The Armenian Genocide: A Multi-Dimensional Process of Destruction

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On the eve of the First World War, about two million Armenians lived in the Ottoman Empire. In the spring of 1915, the Ottoman government took a series of measures against its own Armenian citizens. At the end of the war, only a fraction of the pre-war Armenian community still lived in the Ottoman Empire. Nowadays, almost no Armenians live in the Anatolian interior any longer. These rough facts sketch in a nutshell the complex history of the Armenian genocide. This article provides an overview of the Armenian genocide in the Ottoman Empire in 1915 and argues that the genocide was not just one phenomenon but a multifaceted process of destruction.

The destruction of the Ottoman Armenians can be seen as a complex result of three important forces: military defeat and the loss of territory in the Balkans in 1912–13; the Young Turk coup d’état of 23 January 1913; and the outbreak of the First World War.

Causes: Defeat, Coup, Dictatorship, War

Ever since the creation of new nation-states in the lost Ottoman territories in the nineteenth century, the civil rights of Muslims who stayed behind under the rule of their former subjects were insecure. In Greece and Bulgaria, persecutions and violence against Muslims were not uncommon. The Balkan Wars of 1912–1913 would radically worsen the lives of Muslims in south-east Europe. On 17 October 1912, Serbia, Montenegro, Greece, and Bulgaria declared war on the Ottoman Empire out of discontent with its rule and the possibilities for territorial expansion. Out-powered, demoralised, unprepared, and poorly equipped, the Ottoman army fought fourteen battles and lost them all, except for one. In November, the Bulgarian advance pushed the Ottoman army back to the trenches of Catalca, thirty kilometres west of Istanbul. There, the onslaught was stopped and the imperial capital remained uncaptured. Warfare continued as two other important Ottoman cities fell: the old imperial capital of Edirne was besieged and taken by the Bulgarian army, and on 9 November 1912 the Ottoman garrison surrendered the cradle of the Young Turks, Salonika, to the Greek army. The state of war lasted until the Treaty of London was signed on 30 May 1913, which dealt with territorial adjustments arising out of the conclusion of the war. After the cessation of hostilities, the empire was heavily truncated for good.
The war was traumatic for Ottoman society. The loss of major Ottoman cities, personal property and life was intolerable to the proud Ottoman elite, appalled by the helplessness of its army. The shock of the war would carve deep and lasting scars in Ottoman society, culture, and identity. From 1913 on, nationalist hardliners no longer considered as realistic any sense of overarching Ottoman identity. For Turkish nationalists, the war substantiated the myth of the “stab in the back” by Ottoman Christians. This distrust influenced politics at the highest level: in parliament a tense atmosphere prevailed among the various groups of politicians. The Young Turk nationalists, united in the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), carried out provocations, levelled accusations, slung insults, made threats against Ottoman Bulgarians, Greeks and Armenians, and questioned their loyalty to the state. The loss of the Balkan Wars profoundly polarised Ottoman society along ethno-religious lines.

A true watershed that marked a critical shift in the nature of politics in this period was the Young Turk coup d’état. As Edirne, a former capital of the Ottoman Empire, was under siege and desperately in need of relief, the Ottoman high command held negotiations on 22 January 1913 that foresaw the unconditional surrender of this important city to the Bulgarian government. The CUP was infuriated and a faction of hardliners embarked on a reckless raid on the “Sublime Porte” (Bâb-ı Ali) as the cabinet was in session. The group included Talat, Enver, the doctors Bahaeddin Shakir and Mehmed Nâzım, party orator Ömer Naci, and several irregulars including the short-tempered fedayi Yakup Cemil.

On 23 January 1913 in the afternoon, the court building was surrounded and occupied by sixty armed men. The group kicked in the door and immediately opened fire on the first men in sight: the Grand Vizier’s secretary, Ohrili Nafiz, the war minister’s secretary, Kıbrıslızâde Tevfik Bey, and the veteran police commissioner, Celâl Bey. Upon hearing shots, the cabinet members fled the building. In an attempt to straighten out the situation, Field Marshal and Minister of War Nâzım Pasha appeared on the balcony and yelled to the raiders: “What’s going on?” But Yakup Cemil shot him in the forehead and Nâzım Pasha died instantly. Meanwhile, Enver Pasha ran into the central meeting hall and put his gun to Grand Vizier Mâhmed Kâmil Pasha’s head, giving him the choice of either resigning or dying. The eighty-year-old Kamîl Pasha tendered his resignation to the Sultan, and the CUP was now in charge. Outside, the raiders were shouting: “Long live the people! Long live the CUP!” The coup d’état was a success.

The importance of the CUP coup cannot be overestimated. The CUP never came to power through elections, but installed a brutal dictatorship through a bloody coup. It silenced the Ottoman parliament, intimidated or destroyed the opposition, and filled the ranks of the Ottoman state bureaucracy with Young Turk loyalists and cronies. The regime was born in the midst of a brutal war, which led to a substantial reduction of the traditional limits on state power. The coup made possible a huge concentration of power and paved the way for the Young Turks to transform violently the multi-ethnic Ottoman society into a homogeneous Muslim–Turkish state. The revolution also sparked deep fears of counter-revolution, which resulted in a permanent state of emergency and a greater concentration of power. During their reign, the Young Turks tried to ward off this continuous political crisis through the use of violence against parts of their own population. Violence became a normal instrument of governance, because the regime never enjoyed wide popular support.

In the months after the coup, the CUP, no longer wielding power from behind the scenes, would gradually impose a violent dictatorship upon the empire. Enver reconquered Edirne, promoted himself to general, and became minister of war. The new cabinet stood under the
auspices of Talaat, who went from being party boss to interior minister. Slowly but steadily, the political climate in Istanbul was depacified to an extraordinary extent, with political violence becoming commonplace. Assassinations were carried out by paramilitary gangsters loyal to factions around Talaat and especially Enver. Hüseyin Cahit (1875–1957), publisher of one of the most important newspapers of the period, witnessed one of these political murders as a hitman loyal to Enver Pasha shot a man in his presence for expressing criticism. The Young Turks became the propelling force behind state terror:

To them politics was much more than a game and having seized power they meant to hold on to it. To do so they were willing to use all possible means, so that repression and violence became the order of the day. Nothing was sacred in the pursuit of power and those guilty of dissent must be prepared to pay with their lives.

The paramilitaries who used to live as outlaws amid civil-war conditions now rose to state power. This lent them legitimacy and transposed the severely depacified political culture to Anatolia. Their experience of paramilitary warfare in the Balkan countryside was transplanted into the offices of the Ottoman government.

Lastly, a major catalyst of the genocide was the outbreak of the First World War. This was an unexpected but fatal development for the Ottoman Armenians. On 2 August 1914, one day after the German declaration of war against Russia, a written agreement foreseeing close cooperation and mobilisation was signed between Germany and the Ottoman Empire. On 29 October 1914, without a formal declaration of war, Enver Pasha ordered the Ottoman navy to bombard the Russian shore, including the port city Sevastopol. Ottoman battle cruisers destroyed oil-storage tanks and sank fourteen vessels. The fait accompli triggered declarations of war by the Triple Entente powers. From 11 November 1914 on, the Ottoman Empire was officially at war with Russia, France, and Britain.

The First World War was not something that happened incidentally to the Ottoman Empire. Powerful cadres in the CUP’s nationalist wing consciously headed towards armed confrontation, though not with one particular state. According to a recent study, the CUP entrance into the war was “part of a strategy to achieve long-term security, economic development, and, eventually, national recovery”. In other words, by participating in the war the CUP hoped to solve radically the perceived problems of the empire. Driven by ambition, a desire to enhance state security, and expansionist goals, Enver launched invasions of Persia and Russia in the winter of 1914. Both campaigns resulted in monumental catastrophes. Enver attributed the failures not to his incompetence but to Armenian treason, and from January 1915 designated Armenians as scapegoats. Turkish-nationalist propaganda depicted Armenians as “traitors”, called for a boycott of their businesses, and spread horror stories about alleged crimes committed by Armenian activists. Armenian newspapers were closed and prominent Armenians arrested. From the first day of the war, the Young Turk regime had become more repressive. The more brutal and hopeless the war became, the more the persecution of Armenians intensified. The defeat triggered a wave of persecutions, especially in the eastern provinces.

The Armenian Genocide as a Complex Process

These three political forces—the losses of the Balkan Wars, the CUP coup d’état, and the outbreak of the First World War—converged in sparking a severe radicalisation of anti-Armenian policy by the Young Turk political elite. That policy consisted of a series of overlapping processes that meshed with one another and generated an intended and coherent
process of destruction. These processes were: mass executions of elites, expropriations, deportations, forced assimilation, artificial famine, and destruction of material culture.

Elimination of Elites
Decapitation of the Armenian community by mass executions of the economic, religious, political, and intellectual elite was the first pillar of the genocide. The great roundup in Istanbul of 24 April 1915 was to become a guideline for the arrests of the Armenian elites throughout the vast country. Almost all those detained were men of middle or advanced age with influence, wealth and status. They were imprisoned, often tortured, and finally murdered. For example, in the cities of Bitlis and Harput, all prominent Armenian men were arrested, transported to the suburbs, and shot dead. The bodies were thrown in trenches dug in advance.

A well-documented example of the mass murder of Armenian elites occurred in the southeastern city of Diyarbekir. On Sunday, 30 May 1915, a dozen militiamen handcuffed 636 Armenian dignitaries including the bishop, and transported them to the Tigris. On the banks of the river, the men were loaded onto large rafts on the pretext that they would be moved to the south. Militia members sailed the notables downstream to a gorge where the rafts were moored. The victims were robbed of their money, taken away in groups of six, stripped of their clothes and valuables, and massacred by men recruited by the governor. The perpetrators murdered them with axes, daggers and guns, and dumped the bodies in the river. The destruction of the Armenian intelligentsia was completed breathtakingly quickly: the entire top layer of the community was eliminated within weeks.⁸

Expropriation
Expropriation was a second pillar of the genocide. The Armenian genocide was one of the largest cases of capital transfer in modern history. Parallel to the deportation orders, the Young Turk government issued several decrees about Armenian property. These pseudo-laws stipulated that Armenians would be dispossessed of their businesses and crafts. On 10 June 1915, the government set up the “Committees for Abandoned Property” (Emval-ı Metruke Komisyonu), which were assigned the daily implementation of the dispossession. This was a frontal attack on the Armenian economy, since all Armenian possessions were now officially transferred to the state. On 26 September 1915, the regime issued an additional decree that delegated the implementation of the seizures and record-keeping to the ministries of the interior, justice and finance. With these two laws, the Young Turks had robbed for good the owners of a huge economy: houses, farms, businesses, factories, workshops, ateliers, etc. According to Talaat’s private documents, a total of 41,117 buildings were confiscated throughout the Ottoman Empire. The Committees for Abandoned Property liquidated all possessions of the Armenians and sold them far below market value to Turks. This resulted in the massive impoverishment of the Armenian victims. Apart from the objective effects of material deprivation, the subjective experience of loss was unprecedented. Artisans who had often followed in their ancestors’ footsteps as jewellers, carpenters, tailors, or smiths, now lost not only their livelihood but also their professional identities. The famous Armenian manufacturer of percussion instruments, Zildjian, is an example of a generation of famous artisan families.⁹

Deportation
A third, central pillar of the genocide was the comprehensive deportation of the Armenian civilian population. In April 1915, some Armenians had already been deported from their homes, but this was not yet a national campaign. The complete deportation of the entire Armenian population was officially ordered on 23 May 1915 by Talaat. His order foresaw,
with minimal exceptions, the deportation of Armenians to the inhospitable Syrian desert, beginning with the north-eastern provinces. Talaat tried to camouflage the deportations as a legitimate measure and on 26 May manufactured the “Temporary Deportation Law”. Although the deportations had already begun, the law was ratified on 29 May. The army was assigned a considerable degree of authority to organise the deportations, but their daily management transferred to the “Directorate for the Settlement of Tribes and Immigrants” (İskân-ı Aşâir ve Muhacirîn Müdbaıriyeti). Talaat oversaw the process through telegraphic correspondence and the assistance of local officials.\footnote{10}

The deportations covered the entire Ottoman Empire, a huge swathe of land corresponding to current-day Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel/Palestine, and Iraq. The most violent events occurred in the eight eastern Ottoman provinces where a substantial Armenian minority lived: Erzurum, Van, Trabzon, Sivas, Mamuret ul-Aziz, Adana, Diyarbekir, and Aleppo. The genocide did not unfold equally in all of these provinces; there was a significant regional variation in its intensity and development. Some moderate governors, such as Celal Bey in Konya, Hasan Mazhar Bey in Ankara, and Rahmi Bey in İzmir, delayed and hampered the persecution process, whereas others, including Mustafa Abdülhalik Renda in Bitlis, Cemal Azmi Bey in Trabzon, and Dr Mehmed Reshid in Diyarbekir, intensified the genocide. In the former provinces, Armenians were treated somewhat less violently, and they found slightly more opportunities to escape. In the latter provinces, the general rule was complete destruction.\footnote{11} For example, the forty thousand Armenians in the city of Erzurum were deported to Der el-Zor in early June 1915. The German consul in Erzurum reported that the deportation would amount to “an absolute extermination” (\textit{eine absolute Ausrottung}).\footnote{12} Indeed, even before the convoy from Erzurum province had reached the provincial borders, the deportation convoy was already severely weakened. Near the city of Kemah, gendarmes butchered the remaining deportees and dumped them in the Euphrates. The number of Armenians from Erzurum that actually reached Der el-Zor was probably below two hundred, which corresponds to a destruction rate of 99.3 per cent.\footnote{13}

\textit{Forced Assimilation}

A fourth important aspect of the destruction of the Ottoman Armenians was forced renunciation of one’s ethnic identity. Women and children in particular were forced to renounce Christianity and the Armenian language and to convert to Islam and speak Turkish. This was part of the broader attack on Armenian culture. Although in the long run Talaat also deported the Armenian converts, large numbers of women and children were kidnapped and forced to convert. In some cities, such as Konya and Beirut, Armenian children were taken to large orphanages, where they were given Turkish names and converted to Islam, in an attempt to turn them into Turks. Many people forgot their Armenian identity and family. The reaction of Armenians to the government’s conversion policy was ambivalent and ranged from fearful acquiescence to unwavering opposition. Henry Vartanian, an Armenian from Sivas whose father was murdered, was forcibly converted to Islam. A Turkish acquaintance demanded that Henry renounce Christianity and swear the Islamic oath, “There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his Prophet.” The ceremony was performed in the presence of an imam, the young Henry was ritually circumcised, and was now known as Abdurrahmanoğlu Esad.\footnote{14} This conversion policy sought the dilution of the Armenian population and the obliteration of their culture and collective identity. From an analytical perspective, the kidnapping of tens of thousands of women and children should be considered a mixture of forced disappearance and cultural genocide.\footnote{15}
Artificial Famine

The construction of an artificially created famine region was another form of destruction. It must be noted that this facet of the genocide is under-researched. By the winter of 1915, the Syrian desert town of Der el-Zor began to resemble an outdoor concentration camp because of the ever-increasing influx of deportation convoys. Upon arrival in the Syrian desert, there were no provisions and in early 1916 a famine broke out. This lack of food already was a crime of omission. But the available evidence also strongly suggests that the local Young Turk authorities took active measures against the deported Armenians by creating an ethnic hierarchy of food: the bread available in the city was not equally distributed, and was denied to Armenians. This only exacerbated the famine and led to many more deaths—a crime of commission.  

Destruction of Material Culture

Lastly, destruction of material culture was also a dimension of the genocide. The Young Turks wanted to erase the physical traces of the Armenian presence in the country, by destroying churches and buildings and their Armenian inscriptions. Although the Armenians were gone, in a sense they were still too present. Besides the less ancient churches and cathedrals, the Young Turk regime destroyed many medieval Armenian monasteries, such as Narekavank, Varakavank, Arakelots Vank, Surp Garabed, and Surp Khach. Today, very few traces remain of these former centres of Armenian cultural and religious life, yet in 1914, the Armenian community still owned 2,600 churches, 450 monasteries, and 2,000 schools—indicating the magnitude of the erasure. The destruction of the architecture of the victim group served two purposes: it apparently proved that the victims had never even existed in the area, and it ensured that the survivors had nothing recognisable to return to.

Perpetrators and Victims

The perpetrators of the Armenian genocide were mainly Ottoman Turks, Kurds, and Caucasian peoples such as Chechens and Circassians. Among the perpetrators were well-educated intellectuals, middle-class workers, and unemployed illiterates. The main organiser of the genocide was Talaat Pasha, leader of the CUP and minister of the interior. He orchestrated an official propaganda campaign directed at the public and the outside world, and maintained an internal, secret agenda with a different tone and intentions. Talaat formally rationalised the genocide by collectively accusing the Ottoman Armenians of treason, sabotage and disloyalty. In 1916, he had a book published in four languages (German, Turkish, French, and English), entitled The Armenian Aspirations and Revolutionary Movements. The book contains manipulated photographs of alleged Armenian “terrorists” in every city of the Ottoman Empire. All photos are identical: Ottoman policemen and Young Turk paramilitaries stand behind a group of arrested Armenian men, who are bowing down in front of a few dozen “confiscated” weapons and bombs. The captions always read: “Armenian revolutionaries arrested with their weapons.” These lies were supported by the German war propaganda department, were influential then, and are still widely circulated and believed in today.

Talaat’s true motives were a mixture of ideological and pragmatic concerns, and material as well as immaterial interests. In a confidential conversation with the German consul, he admitted that his government wanted to use the First World War to “settle scores thoroughly” with its internal enemies, without being disturbed by foreign diplomatic intervention. He was even more unequivocal to the US ambassador, Henry Morgenthau. One day Talaat summoned Morgenthau and said:
I have asked you to come today, so that I can explain our position on the whole Armenian subject. We base our objections to the Armenians on three distinct grounds. In the first place, they have enriched themselves at the expense of the Turks. In the second place, they are determined to dominate over us and to establish a separate state. In the third place, they have openly encouraged our enemies. They have assisted the Russians in the Caucasus and our failure there is largely explained by their actions. We have therefore come to the irrevocable decision that we shall make them powerless before this war is ended.  

In his internal, secret correspondence Talaat leaves not a shred of doubt that the genocide was intended to “Turkify” Anatolia by ridding it of Armenians. Throughout the genocide, he kept in touch with local administrators and co-ordinated the de-Armenianisation of the country.

The main internal perpetrator and bystander group was Turks and Kurds, who were involved in both collaboration and resistance. Incitement, incentives, opportunism, and coercion caused the collaboration, especially of Kurds, in the Armenian genocide. Ideology played virtually no role in their participation: it was in the interest of Kurdish nationalists to support Armenians against the common enemy, Turkish nationalism. However, opportunism did play an important role in inducing collaboration. The CUP regime offered bribes to bystanders to provide information about Armenians in hiding or to serve as guides in unfamiliar towns. Kurdish religious hatred against Armenians was hardly a factor at the elite level, and Kurdish sheikhs were known for their rejection of the massacres. These conservative, pious men may have believed in the inferiority of the Christians, but certainly not that they ought to be destroyed. On the other hand, government-appointed imams did instigate ordinary Muslims to kill Armenians. They were incited by quasi-Islamic rhetoric that anyone who killed Armenians would be rewarded in the afterlife. Many uneducated villagers and naive believers allowed themselves to be deceived by this religiously inspired hate speech.

For the victims, it was possible to escape the genocide in four ways: bribery, hiding, flight, and pure luck. First off, paying kickbacks to perpetrators was a way to delay deportation, to escape abuse, or to purchase your life. Vahram Dadrian (1900–48) was fourteen years old when he was deported from the Ankara region. In his diaries, he describes how time and again, bribes saved his family on the long journey to Der el-Zor. Upon arrival in Syria, the Dadrians had reached rock bottom and the once-wealthy family was destitute.

A second risky option was hiding and waiting for the persecution to cease. Many Armenians who survived the genocide did so in very difficult circumstances. Many fugitives were tracked down or betrayed, and killed. Hiding was also very risky for people who helped Armenians. The government had circulated a national instruction prescribing that “any Muslim who protects an Armenian will be executed in front of his house and his house will be burned” (bir Ermeniyi tesahüp edecek bir Müslümanın hanesi önünde idam ve hanesi ihrak).

Third, in the winter of 1914, approximately 130,000 Armenians fled to Russia and Persia. Among them was the expressionist painter Arshile Gorky (1904–48), who managed to flee with his mother, first to Russia and later to the United States. Those who did not flee were deported and/or killed, and after March 1915 flight was made impossible.

Lastly, perhaps the most common means of survival was luck. Several important Armenian intellectuals, such as Aram Andonian (1875–1952) and Michael Shamtanjian (1874–1926), survived the mass executions mainly by coincidences over which they had no control. For
example, the editor of the liberal newspaper Zhamanag, Yervant Odian (1869–1926), survived the genocide because a Turkish police officer in Der el-Zor did not understand his deportation document and sent him back to Anatolia.22

At the end of the First World War, about three thousand Armenian settlements (villages, cities, districts) had been depopulated and their inhabitants massacred. Today, outside Istanbul almost no Armenians live in Turkey any longer. The community now has six churches, no schools, and no monasteries. The genocide developed at a rapid pace: within a year, the Ottoman Armenian community had been beheaded, dissolved, displaced, and exterminated. What made the persecutions genocidal is that the destruction targeted the abstract category of group identity: eventually, all Armenians, loyal or disloyal, political or apolitical, were a target and potential victims. The victims of the genocide hailed from different classes, regions, and backgrounds: highly educated intellectuals, middle-class professionals, illiterate workers and peasants, liberal reformers, secular nationalists, conservative clergy. Their response to the genocide ranged from resistance to flight, docility and existential fear. The vast majority of farmers probably understood neither the cause nor the scale of the genocide. Only after the war did a profound awareness spread among Armenian intellectuals and politicians.

Aftermath

Although the era itself is long over and virtually all persons involved are deceased, the Armenian genocide plays an important role in the current politics of Armenia and Turkey. The genocide left a troublesome legacy in the international relations of the two groups. From the 1960s on, Armenians worldwide began demanding recognition of and attention to the genocide. Successive Turkish governments responded to this trend with denial and trivialisation of the genocide. This denial policy can largely be traced back to the pamphlet that Talaat had published in 1916. According to the proponents of this theory, “only” three hundred thousand Armenians were killed, the Armenians had committed collective treason against the state, the deportation policy was a preventive gesture of the government to remove Armenians from war zones, and was certainly not a systematic and intentional process of anti-Armenian persecution and destruction. The denial policy offended relatives of the victims so much that Armenian nationalists in the 1970s responded with violence. Two terrorist organisations shot dead dozens of Turkish diplomats, which hardened the Turkish denial position.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Armenian Republic emerged from its war with Azerbaijan with no diplomatic contact with Turkey. American and Swiss efforts to achieve rapprochement stalled in mutual distrust and hatred between Armenia and Turkey. The Turkish–Armenian border is still hermetically closed, with very negative consequences for the economies of the region. Furthermore, Turkey’s accession to the European Union depends partly on the reopening of the border, which in turn depends partly on recognition of the genocide. Time does not heal: after almost a hundred years, the Armenian genocide still remains a central problem in Armenian–Turkish relations.
ENDNOTES

1. For the inside story of the coup, see Galip Vardar, İttihat ve Terakki İçinde Dönenler (İstanbul: Tan, 1960), pp. 104–19.


15. See Ara Sarafian, “The Absorption of Armenian Women and Children into Muslim Households as a Structural Component of the Armenian Genocide”, in In God’s Name: Genocide and Religion in the Twentieth Century, ed. Omer Bartov and Phyllis Mack (Oxford:


20. Vahram Dadrian, To the Desert: Pages from My Diary (London: Gomidas Institute, 2003). This raises the question of survival rates during the genocide: did higher-class Armenians have greater chances of surviving because they could afford bribes, or did lower-class Armenians have greater survival chances because they knew the terrain and social life?

