

# Legacy of Denial: Revisiting the Armenian, Assyrian and Greek Genocides a Century Later

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*WRITER'S COMMENT: The Armenian Genocide and the concurrent Greek and Assyrian genocides that accompanied it have long been relegated to a diminished status among much more well-known catastrophes. Despite having grown up with maternal Armenian and Assyrian heritage, I experienced a largely assimilated and standard American childhood, the heartbreaking history of my forebearers a century earlier having gone totally unmentioned save for a few mentions in passing. As I grew up and the cyclical nature of genocide and humanity's capacity for evil became increasingly apparent, I discovered a new interest regarding what can be considered as one of, if not the first, great slaughters of the twentieth century.*

*I have long held the view that the Armenian Genocide was not an independent event, but rather a continuation of a set of mass killings aimed at ethnically cleansing the Ottoman Empire of its Christian population. From this point on, we can begin to not only understand the institutions and tendencies that enabled this genocide, but also those that came after it.*

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: I had the privilege of mentoring Brandon Jetter, a political columnist for the UC Davis Aggie during spring quarter 2019. He took to heart the need to keep his collegiate audience in mind and tell stories through a new lens. Mr. Jetter combines superb, tireless research with clear, balanced reporting, which allows him to write with authority, clarity, and impact. His essay on the roots and consequences of the Armenian, Assyrian, and Greek geno-*

*cides brings a fresh perspective to a century-old tragedy, placing it in its current context and convincing readers why this still matters today. Jetter's research shows that the systematic extermination of Armenians led to the creation of the word "genocide" in 1944. He has taken a dense, complex, disputed topic and unspooled it in a compelling, relevant way. Many students are passionate about politics and wish to write about them—the trick is to bring a fresh, current voice to the table that separates the author from all the work that has come previously, or is being done nationally, and do it in a way that connects to their audience. Mr. Jetter has managed to do this well, and I look forward to his trajectory as a political analyst for our times.*

—*Stephen Magagnini, University Writing Program*

Deep in the heart of the Syrian desert, some 280 miles east of Damascus, lie the ruins of the Armenian Genocide Martyrs' Memorial. Constructed in 1990, the memorial long served as a sight of pilgrimage for thousands of Armenians, descendants of a systematic genocide that once drove their ancestors into these same desert sands over a century ago. With its beige marble walls and pointed domes, the building was a premiere example of Armenian architecture in a country where so many members of the diaspora now live.

Tragically, the complex was destroyed at the hands of ISIS in 2014—perhaps indicative of a cultural cleansing that never really ended.

The desert region of Deir ez-Zor, where the Ottomans marched thousands of Armenians until they died of starvation or disease, is just one of many open-air killing grounds that were utilized by the empire against its Christian minorities. In his memoir *Black Dog of Fate*, Peter Balakian notes that so many Armenians died at Deir ez-Zor that, when visiting the region in 2009, he was able to easily dig up some of the bones of victims, relics of just some of the roughly 1.5 million Armenians who were killed by their Ottoman oppressors from 1915 to 1923.

Yet, despite its significance, the Armenian Genocide continues to remain largely an afterthought in our understanding of world history. Despite this, the blowback from these same mass killings shaped the geopolitical world we know today and served as a preview to the great massacres of the 20th century that would follow. Understanding the

complexity and impact of the Armenian Genocide is thus not only important from a historical context, but also as a means of understanding the human capacity for evil.

But before you can grasp the magnitude of the Armenian Genocide, you must first understand the backdrop against which it occurred.

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*The attack on the Armenian people, which soon developed into a systematic attempt to exterminate the race, was a cold-blooded, unprovoked, deliberate act, planned and carried out without popular approval, by the military masters of Turkey.*

Henry H. Riggs, American missionary in Kharpert during the Armenian Genocide<sup>1</sup>

If memory of the Armenian Genocide has fallen forgotten to time, then the concurrent Greek and Assyrian genocides have similarly vanished from our recollection.

The history of the Armenian Genocide does not solely begin with the Armenians themselves; there is a greater context in which these killings began. Indeed it has been argued that the Armenian Genocide was not purely a distinct event, but also part of a broader, decades-long genocidal policy aimed at other Christian peoples as well, such as the Greeks and Assyrians. This is the argument brought forward by Israeli historians Benny Morris and Dror Ze-evi in their extensive book *The Thirty Year Genocide* (2019), and history shows that it is one with much credence.

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*This business will end in blood.*

Sultan of the Ottoman Empire Abdul Hamid II, 1895, in reference to a reform package issued by European powers to protect the Armenian people<sup>2</sup>

Christian populations in the Ottoman Empire long played the

role of second-class citizens to the ruling Turkish Muslim elite. The Ottoman *dhimmi* system permitted the Christian Armenian people a fairly large degree of autonomy, but also enforced upon them a different set of standards as their counterparts. They were referred to in Turkish as *giaours*, meaning “infidel” or “unbeliever,” and were unfairly levied higher taxes and given stricter legal restrictions. The so-called “Armenian Question” came into conversation in the late 19th century, as European powers began to observe the Ottoman Empire’s mistreatment of its Christian minorities. Around the same time, Armenian leaders began to hear increased reports of crimes directed at their community, such as land seizures, forced conversions, rape, and murder.

A turning point in the treatment of Armenians came in the aftermath of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878. Armenians in the eastern provinces of the Ottoman Empire often saw the largely Orthodox Russian invaders as liberators. Accordingly, Muslim Kurdish and Circassian tribes razed Armenian communities during the war, leaving them devastated and pushing survivors towards an ideological movement in favor of liberation and self-determination. While efforts at independence following the war failed, the brewing revolutionary fervor among Armenians began to instill suspicion and fear among their Muslim neighbors.

The first set of mass killings of Ottoman Christians occurred soon after with the Hamidian massacres of 1894-1896. Distraught by increasingly nationalistic sentiments and pushes for civil rights by the Armenian people, Sultan Abdul Hamid II sought to put down a potential rebellion by creating a paramilitary group known as the *Hamidiye*, whose sole task was to harass the Armenian population. Hamid II was especially irritated by the Armenian community’s pleas to Europe, including efforts in 1895 to pursue a new reform package aimed at limiting the Sultan’s power.

After violently suppressing an uprising by Armenians who refused to pay an oppressive tax in the Sasun region in 1894, the Hamidiye and other Ottoman Muslims began to indiscriminately attack Christian communities. An estimated 100,000 to 300,000 Armenians were then killed<sup>3</sup>, in addition to roughly 25,000 Assyrians<sup>4</sup>. The massacres led to Sultan Hamid II becoming internationally dubbed “Hamid the Damned,” and served as a precursor to the Armenian Genocide.

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*A large segment of the Young Turk party maintains the viewpoint that the Ottoman Empire should be based only on the principle of Islam and Pan-Turkism. The non-Muslim and non-Turkish inhabitants should either be forcibly Islamized (converted to Islam) and follow Turkish customs, or otherwise they ought to be destroyed. These gentlemen in Turkey believe that the time is now for the realization of this plan.*

Report from German Vice Consular to the  
Ottoman Empire, Max Erwin von Scheubner  
Richter<sup>5</sup>

Anti-Christian sentiment in the Ottoman Empire continued well into the early 20th century, as the country took steps to modernize amid a visible geopolitical decline. In 1908, a small group of ambitious political revolutionaries known as the Young Turks gained power of the empire through their political party, the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP). The Young Turks sought to modernize Turkey, and through a coup d'état by military officers that same year, they removed Abdul Hamid II from power.

However, an ideological struggle between nationalists and decentralization-focused liberals emerged in the CUP, even as the organization was pushing the country towards modernization. Ultimately in 1913, the fight came to an end when the nationalistic wing seized control of the party, appointing a triumvirate of Grand Vizier Mehmed Tallat Pasha, Minister of War Ismail Enver Pasha, and Minister of the Navy Ahmed Djemal Pasha—a group collectively known as the Three Pashas—to head the government.

The trio came to lead what was now a crumbling eastern empire. Nationalist aspirations were fermenting among Arab intellectuals to the south, and a series of brutal defeats against Christian subjects in the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913 lost them what little European territory they had left. This resulted in increased antipathy towards the Ottoman Christian population, as well as a mass influx of hostile Muslim refugees into historically Christian territories.

Seizing on the political opportunity of a recently defeated and rapidly collapsing Ottoman Empire, the oppressed Armenians appealed

to Europe for help, hoping to secure greater international oversight regarding their treatment. Meanwhile, in 1914, the Ottomans entered World War I on the side of Germany. In January of 1915, Enver Pasha was soundly defeated by Russian forces at the Battle of Sarikamish. Ill-equipped for the freezing conditions of the Russian winter, Ottoman forces were routed in what was one of the most humiliating battles of the war. The presence of Armenian volunteers fighting alongside the Russian military also proved particularly enraging to Ottoman military leaders. As a result, Enver Pasha returned to Turkey publicly blaming the loss on all Armenians, stoking ethnic tensions in the months preceding the genocide.

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*Turkey is taking advantage of the war in order to thoroughly liquidate its internal foes, i.e., the indigenous Christians, without being thereby disturbed by foreign intervention.*

Grand Vizier of the Ottoman Empire Talaat Pasha  
to Dr. Mordtmann of the German Embassy, June  
1915<sup>6</sup>

After the defeat at Sarikamish, Enver Pasha declared the removal and demobilization of all Armenian and other Christian soldiers from the Ottoman military. Enver sought to move the Christian soldiers into unarmed labor battalions, claiming that it was a preventive measure against the possibility of them siding with the Russians. Many members of these units were ultimately executed by Turkish soldiers, the transfer of Armenians into an unarmed capacity serving as a preliminary run of the genocide that was yet to come.

Relations between the Armenians and the new Ottoman government took a turn for the worse on April 20, 1915 in the city of Van. The day before, an Ottoman official had demanded the conscription of 4,000 able-bodied Armenian men, a deliberate ploy aimed at preemptively executing a possible resistance force. The community resisted and eventually took up defensive arms. A siege by Ottoman forces ensued. Portraying the event as an insurgency, Ottoman officials used this as an opportunity

to finally initiate the forced deportations and killings of their Armenian subjects. The decision to eradicate the Christian population, of course, had already been made well before this.

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*I am confident that the whole history of the human race contains no such horrible episode as this. The great massacres and persecutions of the past seem almost insignificant when compared to the sufferings of the Armenian race in 1915.*

Henry Morgenthau Sr., United States Ambassador  
to the Ottoman Empire<sup>7</sup>

And so it began.

The start of the Armenian Genocide itself is frequently cited as April 24, 1915, a date sometimes referred to as “Red Sunday,” when 235 Armenian intellectuals in the Ottoman capital of Constantinople were rounded up and deported in a preemptive decapitation strike aimed at stifling any form of organized Christian resistance. The total detainees eventually numbered 2,345, the vast majority of whom were murdered following their deportation.

Starting in the summer of 1915, Armenians in eastern Anatolia were forcibly removed from their homes and marched towards concentration camps in the Syrian desert. Insufficient rations were given to displaced Armenians, who were frequently subject to disease, starvation, and mass killings along the treacherous journey. The death marches were organized by Ottoman military leaders, who utilized irregular military forces to lead the Armenians to their deaths. Local Kurdish and Circassian tribes frequently attacked and looted the prisoners along the way.

Rape and murder were commonplace among these marches. Turkish soldiers, having been told “do to [the women] whatever you wish,” took advantage of defenseless women<sup>8</sup>. In cities along the route, such as Damascus and Mosul, female deportees were frequently displayed naked and sold as sex slaves or forced into marriages. Most of all, food was scarce and shelter was non-existent, with many prisoners falling victim to the brutal, scorching conditions of northern Arabia.

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*The roads and the Euphrates are strewn with corpses of exiles, and those who survive are doomed to certain death. It is a plan to exterminate the whole Armenian people.*

Report from *The New York Times*, August 18, 1915<sup>9</sup>

Those who did survive the death marches, few and far between, found themselves in concentration camps in Iraq and Syria. The Empire's Greek and Assyrian populations did not fare much better.

The Ottoman massacres of its Pontic Greek began first with the government's policy of population transfer, which frequently relocated Greeks through violent intimidation and fueled ethnic tensions. Coinciding with the timeline of the Armenian Genocide, the Greek population transfers gradually evolved into outright death marches. In total, anywhere from 450,000 to 750,000 Greek civilians were killed from 1913-1922<sup>10</sup>.

The Assyrians, a distinct ethnic group of Aramaic-speaking Christians, meanwhile, suffered a similar fate as their Greek and Armenian counterparts. The mass killings of Assyrians by Ottoman forces took a number of forms—deportations sometimes among them—but also through other strategies, such as forced famine and the direct destruction of villages. Ultimately, scholars place the total death toll at anywhere from 150,000 to 300,000 Assyrians, out of a pre-war population of around 600,000<sup>11</sup>.

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*The Ottoman Empire should be cleaned up of the Armenians and the Lebanese. We have destroyed the former by the sword, we shall destroy the latter through starvation.*

Enver Pasha, Minister of War of the Ottoman Empire, May 19, 1916<sup>12</sup>

Occurring adjacently, but often left out of the history of the



Ottoman killings, was the deliberate mass starvation of the largely Maronite Christian Lebanese population of Mount Lebanon. Through a blockade of supplies from 1915-1918, the Ottomans starved to death an estimated 200,000 Lebanese in the Mount Lebanon Mutasarrifate, out of a pre-existing community of 400,000<sup>13</sup>. The killings implemented on the Armenians were thus becoming the preferred strategy against Ottoman enemies everywhere.

With regard to the Armenians, other forms of mass killing were utilized as well. Mass burnings were a frequent strategy of the Ottoman military; some 80,000 Armenians in 90 villages across the Muş plain were killed by this technique alone<sup>14</sup>. Drownings occurred in the Black Sea, where thousands of Armenian children and women were rounded up and placed on boats that were later capsized—around 50,000 Armenians drowned to death in the Trabzon province alone.

Lesser known and more infrequent incidents of medical killings also occurred. Cases of poisonings (particularly among children and infants)<sup>15</sup>, gassings and deliberate typhoid infections<sup>16</sup> were reported as well—techniques argued to have served as inspiration for Nazi human experimentation decades later<sup>16</sup>. Regardless of the manner, the goal was always the same: the deliberate destruction of the Armenian people.

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*The Armenians' horror shook the world  
The Turkish throne fell to the ground  
Let me tell you about the death of Talaat.  
Pour the wine, dear friend, pour the wine,  
Drink it nicely; drink it with delight.*

"Pour the Wine," Armenian revolutionary song

As is true with all empires, the Ottomans eventually fell.

The defeat and partition of the Ottoman Empire and its territories to the Allied Powers at the end of WWI marked the end of over 600 years of continuous Turkish rule. In its wake, its territories were divided among England and France, eventually becoming hotbeds for their own independence movements.

As for the Three Pashas, the Ottoman leaders who worked to orchestrate the great genocide, they fled the collapsing Turkish empire

and found refuge in Germany, only to suffer a series of violent deaths. They were among the targets of Operation Nemesis, a covert mission by the Armenian Revolutionary Federation—known as Dashnaks—aimed at assassinating the masterminds of the Armenian Genocide. Naval Minister Djemal Pasha was killed in Tbilisi, Georgia in 1921.

Widely considered the primary architect of the genocide, Grand Vizier Talaat Pasha was assassinated in broad daylight in Berlin by a Dashnak named Soghomon Tehlirian. Tehlirian, whose parents died in the Armenian Genocide, was arrested and tried for murder—but was then acquitted in just over an hour after he pleaded temporary insanity caused by the trauma of his parents' deaths. The trial became just as much about the atrocities committed in the genocide organized by Talaat as it did the crime by Tehlirian. The evidence presented in this testimony, in addition to witnessing the Holocaust first-hand two decades after, later motivated Polish-Jewish lawyer Raphael Lemkin to coin the term “genocide” in 1944<sup>17</sup>.

Interior Minister Enver Pasha escaped the wrath of Operation Nemesis only to die at the hands of a Red Army brigade while leading a Muslim revolt against Russian forces in Central Asia. Enver was killed during a counter attack led by Yakov Melkumov, an ethnic Armenian himself.

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*With the genocide of Armenians, Greeks, Assyrians, the culture of an entire region has been distorted, the ancient civilization of Asia Minor disappeared forever. Wasn't this a crime against humanity?*

Nikol Pashinyan, 16th and current Prime Minister  
of the Republic of Armenia

*Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?*

Adolf Hitler, August 22, 1939, one week before  
the Nazi invasion of Poland<sup>18</sup>

In those 30 years between 1894 and 1924, Christians in Turkey declined from 20% of the population to just under 2%. Once home to a diverse population that included some of the world's oldest Christians,

Turkey's population is now estimated at 99.8% Muslim<sup>19</sup>. The ethnic cleansing of the country's Christian population transformed what was once seen as the great cosmopolitan crossroad between East and West into a contemporary monoculture. Survivors of the great killings of the 20th century have since become dispersed across the world, with the genocide serving as the primary catalyst for the formation of the Armenian and Assyrian diasporas.

To this day, the Turkish government denies the role of the Ottoman Empire in the Armenian Genocide.

Turkey has long questioned the scholarly consensus on the legitimacy of the Ottoman role in the genocide, instead claiming that the numbers are inflated and not the product of an organized killing, but rather the casualties of war. The Turkish lobby in the United States, meanwhile, has spent millions of dollars in a decades-long campaign to ensure that the U.S. does not formally recognize the Armenian Genocide<sup>20</sup>. Despite widespread pressure from the Armenian diaspora, the U.S. government still refuses to use the term "genocide" to describe the mass killings of Armenians from 1914-1920, due largely in part to worries over harming its strategic relationship with NATO ally Turkey<sup>21</sup>.

Contemporary attempts at recognition and reconciliation between Turkey and its miniscule remaining Christian population have largely failed, with advocates of genocide recognition sometimes falling victim to violent retribution. In 2007, for example, Hrant Dink, editor of the bilingual Armenian magazine *Agos*, was assassinated in Istanbul by Turkish nationalist Ogün Samast. Dink, an ethnic Armenian and long critic of the country's policy of genocide denial, had previously been prosecuted three times for "denigrating Turkishness."<sup>22</sup> Controversy ensued when a photograph of the assassin—posing in front of the Turkish flag side by side with smiling police officers—surfaced, doing little to assuage concerns over a possible conspiracy or cover-up.<sup>23</sup>

Ironically, some estimates place the number of self-identified Turks with Armenian ancestry to be as high as 3 to 5 million<sup>24</sup>. In the years coinciding with the genocide, Armenian women and children were frequently kidnapped and forced to convert to Islam, with the children adopted by Muslim families and the girls and women taken to harems to be married to new husbands. Armenian orphans were deliberately placed into Turkish orphanages, where they were given new names, circumcised and forced to convert to Islam.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the eradication of the Armenians

of Turkey can be understood as a deliberate ethnic cleansing, a product of the late Ottoman government's policy of Turkification, which sought to homogenize the empire's population.

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*The Armenian massacre was the greatest crime of the war, and the failure to act against Turkey is to condone it. . . . [T]he failure to deal radically with the Turkish horror means that all talk of guaranteeing the future peace of the world is mischievous nonsense.*

Theodore Roosevelt in private letter to Cleveland  
Hoadley Dodge, May 11, 1918

The legacy of the Armenian Genocide has thus been subject to scorn and debate. Efforts at lasting recognition have become a key goal of the Armenian community both at home and abroad. In addition to attempts at raising awareness and lobbying the United States government to formally recognize the genocide, Armenians have used April 24th—Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day—as an opportunity to both mourn and educate. In 2015, on the 100th anniversary of the genocide, over 130,000 protestors marched from the Little Armenia neighborhood in East Hollywood to the Turkish consulate in Los Angeles, demanding recognition of the Armenian Genocide.

Such action has become replicated elsewhere, including at UC Davis. Every year on April 24, members of the Armenian Student Association gather in the Memorial Union for a “die-in,” where protestors silently lie down or hold signs in commemoration of the genocide. Elsewhere, pushes by Armenian students and other allies have resulted in the implementation of legislation aimed at the recognition of these killings.

In 2015, the ASUCD Senate joined a number of other UC campuses in passing a bill calling for the UC Board of Regents to divest over \$74 million dollars from the Republic of Turkey due to its continued denial of the Armenian Genocide. Three years later, in 2018, ACUSD passed Senate Resolution #12, which formally recognized and condemned the Ottoman government's destruction of its Armenian community.

These sorts of maneuvers at first may seem insignificant, but they are the first small steps in establishing a formal recognition of one of

the great crimes against humanity of the 20th century. For it was the Armenian Genocide that partly inspired and enabled the slaughters that succeeded it. For it was this bloodshed that initiated the first mass exodus of Christians from the Middle East and empowered the ongoing one that followed. For it was this carnage and butchery, this deliberate eradication of an unjustly villainized people, that not only eradicated a religion in the lands where it first took root, but also destroyed thousands of years of ancient history in the process.

Lest we forget.

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