

# A Brief History of the Armenian Genocide

Sara Cohan

*“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 with the sufferings of the Armenian race in 1915.”*  
Henry Morgenthau, American ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, 1913–1916.<sup>1</sup>

## Who Are the Armenians?

The Armenians are an ancient people who have existed since before the first century C.E. Armenia has gained and lost a tremendous amount of territory throughout its long and turbulent history. Boundaries of the past have extended from that of the present-day Republic of Armenia and through most of modern day Turkey. The name “Armenia” was actually given to the country by its neighbors; inhabitants of Armenia refer to it as “Hayastan” derived from the name Haik, a descendent of Noah (from the Bible), and “stan” which means “land” in Persian. The Armenian language is unique from other Indo-European languages, with its own distinct letters and grammar.

Christianity is a deeply rooted aspect of Armenian history and culture. Armenia was the first nation to adopt Christianity as a state religion, in 301 C.E. This early Christian identity has greatly influenced Armenian culture, setting it apart from most of its neighboring peoples. The majority of Armenians belong to the Eastern or Western dioceses of the Armenian Apostolic Church, an orthodox form of Christianity.

Although Armenia was at times a kingdom, in modern times, Armenia has been an independent country for only a few years. It first gained independence in 1918, after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, but this ended when Armenia was invaded by the Red Army and became a Soviet state in 1920. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Armenia was the first state to declare its independence, and remains an independent republic today. Armenia is a democracy and its borders only include a very small portion of the land that was historic Armenia.



1919: An Armenian refugee woman and her son.  
(Photo by Percival Richards/Hesketh Collection/Getty Images).

## Early Massacres

The Seljuk Turks began to inhabit Anatolia as early as the eleventh century and by 1453 their descendants, the Ottoman Turks, had captured Constantinople (now Istanbul), firmly establishing the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Empire was a multinational state that incorporated several ethnic groups including



began in the late nineteenth century under Abdul-Hamid II, the last of the Ottoman Sultans actually to rule the empire. The worst massacres during this time occurred from 1894-1896 after a tax protest by Armenians. They are now known as the Hamidian Massacres and some believe represented a foreshadowing of the genocide to come.

During the Hamidian Massacres, 100,000 to 300,000 Armenians were killed in towns and villages throughout areas of the Ottoman Empire. Thousands of Armenians fled and found refuge in Europe and the United States. Some who stayed converted to Islam in order to save their own lives.

The massacres caught the world's attention because of their unique nature. Armenians were unarmed and adhered to the perimeters set forth by the Ottoman government. The massacres were publicized in newspapers throughout the world. The U.S. media paid particular attention to the events. *The New York Times* as well as other news sources regularly published articles about the brutal killings, coverage that would continue through the Armenian genocide.

Many American missionaries and diplomats who worked throughout the Ottoman Empire witnessed the atrocities firsthand and helped mobilize relief efforts. Aid for Armenian victims became the first international mission of the American Red Cross.

Later during the genocide, a society known as the Near East Relief would raise more than \$100 million in assistance to Armenians; the funds collected saved countless Armenian lives in the 1890s and during the genocide, which at the time represented more money than all the aid raised to help tsunami victims this year. While the funds collected saved countless victims' lives, it was the only aid Armenians would see.

### Hope to Despair

In 1908, Armenians and other minorities of the Ottoman Empire began to rejoice in what promised to be a new era of tolerance and the establishment

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of a participatory government in the Ottoman Empire.

Armenians, Arabs, Greeks, Jews, and Kurds had begun working with a group of Turks to challenge the authority of the Sultan. This group was known as the Ottoman Liberals and the Turkish coalition of the group adopted the name "Young Turks." They wanted to create a modern state that represented inhabitants of the Ottoman Empire more equally and render the Sultan politically powerless. In 1908, one of the Young Turk groups, the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), marched on Constantinople, and overthrew Sultan Abdul-Hamid.

Over the next year, the Ottoman Empire developed a constitutional government providing equal rights for all of its citizens. Ottoman Armenians hoped that the new constitution would protect them from the violence they endured under the Sultan. However, as time passed, advocates of liberalism in

the government lost out to a group promoting authoritarian rule and a radical policy of Turkification.

In April 1909, Armenian hopes were dashed as Hamidian supporters in the city of Adana carried out a massacre of Armenians as part of an attempt to re-establish the power of the Sultan. Adana was heavily populated by Armenians and had at one time been part of Armenian territory. Despite attempts at resistance, in the end almost 30,000 Armenians were killed and nearly half the city destroyed.

### The Armenian Genocide

The culprits of the Adana Massacre were never punished and after 1909, an extreme nationalist political movement promoting a policy of Pan-Turkism ("Turkey for the Turks") gained backing from Turkish populations throughout the Ottoman Empire. In addition, the Ottoman Empire, now known as the "sick man of Europe," was weakened

## ORGANIZATIONS:

### The Genocide Education Project

([www.genocideeducation.org](http://www.genocideeducation.org))

The Genocide Education Project is a nonprofit organization that assists educators in teaching about human rights and genocide, particularly the Armenian genocide, by developing and distributing instructional materials, providing access to teaching resources and organizing educational workshops.

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51 Commonwealth Avenue  
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(415) 264-4203

### Facing History and Ourselves

([www.facinghistory.org](http://www.facinghistory.org))

Facing History and Ourselves is an international educational and professional development organization whose mission is to engage students of diverse backgrounds in an examination of racism, prejudice, and anti-Semitism.

National Office:  
16 Hurd Road  
Brookline, MA 02445  
Phone: 617-232-1595  
Fax: 617-232-0281

### The Choices Program ([www.choices.edu](http://www.choices.edu))

The Choices Program, a civics-based education program based at Brown University, created the curriculum "Confronting Genocide: Never Again?"

The curriculum provides a five-day lesson plan on five genocides of the twentieth century. The lessons trace the international response to each genocide including the Armenian genocide.

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by the loss of its lands in south-eastern Europe in the Balkan Wars of 1912-13.

One of the Ottoman Empire's greatest enemies was Russia, as Russia was constantly threatening the security of the Ottoman borders and controlled parts of the eastern edge of the Ottoman Empire that was populated by Armenians. Since the Russians had advocated for Armenian reforms in the past and because the Russian army did have Armenians serving as soldiers, the Ottoman government was concerned that Ottoman Armenians might commit traitorous acts. This fear helped to fuel Turkish public sentiment against Armenians.

The Ottoman Empire entered World War I in 1914, fighting against Russia in

campaigns that straddled territory inhabited by Armenians on both sides of the border. The Ottoman Empire was badly defeated by Russia in a campaign in the winter of 1914-15, and the government then made the Armenian community a scapegoat for the military losses that had occurred at the hands of the Russians.

By the spring of 1915, leaders of the ruling party, the CUP, seized the opportunity of a world preoccupied by war to erase the Armenian presence from almost all Ottoman lands. The CUP was a triumvirate led by Mehmet Talaat, Ismail Enver, and Ahmed Jemal. Beginning on April 24, 1915 (now commemorated as the beginning of the Armenian genocide), Armenian civil leaders, intellectuals,

## ONLINE RESOURCES:

### [www.TeachGenocide.org](http://www.TeachGenocide.org) ([www.TeachGenocide.org](http://www.TeachGenocide.org))

[www.TeachGenocide.org](http://www.TeachGenocide.org) is a cyber resource library published specifically for teachers by The Genocide Education Project where various teaching resources on the Armenian genocide and other gross human rights violations are available to download for classroom use. Available resources on [TeachGenocide.org](http://TeachGenocide.org) include: lesson plans, newspaper articles, a streaming video, survivor accounts, maps and recommendations for further research.

### Facing History and Ourselves ([www.facinghistory.org](http://www.facinghistory.org))

FHAO not only provides wonderful print resources on the Armenian genocide but also offers online lesson plans. Lessons and Readings on the Armenian Genocide section was developed in collaboration with *Teaching Tolerance Magazine*. (The fall, 2002 issue of *Teaching Tolerance Magazine* includes a feature article on the Armenian genocide, titled "The World Was Silent.")

### The Legacy Project ([www.legacy-project.org](http://www.legacy-project.org))

The Legacy Project provides a collection of visual and literary art created by the descendants of those who survived some of the most horrific atrocities of the twentieth century including the Armenian genocide, the Holocaust, and the Cambodian genocide.

### The Armenian National Institute (ANI) ([www.armenian-genocide.org](http://www.armenian-genocide.org))

ANI is a small research institute dedicated to studying the Armenian genocide. ANI provides a website with historically correct and well organized information. The site also includes a section for educators the author updated in 2004.

### The Forgotten (<http://www.theforgotten.org>)

This award winning website is designed with students in mind. The information on the site is brief and dynamically displayed.

doctors, businessmen, and artists were rounded up and killed. Once these leaders of the Armenian communities were killed, the genocide plan was put into motion throughout the empire. Many Armenian men were quickly executed. Using new technologies, such as the telegraph and the railroads, CUP leaders sent orders to province leaders to gather women and children and either load them onto trains headed for the Syrian Desert or lead them on forced marches into the desert. Embarking with little food and few supplies, women and children had little hope of survival.

On these journeys, Turkish gendarmes regularly subjected Armenian women to sexual violence. Special militias were created by the government to carry out the deportations and murders; and Turkish and Kurdish convicts who had been set free from jails brutalized and plundered the deportation caravans winding through the severe terrain. Some women and children were abducted and sold, or children were raised as Turks by Turkish families. Some Armenians were rescued by Bedouins and other Arabs who sympathized with the Armenian situation. Sympathetic Turkish families also risked their own lives to help their Armenian neighbors escape.

Within months, the Euphrates and Tigris rivers became clogged with the bodies of Armenian women and children, polluting the water supply for those who had not yet perished. Dysentery and other diseases were rampant and those who managed to survive the march found themselves in concentration camps.

By 1918, most of the Armenians who had resided in this historic land were dead or in the Diaspora. Under

*SARA COHAN is the education director of The Genocide Education Project, a nonprofit organization that assists educators in teaching about human rights and genocide, particularly the Armenian genocide. She will present a paper on this subject at the NCSS Annual Conference in Kansas City, MO, in November.*

the orders of Turkey's new leader, Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk), the remaining Armenians in western Cilicia (the region of the Ottoman Empire originally inhabited by Armenians) were expelled, as were the Greek and Assyrian populations.

By 1923, a 3,000-year-old civilization virtually ceased to exist. One and a half million Armenians, more than half of the Armenian population on its historic homeland, were dead, and the Armenian community and personal properties were lost, appropriated by the government, stolen by others or deliberately destroyed. Only a small number of Armenians remained in the former Ottoman capital of Constantinople.

### The Denial

The term "genocide" was not created until 1944. It was devised by a legal scholar, Raphael Lemkin, who had been strongly influenced by his study of the Armenian case and the persecution of Jews under Nazi rule. In 1946, the United Nations adopted the language and two years later the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide was passed.

Despite the affirmation of the Armenian genocide by the overwhelming majority of historians, academic institutions on Holocaust and Genocide Studies, and governments around the world, the Turkish government still actively denies the Armenian genocide. Among a series of actions enacted to counter Armenian genocide recognition and education, the government even passed a law in 2004 known as Article 305 which makes it a criminal offense, punishable by up to 10 years in prison, to discuss the Armenian genocide.

Most of the survivors of the Armenian genocide have now passed away. Their families still continue to demand recognition for the suffering inflicted upon their beloved ancestors more than 90 years ago. 📖

### Notes

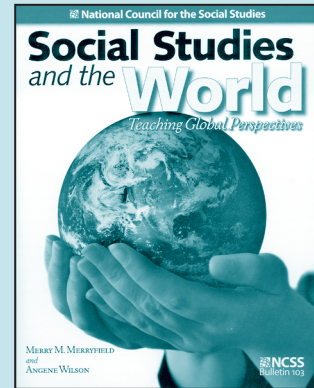
1. Henry Morgenthau, *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story* (London: Taderon Press, 2000), 213.

## NCSS Publications

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Merry M. Merryfield and  
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NCSS, Bulletin No. 103, 141 pp.,  
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