In 1915, leaders of the Turkish government set in motion a plan to expel and massacre 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 massacres and deportations finally ended, some 1.5 million of Turkey’s Armenians were dead, with many others forcibly removed from the country. Today, most historians call this event a genocide — a planned and systematic campaign to wipe out an entire people. However, the Turkish government does not acknowledge that a genocide took place. Today, it is still illegal in Turkey to talk about what happened to Armenians during this era.

**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, like most of their subjects, were Muslim. They permitted religious minorities like the Armenians to practice their religion, but they also subjected them to unequal and unjust treatment. Christians had to pay higher taxes than Muslims, for example, and they had very few political and legal rights.

In spite of these obstacles, the Armenian community thrived under Ottoman rule. Armenians tended to be better educated and wealthier than their Turkish neighbors, who in turn tended to resent their success. Adding to this resentment was a suspicion that the Christian Armenians would be more loyal to Christian governments — such as that of neighboring Russia — than they were to the empire's Muslim rulers. These suspicions grew stronger as the Ottoman Empire crumbled.

At the end of the 19th century, the empire was ruled by the despotic Turkish Sultan Abdul Hamid II, who was obsessed with loyalty. Infuriated by a developing Armenian campaign to win basic civil rights, Abdul Hamid declared that he would solve the “Armenian question” once and for all. “I will soon settle those Armenians,” he told a reporter in 1890. “I will give them a box on the ear which will make them ... [give up] their revolutionary ambitions.”

The first Armenian massacre

Between 1894 and 1896, this “box on the ear” took the form of a state-sanctioned assault on Armenians. In response to large-scale protests by Armenians, Turkish military officials, soldiers and ordinary men sacked Armenian villages and cities and massacred 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. A group of reformers who called themselves the “Young Turks” overthrew Sultan Abdul Hamid and established a more modern constitutional government. At first, the Armenians were hopeful that they would have an equal place in this new state, but they soon learned that what the nationalistic Young Turks wanted most of all was to “Turkify” the empire. According to this 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. At the same time, Ottoman religious authorities declared jihad, or holy war, against all Christians except their allies.
Turkish military leaders soon began to argue that the Armenians were traitors: If they thought they could win independence if the Allies were victorious, this argument went, the Armenians would be eager to fight for the enemy. As the war intensified, Armenians organized volunteer battalions to help the Russian army fight against the Turks in the Caucasus region. These events, and general Turkish suspicion of the Armenian people, led the Turkish government to push for the “removal” of the Armenians from the 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 intellectuals. 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, while people who stopped to rest were shot.
At the same time, the Young Turks created a “Special Organization,” which in turn organized “killing squads” or “butcher battalions” that were ordered to eliminate the empire’s “Christian elements.” These killing squads were often made up of murderers and other ex-convicts. They drowned people in rivers, threw them off cliffs, crucified them and burned them alive. In short order, the Turkish countryside was littered with Armenian corpses.

During this “Turkification” campaign, government squads also kidnapped children, converted them to Islam and gave them to Turkish families. Muslim families moved into the homes of deported Armenians and seized their property.

In 1922, when the genocide was over, there were just 388,000 Armenians remaining in the Ottoman Empire.

**The Armenian genocide today**

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