

Exploring the Roots of the Armenian Genocide

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The Ottoman Empire at one point in time was a powerful nation, and took great pride in their culture and predominantly Muslim Turkish population. However, in the 19th Century the empire started to see a rapid decline economically and politically. Change was necessary, and as WWI was approaching tension heated up between the Turks and their Christian Armenian neighbors whom they did not trust. There was always tension between these two cultures, especially since the Armenians, being the minorities in the Empire, were especially prosperous under Ottoman Rule. Armenians tended to be better educated and financially more successful than their Muslim neighbors. However, they were treated as second-class citizens and denied basic legal rights and civil liberties. By the end of the 1800's the tyrannical Sultan Abdul Hamid II decided to wipe out the entire Armenian community, followed by the reign of the Young Turks in the early 1900's. It is difficult even today to pinpoint the exact reason for the genocide of over a million Armenians at the hands of the Turks, but it can be narrowed down to the social and cultural differences between Muslims and Christians, the change in leadership over the Ottoman Empire in 1908, and the Russian support of the Armenians leading up to WWI.

The most obvious difference between the Turks and the Armenians is their religious culture. The Turkish community living in the Ottoman Empire were predominantly Muslim, while the Armenians were Christians. Not only were the Armenians Christian, but they were actually the first to adopt Christianity as a nation. Armenia was absorbed into the Ottoman Empire in the 16th Century and the people of Armenia fell under the rule of the Muslim Turks (History Channel). Christian Armenians were the minority in the Ottoman Empire, but still managed to thrive. By the 1800's the Ottoman Empire began to decline economically due to their lack of technological

advances. Other European nations were embracing new innovative industrial changes, while the once indestructible Turkish Army was quickly falling behind. The Armenians living in this deteriorating Empire were still able to thrive and were often more financially successful than their Turkish neighbors (Ahnert, 15). This caused a lot of resentment from the Muslim Turks who greatly opposed the Armenian's Christian practices and could not stand to see them prosper in their Muslim dominated society. The Armenian people were treated like second-class citizens and were denied the basic legal and civil rights that the Muslims possessed. They were not able to vote, they were forced to pay significantly higher taxes because of their religion, and the Armenians knew that if they ever were in a legal dispute against a Muslim, they did not stand a chance of winning. There was a saying in Armenia, "Kurd der vourar", which means, "it is a Kurd who strikes" and comes from a fable about a Kurdish Muslim Chief who was trying out his new sword and slashed at an innocent Armenian bystander. The Armenian man put up his shield in defense and broke the Kurd's sword. The Armenian was forced to pay for the Kurd's sword by a judge, and the story was passed down in the Armenian culture to explain why it is useless to bring any claims to a Turkish court against a Muslim (Ahnert, 68-69). In the early 1890's the Armenians began to revolt and demand the same civil liberties as their Muslim neighbors. The Sultan would not stand for this, and devised a plan to end this Armenian revolution once and for all.

By the end of the 19th century the Turkish Sultan, Abdul Hamid II, was infuriated by the Armenians persistent campaigns to gain equal rights in his empire and, "feared their dangerous nationalistic goals" (Ahnert, 15). The Sultan did not tolerate these acts of disloyalty and if the Armenians were not going to obey his laws, then he was going to

have to take serious action. In 1894 the Armenian protests became larger, and as a result the Turkish military officials raided the Armenian villages and killed hundreds of thousands of Armenian citizens. This was the first wave of the Genocide, which lasted from 1894-1896. The Armenians weren't the only group of minorities to be repressed in the Ottoman Empire. Christian minorities in the Balkans were also treated unfairly, especially the Serbs and the Bulgarians (Balakian, 136). It was becoming an international issue, and other European powers were getting involved to try and reform the Ottoman government. Hamid was furious with other nations becoming involved in his domestic affairs, and feared that he might be in danger of losing his place on the throne (Balakian 137).

In the early 1900's a group of activists called the 'Young Turks' were rising in the Ottoman Empire and starting a revolution for a reformed constitutional government in the Ottoman Empire. They believed the Sultan was unable to bring Turkey together as a nation and with all of the negative attention The Ottoman Empire was facing from other European nations, and they believed the Empire would surely fall unless there were major changes to the government and overall leadership of the Empire ("Armenian Genocide"). The Young Turks created a society called the Committee of Progress and Union (CPU) whose main goal was to take over the government and overthrow the Sultan. After years of organizing and planning, the Young Turks prevailed and overthrew Abdul Hamid II in the summer of 1908 (Misah, 14). The Armenians were hopeful that the Committee of Progress and Union (CPU) would be more sympathetic to their goals of equality and perhaps they would finally be able to have a say in the new government. However, they soon found out that this new government was extremely nationalistic, even more so than

the Sultan's regime, seeing all non-Turks and especially non-Muslim Turks as a threat to their ideal "Turkified" nation (Balakian 145). One of the leaders of the CPU, Ziya Goklalp, strongly insisted that in order for the Ottoman Empire to be strong again, "it had to be a pure, homogeneous nation...he espoused the idea that non-Turks were invasive germs that threatened the health of the state" (Balakian 165). As World War 1 began in 1914, the Turks were in a complete warfare state of mind and believed that the Armenians were their "internal enemy" and needed to be wiped out in order to have a strong, united population that would fight together against the Allies in World War I.

In 1829 Eastern Armenia was under Russian rule until the official First Republic of Armenia was created in 1918. Western Armenia was still under Ottoman rule, and the Sultan feared that the Ottoman Armenians would ultimately side with the Russians during WWI because of Russia's Christian leadership ("Armenian Genocide"). The Muslim suspicion of disloyalty was a major reason behind their plot to wipe out the Armenian population. Nationalism was extremely important during the late 1800's and early 1900's, and the Turks feared that if they had to go to war against the Allies, then the Armenians would be more likely to side with the Christian Russians. The Ottoman Empire shared an unstable border with Russia and from 1912-1913 Turkey was at war with the Balkans who were also under Ottoman rule. The Balkan Christians were treated just as unfairly as the Armenians, subjected to higher taxes, random violence, and overall cultural oppression. The Balkan alliances fought the Turks through 1913 and in the end, "The Turks lost 70 percent of their European population and 85 percent of their European territory (Balakian, 161). After the Balkan Wars, Russia mobilized their army and warned Turkey that they would fight against them if they tried to fight against the Balkan states

again. Germany stepped in and aligned themselves with Turkey, making it clear that if Russia attacked Turkey, a European war would surely follow (Balakian 162). When the Ottoman Empire entered WWI in 1914 on the side of the Axis powers, military officials began to worry that the Armenians would surely fight on the side of the Russians; if the Allies were to win the war, the Armenians might have a shot at gaining their independence. Just as the Turks suspected, Armenians began to organize their own battalions in the Caucasus regions in support of the Russian army. This was the final straw for the Ottoman government, and on April 24th, 1915 Turkish Officials in the Ottoman Empire began the systematic removal and extermination of the Armenian population.

“The relationship between World War I and Turkey’s plan to exterminate the Armenians was an evolving narrative of intertwining domestic and international events” (Balakian, 175). The systematic removal and extermination of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire was officially put into motion in the spring of 1915, less than a year after entering the Great War. The Turkish military officials began with the drafting of all able-bodied Armenian men ages twenty to sixty into the Ottoman army, leaving the rest of the community completely vulnerable to the Turkish troops. The Armenian men drafted into the Ottoman army were then stripped of their weapons and killed. (Balakian 213) The women, children, and elderly who were left had no protection or guidance from their husbands, fathers, and other men in the community who could have helped them resist the massacres. The women, children and elderly were forced from their homes and either killed in the streets or sent on death marches across the desert. The most crucial phase in

the Turk's plan on complete Armenian extermination was to wipe out the prominent intellectual leaders in the Armenian culture,

The plan was to eliminate all Armenian writers, political activists, artists, teachers, and church and civic leaders. The able-bodied men were being massacred...and if the cultural leadership could be silenced in the spring and summer, the CUP hoped to render the Armenians totally helpless and vulnerable (Balakian, 211)

On the night of April 24th, 1915 hundreds of intellectual and political activists, writers, artists, and religious figures were rounded up and killed (Masih, 15). The vital cultural infrastructure of the Armenian population was virtually destroyed on this night. The majority of gifted voices and writers of this Armenian generation were now gone, and very little literature remains from this time period. The author of *The Burning Tigris: A History of International Human Rights and Forgotten Hero's* refers to the systematic removal of Armenian intellectuals as "well orchestrated", explaining that the rest of the genocide was relatively easily carried out by the Turks now that all of the healthy men between the ages of twenty and sixty were either imprisoned or killed, and all important political and cultural figures were wiped out in a matter of days (Balakian, 224).

The entire genocide was carefully planned and executed by the Turks, with an estimated 1.5 million Armenians killed from 1915-1923 (Masih, 15). The CPU's plan to exterminate all intellectual and cultural leaders as well as able-bodied men in the beginning of the genocide was a major reason the massacres were able to be carried out for so many years with little resistance from the Armenian community. On May 28th, 1918 Armenian claimed their independence and founded the Armenian Democratic

Republic. Unfortunately, this independence only lasted until 1920 when Armenia was absorbed into the Soviet Union and fell under Russian rule. Finally, in 1991 Armenians were able to claim their independence and officially became the Republic of Armenia, leaving the USSR behind (Masih, 35). The people of Armenia suffered for far too long under both Ottoman and Russian rule. They endured religious and cultural prosecution, civil injustice, political disenfranchisement, and unthinkable acts of violence that lasted decades. Although many Armenians fled to other parts of the world after the Genocide, an independent Armenia finally stands. It is appalling to think that genocides of this magnitude could happen again in history and even today, but even though the world might not be widely educated on the matter of the Armenian Genocide specifically, the Armenian people of the world will never forget and can finally live in freedom.

Works Cited

“Armenian Genocide”. 2013. The History Channel Website. Accessed December 8th, 2013. <http://history.com/topics/armenian-genocide>

The History Channel website had a short but informative page on the Armenian Genocide that touched on the first massacres in the late 1800’s to World War One and the effects the genocide has on Armenia today. The website gives a good description of the change in power in 1908 when the Young Turks came to power in the Ottoman Empire and the reasons why this change in power was detrimental to the Armenians.

Ahnert, Margaret. *The Knock at the Door*. 2007. New York: Beaufort Books. Print

The Knock at the Door is the memoir of a woman whose mother was a survivor of the Armenian Genocide. The book is helpful in understanding the Genocide not only because it gives a first hand account of the terror that swept through the Ottoman Empire, but the author also does extensive research into the main causes of the Genocide including the cultural and religious tensions and the change in power from the Sultan to the Young Turks in the early 1900’s

Balakian, Peter. *The Burning Tigris: the Armenian Genocide and America's Response*. New York: HarperCollins, 2003. Print.

The Burning Tigris is a historical account of the Armenian Genocide focusing on the rise of the Young Turks, the systematic killing of over a million Armenians, and America’s attempt at getting Armenia their independence. The book does a great job at tapping into the roots of the Genocide, and how WWI fueled the massacre. The Author also gives his own point of view stating several times that the genocide was in fact very well planned out and organized by the Turkish government.

Masih, Joseph R., and Robert O. Krikorian. *Armenia: At the Crossroads*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1999. Print.

This book provided great information on the political aspects of both Armenia and the Ottoman Empire and the events leading up to the Genocide. It did not go into great detail on the Genocide itself, but gave a lot of information of the rebuilding of the Armenian community after the Genocide and their eventual independence in 1991. This book was helpful with providing specific dates for major events in Armenian history and giving a clear timeline in the Armenians struggle for independence.