Deportations of Armenians. The man in the foreground is a “gendarme,” a member of the security and public order organization (a precursor to law enforcement) in the 19th-century Ottoman Empire. Photo from the book “Ravished Armenia: The Story of Aurora Mardiganian, the Christian Girl who Lived Through the Great Massacres,” by Aurora Mardiganian. Published by Kingfield Press in 1918.

Editor's Note: Before World War I, there were 2 million Armenians in the Ottoman Empire (now Turkey). By 1923, about 1.5 million of them were dead, and others had been deported to neighboring countries such as Syria, Greece and Egypt. The Turkish government still claims the killings took place as part of World War I, and should not be considered a genocide with the specific aim of wiping out the Armenian people. Most historians do consider the killings genocide, however.

The roots of the genocide can be traced to the mixed character of the Ottoman Empire. The empire had a Muslim government but contained other religious and ethnic groups. One of these groups was the Armenians, who were Christian.
The empire was falling apart by the time World War I started in 1914 and people were struggling financially. In a parallel to the Jews in Germany in World War II, the Armenians were seen as a well-off group of merchants and businessmen. This led many to resent them for their supposed wealth. Armenians were also negatively labeled as money lenders who charged high interest rates.

In addition, the Ottoman government suspected Armenians of disloyalty because of their religion. It feared they might ally themselves with Russia against the Ottoman Empire. At the start of World War I, Russia had not yet become communist and was still a Christian nation.


A Chilling Headline

MILLION ARMENIANS KILLED OR IN EXILE: POLICY OF EXTERMINATION
In a statement issued yesterday, the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief detailed further atrocities committed by Turks upon Armenian Christians. Additional evidence was given to support the claim that the killings are not a byproduct of the war. Instead, they appear to be the result of a Turkish government plan. The sultan of the Ottoman Empire, Abdul Hamid has said to settle the "Armenian question" would be to get rid of the Armenians.

Professor Samuel T. Dutton, the secretary of the committee, said:

"Of the two million Armenians in Turkey a year ago at least one million have been killed or forced into Islam. Others have been compelled to flee the country, or have died upon the way to exile, or are now upon the road to the deserts of Northern Arabia, or are already there. The number of victims is constantly increasing. Surely there can be no greater need of immediate help, even in these troublous times, than the desperate need of the Armenian refugees."

Eyewitness Describes The Scene

Walter H. Mallory is the American Committee's executive secretary. Mallory said his committee is in close touch with the Lord Mayor’s Committee of London, which is also monitoring the Armenian situation. Daily reports of "almost unbelievable atrocities" have been received from the English committee, Mallory said.

Yesterday's statement from the American Committee quotes from a letter received from the English committee. The letter reports that there are "180,000 refugees still in the Caucasus besides 30,000 who have died there."
A large part of yesterday's statement is taken up with a letter the American Committee received from a missionary stationed in the city of Konia. The missionary had visited a railway station at Kachin Han, where a group of desperate deportees had gathered. There he found around 100 people sitting and lying about the station in utter despair. They had been waiting there for three days, and most of them had eaten up all the food they had and looked exhausted and weak. To the missionary, they appeared to be like "famine victims such as one sees in pictures or a scene in India."

"The train from Konia arrived while we were there," the missionary wrote. "The greater number of the people dragged themselves to the cars in an effort to get on board, but were pushed back by the gendarmes, partly because they had no tickets and partly because there was no room. ... The poor people were forced to turn back to where they had been sitting or lying about the station."

"Among the hundred people there were not half a dozen tents, and the half-dozen were improvised and of the flimsiest character. Most of the people were lying out in the open day and night, many of them without even blankets or quilts. Half a mile from the station I found two old women who were crawling off on hands and knees too weak to walk; they had been carried off on a wagon ostensibly to go to a village but once out of sight of the gendarmes the driver had dropped them in the field and hurried away. Without exception all of the people looked forward to certain death by starvation nor was there any other future to be seen for them."