

The Armenian Genocide

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On August 22, 1939, just prior to the German invasion of Poland, Adolf Hitler delivered this message to his Commanders in Chief: "Thus for the time being I have sent to the East only my 'Death's Head Units' with the order to kill without pity or mercy all men, women, and children of the Polish race or language. Only in such a way will we win the vital space we need. Who still talks nowadays of the extermination of the Armenians?" Hitler's rhetorical question is representative of the amnesia concerning the Armenian Genocide of 1915, which still continues through this day. The lack of accountability for government-sponsored mass murder is the unwillingness of governments to honestly examine the past.

At the beginning of this century, more than two million Armenians lived in the Ottoman Empire, most of which were concentrated in the eastern provinces of Turkey. The fundamental laws of the land were based on the Islam religion. Armenians, as Christians, had no legal rights since the testimony of non-Muslims was not recognized in court. Armenians were heavily taxed under the Ottoman Empire with no recourse to protest.

As the old ruling of the sultans ended in 1908 with the Young Turk revolt, Armenians joyfully greeted the new form of government. They saw it as the beginning of a new era of reform and an end to their centuries of oppression. But by 1914 the Ottoman Government had become a dictatorship of three men from the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP): Talaat Pasha, Minister of Interior; Enver Pasha, Minister of War; and Djemal Pasha, Minister of Marine. It was evident that these three men were extreme Turkish nationalists and militant modernizers whose wish was to expand eastwards and rid the country of all non-Turkish minorities with a primary focus on the Armenians.

Turkey's dictators felt that their goal could best be achieved with the help of Germany against England, France, and Russia, and on August 2, 1914, Enver signed a treaty with Germany promising to commit Turkey to the side of the Central Powers in war. At this time, the Ottoman Empire was the center of the Islamic world, and the Sheikh-ul-Islam, was the chief religious authority for all Muslims. The Sheikh was compelled by the CUP dictators and the German government to issue "Jihad", or a declaration of Holy War, on November 23, 1914. Ignoring the fact that Germany and Austria were Christian Allies of Turkey, the Jihad appealed to all Muslims to fight a Holy War against "the unbelievers" (that is, the Christians). The Jihad never had the influence over the masses that the CUP dictators hoped for but nonetheless, the Jihad created an atmosphere of distrust toward Christian minorities in the Ottoman lands, and it later facilitated the government's program of Genocide against the Armenians. The Sheikh

became so disgusted by the CUP policies and resigned in 1915. The New York Times reported his resignation on September 14, 1915, adding that the Sheikh "disapproved of the extermination of the Christian elements."

In December of 1914, Enver's dream of a swift and decisive campaign that would enlarge The Turkish Empire was crushed. Enver personally lead the Turkish 3rd Army in an offensive against the Russians. But the combination of a severe winter and a brilliant Russian counterattack left Enver with a defeat where he lost over 80% of his initial army. He himself narrowly escaped capture. He was so humiliated by this defeat that he forbade his officers to speak of the campaign. Enver's search for a scapegoat for his own failures led to the subsequent deportations and massacre of the Armenians, whom he accused of helping the Russians.

The war placed the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire in an insecure situation because many of their brethren were subjects of the Russian Empire, against whom the Turks were fighting. The Turkish offensive against Armenian civilians initially resulted in the destruction of up to one hundred villages in the Transcaucasus region. The Armenians in the city of Van, having seen the destruction of the surrounding villages became alarmed when they were ordered to deliver 3,000 men to the army. Sensing the fate that awaited them, they refused to go. Djvedet Bey, the brother-in-law of Enver Pasha issued the following order throughout the province: "The Armenians must be exterminated. If any Muslim protects a Christian, first, his house shall be burnt; then the Christian killed before his eyes, then his (the Muslim's) family and himself" (March 1915). Dr. Ernest Yarrow, an American missionary in Van during April 1915, described the Armenian massacres in the Van province as an "organized, systematic attempt to wipe out the Armenians."

Further evidence of the Turkish government's premeditation of the Armenian race was the liquidation of the intellectuals and leaders of the Armenian community. On April 23-24 of 1915, several hundred Armenians were taken away. Within a few days, more then 600 men were arrested and sent out of town and murdered. This event was so devastating to the Armenian community that to this day April 24th is set aside as the memorial date of remembrance of the victims of the Genocide. Within a month, all able-bodied Armenian men and community leaders were murdered. This led the way for the destruction of the remaining old men, women, and children.

On May 26th, 1915, Talaat issued the first official deportation order. The deportations followed a common path. First, there was a call from the town crier that all Armenian males must present themselves at the Government Building. These men were

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then imprisoned, tortured, marched out of town in small groups and then murdered. Then, the women and children were ordered to prepare for deportation. In the words of Henry Morgenthau, Ambassador from the United States to Turkey, "As a last step, those who remained, mothers, grandmothers, children, were driven forth on their death pilgrimages across the desert of Aleppo, with no food, no water, no shelter, to be robbed and beaten at every halt, to see children slain in scores before their eyes, and babies dashed to death against rocks or spitted on the bayonets of the soldier guards."

The United States government condemned the Turkish government. A formal declaration was issued jointly by the Allied governments on May 24, 1915, stating that, "In the face of these fresh crimes committed by Turkey, the Allied governments announce publicly to the Sublime Porte that they will hold all members of the government, as well as such of their agents as are implicated, personally responsible for such massacres."

Genocide - the killing of an entire race. The Polish scholar Raphael Lemkin coined the word genocide. He created the word after the events of 1915 taking place in the Transcaucasus region. Prior to this time, there was not a word that expressed the annihilation of an entire race of people. The Genocide against the Armenian race caused the death of $\frac{3}{4}$ of the Armenian population. In the end, of the more than two million Armenians living in Turkey at the start of the century, only 500,000 survived by the end of 1918.

Today, the Turkish government claim that there was no Genocide of the Armenians. They claim that the Armenians revolted against the Ottoman government, that they were disloyal and could not be trusted and that for reasons of military security the Armenians had to be 'relocated'. They maintain that the deportations were humanely conducted, and that the deportees were protected, their property safeguarded, and their resettlement and return guaranteed.

The Turkish government's argument the deportations were humane leaves many disturbing questions. If the safety and welfare of the Armenians was a government concern, why were they deported to the most inhospitable regions of the Ottoman Empire? How did the government expect helpless women and children to transport themselves hundreds of miles across the desert without food or water? Why did the Turkish Government prohibit the American Red Cross from helping the Armenians? Why was every village and town inhabited by Armenians deported even those areas completely removed from the war zone but only after all the men in the village were murdered first? If Armenian property was safeguarded, where are the records that document the compensation to those Armenians who lost their homes and property? If no Genocide were intended, how can anyone explain away the effect of the deportations? The entire Armenian presence in Turkey has all but disappeared forever.

Every Turkish government since 1915 has tried to completely erase and distort the Armenian tragedy. To this day, western governments are under constant Turkish pressure to neither mention nor acknowledge the Armenian Genocide. Fortunately, countries belonging to the European Parliament (Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Spain, France, Italy, Ireland, Luxembourg, Holland, Austria, Portugal,

Finland, England, Sweden) have officially recognized the Genocide and are unwilling to admit Turkey into the Parliament until the current Turkish government openly admits to the crimes of the past.

As recently as September 26, 2001, Pope John Paul II went to the capital of Armenia, Yerevan, and publicly deplored the killings of Armenians in 1915. He met with the head of the Armenian Apostolic church, Catholicos Karekin II, at a memorial ceremony for the victims of the massacres. Where upon he said the Roman Catholics were "appalled by the terrible violence done to the Armenian people," who were "brought to the brink of annihilation." Pope John Paul II prayed for the sufferers of the genocide and placed a red rose at the eternal flame in memory of the victims.

If remembering the past helps to keep us on our guard so that we will not forget the truth, or to allow others to deny the reality of other horrors we read of today, then the lessons of the Armenian Genocide and other such crimes against humanity will not have been in vain. If this in any way leads to the awareness that governments that commit such crimes must be held accountable, then perhaps in the future such crimes can be prevented.

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...A short bio on one of the featured artists of this issue:

Jamie Kates is a sophomore at Cold Spring Harbor High School, New York, U.S.A. She started her art career at the age of five when she got accepted to the Roslyn School of Fine Arts. Jamie loves to travel and feels that the world around one no matter where, she happens to be, is the best influence for artistic ideas. She would like to study abroad in Paris, France while in college because she loves the French culture. Jamie would like for her career to be in the art field, possibly as an art restorer. "To be able to work up-close with famous works that have been such a major influence on society would be wonderful." Jamie believes that art is the most affective way to express one's self and hopes her art work included in the Holocaust Genocide Project will show others that a bond formed between human beings produced by love, is the strongest protection one can have. She hopes her art proves show essence of another in the spirit of love.