial elite and the urban middle classes and skilled craftsmen were treated relatively mildly by the Ottoman government. The economic elite financed social organisations such as schools, hospitals and charities. Armenians became imperial architects, armourers, watchmakers and cabinet makers; they were responsible for the Imperial Mint, the cannon and shipbuilding industries, and they dominated trade. Armenian businesses based in Istanbul successfully branched out to European cities such as Marseille and Manchester. As a result of this renaissance the Armenian elite gained economic power, although no political power.

Armenian economic superiority

Of the 166 Ottoman importers, 141 were Armenian and 13 Turkish.

Of the 9,800 shopkeepers and craftsmen, 6,800 were Armenian and 2,550 were Turkish.

Of the 150 exporters, 127 were Armenian and 23 Turkish.

Of the 153 industrialists, 130 were Armenian and 20 were Turkish.

Of the 37 bankers throughout the country, no fewer than 32 were Armenian.

Krikor Zohrab, Armenian parliamentarian and writer, 1913

This disparate economic development and modernisation led to envy on the part of the Ottoman Turks. The Turkish political elite in Istanbul in particular took exception to the success of the Armenian merchants.⁴

The decline of the Ottoman Empire led to major political strife. The autocratic Sultan Abdulhamid II (1842-1918) enforced a policy of centralisation, which provoked feelings of radicalism and separatism. This radicalism pervaded every level of society and education. Ottoman intellectuals disseminated European nationalistic theories at military, political and medical educational institutions. In 1889, the resulting generation of well-educated public servants and military cadets established the Committee of Union and Progress (*İttihad ve Terakki Cemiyeti*, CUP). The goal of this illegal committee was to restore the constitution of 1876. Most of these Young Turks (*Jeunes Turcs*) lived in Paris, spreading propaganda against the Sultan. Major CUP members were party leader Mehmed Talaat (1874-1921), Major İsmail Enver (1881-1922), and activist Dr Bahaeddin Shakir (1874-1922).⁵

2. Ideology

The ideology of the CUP represented three main streams: Ottomanism, Islamism and Turkism. This trichotomy was formulated by historian Yusuf Akçura (1876-1935) who, in 1904, wrote the influential manifesto *Three Types of Politics*. In this pamphlet Akçura stated that the Ottoman



Ismail Enver Pasha
Source: Armenian Genocide Museum Institute

political elite was standing on the threshold of rejecting Ottomanism and Islamism: the first through religious discord, the second through the well-developed nationalism among non-Turkish Muslims such as Albanians. Akçura's conclusion was that people should accept Turkish nationalism as their guiding ideological principle. He found these thoughts echoed in the work of Ziyâ Gökalp (1876-1924), a sociologist who wrote a great deal about Turkish nationalism throughout his career. His most important writings cover the Turkification of the Ottoman Empire, for example in the fields of language, religion, public life, ethics and economy. In his articles and poems, Gökalp extolled the virtues of Turkish culture and history in particular and expressed open hostility towards non-Turkish sections of the population.

The decline of the state radicalised both the internal political culture and the ideology of the CUP. One of the most radical factions developed a profoundly ethnic Turkish nationalism driven by a collective hatred of Armenians.⁶



Territorial Modifications in the Balkans

Source: *The Other Balkan Wars: A 193 Carnegie Endowment Inquiry in Retrospect*, George F. Kennan (Washington, DC; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1993), p. 70

3. Causes of the genocide

The genocide of the Ottoman Armenians was the result of three important factors: the loss of the Balkan War and territory in 1912-1913, the coup by the Young Turks of 23 January 1913, and the start of the First World War.

On 17 October 1912, Serbia, Montenegro, Greece and Bulgaria declared war on the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman army was unprepared and ill-equipped to fight. Following the Bulgarian offensive in November 1913, the Ottoman army retreated to the trenches 30 kilometres west of Istanbul. The attack was repelled and the capital Istanbul remained under Ottoman control. Further fighting led to the complete and permanent loss of the Balkan Peninsula. The Treaty of London, signed on 30 May 1913, was regarded as a watershed for the Ottoman Empire. It had a deep and traumatic impact on Ottoman society. The loss of major Ottoman cities, personal possessions and human life, and the dismay regarding the inadequacy of the army had wounded the

50 pride of the Ottoman elite. Ottoman society, culture and identity had been dealt a heavy blow. From 1913 onwards, nationalists felt that the idea of a unified 'Ottoman' identity was no longer realistic. The war had also reinforced the myth of a 'stab in the back' by the Ottoman Christians. Tensions mounted among politicians, with the CUP launching provocations, accusations, curses and threats at Ottoman Bulgarians, Greeks and Armenians in Parliament.

Revanchism

The loss of the Balkan War brought a culture of revanchism. In a letter to his wife on 8 May 1913, Enver wrote: 'If I could only tell you about the atrocities committed by the enemy... at just a stone's throw from Istanbul, then you would understand what is going on in the minds of Muslims far away. Yet our anger is growing: revenge, revenge, revenge, there is no other word for it!'⁷

A second milestone was the coup by the Young Turks of 23 January 1913. The Young Turks, never elected to power, used a violent coup to install a dictator. Parliament was forced into silence, members of the opposition were intimidated or killed, and the Young Turks muscled their way into the Ottoman state bureaucracy. The foundations of their rule lay in a brutal war. The coup led to a concentration of power in which the Young Turks transformed the multi-ethnic Ottoman society into a homogenous Turkish nation state. The new regime was not widely supported by the population and any danger of a counter-revolution was warded off by sheer violence.⁸

The Young Turk regime that ruled from 1913 until 1918 comprised a circle of around 50 men led by the 'duo' Talaat and Enver. Local party barons and Young Turk provincial governors were quite influential on a national level. There was intense rivalry within the Young Turk dictatorship, particularly between Enver as military commander and Talaat as head of the civilian administration. These rivalries would later influence the course of the Armenian genocide.

However, the most important trigger for the genocide was the start of the First World War. On 2 August 1914, one day after Germany had declared war on Russia, Germany and the Ottoman Empire signed an agreement for close collaboration and mobilisation. On 29 October 1914, without an official declaration of war, Enver ordered the Ottoman Navy to shell the Russian coast, upon which the allied states declared war on the Ottoman Empire. From 11 November 1914, the Ottoman Empire was officially at war with Russia, France and Great Britain.

The Young Turks had deliberately engineered an armed confrontation. This war of aggression was part of their strategy to achieve long-lasting security and economic development and eventually national recovery. In other words, the CUP hoped that participation in the war would offer a radical solution to the problems of the Empire.⁹

Nonetheless, the Ottoman Army suffered heavy losses. Driven by ambition and expansionism, Enver launched a number of invasions, with catastrophic results. He attributed these disasters

to 'Armenian betrayal'. From January 1915 onwards, the Armenians were used as a scapegoat: Turkish-nationalistic propaganda accused the Armenians of treason, called for a boycott of Armenian businesses and spread horror stories of alleged crimes by Armenian activists. Armenian newspapers were shut down and prominent Armenians arrested. The more hopeless the war became, the more radical the persecution of the Armenians.¹⁰

4. Nature and course of the genocide

The Armenian genocide was a consistent process of destruction, with mass executions, dispossession, deportation, forced assimilation, state-induced famine and destruction of material culture.

The mass executions of the economic, religious, political and intellectual elite resulted in a 'beheading' of Armenian society. The large-scale razzia in Istanbul on 24 April 1915 became a blueprint for the rounding up of the Armenian elite — middle-aged and elderly men with influence, wealth and status — living in the many cities across the vast empire. They were arrested, imprisoned, tortured and finally murdered. The destruction of the Armenian intelligentsia proceeded at a staggering pace: the entire higher echelon of the community was eliminated in a matter of weeks.¹¹

Executed in public square
Source: Armenian National Institute

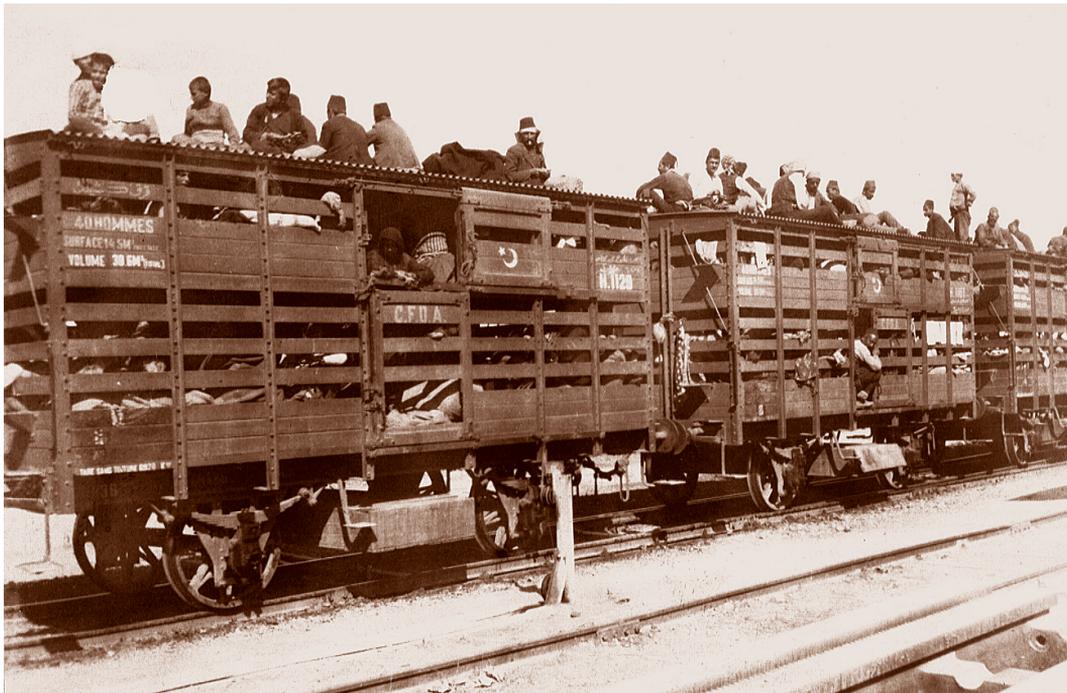


Mass murder in Diyarbekir

On Sunday 30 May 1915, the entire Armenian elite — 636 dignitaries including the bishop — in the south-eastern city of Diyarbekir was handcuffed and taken to the Tigris by members of the militia. Once they reached the river they were loaded onto large rafts, supposedly for transportation to the south. The militia sailed the notables downstream to a gorge where they moored the rafts. The victims were robbed of their money and taken away in groups of six, then stripped of all clothing and valuables and murdered by men recruited by the governor, using axes, daggers and guns. The bodies were then dumped into the river.

The Armenian genocide represents one of the foremost examples of asset transfer — economic dispossession — in modern history. The Young Turk government passed new laws providing for the annexation of Armenian businesses and trades. On 10 June 1915, the government passed a law establishing the Abandoned Property Commission (*Emval-ı Metruke Komisyonu*) which was tasked with organising the daily carrying out of seizures. This was a full-frontal attack on the Armenian economy, as all Armenian property was now officially transferred to the state. A new

Deportation of the Armenians on the Baghdad railway
Source: Armenian Genocide Museum Institute



law followed on 26 September 1915 which delegated the implementation of the seizures to the Ministries of Internal Affairs, Justice and Finance, who would keep a detailed overview. Law was an instrument of power for the Young Turks, as these two laws gave them access to vast economic resources, including properties, factories, workshops and studios. These measures led to mass poverty among the Armenians.

Robbery

'Leave all your belongings – your furniture, your bedding, your artefacts. Close your shops and businesses with everything inside. Your doors will be sealed with special stamps. On your return, you will get everything you left behind. Do not sell property or any expensive item. Buyers and sellers alike will be liable for legal action. Put your money in a bank in the name of a relative who is out of the country. Make a list of everything you own, including livestock, and give it to the specified official so that all your things can be returned to you later. You have ten days to comply with this ultimatum.'¹²

Government notice displayed in public places in Kayseri, 15 June 1915

On 23 May 1915, Talaat gave the official order for the final deportation of the entire Armenian population. Some Armenians had already been isolated from their settlements by deportation, and this new order led to the deportation of virtually all Armenians to the inhospitable Syrian desert city of Der el-Zor. In an attempt to camouflage the deportations as legal, Talaat drew up the temporary 'Dispatchment and Settlement Law'. This law came into force on 29 May, although deportations had already begun. The daily administration for the deportations was transferred to the Directorate for the Settlement of Tribes and Immigrants (*İskân-ı Aşâir ve Muhacirîn Müdüriyeti*), under the authority of the army. Talaat was kept informed of progress via telegraph correspondence and the assistance of local officials.¹³

These measures led to the mobilisation of a huge peasant population which lived for the most part in the Anatolian countryside. Some Armenians had a few days to get ready to leave, while others received just a few hours' notice.

Deportation from Erzurum

In early 1915, 40,000 Armenians living in the city of Erzurum were deported to Der el-Zor. The German Consul in Erzurum reported in no uncertain terms that the deportation would end in 'an absolute extermination' (*eine absolute Ausrottung*). And indeed, many Armenians had already died or were seriously weakened even before the convoy from Erzurum had reached the provincial border. Once they reached the city of Kemah the survivors of the march were slaughtered and their bodies thrown into the Euphrates. The total number of Armenians from Erzurum that actually reached Der el-Zor was probably less than 200, a destruction rate of 99.3 percent.

WSB TELEGRAM RECEIVED GREEN CIPHER

1143
From Constantinople
Dated July 31, 1915,
August 3, 10 AM.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE
AUG 3 1915
SECRETARY AUG 3 1915
DIVISION OF
EASTERN AFFAIRS
Amad Aug. 4th
Falses

Secretary of State,
Washington.

893, July 31, 5 p m.
**67.4016/74* *67.4016/74*
My 841 and 858. Doctor Lepsius,

President of German-Orient Mission which main-
tains six Armenian orphan asylums in Turkey, has
information from reliable source that Armenian
mostly women and children, deported from the
Erzerum district, have been massacred near
Kemakh between Erzizinghan and Harput. Similar re-
ports comes from other sources showing that but
few of these unfortunate people will ever reach
their stated destination. Their lot inexpress-
sibly pitiable. The Doctor proposes to submit
matter to International Red cross for common
action to try to induce Germany to demand cessa-
tion of these horrors. He earnestly requests
access to information Embassy has on file. Will
give him if department has no objection.

MORGENTHAU,
American Ambassador

INDEX BUREAU
68/7104/98
33

Deciphered by

Index 82-10, 21.

Message from the American
ambassador Morgenthau on the
deportations from Ezurum, 31
July 1915
Source: Armenian National
Institute

By July 1915, the entire Armenian population had been uprooted, bound for the Syrian desert. In some cases people had to travel over 1,000 kilometres through the scorching heat of the merciless Eastern Anatolian summer, which proved a death sentence for many. Moreover, the Young Turk leaders were well aware that the chances of survival in the desert of the Der el-Zor region were virtually nil. For children, the elderly and pregnant women in particular the deportations were nothing less than death marches.¹⁴

When reaching the Syrian desert, they found nothing had been arranged for them. In early 1916, there was a famine in Der el-Zor, to which the Young Turk authorities remained indifferent. In the summer of 1916 Talaat even decided too many Armenians had survived the journey to Der el-Zor, and he instructed his district governor to herd thousands of Armenians into caves and kill them.



Armenian orphans collected in the desert of Der el-Zor, 1919
Source: Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute

Another important aspect of the destruction of the Ottoman Armenians was the forced loss of identity. Women and children had to renounce their Christian faith and convert to Islam, as part of a large-scale attack on Armenian culture. Numerous women and children were abducted during the deportations and forced to convert. In cities like Konya and Beirut, Armenian children were placed in huge Muslim orphanages where they were given Turkish names and were only allowed to speak Turkish. As a result, many forgot their Armenian identity. The abductions and conversions were aimed at marginalising the Armenians and eradicating their culture and collective identity.¹⁵

Finally, the material culture of the Armenians was obliterated. The Young Turks damaged and destroyed Armenian churches and removed Armenian inscriptions from buildings. This destruction was aimed at eliminating all traces of Armenian cultural and religious life from the Ottoman

56 Empire. Many medieval Armenian monasteries, such as Narekavank, Varakavank, Arakelots Vank, Surp Garabed and Surp Khach were demolished by the Young Turk regime. The destruction served a dual purpose: it made it appear that the Armenians had never existed, while ensuring that survivors, if any, had nothing to return to.

All traces wiped out

In 1914 the Armenian community owned 2,600 churches, 450 monasteries, and 2,000 schools. At the end of the war, roughly 3,000 Armenian settlements (villages, towns, neighbourhoods) had been depopulated, their inhabitants wiped out. Today there are hardly any Armenians living in Turkey, except in Istanbul. The present Armenian community has six churches, but not a single school or monastery remains.¹⁶

5. Perpetrators, victims, bystanders

5.1 Perpetrators

The most important perpetrators in the process of the genocide were the Ottoman Turks and Kurds, which included highly educated intellectuals as well as labourers and unemployed illiterates. Talaat, leader of the Young Turk party and Minister of Home Affairs, engineered the genocide, rationalising it by accusing the Armenians collectively of high treason, sabotage and disloyalty. In 1916 he published a four-volume book entitled *The Armenian Aspirations and Revolutionary Movements*.¹⁷ This book contains manipulated photographs of alleged Armenian ‘terrorists’ in each city of the Ottoman Empire. Every photograph tells the same story: Ottoman policemen and Young Turk paramilitaries gathered behind a group of Armenian men who, with heads bowed, are standing in front of a pile of guns and bombs. And the caption invariably reads: ‘Armenian revolutionaries arrested with their weapons’. The lies spread by the Young Turks and supported by the German department for war propaganda were influential and are still disseminated and believed by many people today.

Talaat’s true motives were ideological and pragmatic, and he had both material and immaterial interests. In a confidential conversation with the German Consul he admitted that ‘the Ottoman government intends to use the Great War to effectively do away with its internal enemies, the indigenous Christians of every denomination, without being disturbed by foreign diplomatic intervention’. In internal secret correspondence Talaat left it in no doubt that the purpose of the genocide was to ‘Turkify’ Anatolia by driving out all Armenians.

Talaat was quite clear to the American Ambassador Henry Morgenthau about his intentions:

‘I have asked you to come today so that I can explain our position on the whole of the Armenian subject. We base our objections to the Armenians on three distinct grounds.

In the first place they have enriched themselves at the expense of Turks. In the second place they are determined to domineer over us and to establish a separate state. In the third place they have openly encouraged our enemies. They have assisted the Russians in the Caucasus and our failure there is largely explained by their actions. We have therefore come to the irrevocable decision that we shall make them powerless before this war is ended... It is no use for you to argue, we have already disposed of three quarters of the Armenians; there are none at all left in Bitlis, Van and Erzurum. The hatred between the Turks and the Armenians is now so intense that we have got to finish with them. If we don't, they will plan their revenge... We care nothing about the commercial loss. We have figured all that out and know that it will not exceed five million Turkish Lira. We don't worry about that. I have asked you to come here so as to let you know that our Armenian policy is absolutely fixed and that nothing can change it. We will not have the Armenians anywhere in Anatolia... No Armenian can be our friend after what we have done to them.'¹⁸

5.2 Victims

Throughout their history the Armenians suffered periods of persecution, and many Armenians saw the genocide as yet another 'regular' Ottoman pogrom. The victims of the genocide came from various classes, areas and backgrounds and had a wide political and ethnic diversity. Internal unity was never a characteristic of the Armenian community. For this reason the genocide remained incomprehensible to many: many intellectuals who were arrested on 24 April 1915 wondered what they had in common with their fellow detainees. One of the few Armenians who did foresee the catastrophe was the journalist Aram Andonian (1875-1952). In 1913 he wrote that the ethnic nationalism as practised in the Balkans would bring nothing but misery.¹⁹

The description and definition of the target group of the genocide was continually being changed and adapted. Initially, Talaat ordered the deportation of the Apostolic Armenians. As the summer of 1915 progressed there was some confusion as to the definition of an Armenian. This led to the inclusion of Protestant and Catholic Armenians in the group to be persecuted, followed later even by Armenians who had converted to Islam. The Armenian identity was radicalised. The destruction became targeted at the abstract identity of the group: eventually every Armenian, whether loyal or disloyal, political or apolitical, was a target and a potential victim. This is what makes the destruction of the Armenians genocide.

5.3 Bystanders

The most important bystanders in the country itself were Turks and Kurds, who were involved both as collaborators and rebels. There was little ideological background to the Kurdish participation — the Armenians had even helped the Kurds in their struggle against Turkish national-

58 ism. Opportunism, incitement and coercion lay at the foundation of their participation in the genocide. Kurds received payment for providing information to the Young Turk elite about Armenians who had gone into hiding. However, the Kurd sheikhs explicitly condemned the bloodshed. Government-appointed imams also encouraged Muslims to murder Armenians. The propaganda extended to pseudo-Islamic rhetoric stating that a heavenly reward awaited all who killed Armenians. Many uneducated peasants and naive believers were swayed by this religiously inspired hate speech.²⁰

There were also foreign eyewitnesses to the genocide. The initial response of the international community was one of shock and incredulity and there were vehement protests against the events. The wave of persecutions in the spring of 1915 prompted the allies to make a joint declaration condemning the massacres. The declaration criticised the ‘crimes of Turkey against humanity and civilization’ and promised ‘that they will hold personally responsible [...] all members of the Ottoman government and those of their agents who are implicated in such massacres’.²¹

During the war England published the *Blue Book*, a collection of eyewitness accounts of the treatment of Armenians. The book was anonymised to protect the people involved, and for this reason it was condemned as anti-Turkish propaganda. Later, the original version with a long list of names and no blanks was discovered in the British archives. In 2005, an unabridged edition of the collection was published.²²

Germans and Austrians could move about freely and had privileged access to military zones where normal citizens were not allowed. Consequently, their confidential internal consular reports on the Ottomans may well provide the most truthful account of daily events. The German response to the Armenian genocide was ambivalent. Within German politics there was tension between the elite, whose task it was to serve the larger military interests, and lower-ranking soldiers and officials who were directly confronted with the atrocities. German soldiers and consuls regularly spoke of *Ausrottung*, *Vernichtungspolitik*, and *Rassenmord* (eradication, policy of destruction and race murder). The Austrian officer Pomiankowski called the genocide ‘*die Ausrottung einer ganzen Nation*’ (the eradication of an entire nation). The Austro-Hungarian ambassador Johann von Pallavicini (1848-1941) called the genocide ‘*eine gänzliche Ausrottung*’ (a total eradication) and a ‘*Politik der Exterminierung*’ (policy of extermination).

In the autumn of 1915 a group of around 50 Germans responded to the genocide by signing a joint petition putting pressure on the German government. The petition argued that the genocide had caused serious damage and urged the German government to stop and prevent deportations. The petition made mention of economic arguments, humanitarian principles and the reputation of Germany. However, German military and political leaders considered the alliance with Turkey too important and merely voiced a few half-hearted internal protests against Talaat and Enver.²³

The United States maintained a neutral position until 1917, and their consuls in the major cities

№ 44.

ЕЖЕНЕДЕЛЬНЫЙ ЖУРНАЛЪ

Цѣна 20 к

АРМЯНСКІЙ ВѢСТНИКЪ

27 Ноября.

ГОДЪ ИЗДАНІЯ I^{ый}

1916г.

ЖЕРТВЫ ТУРЕЦКИХЪ ЗВѢРСТВЪ.



Трупы армянъ.

МОСКВА.

Weekly Journal, Moscow, 27 November 1916. 'Victims of Turkish cruelties'

witnessed the deportation from the beginning to the end. The American Consul in Harput, for example, wrote a weighty and damning report following field work in the region, and Ambassador Henry Morgenthau wrote about the genocide in his diaries and memoirs. On 16 July 1915, Morgenthau reported to Washington that 'harrowing reports of eyewitnesses suggest that a *campaign of race extermination* is in progress under a pretext of reprisal against rebellion'.

American interests in the Ottoman Empire ran from diplomacy and commerce to charity, Christian missions and education. The genocide effectively destroyed their infrastructure: Armenian business and institutions were confiscated, consulates lost skilled personnel, businesses lost investors and board members, banks lost customers and staff and educational institutions lost their teachers. The Americans withdrew from the Ottoman Empire in 1917 and it would be many years before they would once again enter into diplomatic relations with Turkey.²⁴

Essentially, it was in the interest of the major powers to continue their business relations



Armenian looking at the human remains at Der el-Zor, 1916
Source: Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute

with the Armenians. However, the impact of the genocide was overwhelming. The Germans were the first to realise this and decided that at the very least, their own interests must not be compromised. After the war, the Americans, French and British forgot their Armenian business partners, rushing to the new Turkey to safeguard their economic interests. On the whole, the efforts of these states were driven by self-interest: they demanded compensation for their financial losses resulting from the genocide and regarded the wholesale destruction of the Armenians as 'regretful'.

6. The survivors

Some Armenians managed to escape the mass destruction. Besides good luck, there were a number of factors that determined their chance of success in surviving the genocide: bribery, conversion, going into hiding, or fleeing.

To start with, bribing the perpetrators was one way of delaying deportation or escaping abuse or murder. Vahram Dadrian (1900-1948) was a boy of 14 when he was deported from the Ankara region. In his diary he describes how time and time again his family managed to survive by using bribes on the long journey. By the time they arrived in Syria they had virtually nothing left, and the once-prosperous Dadrian family was now quite destitute.²⁵

In the spring of 1915 it was still possible to escape deportation by converting to Islam. Henry Vartanian, an Armenian from Sivas whose father had been murdered, recounted how a Turkish

acquaintance offered shelter to his family during the war, on the condition that they renounce Christianity and spoke the Muslim oath 'There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet'. The ceremony was carried out, during which the Young Harry was ritually circumcised. He continued his life as Abdurrahmanoğlu Esad.²⁶

Many Armenians attempted to go into hiding and wait for the persecutions to pass. Going into hiding involved many risks. The Armenians who thus survived often had to face extreme hardship. Many were tracked down or betrayed and murdered anyway. It was also risky for those offering shelter. The government had sent out a nationwide decree that 'any Muslim harbouring an Armenian would be executed in front of his house and his house burnt down (*bir Ermeniye tesahüp edecek bir Müslümanın hanesi önünde idam ve hanesi ihrak*)'.²⁷

The beginning of the First World War saw a steady flow of refugees on the move, including some 130,000 Armenians who fled to Russia and Persia (now Iran). Among those was the expressionist painter Arshile Gorky (1904-1948), who survived by escaping the country with his mother, first to Russia and then to the United States. After March 1915, escape was no longer possible.

Yet the single most important factor in most survivors' stories was pure chance or luck. Some leading Armenian intellectuals such as Aram Andonian and Michael Shamtanjan (1874-1926) survived the mass executions by a set of coincidences beyond their control. The editor of the liberal newspaper *Zhamanag*, Yervant Odian (1869-1926), for example, escaped the genocide because a Turkish officer in Der el-Zor did not understand his deportation document and sent him back to Anatolia.²⁸

7. Aftermath of the genocide

On 31 October 1918, the string of defeats suffered by the Ottoman Empire resulted in an unconditional surrender. That same night the leaders of the CUP escaped to Odessa in a German submarine, fearing they would be captured and brought to justice. This group comprised Enver, Talaat, Cemal, the doctors Bahaeddin Shakir and Nâzım, and two others. The ensuing power vacuum was filled by the new sultan Mehmet V and the liberals. This new government put an immediate stop to anti-Armenian measures. Deported Armenians could now return to their homes and were compensated for their losses.

During this period the genocide received extensive press coverage and was discussed in parliament. Two estimates from the time put the number of deaths at 800,000 and 1.5 million: by the end of 1918 the liberals acknowledged that 800,000 Armenians had been murdered, while according to Armenian organisations the genocide had claimed 1 to 1.5 million victims. On the basis of later studies it can be stated that the number of deaths in the Armenian genocide of 1915 totalled around 1.2 million.

In 1919, the liberal government established a military tribunal charged with investigating war crimes. Research results from this court martial contain crucial information, including confessions, testimonies and telegrams, which has proved invaluable for historical research. The first

62 series of sessions commenced on 5 February 1919 and the tribunal's final sitting took place on 9 February 1920. Soldiers, eyewitnesses, politicians and Muslim clerics were questioned and 42 official and authenticated documents (telegrams, memoranda, declarations, letters and cross-examinations) were unearthed and presented as evidence. The main charge was 'deportation and murder' (*tehcir ve taktıl*) implicating the entire cabinet including the ministers, the army and the CUP as a political party. The court's final verdict, handed down on 5 July 1919, was that the Young Turk government had engaged in a systematic attempt to bring about the total destruction of the Armenian people. The entire leadership of the CUP was sentenced to death *in absentia*. However, the perpetrators escaped justice because they had fled abroad and because the Young Turks returned to power under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923, driving out the surviving Armenians.²⁹

Even though the genocide took place almost 100 years ago and all the persons involved have since died, the Armenian genocide continues to play an important role in present-day international politics. The Armenian genocide has left a lasting legacy. From the 1960s the Armenian diaspora worldwide has called for recognition and a public discussion of the genocide. The response of succeeding Turkish governments has been one of denial and trivialisation. This politics of denial can be largely traced back to the pamphlet published by Talaat in 1916. According to supporters of this theory, 'only' 300,000 Armenians were killed; the Armenians were guilty of collective high treason against the state; the deportation was a preventative measure of the state to evacuate Armenians from war zones and there was never any question of systematic and deliberate killing, let alone anti-Armenian persecution.

The surviving family members of the victims felt deeply insulted by these politics of denial, which prompted a violent response from Armenian nationalists in the 1970s. Two terrorist organisations shot and killed dozens of Turkish diplomats, leading to a denial by the Turks in even stronger terms.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Armenian Republic had no diplomatic contact with Turkey. American and Swiss attempts at reconciliation stranded on mutual mistrust and hatred. The Turkish-Armenian border remains firmly closed, which has a highly negative impact on the local economy. Moreover, Turkey's entry into the European Union depends in part on the reopening of this border, which in turn also depends on the acknowledgement of the genocide. Time does not always heal: the Armenian genocide is still a key problem in Armenian-Turkish relations.



Genocide Memorial, Yerevan
Source: Wikimedia