

“A Box on the Ear”: The Armenian Genocide

To understand the intricacies of the Armenian Genocide, one must look at the history of the Armenians and the Ottoman Empire before World War I. Armenia is one of the oldest countries in the world with a recorded history of about 3,500 years. The Armenians were absorbed into the Ottoman Empire in the early sixteenth century during the Empire’s rapid expansion into the Balkans, Central Asia, and the Middle East. The Empire had been founded in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century by a tribe of nomadic Turks living on the frontiers of the Byzantine Empire.¹ The Ottoman Empire experienced a meteoric rise in power and prestige under Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-1566), one of the most famous rulers of all time.²

Life for Armenians in the Ottoman Empire before the late nineteenth century was generally good. Jews and Christians were allowed to practice their religions in peace and go about their daily lives. They were given *Ahl al-Dhimma*, the protection of the state given to minorities.³ However Jews and Christians did face forms of discrimination in Ottoman society. They had to pay a special poll tax called the *jizya* and were generally seen as subordinates to their Muslim counterparts⁴ All considered, minority groups in the Ottoman Empire faced less discrimination than minority groups in European countries. For example, the Spanish Inquisition during the 16th century engaged in the forced conversion of Islamic peoples and deported a large number of its Jewish population, many of which found refuge in the Ottoman Empire.⁵

So what changed? Although the Armenians faced some obstacles in the Ottoman Empire,

¹ Rouben P. Adalian, “Ottoman Empire and the Armenian Genocide,” *History*, 2017, <http://www.armenian-genocide.org/ottoman.html>

² Ibid

³ Yevgeniya Baraz, “The Position of Jews and Christians in the Ottoman Empire,” *Inquiry Journals* 2, no. 5 (2010), <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/242/the-position-of-jews-and-christians-in-the-ottoman-empire>

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Edward A. Ryan, “Spanish Inquisition,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Chicago, Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2015), <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Spanish-Inquisition>

their security was rarely an issue. We can determine the answer by examining the decline of the Ottoman Empire, and the best place to begin that story is with Sultan Abdulhamid II.

Abdulhamid ascended to the Ottoman throne 31 August 1876. The Ottoman Empire on the eve of his ascension was racked by internal and external threats and economically bankrupt. In addition, Russia declared war on the Ottoman Empire in April of 1877 with the aims of conquering the capital city of Istanbul. By January of 1878, the Russians were on the outskirts of the Ottoman capital and Abdulhamid began peace talks with Russia. These peace talks, known as the Treaty of Berlin, resulted in the Ottomans losing two-fifths of its total territory. ⁶

Perhaps more central to our story is what was happening domestically. The external pressures Abdulhamid faced convinced him that the only way to retain power was to rule with an iron fist, a conclusion that would cost the Armenians dearly in 1896.⁷ As the Ottomans Empire faced dismemberment by the European powers in the Treaty of Berlin, various minorities within the Empire began clamoring for rights and independence, one such group being the Armenians. Two Armenian revolutionary parties, the *Henchak* and *Dashnaktsutyun*, were founded in 1887 and 1890 to advocate for Armenian independence. Interestingly enough, neither revolutionary party was founded in the Ottoman Empire, nor did most Armenians share their nationalist sentiments.⁸ Abdulhamid feared that there would be a large Armenian national movement and sought to repress it, commenting to a reporter in 1890, “I will soon settle those Armenians. I will give them a box on the ear which will make them...relinquish their revolutionary ambitions.”⁹ This “box on the ear” initially took the form of increased taxes, which fostered resentment in

⁶ Eugene Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), pg. 4.

⁷ Ibid, pg. 4.

⁸ “Hamidian Massacres,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2016), <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hamidian-massacres>

⁹ “Armenian Genocide,” *History*, 2017, <http://www.history.com/topics/armenian-genocide>

some Armenian communities. Armenians took to the streets in some areas to protest the increased taxes. In response to the protests, Turkish mobs and government troops began massacring Armenians in the affected communities. This violence peaked in December 1895, when a little under 3,000 Armenians were burned alive in the cathedral of Urfa.¹⁰ In another instance in 1896, Armenian revolutionaries seized the Ottoman Bank in Istanbul, and in reprisal more than 5,000 Armenians were killed by Turkish mobs, who some say were directed by government troops.¹¹ These killings were referred to as the Hamidian Massacres, named after its instigator, Sultan Abdulhamid II. Ironically, Abdulhamid's mother was an Armenian.

The Hamidian Massacres showed the ineffectiveness, brutality, and reactivity of Abdulhamid's rule, and some began to question his ability to lead the country. In 1889, a group of army officers, which would later become the Young Turks, began conspiring against Abdulhamid. The Young Turks wanted to restore the Ottoman Empire to its status of a great power through democratization and reform. Abdulhamid discovered the conspiracy, prompting the members to flee the country. On July 3rd 1908 Major Ahmed Niyazi, a member of the Young Turk movement, led a revolt against Ottoman authorities in Resna. Abdulhamid, realizing the loyalty of his army could not be guaranteed, restored constitutional rule.¹² The Young Turks eventually wrested power from the other constitutional parties, obtaining complete power through a coup d'état in 1913.¹³ Abdulhamid was deposed and replaced by his brother Mehmed V, a tool of the Committee. Though many hoped this would be a turning point for the Empire, the Committee and Young Turk leadership immediately faced a world torn apart by war. In

¹⁰ "Hamidian Massacres," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hamidian-massacres>

¹¹ Ibid

¹² "Young Turks," *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2016), <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Young-Turks-Turkish-nationalist-movement>

¹³ "Young Turks," *Encyclopaedia of the Modern Middle East and North Africa*, 2017, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/history/modern-europe/turkish-and-ottoman-history/young-turks>

August 1914, the Ottoman Empire joined the war on the side of the Central Powers.

Though there are several contending theories on what sparked the Armenian Genocide, the most widely accepted reason is the Ottoman defeat at the battle of Sarikamish in January 1915. Enver Pasha, one of the leaders of the Young Turks, pushed for a military campaign against Russia. The Ottoman Army was crushed at the battle of Sarikamish, losing men to exposure and Russian fire. Ottoman casualties were estimated to be at 75,000 to the Russians 28,000.¹⁴ Despite poor generalship and lack of planning (they invaded Russia, in the winter, without winter clothes; what can go wrong?) the Turkish government blamed the loss on Armenian treachery.¹⁵ The tensions leftover from the Hamidian Massacres came full circle. Turkish officials reasoned that the Armenians still wanted independence, and that they were taking advantage of World War I to sabotage the Ottoman war effort to gain that independence.

First to go were the Armenian soldiers in the Ottoman army. These soldiers were demobilized, stripped of their weapons, and systematically murdered by Ottoman troops. Villages and towns located near the Russian border were next. Some Armenians saw what was going on and tried to resist, as in the case of the Armenians in the village of Van. This worked against them; the Ottoman government would use the resistance as proof of an Armenian rebellion. On 24 April 1915, 250 leading Armenian intellectuals and political leaders were arrested in Istanbul and killed in the months that followed. By May of 1915, legislation was passed that made the deportation of Armenians from their ancestral lands legal, and thousands of Armenians were rounded up by Ottoman troops, as well as other ethnic groups like Kurds and Circassians. Armenians caught up in this wave of deportations were forced into death marches. If

¹⁴John Shea, "The Battle of Sarikamish," *World War I Today*, 2014
<http://wwitoday.com/wwiScEventDetail.php?id=69>

¹⁵Ronald Grigor Suny, "Armenian Genocide," (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2016),
<https://www.britannica.com/event/Armenian-Genocide>

anyone reached the deserts of Syria, they faced starvation and further massacres/brutality. In this brief period between 1915-1916, estimates of Armenian dead range anywhere from 600,000 to 1,000,000 as a result of massacres and forced marches.¹⁶

So what are the legacies of the Armenian Genocide? A massive number of Armenians, Anatolian Greeks, and non-Turkish minority groups were either killed or displaced from their ancestral homes in the Ottoman Empire. The Young Turks who presided over the Genocide fled the country and renowned war hero Ataturk took control of the new nation state of Turkey. Since then, Turkey has denied that the killing of the Armenians was a Genocide, claiming that it was necessary to kill them for reasons of national security. In fact, it is illegal to refer to the killings as a Genocide in Turkey.¹⁷ Issues of recognition do not stop in Turkey. Several major countries, including Great Britain, the United States, and Israel refuse to acknowledge the killings as Genocide either. This is due in large part to Turkey's alliance with the aforementioned countries; if they were to say that this was a Genocide, they run the risk of losing Turkey as an ally. Heated debates still take place in Congress as attempts to have it recognized continually get shelved, and there seems to be no end in sight. The unfortunate by-product of these endless debates is that the Armenian Genocide fades from popular memory. Yet for the survivors and their descendants, this period of violence factors large in their memory and heritage.

¹⁶ Ronald Grigor Suny, "Armenian Genocide," (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2016), <https://www.britannica.com/event/Armenian-Genocide>

¹⁷ "Armenian Genocide," History, 2017, <http://www.history.com/topics/armenian-genocide>

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