

Armenian Genocide

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Summary

In early 1915 the Young Turk government of the Ottoman Empire decided to deport hundreds of thousands of Armenians and Assyrians from their homes into distant parts of the Empire, eventually into the deserts of Syria. Armenian soldiers in the Ottoman Army were demobilized and massacred; women and children were driven on long marches, starved, beaten, and often murdered. These events have been called the first major genocide of the 20th century, but the government of the Turkish state and many of its supporters deny that a genocide took place; rather, they claim that the government acted to suppress an Armenian insurrection and people were killed in the process. New scholarship confirms that the Ottoman government intended the elimination of Armenians and Assyrians to render them impotent in the contest for lands in eastern Anatolia.

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Introduction

Historians generally have explained (or excused) the Turkish deportations and massacres of the Armenians during the First World War as the result of conflicting ideologies, religious or nationalist; as the understandable and justified response of the Young Turk triumvirate to Armenian subversion in time of war; or as a long-planned elimination of non-Turks in Anatolia to create a national homeland for the Turkish people. Such ideological or political explanations necessarily focus on the leadership of the two peoples in conflict – the [Ottoman](#)

[government](#) and the Armenian revolutionaries – without full examination of deeper causes and the broad social and demographic dimensions of the late Ottoman environment. While a focus on the political and intellectual elites is essential to explain the instigating events of early 1915 that precipitated the Armenian tragedy, the scope of the killing and the degree of popular violence on the part of ordinary Turks, Kurds, Circassians, and others, requires investigation of both the complex evolution of interethnic relations of the Ottoman peoples as well as consideration of the international competition among the Great Powers that constrained Ottoman decision makers. Existing histories have looked upon Armenians as little more than innocent victims, without understanding their intimate connections to Ottoman society (which in part explains the passivity of the overwhelming majority), or examining the ideologies and influences that encouraged a committed minority to engage in armed resistance. Historians must ponder why the relatively benign symbiosis of several centuries, during which the ruling Ottomans referred to the Armenians as the “loyal millet” (*millet-i sadika*), broke down into the genocidal violence of 1915. What were the experiences and perceptions, the cognitive conclusions and affective understandings of Ottoman leaders and ordinary people, which led to the mass killing of hundreds of thousands of Armenian and Assyrian subjects of the [Ottoman Empire](#)?

The Background of Ethnic and Religious Minorities

[Armenians](#), like Assyrians, Greeks, Jews, and other non-Sunni Muslim peoples of the [Empire](#), were not only an ethnic and religious minority in a country dominated demographically and politically by Muslims, but given an ideology of inherent Muslim superiority and the segregation of [minorities](#), were also an underclass. They were subjects who, however high they might rise in trade, commerce, or even governmental service, were never to be considered equal to the ruling Muslims. They would always remain *gavur*: infidels inferior to the Muslims. Active persecution of non-Muslims was relatively rare in the earlier centuries of the Ottoman Empire, but discrimination was ubiquitous and sanctioned by law and religion. The inferiority of the *gavur* was voluntary, Muslims believed, since unbelievers could at any time convert to Islam and thereby change their status. When Christians and Jews maintained their separate identities and communities and became visibly wealthier, effectively identified with Europeans, resentment of their enhanced status grew among Muslims. The “natural,” divinely ordained hierarchy of Muslim superiority appeared challenged by these alien elements in their midst. Unbelievers were to “stay in their place” and not appear to be equal or better than the Muslims. As [imperialist](#) Europe and [nationalist](#) movements threatened Ottoman control of the Balkans, hostilities and fears of decline ate away at the formerly cosmopolitan idea of an empire tolerant of its diverse constituent peoples.

Even in the *Tanzimat* period (1839-1878), when reforming rulers and bureaucrats eliminated

some of the most excessive practices against their subjects and attempted to create the basis for a *Rechtsstaat* in the Empire, the Christians only partially benefited from the movement toward equality under the law. Armenians in eastern Anatolia repeatedly complained about armed Kurdish bands that took their livestock, land, and women. Occasionally Muslims rose in angry pogroms against Christians, and state authorities tended to excuse such behavior as an understandable response to Armenian rebellion. Beginning in the late 1870s and through the following decade, the Armenians of the provinces petitioned in greater numbers to their leaders in Istanbul and to the European consuls stationed in eastern Anatolia. Hundreds of complaints were filed; few were dealt with. Although the most brutal treatment of Armenians was at the hands of Kurdish tribesmen, the Armenians found the Ottoman state officials absent, unreliable, or simply another source of oppression. Corruption was rampant. Ordinary Muslims suffered from it as well, but the Armenians had the added burden of not belonging to the favored Muslim faithful. Massacres were reported from all parts of eastern Anatolia, particularly after the formation in the early 1890s of the officially sanctioned Kurdish military units known as the *Hamidiye*. Against this background of growing Kurdish aggression, Western and Russian indifference, and the collapse of the *Tanzimat* reform movement with the coming to power of [Abdülhamid II, Sultan of the Turks \(1842-1918\)](#), a small number of Armenians, many from the [Russian Empire](#) and influenced by the radical intelligentsia of Russian Transcaucasia, turned to a revolutionary strategy. Armenian revolutionary parties – most importantly the *Hunchaks* and the *Dashnaks* – arose from a number of self-defense groups within Russia and Turkey, a tradition of resistance to state intervention characteristic of some highland Armenians, like those of Zeytun and Sasun. Armenian radicals, along with Young Turk and Macedonian revolutionaries, were seen as a serious threat to the sultan's despotism, and in 1894-1896 massive violence led to the death of hundreds of thousands of Armenians in Anatolia.

Young Turk Revolution 1908

When Ottoman military officers joined with Young Turk intellectuals early in the 20th century, the opposition proved able to bring down the Hamidian regime (July 1908). Ottoman Armenians and other minorities joyfully greeted the “[revolution](#)” that brought the Young Turks to power. They hoped that the restoration of the liberal constitution would provide a political mechanism for peaceful development within the framework of a representative parliamentary system. The leading Armenian political party, the *Dashnaktsutiun*, had been loosely allied with the Young Turk [Committee of Union and Progress](#) (CUP) and continued to collaborate with them up to the outbreak of the Great War. Nevertheless, the deep social hostilities between the peoples of the Empire persisted, indeed worsened, in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

Politically, most Ottoman Armenians sought a future within the Empire. Reform of the more repressive Ottoman institutions like tax farming, guarantees of equality under the law, and perhaps autonomy under a Christian governor for the Anatolian provinces, made up the program of the Armenian liberals. After 1908, the revolutionaries turned to parliamentary politics, and even the most radical agreed to work for reforms within the Ottoman constitutional regime. Both the *Tanzimat* reform movement and the Young Turk government that came to power in 1908 promoted a notion of legal protection of non-Muslims in a program that came to be known as Ottomanism (*osmanlılık*). The ideological umbrella of Ottomanism, however, was broad enough to include under it those who believed that the unity of the Empire could be best guaranteed by having the Ottoman Turks rule over the other nationalities. While some Ottoman reformers were prepared to go as far as the liberal Prince [Mehmed Sabaheddin \(1879-1948\)](#) and call for a federation of equal nations, others used the guise of Ottomanism to mask their Turkish nationalist or Pan-Turkic preferences. In the decade from 1908 to 1918 Turkish nationalism, which included virulent hostility to non-Muslims, increasingly dominated leading intellectual and political circles close to the Young Turks.

Some 2 million Christian Armenians lived in the Ottoman lands in 1915, most of them peasants and townspeople in the six provinces of eastern Anatolia. In an Anatolian population estimated to be between 15 and 17.5 million inhabitants, Armenians were outnumbered by their Muslim neighbors in most locations, though they often lived in homogeneous villages and sections of towns, and occasionally dominated larger rural and urban areas.¹ The most influential and prosperous Armenians lived in the imperial capital, Istanbul (Constantinople), where their visibility made them the target of both official and popular resentment from many Muslims. The mountainous plateau of eastern Anatolia – that Armenians considered to be historic Armenia – was an area in which the central government had only intermittent authority. An intense four-sided struggle for power, position, and survival pitted the agents of the Ottoman government, the Kurdish nomadic leaders, the semi-autonomous Turkish notables of the towns, and the Armenians against one another. Local Turkish officials ran the towns with little regard to central authority, and Kurdish *beys* held much of the countryside under their sway. Often the only way Istanbul could make its will felt was by sending in the army. Though Kurds had repeatedly revolted against the Ottoman state and collaborated with the invading Russians in the 19th century, the Sublime Porte saw Armenians as a more seriously subversive element, since European powers, most importantly Russia, promoted their protection and used the “Armenian Question” as a wedge into Ottoman internal affairs. Encouraging Muslim resentment and fear of the Armenians, the state created an Armenian scapegoat that could be blamed for the defeats and failures of the Ottoman government. The social system in eastern Anatolia was sanctioned by violence, often state violence, and the

claims of the Armenians for a more just relationship were neglected or rejected. Ottoman governments recognized no right of popular resistance, and acts of rebellion were seen as the result of the artificial intervention of outside agitators and disloyal Armenian subjects.

Social grievances in towns, along with the population pressure and competition for resources in agriculture, were part of a toxic mix of social and political elements that provided the environment for growing hostility toward the Armenians. Whatever resentments the poor peasant population of eastern Anatolia may have felt toward the people in towns – the places where they received low prices for their produce, where they felt their social inferiority most acutely, and where they were alien to and unwanted by the better-dressed people – were easily transferred to the Armenians. The catalyst for killing, however, was not spontaneously generated out of the tinder of social and cultural tensions. It came from the state itself: from officials and conservative clergy who had for decades perceived Armenians as alien to the Ottoman Empire, and from dangerous revolutionaries and separatists who threatened the integrity of the state. Armenians were imagined to be responsible for the troubles of the Empire, allies of the anti-Ottoman European powers, and the introduction of politically radical ideas, including trade unionism and socialism, to the Empire.

Turkish Nationalism and the Catastrophic Results of the War for Armenians

As Europe drifted through the last decade before World War I, the Ottoman government experienced a series of political and military defeats: the [annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina by Austro-Hungary](#) in 1908, the subsequent declaration of independence by [Bulgaria](#), the merger of Crete with [Greece](#), revolts in [Albania](#) in 1910-1912, losses to Italy in Libya (1911), and in the course of [two Balkan Wars](#) (1912-1913) the diminution of Ottoman territory in Europe and the forced migration of hundreds of thousands of Muslims from Europe into Anatolia. As their liberal strategies failed to unify and strengthen the Empire, the Young Turk leaders gradually shifted away from their original Ottomanist views of a multinational empire based on guarantees of civil and minority rights to a more Turkish nationalist ideology that emphasized the dominant role of Turks. In desperation a group of Young Turk officers, led by [Ismail Enver Pasha \(1881-1922\)](#), seized the government in a coup d'état in 1913, and for the next five years, years fateful for all Armenians, a triumvirate of Enver, [Ahmet Cemal Pasha \(1872-1922\)](#), and [Mehmed Talat Pasha \(1874-1921\)](#) ruled the Empire. Their regime marked the triumph of Turkish nationalism within the government itself.

This shift toward Turkish nationalism left the Armenian political leadership in an impossible position. Torn between continuing to cooperate with the Young Turks in the hope that some gains might be won for the Armenians and breaking with their undependable political allies

and going over to the opposition, the Dashnaks decided to maintain their alliance with the ruling party. Other Armenian cultural and political leaders, however, most notably the Hunchak party, opposed further collaboration with the government. As the Ottomans entered the First World War, even as Armenian soldiers joined the Ottoman Army to fight against the enemies of their government, the situation grew extremely ominous for the dangerously exposed Armenians.

What was then known as “the Great War” was a catastrophe for all the peoples of the Ottoman Empire and most completely for the Armenians and Assyrians. Of the more than 20 million subjects of the sultan, perhaps as many as 5 million would perish because of the decision by the CUP to join what was for them a war not of necessity but of choice. Most of the victims were civilians. 18 percent of Anatolian Muslims would die: the casualties of battle, famine, disease, and governmental disorganization. About 90 percent of the Armenians would be gone by the end of the war – deported, massacred, forcibly converted to Islam, or exiled beyond the borders of the new Turkey. In the twelve years from 1912 to 1924, the non-Muslim population in Ottoman Asia Minor fell from roughly 20 percent to 2 percent.²

The Young Turks entered the war to save, even enhance, their empire, only to preside over its demise. The war laid the foundations for the Empire’s successor, the national state created by a Turkish nationalist movement, by ethnically cleansing what would now become the “heartland” of Turks and mobilizing millions of ordinary Muslims to fight for their “fatherland.” “In Turkey’s collective memory today,” a historian of the Ottoman war writes, “the Ottomans lost the First World War; the Turks won it.”³

The Ottoman Empire fought from 1914 to 1918 on nine different fronts, from the Dardanelles and the [Balkans](#) to Palestine and Arabia to the Caucasus and Persia. Over 3 million Ottomans, mostly Turks, were conscripted to fight the war against the Entente. An estimated 771,844 were killed: over half by disease. The mortality rate reached 25 percent.⁴ Only [Serbia](#) would suffer the loss of a higher percentage of its population than the Ottomans. The war blurred the distinctions between civilians and the military. Violence would be visited upon all citizens in this [total war](#). Civil society would suffer enormously, while the state’s power would be extended into society in unprecedented ways. The gross domestic product in Turkey in the 1920s was half the pre-war level.⁵ The [urban populations](#) of the region would not recover until the 1950s. Millions of people would be moved, either conscripted or forcibly deported by their government. Every tenth person in the Ottoman Empire would become a displaced person in the years of war.⁶ Hundreds of thousands would be slaughtered because of state policy, and further hundreds of thousands would be forcibly converted to Islam, losing their

original identity as Christians.

The “Evolution” of Armenian Genocide

What would evolve into genocide began haphazardly in policies designed both to rearrange the demographic topography of Anatolia and to prepare for the war with Russia and its European allies. For the Young Turks the war was conceived as a transformative, revolutionary opportunity, a moment to gamble in order to save their empire and make it more secure. How that might be accomplished was influenced and shaped by their own understanding of what they desired, who their friends were, and who had to be eliminated in order to realize their emerging vision. As they worked out their jerry-built design of the future empire and improvised the means to achieve it, the party leaders consolidated their hold over the state. When Enver became minister of war in January 1914, he immediately purged the army of hundreds of officers, solidifying the military’s loyalty to himself and the CUP. The Ministry of Interior under Talat took command of the Ottoman gendarmerie. To realize their ambitions in the east the Young Turks organized a new Special Organization (*Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa*) similar in aims to an already existing paramilitary and working eventually in tandem with the original organization.⁷ Headed by Doctors [Behaeddin Şakir \(1874-1922\)](#) and [Selânikli Mehmet Nazım Bey \(1870-1926\)](#), the organization was financed and supplied by the Ministry of War but in cooperation with other parts of the government and under the direct supervision of the party. Formed initially for covert action in Russian Caucasia and Persia, the new *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa* recruited tribesmen – Circassians, Kurds, and others – as well as prisoners, criminals, and bandits for its ranks. Prisons were emptied on orders of the government. More than 10,000 imprisoned criminals, many of them convicted of murder, were given a new role as fighters in the squadrons of the Special Organization. By fighting for the fatherland these former “people without honor” (*namussuz*) became respectable (*namuslu*).⁸ Referred to as *çetes* (gangs, guerrillas), these specially recruited fighters were available to the Young Turks independently from the regular army and could be used for actions against designated civilians.⁹ They played a decisive and disastrous role in the destruction of the Armenians.

Having suffered territorial losses in the Balkan Wars and been forced to accept a European-imposed reform in the “Armenian provinces” in 1914, the Young Turks joined the Central Powers ([Germany](#) and [Austro-Hungary](#)) as they waged war against the Entente ([Great Britain](#), [France](#), and Russia) in a desperate effort to restore and strengthen their empire. Armenians precariously straddled the Russian–Ottoman front, and both the Russians and the Ottomans attempted to recruit Armenians in their campaigns against their enemies. Most Ottoman Armenians supported and even fought alongside the Ottomans against the Russians, while

Armenians in Russia, organized into volunteer units, joined the tsarist campaign. In late 1914 and early 1915 massacres of Christians – Armenians and Assyrians – and Muslims occurred in the Caucasus and Persia, where Russians and Ottoman forces faced each other. Anxious to fight the Russians in 1914, the Ottoman government instigated the war by attacking Russian ships in the Black Sea. Enver led a huge army against tsarist forces on the eastern front late in the year, and at first, he was dramatically victorious. Kars was cut off and Sarıkamış surrounded. But the Ottoman troops were not prepared for the harsh winter in the Armenian highlands, and early in 1915 the Russians, accompanied by Armenian volunteer units from the Caucasus, pushed the Ottoman Army back. A disastrous defeat followed in which Enver lost three-quarters of his army – more than 45,000 men. Some Armenian soldiers deserted, and a few Ottoman Armenians fled to the areas occupied by the Russians, confirming in Turkish minds the treachery that marked the Christian minorities. Enver's defeat on the Caucasian front was the prelude to the “final solution” of the Armenian Question.

Mass Deportation, Forced Marches, and Death Camps

The Russians posed a real danger to the Ottomans, just as the Allied forces were attacking [Gallipoli](#) in the west. In this moment of defeat and desperation, the triumvirate in Istanbul decided to demobilize the Armenian soldiers in the Ottoman Army and to deport Armenians from eastern Anatolia. The first victims of the state were these disarmed Armenian soldiers, who were easily segregated and systematically killed. Thus, the muscle of the Armenian communities was removed. Almost immediately, the government ordered the deportation of Armenians from cities, towns, and villages in the east, ostensibly as a necessary military measure to ensure the security of the rear. Soon Armenians throughout the country were forced to gather what belongings they could carry or transport and leave their homes at short notice. The exodus of Armenians was haphazard and brutal; irregular forces, local Kurds, and Circassians, cut down hundreds of thousands of Christians, as civil and military officials oversaw and facilitated the removal of the Empire's Armenian and Assyrian subjects. When some Armenians resisted the encroaching massacres in the city of Van in eastern Anatolia, the CUP had the leading intellectuals and politicians in Istanbul, several of them deputies to the Ottoman Parliament, arrested and sent from the city (24 April 1915). Most of them perished in the next few months. Thus was the brain of the Ottoman Armenian people removed: the intellectual and political leadership and the connective tissue that linked separate communities together. Women, [children](#), and old men in town after town were marched through the valleys and mountains of eastern Anatolia. Missionaries, diplomats, and foreign military officers witnessed the convoys, recorded what they saw, and sent reports home about death marches and killing fields. Survivors reached the deserts of Syria where they languished in concentration camps; many starved to death, and new massacres occurred.

The canvas on which the mass deportation and massacre of Armenians and Assyrians took place was a landscape that stretched from Istanbul almost 1,000 miles to the east, beyond the eastern ends of the Ottoman Empire into Persia and the Caucasus. Mountains, valleys, rivers, and deserts were the topographies through which hundreds of thousands of uprooted people moved in convoys. Guarded by Ottoman soldiers and gendarmes, they were attacked and slaughtered by the *çetes* (gangs of irregular fighters) of the *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa* (Special Organization), and by Kurds, Turks, and Circassians. Driven to exhaustion, starvation, and suicide, hundreds of thousands would perish; others would be forced to emigrate or convert to Islam to save their lives. Men died in greater numbers; many woman and children were taken into the families of the local Muslims. Tens of thousands of orphans found some refuge in the protection of foreign missionaries. It is conservatively estimated that between 600,000 and 1 million were slaughtered, or died on the marches. Other tens of thousands fled north, to the relative safety of the Russian Caucasus. Hundreds of thousands of women and children, we now know, were compelled to convert to Islam and survived in the families of Kurds, Turks, and Arabs. Those who observed the killings, as well as the Allied powers engaged in a war against the Ottomans, repeatedly claimed that they had never witnessed anything like it. The word for what happened had not yet been invented. There was no concept to mark the state-targeted killing of a designated ethnoreligious people. At the time, those who needed a word borrowed from the bible and called it “holocaust.”

What might have been rationalized as a military necessity, given the imperial ambitions and distorted perceptions of the Ottoman leaders, quickly became a massive attack on their Armenian subjects, a systematic program of murder and pillage. An act of panic and vengeance metamorphosed monstrously into an opportunity to rid Anatolia once and for all of the one people that stood in the way of the Young Turks’ plans for a more purely Muslim Empire, dominated by ethnic Turks. A whole category based on religion and ethnicity, the people of a particular *millet* (religious community), were singled out as potentially dangerous to the state. The deportations of Armenians and Assyrians were rationalized at the time and later as a military necessity, framed by the imperial ambitions and distorted perceptions of the Ottoman leaders, though the government refused to take responsibility for the massacres, claiming that they were caused by local officials and excessive hatred of Armenians by common people.

The Politics behind the Genocide

The causes of what has come to be known as the first genocide of the 20th century were both immediate and long-term.¹⁰ The environment in which genocide occurred – the imperial appetites of the Great Powers, the fierce competition for land and goods in eastern Anatolia,

the aspirations and aims of Armenians, and the ambitions and ideas of the Young Turks – shaped the cognitive and emotional state of the perpetrators and their “affective disposition,” that allowed them, indeed, in their minds required them, to eliminate whole peoples. In the context of war and invasion, a mental and emotional universe developed that included perceived threats, the Manichaean construction of internal enemies, and a pervasive fear that triggered a deadly, pathological response to real and imagined immediate and future dangers. A government had come to believe that among its subject peoples whole “nations” presented an immediate threat to the security of the state. Defense of the Empire and of the “Turkish nation” became the rationale for mass murder. Armenians were neither passive nor submissive victims, but the power to decide their fate was largely out of their hands. A “great inequality in agency” existed between Young Turks and their armed agents and the segmented and dispersed Armenians.¹¹

The purpose of the genocide was to eliminate the perceived threat of the Armenians within the Ottoman Empire by reducing their numbers and scattering them in isolated, distant places, and to replace them with Muslim [refugees](#) who had fled from the Balkans. The destruction of the *Ermeni millet* was carried out in three different but related ways: dispersion, massacre, and assimilation by conversion to Islam. A perfectly rational (and rationalist) explanation, then, for the genocide appears to be adequate: a strategic goal to secure the Empire by elimination of an existential threat to the state and the Turkish (or Islamic) people. But, before the strategic goal and the “rational” choices of instruments to be used can be considered, it is necessary to explain how the existential threat was imagined; how the Armenian and Assyrian enemy was historically and culturally constructed; and what cognitive and emotional processes shaped the affective disposition of the perpetrators that compelled them to carry out massive uprooting and murder of specifically targeted peoples, and to believe that such actions were justified.

Rather than being a struggle between primordial nations (as imagined by nationalists) inevitably confronting one another and contesting sovereignty over a disputed land, the genocide was the result of an accelerating construction of different ethnoreligious communities within the complex context of an empire with its possibilities of multiple and hybrid identities and coexistence. The hierarchies, inequities, institutionalized differences, and repressions that characterized imperial life and rule, had for centuries allowed people of different religions, cultures, and languages to live together. Armenians and others acquiesced to their position in the imperial hierarchy and even developed some affection for the polity in which they lived. Shared experiences as Ottomans in some cases led to material prosperity and cultural hybridity, but always under conditions of insecurity and, often capricious, governance. The imperial paradigm met its greatest challenges from what might be lumped together under the concept of “progress”: the technological and industrial advancement of

the capitalist West, which rendered the Ottoman Empire relatively “backward” in the internationally competitive marketplace, as well as the idea of equality that challenged the differentiated and unequal treatment of the various peoples of the Ottoman realm. Religion, language, and culture distinguished the *millets* – the Muslim, Armenian, Greek, Catholic, Protestant, Assyrian, and Jewish – one from another, yet members of all of them could aspire to be Ottoman and participate in the cultural, social, and even political life of the Empire without ever achieving full equality with the ruling institution.

From abroad, two powerful influences shaped the evolution of the various Ottoman peoples: the increasingly hegemonic discourse of the nation, which redefined the nature of political communities and legitimized culture as the basis of sovereignty and possession of a “homeland”; and the imperial ambitions of European powers, which repeatedly intervened in Ottoman politics, hiving off parts of the Empire’s territory, hollowing out the sultan’s sovereignty, and insisting on protection of his Christian subjects. Migration of some peoples out of the Empire and others into it, competition over land, particularly in eastern Anatolia, Armenian resistance to old forms of “feudal” subjugation to the Kurds – all contributed to structural and dynamic influences that generated a mental world of opposition and hostility among the *millets*.

Determined to save their empire, the Young Turks came to power at a moment of radical disintegration of their state that was threatened, in their minds, both by the great European powers and the non-Turkic peoples (not only by Balkan Christians, Armenians, and Greeks, but Muslim Kurds, Albanians, and Arabs as well). Clear to those Young Turks who eventually won the political contest by 1914 was that “Turks” would dominate in one way or another, and that this imperial community would not be one of civic equality. It would, in other words, be neither an ethnically homogeneous nation state like the paradigmatic states of Western Europe, nor a multinational state of diverse peoples equal under the law. It would remain an empire with some peoples dominant over others.¹² One of the most radical of the Turkish nationalists, [Ziya Gökalp \(1876-1924\)](#), stated, “The people is like a garden. We are supposed to be its gardeners! First, the bad shoots are to be cut. And then the scion is to be grafted.”¹³

Genocide as Response to Crisis

The Armenian genocide was not planned long in advance, but was a contingent reaction to a moment of crisis that grew more radical over time. Yet genocide became possible as a technique of state security only after a long gestation of a militant, deeply hostile anti-Armenian disposition. The genocide should be distinguished from the earlier episodes of conservative restoration of order by repression (the Hamidian massacres of 1894-1896) or urban ethnic violence (Adana, 1909). Although there were similarities with the brutal policies

of massacre and deportation that earlier regimes used to keep order, the very scale of the Armenian genocide and its intended effects – to rid Anatolia and other parts of the Empire of an entire people – make it a far more radical, indeed revolutionary, transformation of the imperial setup. Neither religiously motivated nor a struggle between two contending nationalisms, one of which destroyed the other, the genocide was the product of a pathological response of desperate leaders who sought security against a people they had both construed as enemies and driven into radical opposition to the regime under which they had lived for centuries. While an anti-Armenian disposition existed and grew more virulent within the Ottoman elite long before the war, and some extremists contemplated radical solutions to the Armenian Question, particularly after the Balkan Wars, the World War not only presented an opportunity for carrying out the most revolutionary program against the Armenians, but provided the particular conjuncture that convinced the Young Turk triumvirate to deploy ethnic cleansing and genocide against the Armenians. Had there been no World War there would have been no genocide, not only because there would have been no “fog of war” to cover up the events but because the radical sense of endangerment among Turks would not have been as acute. As spring approached in 1915, and the Armenians could be linked to the Russian advance as collaborators, the governing few believed that the circumstances were propitious to remove the Armenians. Ziya Gökalp, who like so many others saw the genocide as necessary or even forced on the Ottomans, could with confidence write, “there was no Armenian massacre, there was a Turkish-Armenian arrangement. They stabbed us in the back, we stabbed them back.”¹⁴ What was done had to be done in the name of national security, and so a kind of lawful lawlessness was permitted.

The choice of genocide was not inevitable. Predicated on long-standing and ever more extreme affective dispositions and attitudes that had demonized the Armenians as a threat that needed to be dealt with, the ultimate choice was made by specific leaders at a particular historical conjuncture when the threat seemed to them most palpable. The Young Turks’ sense of their own vulnerability – combined with resentment at what they took to be Armenians’ privileged status, Armenian dominance over Muslims in some spheres of life, and the preference of many Armenians for Christian Russia – fed a fantasy that the Armenians presented an existential threat to Turks, not only an immediate menace but a future peril as well.

The catalytic moment that triggered the most brutal response to anxiety about the future came with the World War. There was no blueprint for genocide elaborated before or even in the early months of war, but the disposition to dispose of the Armenians had already been forming in the decade before [Sarajevo](#). The Armenian genocide was both the result of increasingly radical attitudes of Turkish national imperialists and triggered by the events of 1914-1915: the imposition of the European reform plan; the breakdown of CUP-Armenian

relations when the Dashnaks refused to instigate rebellion among Caucasian Armenians; the colossal losses at Sarıkamış; and the rapid reconstruction of Armenians as an imminent internal danger. Those who perpetrated genocide operated within their own delusional rationality.¹⁵ The Young Turks acted on fears and resentments that had been generated over time and directed their efforts to resolve their anxieties by dealing with those they perceived to threaten their survival – not with their external enemies but an internal enemy they saw allied to the Entente – the Armenians. What to denialists and their sympathizers appears to be a rational and justified strategic choice to eliminate a rebellious and seditious population, in this account is seen as the outcome of the Young Turk leaders' pathological construction of the Armenian enemy.¹⁶ The actions that the Young Turks decided upon were based in an emotional disposition that led to distorted interpretations of social reality and exaggerated estimations of threats.¹⁷ The conviction that Armenians desired to form an independent state was a fantasy of the Young Turks and a few Armenian extremists. The great majority of Armenians had been willing to live within the Ottoman Empire if their lives and property could be secured. They clung to the belief that a future was possible within the Empire long after it seemed to some to be reasonable. Still, they had been socialized as Ottomans: this was their home, and what they knew. Only when their own government once again turned them into pariahs did some of them defect or resist.

The Armenian genocide, along with the killing of Assyrians and the expulsion of the Anatolian Greeks, laid the ground for the more homogeneous nation state that arose from the ashes of the Empire. Like many other states, including Australia, Israel, and the United States, the emergence of the Republic of Turkey involved the removal and subordination of native peoples who had lived on its territory prior to its founding. The connection between ethnic cleansing or genocide and the legitimacy of the national state underlies the desperate efforts to deny or distort the history of the nation and the state's genesis.

Conclusion

Estimates of the Armenians killed in the deportations and massacres of 1915-1916 range from a few hundred thousand to 1,500,000. The more conservative estimates of between 600,000 and 800,000 killed, with hundreds of thousands of others converted to Islam or surviving as refugees, appear most accurate. Whatever the actual number of those killed, the result was the physical annihilation of Armenians in the greater part of historic Armenia, the final breaking of a continuous inhabitation of that region by people who called themselves Armenian. By the act of genocide, the Young Turks prepared the ground for the Turkish national state, the republic founded by [Mustafa Kemal \(-1938\)](#), that now occupies the Anatolian peninsula. Once the Greeks were driven into the sea at [Smyrna](#) in 1922 and Cilicia

cleared of Armenians, the Turkish nationalists gained a homeland for the Turkish people. Though they would have to share eastern Anatolia with Kurds who in time acquired their own political ambitions, the successive Turkish regimes were successful in gaining international recognition of their rights to the territory that once made up the heartland of Armenian kingdoms and the eastern marchlands of the Byzantine Empire.

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Notes

1. Karpas, Kemal: *Ottoman Population, 1830-1914: Demographic and Social Characteristics*, Madison 1985, p. 190; McCarthy, Justin: *Muslims and Minorities: The Population of Ottoman Anatolia and the End of the Empire*, New York 1983, p. 110. [↑](#)
2. Zürcher, Erik-Jan: *Griechisch-orthodoxe und muslimische Flüchtlinge und Deportierte in Griechenland und der Türkei seit 1912*, in: Bade, Klaus J. et al. (eds.): *Enzyklopädie Migration in Europa vom 17. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart*, Paderborn et al. 2007, pp. 623-627. [↑](#)
3. Aksakal, Mustafa: *The Ottoman Empire*, in: Winter, Jay (ed.): *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, Cambridge 2014, p. 464. [↑](#)
4. *Ibid.*, p. 468; Erik J. Zürcher estimates 325,000 directly killed in action and between 400,000 and 700,000 wounded, see *The Ottoman Soldier in World War I*, in his: *The Young Turk Legacy and Nation Building: From the Ottoman Empire to Atatürk's Turkey*, London et al. 2010, p. 186. [↑](#)
5. *Ibid.*, p. 478. [↑](#)
6. Akın, Yiğit: *The Ottoman Home Front during World War I: Everyday Politics, Society, and Culture*, Phd. dissertation in history, Ohio State University 2011, p. 245. [↑](#)
7. Kévorkian, Raymond: *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History*, London 2011, pp. 180-187; Kévorkian's account of the formation of the Special Organization is based on the testimonies at the trials of the Unionists held in 1919-1920 and published originally in *Takvim-i Vekayi*. [↑](#)
8. Kévorkian, *Armenian Genocide* 2011, pp. 184; testimony from the First Session of the Trial of the Unionists, April 27, 1919, at 1:50: *Takvim-i Vakayi*, no. 3540, May 5, 1919, p. 5, col. 2, lines 8-14; Krieger: *Engghati Haiaspanutyun Vaveragrakan Patmutyune*, New York 1980, p. 215; Sixth Session of the Trial of the Unionists, May 14, 1919, questioning of Midhat Şükrü (pp. 91-99): *Takvim-i Vakayi* no. 3557, May 25, 1919, p. 92. [↑](#)
9. A useful review of the historiographical literature on *Teşkilat-ı Masusa* can be found in Safi, Polat: *History in the Trench: The Ottoman Special Organization – Teşkilat-ı Masusa Literature*, *Middle Eastern Studies*, XLVIII/1 (2012), pp. 89-106. Regrettably, the article

- deals primarily with what cannot be said about the Special Organization rather than what it actually was. An early account still worth reading is Stoddard, Philip H.: *The Ottoman Government and the Arabs, 1911-1918: A Preliminary Study on the Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa*, PhD dissertation, Princeton University 1963. ↑
10. In the last few decades, scholars have designated other early 20th-century mass killings as genocide, most notably the German attempt to exterminate the Herero and Nama peoples in Southwest Africa in 1904-1905. See, Hull, Isabel V.: *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany*, Ithaca et al. 2005. ↑
 11. In his reply to an article on 1915, by Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, historian Gerard J. Libaridian writes, “It is difficult to imagine a ‘shared history’ that does not take into consideration the great inequality of agency that existed. A shared history does indeed exist, but it is not a history of equals between the Ottoman imperial state and its Armenian subjects.” (Commentary on Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu’s article on the Armenian Issue: “Turkish Armenian Relations: Is a ‘Just Memory’ Possible?”, *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Spring 2014, p. 7, <http://www.turkishpolicy.com/article/989/commentary-on-fm-davutoglus-article-on-the-armenian-issue/>). ↑
 12. On the conceptual difference between empire and nation state, see Suny, Ronald Grigor: *The Empire Strikes Out: Imperial Russia, ‘National’ Identity, and Theories of Empire*, in: Suny, Ronald Grigor/ Martin, Terry (eds.): *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, Oxford et al. 2001, pp. 23-66. ↑
 13. Gökalp, Ziya: *Kızıl elma*, translation from: Kinloch, Graham Charles / Mohan, Raj P.: *Genocide Approaches, Case Studies, and Responses*, New York 2005, p. 50; also, cited in: Jonderden, Joost: *Elite Encounters of a Violent Kind: Milli İbrahim Paşa, Ziya Gökalp and Political Struggle in Diyarbekir at the Turn of the 20th Century*, in: Jonderden, Joost / Verheij Jelle (eds.), *Social Relations in Ottoman Diyarbekir*, Leiden 2012, p. 80. ↑
 14. Jonderden, *Elite Encounters of a Violent Kind* 2012, p. 72. ↑
 15. The words “delusional rationality” come from Turkeyilmaz, Yektan: *Rethinking Genocide: Violence and Victimhood in Eastern Anatolia, 1913-1915*, PhD dissertation in Cultural Anthropology, Duke University 2011, who writes, “These ‘rationalities’ have no basis in reason, and yet become a powerful motor for killing on a mass scale” (p. 43). ↑
 16. The argument from state security was made repeatedly by the Young Turk leaders and was reproduced in the first major collection of materials issued by the Ottoman government on the Armenian deportations: *Dahiliye, Nezareti: Ermeni Komitelerinin Amal Ve Harekat-ı İhtilaliyesi*, Istanbul 1916. ↑
 17. For interpretations of the genocide that are compatible, though not identical, with my own analysis, see, for example, the thoughtful essay by Astourian, Stepan: *The Armenian Genocide: An Interpretation*, *The History Teacher*, XXIII, 2 (February 1990),

pp. 111-160; Mann, Michael: *The Dark Side of Democracy*, Cambridge 2004; Levene, Mark: *Genocide in the Age of the Nation State*, 2 vols., London 2005; Valentino, Benjamin A.: *Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the Twentieth Century*, Ithaca, New York 2005; and Bloxham, Donald: *The Great Game of Genocide*, Oxford 2005. ↑

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