The Armenian Genocide of 1915

In the midst of World War I, with the Ottoman Empire at war with the Russian Empire, the Ottoman Turkish government decided that the Christian minority Armenians would likely be sympathetic to the Russians, and in 1915 the Turkish government initiated the mass deportation of Armenians living within Turkey, citing, among other reasons, security concerns.

As is all too often the case with ethnic and religious minorities, Armenians living under Ottoman rule had been subject to sometimes violent persecution for decades, but the events of 1915 were of a different magnitude altogether. Estimates vary, but between 300,000 and 1,500,000 Armenians died as a result. Many nations and most scholars identify these events as the Armenian Genocide, although some, including the Turkish government, deny both the name and many accounts of the events. Henry Morgenthau Sr. was the U.S. Ambassador to Turkey during these events, and this selection from his account offers a description of some of the tactics and atrocities committed. He collected information from U.S. diplomats and aid agency workers, whom he also helped to organize, and after he returned to the United States in 1916, published this account and worked for the succor of the Armenian population.

Morgenthau's description of cruelty and brutality can be difficult to read. Armenians were systematically forced from their homes and stripped of all their possessions, men were separated and often murdered, sexual assaults and rapes were common, and old men, women, and children were put on forced marches that were intended to result in their deaths.

Genocide was only defined as a concept in 1944, but that didn't prevent such acts from taking place before then. The recognition of genocide has prompted nations to assess their moral and legal responsibilities and powers and PROMOTED the development of international law to provide for intervention, although unfortunately the Armenian genocide was not the only event where a government or ethnic group has tried to eradicate a part of the population in the 20th century. Among the most well-known are the Nazis' attempt to exterminate the Jews, the collectivization and purges of Joseph Stalin in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in the 1920s and 1930s, Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution in China in the 1960s, the Cambodian killing fields under Pol Pot in the 1970s, and Hutu attacks on Tutsis in Rwanda and the Serbian ethnic cleansing of Bosnians in the Balkans in the 1990s, among others. Hierarchies based on social, ethnic, and political differences are part of political life. Nonetheless, it is a tragic extreme of social hierarchies when groups resort to exterminating each other.

I have…laid aside any scruples I had as to the propriety of disclosing to my fellow countrymen the facts which I learned while representing them in Turkey. I acquired this knowledge as the servant of the American people, and it is their property as much as it is mine.

The Central Government [of Turkey] now announced its intention of gathering the two million or more Armenians living in the several sections of the empire and transporting them to this desolate and inhospitable region. Had they undertaken such a deportation in good faith it would have represented the height of cruelty and injustice. As a matter of fact, the Turks never had the slightest idea of re-establishing the Armenians in this new country. They knew that the great majority would never reach their destination and that those who did would either die of thirst and starvation, or be murdered by the
wild Mohammedan desert tribes. The real purpose of the deportation was robbery and destruction; it really represented a new method of massacre. When the Turkish authorities gave the orders for these deportations, they were merely giving the death warrant to a whole race; they understood this well, and, in their conversations with me, they made no particular attempt to conceal the fact.

All through the spring and summer of 1915 the deportations took place. Of the larger cities, Constantinople, Smyrna, and Aleppo were spared; practically all other places where a single Armenian family lived now became the scenes of these unspeakable tragedies. Scarcely a single Armenian, whatever his education or wealth, or whatever the social class to which he belonged, was exempted from the order. In some villages placards were posted ordering the whole Armenian population to present itself in a public place an appointed time—usually a day or two ahead, and in other places the town crier would go through the streets delivering the order vocally. In still others not the slightest warning was given. The gendarmes would appear before an Armenian house and order all the inmates to follow them. They would take women engaged in their domestic tasks without giving them the chance to change their clothes. The police fell upon them just as the eruption of Vesuvius fell upon Pompeii; women were taken from the wash-tubs, children were snatched out of bed, the bread was left half baked in the oven, the family meal was abandoned partly eaten, the children were taken from the schoolroom, leaving their books open at the daily task, and the men were forced to abandon their ploughs in the fields and their cattle on the mountain side. Even women who had just given birth to children would be forced to leave their beds and join the panic-stricken throng, their sleeping babies in their arms. Such things as they hurriedly snatched up—a shawl, a blanket, perhaps a few scraps of food—were all that they could take of their household belongings. To their frantic questions "Where are we going?" the gendarmes would vouchsafe only one reply: "To the interior."

In some cases the refugees were given a few hours, in exceptional instances a few days, to dispose of their property and household effects. But the proceeding, of course, amounted simply to robbery. They could sell only to Turks, and since both buyers and sellers knew that they had only a day or two to market the accumulations of a lifetime, the prices obtained represented a small fraction of their value. Sewing machines would bring one or two dollars—a cow would go for a dollar, a houseful of furniture would be sold for a pittance. In many cases Armenians were prohibited from selling or Turks from buying even at these ridiculous prices; under pretense that the Government intended to sell their effects to pay the creditors whom they would inevitably leave behind, their household furniture would be placed in stores or heaped up in public places, where it was usually pillaged by Turkish men and women. The government officials would also inform the Armenians that, since their deportation was only temporary, the intention being to bring them back after the war was over, they would not be permitted to sell their houses. Scarcely had the former possessors left the village, when Mohammedan mohad—immigrants from other parts of Turkey—would be moved into the Armenian quarters. Similarly all their valuable—money, rings, watches, and jewellery—would be taken to the police stations for "safe keeping," pending their return, and then parcelled out among the Turks. Yet these robberies gave the refugees little anguish, for far more terrible and agonizing scenes were taking place under their eyes. The systematic extermination of the men CONTINUED; such males as the persecutions which I have already described had left were now violently dealt with. Before the caravans were started, it became the regular practice to separate the young men from the families, tie them together in groups of four, lead them to the outskirts, and shoot them. Public hangings without trial—the only offense being that the victims were Armenians—were taking place constantly. The gendarmes showed a particular desire to annihilate the educated and the influential. From American consuls and missionaries I was constantly receiving reports of such executions, and many of the events which they described will never fade from my memory. At Angora all Armenian men from fifteen to seventy were arrested, bound together in groups of four, and sent on the road in the direction of Caesarea. When they had travelled five or six hours and had reached a secluded valley, a mob of Turkish peasants fell upon them with clubs, hammers, axes, scythes, spades, and saws. Such instruments not only caused more agonizing deaths than guns and pistols, but, as the Turks themselves boasted, they were more economical, since they did not involve the waste of powder.
and shell. In this way they exterminated the whole male population of Angora, including all its men of wealth and breeding, and their bodies, horribly mutilated, were left in the valley, where they were devoured by wild beasts. After completing this destruction, the peasants and gendarmes gathered in the local tavern, comparing notes and boasting of the number of "giaours" that each had slain. In Trebizond the men were placed in boats and sent out on the Black Sea; gendarmes would follow them in boats, shoot them down, and throw their bodies into the water.

When the signal was given for the caravans to move, therefore, they almost invariably consisted of women, children, and old men. Anyone who could possibly have protected them from the fate that awaited them had been destroyed. Not infrequently the prefect of the city, as the mass started on its way, would wish them a derisive "pleasant journey." Before the caravan moved the women were sometimes offered the alternative of becoming Mohammedans. Even though they accepted the new faith, which few of them did, their earthly troubles did not end. The converts were started, the individuals bore some resemblance to human beings; in a few hours, however, the dust of the road plastered their faces and clothes, the mud caked their lower members, and the slowly advancing mobs, frequently bent with fatigue and crazed by the brutality of their "protectors," resembled some new and strange animal species. Yet for the better part of six months, from April to October, 1915, practically all the highways in Asia Minor were crowded with these unearthly bands of exiles. They could be seen winding in and out of every valley and climbing up the sides of nearly every mountain—moving on and on, they scarcely knew whither, except that every road led to death. Village after village and town after town was evacuated of its Armenian population, under the distressing circumstances already detailed. In these six months, as far as can be ascertained, about 1,200,000 people started on this journey to the Syrian desert.

"Pray for us," they would say as they left their homes—the homes in which their ancestors had lived for 2,500 years. "We shall not see you in this world again, but sometime we shall meet. Pray for us!"

Lawrence Morris

Further Reading


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