The Armenian Genocide, 1915

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In 1915, the Turkish government set out to remove or kill all Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire (later Turkey). At the time, there were about 2 million Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. By the early 1920s, some 1.5 million of them were dead. Many others had been forcibly removed from the country. The killings finally ended in 1922.

Today, most historians call this event a genocide. A genocide is a planned and organized attempt to wipe out an entire people.

The roots of genocide: The Ottoman Empire

The Armenian people have made their home in the Caucasus region of Eurasia for some 3,000 years. For some of that time, Armenia was an independent kingdom. However, most of the time Armenia was ruled by other peoples. During the 1400s, it was swallowed up by the mighty Ottoman Empire.
The Ottoman rulers were Muslim, as were most of their subjects. The Armenians were Christian. Armenians were allowed to practice their religion, but they were not given the same rights as Muslims.

In spite of this, Armenians did very well under Ottoman rule. They tended to be wealthier than their Turkish neighbors. Many Turks resented their success.

Many Turks also suspected that the Christian Armenians might not be loyal subjects of the empire. Perhaps, they said, Armenians were secretly more loyal to neighboring Christian governments. These suspicions grew stronger as the Ottoman Empire began to break apart.

At the end of the 1800s, the empire was ruled by Sultan Abdul Hamid II. Abdul Hamid did not trust the Armenians. He was also angered by their attempts to win more rights.

Abdul Hamid decided to take care of the Armenian "problem" once and for all.

**The first Armenian massacre**

Abdul Hamid unleashed a vicious attack on Armenians. Between 1894 and 1896, Turkish soldiers and ordinary men destroyed Armenian towns and killed their citizens. Hundreds of thousands of Armenians were murdered.

**The rise of the Young Turks**

In 1908, a new government came to power. The empire's new leaders were known as the “Young Turks.” They declared themselves to be reformers.

At first, Armenians were hopeful that they now would be better treated. However, they soon learned that what the Young Turks wanted most of all was to “Turkify” the empire. According to their way of thinking, Christian Armenians were a grave danger to the empire.

**World War I**

In 1914, the Turks entered World War I on the side of Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire.
Turkish military leaders soon began to argue that the Armenians were traitors. They claimed the Armenians would fight for the enemy if they thought it would win them independence. The Turkish government soon began to remove Armenians from war zones.

**Genocide begins**

On April 24, 1915, the Armenian genocide began. That day, the Turkish government killed several hundred Armenian leaders. After that, ordinary Armenians were turned out of their homes and sent on death marches through the Mesopotamian desert without food or water. Many of the marchers were stripped naked and forced to walk under the scorching sun until they dropped dead. People who stopped to rest were shot.

At the same time, “killing squads” were created by the government. These killing squads were given orders to wipe out the Armenians. They drowned people in rivers, threw them off cliffs and burned them alive. Soon, there were dead bodies everywhere.
Government squads also kidnapped young Armenian children and gave them to Turkish families. Muslim families moved into the empty homes of Armenians and seized their property.

The genocide finally ended in 1922. By then, there were only 388,000 Armenians remaining in the Ottoman Empire.

**The Armenian genocide today**

Ever since then, the Turkish government has denied a genocide took place. Government officials claim the Armenians were an enemy force and that their killing was a necessary war measure. Almost no non-Turkish historians believe this is true.