

# Armenia

The Armenians were written about in the *Iliad* when they were allies of Troy. They first emerged as a political power in 650 B.C. Despite being parts of different empires (at different times ruled by Persians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs and Mongols) the Armenians kept their language, their culture and, after 301 A.D. their distinct Christian identity. The snow-capped peak of Mount Ararat became its focal point and by 600 BC Armenia as a nation sprang into being. Following the advent of Christianity, Armenia became the very first nation to accept it as the state religion. A golden era of peace and prosperity followed which saw the invention of a distinct alphabet, a flourishing of literature, art, commerce, and a unique style of architecture. By the 10th century, Armenians had established a new capital at Ani, affectionately called the “city of a thousand and one churches.”



In the eleventh century, the first Turkish invasion of the Armenian homeland occurred. Thus began several hundred years of rule by Muslim Turks. By the sixteenth century, Armenia had been absorbed into the vast and mighty Ottoman Empire. As the Ottoman Empire gradually disintegrated, formerly subject peoples including the Greeks, Serbs and Romanians achieved their long-awaited independence. Only the Armenians and the Arabs of the Middle East remained stuck in the backward and nearly bankrupt empire, now under the autocratic rule of Sultan Abdul Hamid.

By the 1890s, young Armenians began to press for political reforms, calling for a constitutional government, the right to vote and an end to discriminatory practices such as special taxes levied solely against them because they were Christians. The despotic Sultan responded to their pleas with brutal persecutions. Between 1894 and 1896 over 100,000 inhabitants of Armenian villages were massacred during widespread pogroms conducted by the Sultan's special regiments.

In July 1908, reform-minded Turkish nationalists known as "Young Turks" forced the Sultan to allow a constitutional government and guarantee basic rights. Armenians in Turkey were delighted with this sudden turn of events and its prospects for a brighter future. Both Turks and Armenians held jubilant public rallies attended with banners held high calling for freedom, equality and justice.

However, their hopes were dashed when three of the Young Turks seized full control of the government via a coup in 1913. This triumvirate of Young Turks, consisting of Mehmed Talaat, Ismail Enver and Ahmed Djemal, came to wield dictatorial powers and concocted their own ambitious plans for the future of Turkey. They wanted to unite all of the Turkic peoples in the entire region while expanding the borders of Turkey eastward across the Caucasus all the way into Central Asia. This would create a new Turkish empire, a "great and eternal land" called Turan with one language and one religion.

The traditional historic homeland of Armenia lay right in the path of their plans to expand eastward. And on that land was a large population of Christian Armenians totaling some two million persons, making up about 10 percent of Turkey's overall population.

Along with the Young Turk's newfound "Turanism" there was a dramatic rise in Islamic fundamentalist agitation throughout Turkey. Christian Armenians were once again branded as infidels (non-believers in Islam). Young Islamic extremists, sometimes leading to violence, staged anti-Armenian demonstrations. During one such outbreak in 1909, two hundred villages were plundered and over 30,000 persons massacred in the Cilicia district on the Mediterranean coast. Throughout Turkey, sporadic local attacks against Armenians continued unchecked over the next several years.

The Armenians had always been one of the best-educated communities within the old Turkish Empire. Armenians were the professionals in society, the businessmen, lawyers, doctors and skilled craftsmen. And they were more open to new scientific, political and social ideas from the West (Europe and America). Children of wealthy Armenians went to Paris, Geneva or even to America to complete their education.

By contrast, the majority of Turks were illiterate peasant farmers and small shopkeepers. Leaders of the Ottoman Empire had traditionally placed little value on education and not a single institute of higher learning could be found within their old empire. The Young Turks decided to glorify the virtues of simple Turkish peasantry at the expense of the Armenians in order to capture peasant loyalty. They exploited the religious, cultural, economic and political differences between Turks and Armenians.

When World War I broke out in 1914, leaders of the Young Turk regime sided with the Central Powers (Germany and Austria-Hungary). The outbreak of war would provide the perfect opportunity to solve the "Armenian question" once and for all. The world's attention became fixed upon the battlegrounds of France and Belgium where the young men of Europe were soon falling dead by the hundreds of thousands. The Eastern Front eventually included the border between Turkey and Russia. With war at hand, unusual measures involving the civilian population would not seem too out of the ordinary.

Turks disarmed the entire Armenian population under the pretext that the people were naturally sympathetic toward Christian Russia. At this time, about forty thousand Armenian men were serving in the Turkish Army. In the fall and winter of 1914, all of their weapons were confiscated and they were put into slave labor battalions building roads or were used as human pack animals. Under the brutal work conditions they suffered a very high death rate. Those who survived would soon be shot outright. The decision to annihilate the entire population came directly from the ruling triumvirate of ultra-nationalist Young Turks. The actual extermination orders were transmitted in coded telegrams to all provincial governors throughout Turkey. Armed roundups began on the evening of April 24, 1915, as 300 Armenian political leaders, educators, writers, clergy and dignitaries in Constantinople (present day Istanbul) were taken from their homes, briefly jailed and tortured, then hanged or shot.

Next, there were mass arrests of Armenian men throughout the country by Turkish soldiers, police agents and bands of Turkish volunteers. The men were tied together with ropes in small groups then taken to the outskirts of their town and shot dead or bayoneted by death squads. Local Turks and Kurds armed with knives and sticks often joined in on the killing.

Then it was the turn of Armenian women, children, and the elderly. On very short notice, they were ordered to pack a few belongings and be ready to leave home, under the pretext that they were being relocated to a non-military zone for their own safety. They were actually being taken on death marches heading south toward the Syrian Desert.



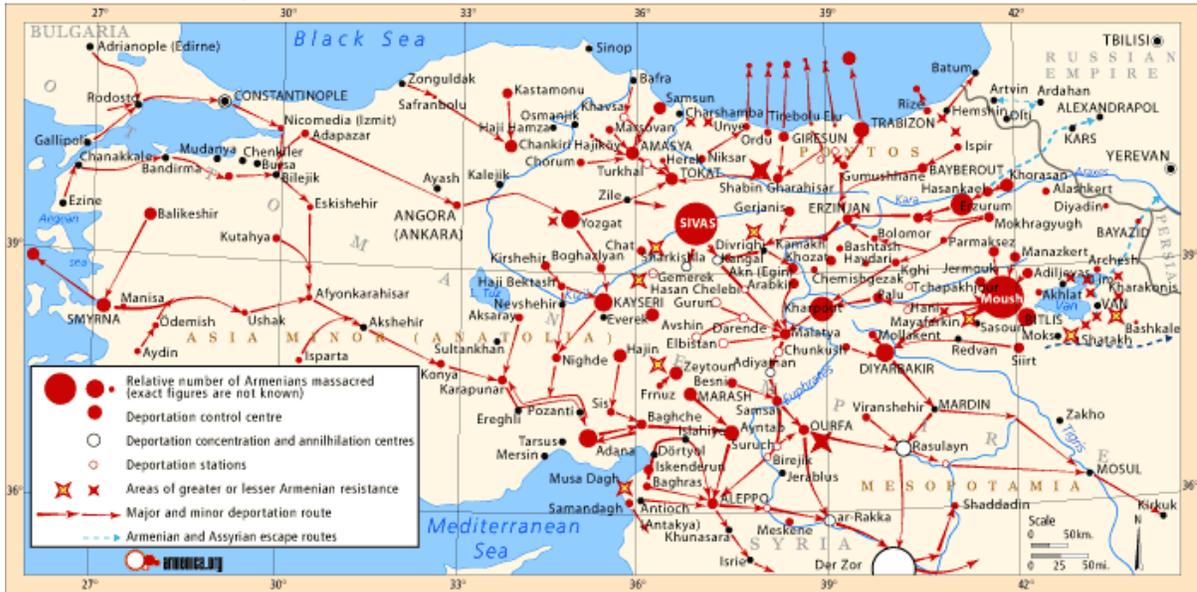
The children were coerced into denouncing Christianity and becoming Muslims, and were then given new Turkish names. For Armenian boys the forced conversion meant they each had to endure painful circumcision as required by Islamic custom.

The death marches during the Armenian Genocide, involving over a million Armenians, covered hundreds of miles and lasted months. Indirect routes through mountains and wilderness areas were deliberately chosen in order to prolong the ordeal and to keep the caravans away from Turkish villages.

Food supplies being carried by the people quickly ran out and they were usually denied further food or water. Anyone stopping to rest or lagging behind the caravan was mercilessly beaten until they rejoined the march. If they couldn't continue they were shot. A common practice was to force all of the people in the caravan to remove every stitch of clothing and have them resume the march in the nude under the scorching sun until they dropped dead by the roadside from exhaustion and dehydration.

An estimated 75 percent of the Armenians on these marches perished, especially children and the elderly. Those who survived the ordeal were herded into the desert without a drop of water. Being thrown off cliffs, burned alive, or drowned in rivers.

## Armenian Genocide, 1915



The Allied Powers (Great Britain, France, and Russia) responded to news of the massacres by issuing a warning to Turkey: "...the Allied governments announce publicly...that they will hold all the members of the Ottoman Government, as well as such of their agents as are implicated, personally responsible for such matters."

The warning had no effect.

Temporary relief for some Armenians came as Russian troops attacked along the Eastern Front and made their way into central Turkey. But the troops withdrew in 1917 upon the Russian Revolution. Armenian survivors withdrew along with them and settled in among fellow Armenians already living in provinces of the former Russian Empire. There were in total about 500,000 Armenians gathered in this region.

In May 1918, Turkish armies attacked the area to achieve the goal of expanding Turkey eastward into the Caucasus and also to resume the annihilation of the Armenians. As many as 100,000 Armenians may have fallen victim to the advancing Turkish troops.

World War I ended in November 1918 with a defeat for Germany and the Central Powers including Turkey. Shortly before the war had ended, the Young Turk triumvirate; Talaat, Enver and Djemal, abruptly resigned their government posts and fled to Germany where they had been offered asylum.

In the months that followed, repeated requests by Turkey's new moderate government and the Allies were made asking Germany to send the Young Turks back home to stand trial. However all such requests were turned down. As a result, Armenian activists took matters into their own hands, located the Young Turks and assassinated them along with two other instigators of the mass murder.

Meanwhile, representatives from the fledgling Republic of Armenia attended the Paris Peace Conference in the hope that the victorious Allies would give them back their historic lands seized by Turkey. The European Allies responded to their request by asked the United States to assume guardianship of the new Republic. However, President Woodrow Wilson's attempt to make Armenia an official U.S. protectorate was rejected by the U.S. Congress in May 1920.

But Wilson did not give up on Armenia. As a result of his efforts, the Treaty of Sevres was signed on August 10, 1920 by the Allied Powers, the Republic of Armenia, and the new moderate leaders of Turkey. The treaty recognized an independent Armenian state in an area comprising much of the former historic homeland.



Turkish nationalism once again reared its head. The moderate Turkish leaders who signed the treaty were ousted in favor of a new nationalist leader, Mustafa Kemal, who simply refused to accept the treaty and even re-occupied the very lands in question then expelled any surviving Armenians, including thousands of orphans.

No Allied power came to the aid of the Armenian Republic and it collapsed. Only a tiny portion of the easternmost area of historic Armenia survived by being becoming part of the Soviet Union.

The Turks demolished any remnants of Armenian cultural heritage including priceless masterpieces of ancient architecture, old libraries and archives. The Turks even leveled entire cities such as the once thriving Kharpert, Van and the ancient capital at Ani, to remove all traces of the three thousand year old civilization.

Referring to the Armenian Genocide, the young German politician Adolf Hitler duly noted the half-hearted reaction of the world's great powers to the plight of the Armenians. After achieving total power in Germany, Hitler decided to conquer Poland in 1939 and told his generals: "Thus for the time being I have sent to the East only my 'Death's Head Units' with the orders to kill without pity or mercy all men, women, and children of Polish race or language. Only in such a way will we win the vital space that we need. Who still talks nowadays about the Armenians?"



The Permanent People's Tribunal recognized the Armenian Genocide on April 16, 1984.

The European Parliament voted to recognize the Armenian Genocide on June 18, 1987.

President Bush issued a news release in 1990 calling on all Americans to join with Armenians on April 24 in commemorating "the more than a million Armenian people who were victims."

President Clinton issued a news release on April 24, 1994, to commemorate the "tragedy" that befell the Armenians in 1915.

The Russian Duma (the lower house of the bicameral Russian legislature) voted on April 20, 1994, to recognize the Armenian Genocide.

Israel officially condemned the Armenian Genocide as Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin proclaimed on the floor of the Knesset (the Israeli legislature), on April 27, 1994, in answer to the claims of the Turkish Ambassador, that "It was not war. It was most certainly massacre and genocide, something the world must remember."

The Armenian genocide is similar to the Jewish holocaust in many respects. Both people adhere to an ancient religion. Both were religious minorities of their respective states. Both have a history of persecution. Both have new democracies. Both are surrounded by enemies. Both are talented and creative minorities who have been persecuted out of envy and obscurantism.

**Issues:**

- The Republic of Turkey must cease to be the only major country in the world to deny the Armenian Genocide.
- The Republic of Turkey must show good will by allowing American aid to present-day Armenia to pass through unhindered.
- The Republic of Turkey must cease to train Azerbaijani soldiers in Turkey for the purpose of attacking Armenia.