

Setting the Stage

On October 29, 1914, the Ottoman Empire, led by the Young Turk government, entered the First World War on the side of the Central Powers—the German and Austro-Hungarian empires. Under the cover of war, the Armenian Christians, who were viewed as ethnic and religious others by the state, were targeted by the government for total destruction. This was part of a plan to form a Turkish state and expand Ottoman territories east, beyond the Armenian Highlands. These crimes against the Armenian people are known as the Armenian Genocide.

Genocide

In 1915, leaders of the Young Turk government began to eliminate its Armenian population through political orders of forced deportations and mass murder. To avoid any possible resistance, more than 200 Armenian community leaders were arrested on April 24th in Constantinople (Istanbul). Most were executed soon after.

In large groups, Armenians were forced out of their homes and pushed south toward the Syrian desert. Along the way, men were separated and killed, while women and children were forced to march under extreme harsh conditions. They were forcefully starved, without shelter and protection from harassment and violence. As Armenians were removed from their towns, new laws allowed for their homes, businesses and churches to be looted, confiscated and/or destroyed. Most Armenians survived death as a result of forced conversion to Islam, abduction, forced adoption, or by being sold or married into Turkish, Kurdish or Arab households. Others were saved due to aid from American and European missionary and relief organizations, while others were saved by neighbors who resisted political orders to harm Armenians.



Family of deportees on the road.
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End of the Ottoman Empire

By November 1918, Ottoman involvement in the First World War resulted in their defeat and the victorious Allied powers partitioned and occupied the empire. Between 1919 and 1920, the Ottomans held special military tribunals, which tried Young Turk leaders for crimes such as intentional massacre, deportation, plunder of properties, torture and torment. The key leaders, Mehmed Talât, Ismail Enver, Ahmed Cemal, Dr. Mehmed Nazim and Dr. Behaddin Şakir were found guilty of first degree mass murder and were given the death penalty in absentia. However, this punishment was never followed through. Soon after, a Turkish nationalist movement led by General Mustafa Kemal formed to force Allied troops out. During this period, Armenians continued to be targets of genocidal policies. By 1923, General Mustafa Kemal and his forces went on to form the modern-day Republic of Turkey.

An estimated 1.5 million Armenians, approximately two-thirds of the pre-war Armenian population living in the Ottoman Empire, were murdered between 1915 and 1923. As of 2020, despite overwhelming evidence, scholarly research, and testimony of survivors and foreign witnesses that confirm the destruction of the Armenians as a genocide, the Turkish government continues to refuse to acknowledge its past crimes, denying the genocide at home and abroad.

Armenian Genocide Testimony

Firsthand experiences and memory of the Armenian Genocide are preserved in USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive through two collections — the Armenian Film Foundation collection and the Richard G. Hovannisian Armenian Genocide Oral History collection. Both collections give access to survivor testimonies and other eyewitness accounts, in addition to survivor descendant and scholar testimonies recorded between the 1970s to the early 2000s. The audiovisual testimonies from the Armenian Film Foundation were filmed for use in documentary films that would bring international awareness and education about the Armenian Genocide. The average length of these testimonies are about 20 minutes. The Richard G. Hovannisian Armenian Genocide Oral History collection consists of audio testimony recorded by university students, which offer a complete history of the life of Armenians, before, during and after the Armenian Genocide. The average length of these testimonies are about 90 minutes.