



Armenian Genocide

For centuries, the Ottoman Empire had operated with many different ethnicities within its borders. These different ethnicities, or “millets”, had some autonomy and maintained their own religions and languages. During the First World War, a new government in Istanbul carried out attacks on Armenian communities, claiming that they were a threat to national security. The Ottomans forced Armenians to flee their homes and into labor camps, and systematically massacred their communities. The atrocities provoked international outrage. From 1915 to 1917, over one million Armenians died.



00:01

Raj Bhat

Chances are you've heard the word "genocide" before. The Holocaust during World War II was considered an act of genocide, for example. But do you know the full definition? The term "genocide" was coined by Polish lawyer Raphael Lemkin in his 1944 book "Axis Rule in Occupied Europe." It comes from the Greek *genos*—race or ethnicity—and *cide*—murder. The United Nations defines genocide as the mass extermination of a group of people based upon that community's race, religion, ethnicity, or nationality, with the intent to destroy.

00:50

Painting of the Ottoman sultan and many others in a meeting

Between 1915 and 1917, in the middle of World War I, the Ottoman Empire waged an internal war against a minority group. It nearly destroyed the Armenian people. The Armenians had lived relatively peacefully under Ottoman rule for centuries. So why did this genocide happen at this time? Prior to the early 20th century, the Ottoman Empire was made up of different ethnic and religious communities. The Ottoman sultan ruled many people. They spoke different languages and held diverse beliefs. This included Muslims, Christians, Jews, Turks, Armenians, Greeks, Assyrians, Kurds, Arabs, and many others. It was a multicultural, multiethnic, and multi-faith empire.

01:38

Photos of people of many diverse religious communities

For centuries, these multiethnic and multi-faith communities were divided into *millet*s, or religious communities. Non-Muslim communities, such as Jewish and Christian *millet*s, lived under certain restrictions. These Christian and Jewish communities were referred to as People of the Book, since Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all believed in the same God—Yahweh, God, or Allah, depending on one's faith. These *millet*s could worship in their own way. But they could not serve in the military and were required to pay additional taxes. Many *millet*s kept their own language and worshipped as they pleased.

The level of freedom, however, did vary from ruler to ruler. There were periods of unrest and persecution, especially during times of war.

02:29

Image of a map of the Anatolian Peninsula

The Armenians were *millet*s. They were a largely Christian community that mainly lived in the eastern provinces of the Anatolian Peninsula—the peninsula that is modern-day Turkey. The Armenians had lived in this area for over 1,000 years, long before the Ottoman Empire existed. Founded in about 95 BCE, the Armenian kingdom went through periods of stability and invasion. According to Movses Khorenatsi, known as the father of Armenian history, this community was the first to convert to Christianity—before the Romans—and establish a Christian state. They created their own alphabet in the fifth century CE, translated the Bible, and had a long history of shared beliefs, stories, and myths.

03:15

Artwork depicts a border community at war; an 1877 "war map" depicts Russia, an enemy at the time, as an octopus

By the 19th century, Ottoman rulers began to view Armenian communities along the Russian border as a threat. Russia was a longtime enemy of the Ottomans. The Muslim community believed that the Armenians might turn on them if there were a war. So, Ottoman rulers attempted to dilute the Armenian community by resettling majority Muslim populations among them. In addition, some Turks and Kurds envied Armenians. They perceived Armenians as better off than themselves, with more wealth and higher literacy rates. Of course, this tension was based more on perception than fact.

03:52

After a period of reform in the 19th century, the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 formed a constitutional government with a parliament. Various millets were elected to Parliament. Many hoped this would lead to reform and change.

However, the leading political party of the revolution, the Committee of Union and Progress—C.U.P.—did not view millet communities as part of a new Turkish nation-state they wished to establish. This party began consolidating power and trying to transform the empire. Tensions were rising. The 1914 assassination of the archduke of Austria-Hungary and the major war sparked by this assassination would only increase this tension.

04:42

Genocide, 1915

*Images of soldiers from
Turkey and Armenia*

After the assassination of the archduke in 1914, major European states declared war on each other. The Ottoman Empire, under the control of the Turks, aligned with Germany and Austria-Hungary. They would fight against the Entente, including Russia. The war renewed Turkish beliefs that Armenians would turn against the Ottomans and fight alongside Russia. The Turks also believed that the Armenians and Christian groups were getting in the way of achieving a more Turkic, Muslim empire. In the early years of the war, Armenians fought alongside Turks and Kurds against Russia and the Entente. However, after losing a major battle against Russia in 1915, the Turks began to blame Armenians for the loss.

05:29

Rumors soon spread that groups of Armenians were staging a rebellion. This created more hostility towards Armenians, both inside and outside of the military. In order to prevent rumored revolts, the Ottoman government ordered Armenian communities to be forcefully relocated from border areas and military fronts. Armenian soldiers had their weapons confiscated.

Described as “sitting ducks,” some of these men were sent to labor camps. Then hundreds were taken out to deserted areas and shot. As historian Ronald Grigor Suny wrote in “A History of the Armenian Genocide,” “What evolved rapidly into genocide “began as sporadic massacres “that, following a colossal defeat, “resulted in political panic, despair, and a thirst for vengeance.” The extermination of the Armenian people had begun.

06:26

*Image of a woman leaning
over a young child*

Some Turkish officials in Istanbul tried to warn their Armenian friends. One official quietly told his friend, “A new storm is about to break upon the Armenians, so I hope that you will save yourself.” The recommendation was to leave for Europe immediately, without regard for property or investments. Many managed to escape; some fled to Europe and others to America, but more horrors were to come. The relocation efforts soon turned into mass extermination, especially in the areas along the fronts and in rural provinces. Turkish and Kurdish soldiers forced whole families to march away from their homes. Their houses and possessions were later sold to the highest bidder. Bands of Ottoman soldiers marched through Armenian villages and tortured inhabitants. Armenian houses were robbed. Churches were stripped and religious icons left in the mud. Turkish officials attempted to justify this violence by stating that these acts were in retaliation for Armenian rebellion. They claimed that Armenians in the eastern provinces must be removed or eliminated.

07:36

*Photo of many orphaned
Armenian children*

Fear and rumors continued to stoke the flames of violence. Some Armenians did rebel against the slaughtering of their people. This allowed Turkish authorities to justify increased removals and killings. One official ordered that all Armenian men over the age of 12 should be killed. Armenian women were raped and murdered or taken by Turkish men as wives. Small children became orphans. Some were adopted by Christian missionaries and others by Turkish families.

08:10

*Image of a poster
campaigning for funds to
provide aid to persecuted
Armenians
Photo of executed
Armenian people*

Christians in other parts of the world, in particular Europe and America, heard reports of Armenian persecution. Organizations were formed to provide aid to a Christian community thousands of miles away. Some ambassadors living in Istanbul worked to convince Turkish officials to stop the violence. Nothing seemed to work. The American ambassador to Istanbul, Henry Morgenthau, Sr., described events as “a campaign of race extermination.” From 1915 to 1917, over one million Armenians died. Most were executed as they journeyed to labor camps. They were buried in mass graves or burned. Some resisted, but any resistance provided officials with an excuse to justify their actions. After the war, some of the Turkish leaders who ordered the killings were brought to trial, but only a few were punished. Others escaped, mainly to Germany.

09:12

In the years that followed, some of these men were assassinated by Armenians who sought revenge. To this day, the Turkish state maintains that the mass killing of Armenians did not happen or was justified. However, most major powers in the world recognize and memorialize this period as the Armenian Genocide: the mass extermination of an ethnic or religious group.