Between 1915 and 1923, almost the entire Armenian population was systematically driven from their homeland in the Ottoman Empire by Turkish officials. The displaced Armenians were forced to walk to the distant areas of Syria and Iraq from their homeland. Over one million Armenians—more than half of their population—died in the process. These forced marches were hidden from public view by the events of World War I. This deliberate and systematic destruction of the Armenian population is referred to as the Armenian genocide, the Armenian Holocaust, or referred to by the Armenians as the Great Calamity.

These forced acts of deportation vastly reduced the Armenian population in the Ottoman Empire to a mere minority. As the Armenians were deported, they were forced to march for days without their basic human rights to food, shelter, or rest. Members of the Turkish army claimed to be acting under orders as they forcibly removed the Armenians from their villages, allowing them only to bring what they could carry. The Turks maintained that the exodus was temporary and gave promises of safe conduct, which were not fulfilled as many Armenians were starved, beaten, killed and mutilated during this enforced deportation. War, violence, and rioting, perpetuated against the Armenians who were unfortunate enough to remain in the villages resulted in as many as 14,000 Armenian casualties. Populations were reduced to fewer than 100 civilians in many of the villages. Centuries of hatred between Turkey and Armenia fueled much of the brutality toward the Armenians. This fact, according to Armenians, defines this period as extermination and not simply deportation.

The Armenian genocide is a hotly debated issue that has become even more prevalent in the twenty-first century because of the existing tensions between the United States and the Middle East, and Turkey's influence as a United States' military ally in the region.

Understanding the Discussion

Committee of Union and Progress (CUP): The most influential branch of the Turkish government at the time of the Armenian genocide.

Deportation: The act of systematically removing an individual or a group from a homeland.

Diaspora: A population with a common ethnicity, culture, or race that has been removed from its homeland. By driving vast numbers of Armenians from their homes, the Ottoman Empire created a mass of displaced Armenians: the Armenian diaspora.

Extermination: The process of eliminating by destruction or complete annihilation.
Genocide: The act of killing, inflicting fatal conditions, or preventing births among a population based on that population's ethnicity, religion, or race.

Special Order: The division of the CUP that was responsible for the deportations of Armenian civilians during World War I.

History

Modern Armenia lies south of the Black Sea, sandwiched between Turkey and Azerbaijan, northeast of Iraq and Iran. In 1915, when the deportations began, Armenia lacked defined boundaries and had been subject to the far-reaching Ottoman Empire since the fourteenth century. Most Armenians settled in the provinces of Greater or Historic Armenia to the east of Turkey—some inhabiting areas as far west as Constantinople—where their socio-economic status and cultural differences forced them to live in poverty alongside the wealthier Turks. Armenians also had to pay exorbitant taxes in exchange for property under Ottoman rule. Despite all this, however, the Armenians were still able to maintain a wholly singular culture and tradition.

The Turk-Armenian conflict of the twentieth century had been building since the first century when Armenians adopted Christianity, to the great chagrin of their Turkish Muslim neighbors. The result of the religious clash was an intense inter-cultural hatred, which erupted into gang-based attacks and massacres on both sides throughout the twentieth century as Armenians fought for political independence and the Turks struggled to maintain control.

The source of this violent conflict can be attributed to the gradual collapse of the once-powerful Ottoman Empire. In 1832, the countries subject to Ottoman rule began to declare independence. By 1914, when Turkey entered World War I, more than three quarters of the empire's territory had fallen away. The disintegration of the Ottoman Empire drove anti-Christian sentiment and fears of Armenian rebellion to an even higher degree, and convinced many Turks that the only way to salvage the empire was to evacuate the threatening minority.

In 1914, Turkey entered the First World War on the side of Germany. The evacuation and subsequent deaths that characterized the Armenian genocide went unnoticed until 1916, when Lord James Bryce and Arnold Toynbee compiled a volume of first-person Armenian accounts of their experiences entitled "The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire." The Turkish government immediately denounced this information as propaganda. However, it became public knowledge that the Ottoman Empire's Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) had been forcing Armenians out of their homeland under the pretense of relocating them as a preventative measure for rebellion. This volume revealed that Armenians were perishing en masse in a manner that resembled genocide, and that Turkish brutality was mostly to blame. When the United States declared war on Germany and joined the Allies in 1917, many American soldiers witnessed the deportations.

At the end of the First World War, the few surviving Armenians filtered back into Turkey to find that their communities and their cities had been destroyed. In 1923, Turkey and the Allied forces signed the Treaty of Lausanne, which neither documented "Armenia" as an entity, nor recognized, officially or informally, any crimes against the Armenians. The actions of the Turkish officials, Armenians claim, should be labeled genocide. The Turkish officials disagree, maintaining that many more Turks than Armenians died as a result of massacres and hate crimes during those years.

The destruction of Turkish records and poorly-kept population counts are among the reasons that little information about the Armenian genocide exists. Furthermore, Turkey insists that the Armenians were in no way exterminated and that the deportations were necessary to prevent insurrection in a time of war. Turkish officials claim that the government fully intended to fulfill the promise of safe conduct of all Armenians to residences for a temporary term of exile. The Turkish government claims that the Armenian death toll was the
result of food shortages and other wartime hardships. Turkish officials also point out the numerous Muslim
deaths that took place at the time of the alleged genocide.

Armenians insist that the deportations constitute a planned extermination designed to eliminate the entire
Armenian population. They claim that the Armenian genocide was a government conspiracy plotted years
ahead of time by the CUP, and that the outbreak of World War I provided a convenient excuse for the Turks to
enact their long-standing plans for annihilation. Circumstantial evidence related to the CUP suggests that
officials planned the evacuation and extermination of the Armenians. Furthermore, telegrams sent between
members of the Special Organization also suggest that extermination was the purpose of the evacuation.
However, all Turkish correspondence specifically discussing the Armenian genocide was destroyed in the
years following the war: proof, claim the Armenians, that the Turks had conspired to formulate a secret mission
to exterminate the Armenians. The Turks, however, dismiss this theory.

The Armenian Genocide Today

Turk-Armenian relations continue to remain strained. Armenian descendants continue to press for
acknowledgement of the Armenian genocide as the first genocide of the twentieth century, while Turkish
officials deny the characterization of the events as genocide. However, over the last several decades, a new
type of evidentiary literature has emerged: survivor testimony. Victims of the Armenian genocide have purged
painful memories by speaking about the events and have shed light on that shadowed period in history.

The Armenian genocide continues to be a contentious issue around the world. Turkey is one of the United
States' allies in the war against terrorism in the Middle East, and serves as the United States' bridge to Iraq.
The United States, as a whole, does not recognize the Armenian genocide; however, forty individual U.S.
states do. Armenians continue to push the United States Congress to pass a bill that will officially acknowledge
the historic mass slaughter as genocide.

If the United States were to acknowledge the Armenian genocide, its relationship with Turkey could be
irreparably damaged. The United States would be forced to sacrifice the use of the Turkish airspace and naval
ports that make access to Iraq possible. Such a rupture could significantly injure American military operations
in the Middle East and pose an even greater threat to the American soldiers stationed there. Public
acknowledgment of genocidal conspiracy could also potentially seriously hinder Turkish efforts to join the EU.
These diplomatic and military considerations further complicate the United States' position on the issue. The
Armenian cause is continually developing into a moral dilemma for the United States government.

Now nearly a century later, Turkey's president, Abdullah Gul, and his Armenian counterpart, Serzh Sargsyan,
have reached a breakthrough in their highly fragile negotiations. As of April 2009, the two leaders, through the
mediation of Switzerland, agreed to a road map that could lead to the resumption of diplomatic relations and
the reopening of their borders. In May 2009, both leaders also met in Prague and agreed to reconstruct
relations quickly and without any preconditions. If these agreements succeed, they will be very significant for
the region and possibly put an end to the animosity and hatred that has tormented both sides.

In the 2010s, the debate surrounding the use of "genocide" to refer to the killings of Armenians has intensified
as official recognition of the genocide has become more widespread, despite a 2015 ruling by the European
Court of Human Rights that denying the genocide is not a crime. Pope Francis described the events as the first
genocide of the twentieth century during a Mass on the 100th anniversary of the start of the killings, in April
2015. As a result of this incident, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan to recall his ambassador to the
Vatican. The following summer, Pope Francis visited Tsitsernakaberd, the genocide memorial in Armenia's
capital, on a visit to the country, and gave a speech in which he once again referred to the events of 1915 as a
genocide, leading to further condemnation by the Turkish government. In June 2016, the German parliament
passed a resolution officially recognizing the Armenian genocide, and the Turkish ambassador to Germany was also recalled. Meanwhile, US president Barack Obama campaigned on the promise of recognizing the killings as a genocide, but declined to do so after becoming president. With the rise of the Islamic State, the United States’ alliance with Turkey has become even more important, but Armenian American groups have repeatedly expressed displeasure with the government’s denial or downplaying of the wrong done to their ancestors.

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