

Armenian Genocide

1915 – 1923



The Armenians, a Christian group, had lived in the rugged mountain region of eastern Turkey within the Ottoman Empire for more than a thousand years. The Armenians had grown in size and power over the years. By the mid-1800s, the Ottoman Turks had become fearful about the Armenians' growing independence and were determined to solve the "Armenian Question." In 1908, a new group called the Young Turks overthrew the sultan and took control of the Ottoman Empire. The Young Turks seemed, at first, to reach out to the empire's minorities but then turned on the Armenians. The Young Turks believed the Armenians to be rejecting their rule and culture because Armenians, having never converted to Islam, had their own culture and language.

During World War I, the Ottoman Empire joined forces with Germany and Austria-Hungary against Russia, Serbia, France and England. The Young Turks saw the war as an opportunity to take care of its "Armenian Question" without foreign influence. Some Armenians lived in Russia, just across the Ottoman border and joined the Russian army. The Ottoman Turks feared the Armenians would help the Russian army invade, so in 1915, orders were given to resettle the Armenian people away from the borders. The Turks rounded up most of the military-age men and marched them to a remote location to be murdered. The other men and women were marched in caravans to unknown destinations through deserts with no food or water. Those that didn't die from starvation or heat stroke were killed by bayonet.

Henry Morgenthau, the American ambassador in Constantinople, learned of the atrocities against the Armenians from survivors. In June 1915, Morgenthau wrote to make the U.S. government aware of the situation. Little was done to help the Armenians. Morgenthau spoke with Mehmet Talaat, leader of the Young Turks, about the atrocities to no avail. Other countries, such as France and Great Britain, issued statements declaring these actions "crimes [that were] were committed by Turkey." In 1916, Morgenthau left Constantinople because, he said, "My failure to stop the destruction of the Armenians had made Turkey for me a place of horror."

World War I ended in November 1918, with the defeat of Germany, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire. Out of the 2 million Armenians who lived in the Ottoman Empire at the start of the war, more than 1 million were murdered through actions now termed genocidal. Seven Turkish officials were tried and sentenced to death, but as they had fled the country, the sentences were not carried out. Since the creation of a United Nations convention to prevent and stop genocide, the survivors of the Armenian genocide and their families have sought to have these events recognized as genocide. Most scholars agree that this was the first genocide of the 20th century, and many countries have passed resolutions recognizing it as such. In the United States, attempts to pass just such a resolution in Congress have been limited as the government of Turkey refuses to recognize the events as genocide and works to halt discussion of the topic.

Other Resources on This Topic

Books:

- "The Burning Tigris," by Peter Balakian
- "The Forty Days of Musa Dagh," by Franz Werfel
- "Forgotten Fire," by Adam Bagdasarian

Web Sites:

- <http://www.genocideintervention.net/>
- <http://www.genocide1915.info/>
- <http://www.armenian-genocide.org/index.html>

