In 1915, the Turkish government set in motion a plan 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, when the killings finally ended, some 1.5 million of Turkey’s Armenians were dead. Many others had been forcibly removed from the country.

Today, most historians call this event a genocide — a planned and organized campaign to wipe out an entire people. However, the Turkish government does not admit that a genocide took place. Today, it is still illegal in Turkey to talk about what happened to Armenians.

**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. At the beginning of the fourth century A.D., it became the first nation in the world to make Christianity its official religion.

For the most part, however, control of the region shifted from one empire to another. During the 15th century, Armenia was absorbed into the mighty Ottoman Empire.
The Ottoman rulers were Muslim, as were most of their subjects. They allowed Christians like the Armenians to practice their religion, but they also treated them very harshly. Christians had to pay higher taxes than Muslims, for example, and they had very few political and legal rights.

In spite of this, the Armenian community did very well under Ottoman rule. Armenians tended to be wealthier than their Turkish neighbors, who often resented their success. Many Turks also suspected that the Christian Armenians might be more loyal to neighboring Christian governments than they were to the empire's Muslim rulers. These suspicions grew stronger as the Ottoman Empire began to break apart.

At the end of the 19th century, the empire was ruled by Sultan Abdul Hamid II. Abdul Hamid was a tyrant obsessed with loyalty. Angered by an Armenian campaign to win civil rights, he declared that he would solve the “Armenian question” once and for all.

The first Armenian massacre

Abdul Hamid unleashed a state-approved assault on Armenians. Between 1894 and 1896, Turkish military officials, soldiers and ordinary men sacked Armenian villages and cities 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 in Turkey. The country's new leaders were known as the “Young Turks.” They declared themselves to be reformers.

At first, the 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, non-Turks – and especially Christian non-Turks – were a grave threat to the new state.

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 push for the “removal” of the Armenians from war zones along the Eastern Front.

Genocide begins

On April 24, 1915, the Armenian genocide began. That day, the Turkish government arrested and executed 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 and were given orders to wipe out the Armenians. These killing squads drowned people in rivers, threw them off cliffs, crucified them and burned them alive. The Turkish countryside was soon littered with Armenian corpses.
During this “Turkification” campaign, 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 that a genocide occurred. 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 to be true.