

Armenians in the Ottoman Empire

Armenians in the Ottoman Empire were people of Armenian origin who lived under **Ottoman** rule from the empire's original creation to its eventual collapse.

Armenians in the Ottoman Empire lived under the **millet system** as a **Christian** minority up until the **Tanzimat** reforms which concluded in the construction of the first Ottoman constitution. When the **Committee of Union and Progress** (CUP) became the ruling party of the Ottoman Empire, they vigorously enforced **Ottomanism** and saw the **Turks** as the dominant group. These developments caused more oppression and eventually led to the **Armenian Genocide**.

Initial years under Ottoman rule

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Painting a Christian Armenian couple getting married under Ottoman Islamic rule. Jean-Baptiste Vanmour, 1707.

In 1453, the Ottoman Turks under the command of **Sultan Mehmed II** conquered the **Byzantine** capital of **Constantinople**.^[1] Constantinople (later renamed **Istanbul**) became the capital of the Islamic **Ottoman Empire** for the remainder of its lifespan (1453-1922).^[1] Under the Ottoman Empire, there were three main non-**Muslim** communities: the **Jewish** community, the **Greek Orthodox Church** and the **Armenian Apostolic Church**.^[2] Christianity is a firmly embedded central component of Armenian history and culture, which dates back to 301 C.E when Armenia became the first ever nation to implement Christianity as a **state religion**.^[3] Under Ottoman Islamic rule, Sultans allowed the Christian Armenian communities to preserve their culture, customs, language and religiosity so long as they remained loyal to the Ottoman sultan and the state.^{[1][2]} This governance of the non-Muslim community was achieved through the implementation of what has become known as the millet system.^[1]

The Millet System

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The Ottoman Empire's system regarding the governance of their non-Muslim communities within the empire was known as the millet system. The word 'millet,' which when translated means 'nation' or 'people,' was used by the Ottomans to describe these non-Muslim groups as corporate religious groups within the empire.^[1] Ultimately, the millet system entailed having non-Muslim religious communities such as the Armenian community guaranteed the right to life, property, and the freedom to practice their

religious faith so long as they remained loyal to the Sultan and the state.^[2] Armenians were afforded this basic limited amount of autonomy provided they paid double the amount of taxes compared to a regular Ottoman citizen at the time.^[1] Influential leaders collected these taxes within the Armenian community and were also expected to deal with whatever additional issues that were occurring within the community at the time (social and legal).^[1] The millet system also determined that Armenians would be forbidden from participation within the military.^[1] Other limitations were also in place, which mandated Armenians and other millets to wear certain clothing and identifiers such as a [crucifix](#) around their neck.^[1]

Armenian millets were operating just eight years after the [fall of Constantinople](#) in 1453 when Sultan Mehmed II appointed Hovakim, an Armenian [bishop](#), to act as a ruling figurehead for the Armenian community.^[2] Hovakim known as [Hovakim I](#) was the first Armenian [Patriarch of Constantinople](#) within the Ottoman Empire. Hovakim I was based in the Ottoman Capital in [Istanbul](#) where he was entrusted with commanding over the Armenian people and ensuring the prevention of anti-Ottoman movements within his community.^[2] While a variation of the millet system may have been in place since the 1460's, it is widely argued that the appearance of the term 'millet' gained prominence after the Ottoman Empire began to face serious multifaceted challenges to its empire vis-a-vis its military defeats to [the Holy League](#) in 1697 and the emergence of a new foe in the [Russian Empire](#).^[2] Each millet system enjoyed increasing influence and power at this time, particularly the Greek Patriarch of Constantinople and the [Greek Phanariots](#).^[4] The Phanariots were elite Greek merchants that had a critical influence over internal political issues within the Ottoman Empire.^[4] Their influence within the Ottoman Empire was drastically reduced however after the [Greek Revolution](#), with the other religious millets particularly the Armenian millets greatly benefiting from this shift of influence.^[4]

By the 19th Century, the Armenian community was divided into [Christian Apostolic](#), [Catholic](#), and [Protestant](#) millets, meaning that there was no centralized, hierarchical leadership structure.^[1] The Ottomans dealt with this Armenian division by having Armenian patriarchs for each millet in Istanbul and [Jerusalem](#).^[1] The ottomans had from an early stage of their reign, identified the crucial role that religious [clergymen](#) had in not only the collection of taxation within its community but also of influencing the communities feelings and sentiments.^[2] The relationship between the Armenian clergy and the Ottoman Empire that existed up until the middle of the 19th century is one that indeed can be described as cordial and one of mutual benefit. The Armenian clergy and a small merchant faction within its elite enjoyed influence and power. At the same time, the Ottoman empire was intrinsically pleased with maintaining their ability while also benefiting from the use of the Armenian merchants.^[4] While the vast majority of Armenians were poor peasants, a small minority of Armenians would establish themselves as the financial backbone of the Ottoman Empire itself.

^[1] The Armenian [Amira group](#) bankers would establish themselves as the most influential merchant group of the Ottoman Empire, serving as bankers to the Ottoman central government while also controlling key positions within crucial sectors of industry. Jobs such as the director of [Imperial Currency Mint](#), chief imperial architect, and the superintendent of large Gun-powder factories were filled by the Amira group.^[1] When one realizes the extent to which both the Armenian clergy and the Armenian elite were benefiting from the implementation of this millet system (particularly during the 18th/19th Century), it is easy to theorize why Armenia seemingly had made no precise demands for liberation until the Tanzimat reformation.^[4]

The Tanzimat Reforms

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Hatt-ı Şerif of Gülhane, 1839.

On 3 November 1839, the process that became known as the Tanzimat reforms began when [Sultan Abdulmecid](#)'s marked the opening of his reign with the issuance of the [Hatt-ı Şerif of Gülhane](#).^[5] The Hatt-ı Şerif of Gülhane was the brainchild of statesmen, [Mustafa Resid Pasha](#), the Ottoman minister of foreign affairs.^[5] The Hatt-ı Şerif of Gülhane outlined three central notions in which: (i) The life, property, and honor of all subjects under the Ottoman Empire must be guaranteed, (ii) A new fixed tax system would replace the outdated tax farming system and finally, (iii) Lifetime military conscription would be replaced to conscription of four to five years.^[5] Perhaps the most notable and groundbreaking element of the Hatt-ı Şerif of Gülhane was its assertion that all Ottoman subjects regardless of religion would be equal before the law.^[5] This was the first time during the Ottoman Empire in which non-Muslims would be deemed equal to their Muslim counterparts, something that would become a more regular occurrence among the Sultan and Ottoman government during this period.^[5]

On 18 February 1856, thousands of citizens gathered in Istanbul to hear Sultan Abdulmecid's [Hatt-i Humayun](#), the second proclamation of the Tanzimat reforms.^[5] While specific points were reiterated from the 1839 Hatt-ı Şerif of Gülhane proclamation, the 1856 Hatt-i Humayun was far more in-depth and specific.^[5] For instance, this time, there was a particular reference to the need for adherence to annual national budgets, the creation of more banks, and the adaptation of a more Europeanized economic model in hopes of building a more substantial empire financially.^[5] Similarly, steps would be taken that would lead to the introduction of commercial law and the codifying of [penal law](#) within the empire while at the same time making penal reforms that would, for example, look to no longer punish [apostates](#) by death.^[5] The proclamation greatly emphasized that all citizens were now to be considered equal under Ottoman law regardless of religion. This intrinsically meant that the millet systems would have to be abandoned, and all non-Muslim communities could naturally become citizens of the Ottoman

Empire. Additionally, the sultan vowed that these historic minorities would be safeguarded and offered legal protection from discrimination, with the final goal ultimately being to break down the barriers erected by the discriminatory millet system and create a brotherhood of Ottoman citizens that is both multi-ethnic and multi-national. ^{[1][5]}

Mustafa Reşid Paşa reading the Hatt-ı Şerif of Gülhane to a crowd in Istanbul in 1839.

[The Land Code of 1858](#) was another feature of the Tanzimat reforms which revolutionized property and land ownership within the Ottoman Empire. ^[1] This Land Code entitled farmers, merchants, and peasants who were living on land and farming on land to own properties which were previously under state ownership. The sultan agreed to sign away these properties he owned to these citizens of all classes, who in turn, would have to pay the sultan via newly established property taxation. ^[1] Ultimately, while the Tanzimat reforms were slow to be enacted, their seeming strides toward progression raised expectations particularly among those within the Armenian community. ^[6] More and more of the common Armenian population were educating themselves about reforms and laws within the community in which they previously had little to no say in. ^[6] Similarly, the elites within the Armenian population felt they had a part to play in helping to build a new reformed Ottoman Empire and generally were rather receptive of the Tanzimat reforms initially. ^[6] The construction of the first Constitution in 1876, during the [First Constitutional Era](#) was another seminal moment of reformation during the Tanzimat period, which would ultimately mark the end of this era. While the Tanzimat reforms seemed a success for the Ottoman Empire, the unchecked centralized nature of the sultan's power ultimately would lead to problems of drought and debt for the Ottoman Empire immediately following the end of the Tanzimat reforms. ^[1]

The First Ottoman Constitution

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English version of the 1876 Ottoman Constitution, published in 1908 in *The American Journal of International Law*

Several young Armenians who had traveled back to the Ottoman Empire after receiving [higher education](#) in [Western Europe](#) saw several problems with the millet system when they returned home. The leaders of the Armenian millet were corrupt and wanted to cooperate with Ottoman powers and keep the people in their millet in ignorance. ^[7] This group of intellectuals wanted written regulations defining the duties of the people at the top of the Armenian millet, such as the [patriarch](#). Reorganizing the millet would help separate state and religion. ^[5] After several rejections a [Code of Regulations](#) was accepted by the [National Assembly](#) in 1860. This code was 150 articles long and, among other things, reduced the power of the

Armenian patriarch, but he was still the representative of the Armenian millet. The document was called the [Armenian National Constitution](#). Still, it was only valid for inside the Armenian millet, so according to scholars, the Code of Regulations is a more fitting term.^[8]

The Armenian National Constitution did not change much for the people in the millet, but it is one of the factors which led to the making of the [First Ottoman Constitution](#) in 1876.^[7] ^[5] The first Ottoman Constitution was created by Midhat Pasha in order to calm the chaos in the Ottoman Empire and decrease the power of separatist movements. This new Ottoman Constitution set the path for the Ottoman Empire for modernization and becoming more like the West.^[9] The period in which this constitution was implemented is called the First Constitutional Period and took from 1876-1878.^[10]

The Armenian National Constitution is still used in the Armenian Church in the [diaspora](#).^[8]

The First Ottoman Constitution was implemented again in 1908 after the [Young Turk Revolution](#).^[10]

The Armenian Genocide

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The Armenians in the Ottoman Empire have been subject to several massacres before 1915, such as the [Hamidian massacres](#) in 1894-1896 and the [Adana massacres](#) in 1909.^[11] While the former massacres were often to scare and intimidate the Armenians, the genocide in 1915 had as goal to completely eliminate the Armenians from the Ottoman Empire. The Armenian [Genocide](#) is the name for the deportation and killing of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, which ended in the death of 80,000 to 1,5 million Armenian people.^[12]

In 1913, the year before the genocide, around 2 million Armenians were living in the Ottoman Empire.^[13] At the start of [World War I](#) the Ottoman Empire was fighting with the [Russians](#), as well as the [British](#) and [French](#) at the same time. The losses of the [Balkan War](#) included more than half of the European territory that used to be part of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman government decided that it was not possible for the Muslim Ottomans to live alongside the Christian population of the Ottoman Empire and wanted to homogenize the population.^[11] The [Committee of Union and Progress](#) (CUP) was the governing party of the Ottoman Empire from 1908 to 1918.^[1] The CUP was a nationalist party that believed in [Ottomanism](#) and saw the need for the Turks as a dominant group. This included relocating the non-Turk Muslim population and the non-Muslim population of the Ottoman Empire.^[11]

Armenian Population in the Ottoman Empire in the 1870s

The Russians took advantage of the fact that the Ottoman Empire was fighting a war on two fronts and moved their army towards the city in [Eastern Anatolia](#) with the largest Armenian population. The Armenians disagreed on whether to support the Russians or the Ottomans; some joined the Russian army, others the Ottoman army, and others did not join. The Ottoman government ordered the deportation of Armenians from towns most affected by the fighting; this later included all Armenians in [Anatolia](#). Ottoman officials carried out the orders and Turks, [Kurds](#) and local tribespeople. Many Armenians died in these deportations, many fled to [Syria](#), Russia, or [Iraq](#), and many died while fleeing. The Armenians being deported were often raped, kidnapped, or starved. Around 800,000 to 1.5 million Armenians died during these massacres; the people who remained in the Ottoman Empire were often women and girls forced to marry into Turkish Muslim families. The boys were often adopted and converted to Islam. ^{[1][14]}

Not everybody has agreed on the reason or a name for the events that happened to the Armenians in 1915 and during World War I. The Turkish government calls these deportations a defensive action against rebellion started by Kurds and local Muslim rebels, while the Armenian people call it a genocide. ^[1] It is genocide according to the definition of genocide by the [United Nations](#). ^[15]

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