

ARMENIAN GENOCIDE: DESTRUCTION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

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The citizen of any civilized country looks to the state for protection of himself, his family and his property against threats and violence. These are the basic protections that are assured to him by his Government through laws it makes, and are realized through the bodies of justice: the courts, the police, and all other administrative organs of Government. These protections vanish, when a Government determines on a policy of genocide, a crime that negates man's very nature. When prosecuted to the most vile and extreme of limits, genocide ends the life of whole people. All that is left is ruins - real destruction, when there is no future - only a blank page in the book of nation's history.

The conception of genocide was proposed by Raphael Lemkin¹ and collaborated in a 1946 Resolution of the United Nations General Assembly². Although the 1948 United Nations Genocide Convention is definitive for legal purposes, it is generally seen by scholars as strongly flawed³.

The destruction feature of Genocide, according to Lemkin, is that it aims at destroying a group rather than the individuals that make up the group. He stated: "Genocide has two phases: one the destruction of the national identity of the oppressed group, the other, the imposition of the national identity of the oppressor".

Lemkin also wanted to include the term "cultural genocide" as a crime to describe the deliberate destruction of a group's cultural way of life. He argued that efforts to destroy the foundation of the life of groups include the breakdown of the political and social institutions of culture, language... (and) national feelings.

Scholars often utilize another term coined by Lemkin referring to cultural genocide – ethnocide⁴. Hence, Totten⁵ argues that vandalism against Armenian cultural monuments constitutes an act of genocide, and Denitch⁶ suggests that genocide must now include the disappearance of cultural markers from a territory.

¹ Lemkin, R.. Axis rule in occupied Europe. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC. 1944, pp. 79-85.

² Churchill, W. (1997). A little matter of genocide: Holocaust and denial in the Americas, 1492 to the present. San Francisco: City Lights Books.

³ Chalk, F., & Jonassohn, K. (1990). The history and sociology of genocide. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.; Fein, H. (1993). Genocide: A sociological perspective. London: Sage.

⁴ Hovhanissian, A. 1999. Turkey: a Cultural Genocide in L. Chorbajian and G. Shirimian (eds.), Studies in Comparative Genocide. London: Macmillan Press.

⁵ Totten, S., Parsons, W. S., & Charny, I (eds.). 1997. Century of Genocide: Eye-witness accounts and critical views. New-York: Garland Publishing.

⁶ Denitch, B. 1993. Unmaking multi-ethnicity in Yugoslavia: metamorphosis observed, Anthropology of East Europe Review, II (1-2), 43-53.

Armenians were involved in almost all economic sectors of the Ottoman Empire and held the highest levels of responsibility. They organised themselves in numerous societies, political parties and other associations. Beginning with 1863 education had been offered to the whole people, and absolutely free for all¹. There existed 1.996 Armenian schools, with 173,022 pupils, of these 1,251 schools with over 76,548 pupils were on the territories of Western Armenia before World War I (teachers 2,088). European education and European books were being introduced among the Armenians.

Music was a compulsory subject in the Armenian schools, thanks to which many talented musicians were revealed. The earliest operettas, operas, as well as musical theatres came into being in Constantinople by the efforts of Western Armenians.

In 1912 the Armenian patriarchy of Istanbul presented an account of the churches and monasteries in Western Armenia (Eastern Anatolia) and in the Ottoman Empire. More than 2300 were accounted including the early unique Christian monuments of IV-V cc, 450 monasteries and 2,000 schools.

But the Ottoman authorities interpreted any manifestation of cultural and religious revival, however individual or local, as an act of national rebellion. Turkish officials began to look upon Armenians as unruly, subversive, alien elements who consorted with foreign powers. The Turks thought that there was an intention to break up what remained of the Ottoman Empire and to rise against their Mohammedan masters, and they became very fearful of the Armenians. The tension between Muslims and Armenian-Christians was increasing.

There was also much envy of the prospering of the hardworking Armenians. A large part of the general dislike of the Armenians, according to Hepworth, probably originated in their remarkable aptitude and their exceptional talent. "The Turk is extremely jealous of the Armenian, jealous of his mental superiority of his thrift and business enterprise. Turks had not the ability to compete with them, and were constant losers".² The feeling of enmity had been growing steadily and only needed a proper occasion to explode in violence. The result was an orgy of violence that shocked the civilized world.

The systematic attempt at Armenian Genocide in 1915 was not a mere occurrence, but rather the culmination of a protected process of victimization and national destruction involving periods of persecution and recurrent episodes of massacres. Under the rule of Sultan Abdul-Hamid II (1879-1909) the policy of subjecting the Armenian population to large-scale massacres had already been employed by the Ottoman authorities, although in a less organized and less systematic manner than in 1915.

The first large massacre occurred in Sassoun, a mountainous Armenian village, located in one of the Armenian provinces, and during the period of 1895 to 1896 up a series of subsequent massacres and atrocities were carried out by the Ottoman authorities throughout Turkish Armenia, upon the directives issued by Sultan Abdul-Hamid II. Up to 300.000 Armenians perished in this carnage initiated by the Sultan. Innumerable terrible acts were committed by the Turkish troops during these massacres, however, one of the hideous acts occurred during the massacre in Urfa on the 28th and 29th of December 1895.

¹ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armenians_in_the_Ottoman_Empire

² Hepworth, George H. (George Hughes), 1883-1902. Through Armenia on Horseback. New York, E. P. Dutton & Co., 1898. p. 344.



The Armenian cathedral which was used as a refuge by 3.000 fleeing Armenian men, women and children was broken into by the Tuskish troops and set alight.

G. N. Fitzmaurice (Acting vice-consul at Adana) writing on March 16, 1896 describes the sickening scene:

“The gallery and wooden framework soon caught fire, whereupon blocking up the staircases leading to the gallery with similar inflammable material, they left the mass of struggling human beings to become to prey of the flames. During several hours the sickening odour of roasting flash pervaded the town, and even today, two months and a half after the massacre, the smell of putrescent and charred remains in the church is unbearable”¹.

The massacres initiated by Sultan Hamid in the mid 1890's set an ominous precedent. The policy of victimisation which was embarked upon reflected the motto which the Sultan had clearly adopted viz: “The way to get rid of the Armenian Question is to get rid of the Armenians”,-a motto which was also adopted by the Ittihadist Turks in 1915, in a manner characterized by unparalleled ideological fanaticism and extreme ferocity. On the 16th of September 1915, in a telegram to the Prefecture of Aleppo, the Minister of the Interior Tallaat wrote: “You have already been advised that the Government, by order of the Djemiet, has decided to destroy completely all the indicated persons (Armenians) living in Turkey... The existence must come to an end, however tragic the means may be; and no regard must be paid to either age or sex, or to conscientious scruples”.²

Clearly defined logical stages could be discerned in the actual implementation of the genocide in 1915. The first stage in the genocidal process was the emasculation of the Armenian population which was achieved by the following three measures:

Firstly, in the last days of February 1915, an estimated 250.000 Armenian men who had been conscripted into the Ottoman army were disarmed and herded into specially formed “labour Battalions”. Ill-fed, ill-clothed and savagely beaten, thousands were used as pack animals to carry army supplies into the Caucasus mountains. Many hundreds died of starvation, disease and exhaustion on the way, while those few who reached their destination were brutally murdered. The reminder were grouped into squads of 50 or 100, taken to isolated areas and systematically executed. As the then U.S. Ambassador in Turkey, Henry Morgenthau was to observe: “...throughtout the Turkish Empire a systematic attempt was made to kill all able-bodied (Armenian) men, not only for the purpose of removing all males who might propagate a new generation of Armenians, but for the purpose of rendering the weaker part of the population an easy prey”³.

Secondly, a decree was issued ordering the disarming of the civilian Armenian population. In the years following the 1908 revolution the Armenians were permitted to bear firearms for self-protection, however these same arms were now held as evidence by the Turkish government for fabricated charges of treason and insurrection. The disarming of the civilian population was left to the local authorities who often employed violent and extreme methods. In every administrative district the authorities demanded the surrender of a definite number of firearms. Those who could not produce them were tortured, often in

¹ The Armenian Genocide as reported in the Australian press. Armenian National Committee. 259 Penshurst St. Willoughby, N. S. W. 2068 Sydney 2011. pp.13-16.

² www.firstworldwar.com/source/armenia_talaatorders.htm.

³ Morgenthau, Henry, Ambassador Morgenthau's story. Garden City. New York, 1918.

the most hideous and fiendish manner, while those who did surrender their arms were immediately imprisoned for conspiracy and treason. Under the pretext of searching for hidden firearms a wave of terror and violence was unleashed by the Turkish government upon every Armenian village and town in the country.

Thirdly, on April 24 1915 upon the direct orders of Interior Minister Talaat, 600 of the leading members of the Armenian community in Constantinople – intellectuals, politicians, writers, educators, lawyers, doctors and so forth were arrested and without any inquiry or trial deported to the wild interior regions of the empire. Despite the declarations by Talaat that this was a temporary measure and that most of the deportees would quickly be released, only a very few survived; the remainder had been savagely butchered by the Turkish gendarmes upon the direct orders of Talaat himself.

The mass executions of the economic, religious, political and intellectual elite resulted in a “beheading” of Armenian society. Middle-aged and elderly men with influence, wealth and status living in many cities across the whole empire were arrested, tortured and finally murdered. The destruction of the Armenian intelligentsia was eliminated in a matter of weeks. The Young Turk government passed new laws providing for the annexation of Armenian business and trades. On 10 June 1915, the government passed a law establishing the Abandoned Property Commission. That was a full-scale attack on the Armenian economy: all Armenian property was now officially transferred to the state.

The Armenian population now being deprived of its leadership and intellectual elite, its able-bodied male population, and its means of self-protection, was rendered completely defenceless thereby making it an easy prey for the next gruesome stage in this monstrous scheme – that of mass deportation and extermination.

The deportations were highly organised and systematically executed. They were carefully timed, moving from one Armenian centre to another while not sparing the smallest Armenian hamlet. In some centres such as Bitlis, Moush and the eastern Armenian provinces the Armenian inhabitants were not subjected to mass deportation, but rather were massacred outright by the Turkish authorities with the assistance of local Kurdish and Turkish villagers.

So a common pattern in the deportation process emerged. Initially all Armenian men in the particular town or village would be ordered to present themselves at the government building. After being jailed for a day or two, they would be marched out of their village and at the first deserted spot on the road shot or bayoneted to death. A few days later the remaining Armenian inhabitants, consisting of old men, women and children, would also be summoned. They would be formed up into caravans and forced to march on foot for hundreds of miles towards concentration camps situated in the burning deserts of northern Syria. Neither food nor water was provided to the deportees; mercilessly whipped and driven by the Turkish gendarmes continued to walk endlessly until they died from thirst, hunger, exposure or exhaustion. Furthermore, at the approval and encouragement of the Turkish authorities, the Armenian deportees were waylaid by the Turkish gendarmes themselves, local Kurds and by the “Chettis” – specially formed Turkish death units composed mostly of common criminals who had been released from Turkish prisons on the sole condition that they engage in the slaughter of the Armenians. The helpless Armenian deportees were now to be subjected to crimes and violations of human body which could only originate from the most prevented and depraved human mind. The accounts of the sadistic orgies which occurred on their way are even today too shocking and too ghastly recount.



Finally, the material culture of the Armenians was obliterated. The Young Turks damaged and destroyed Armenian churches and removed Armenian inscriptions from buildings. This destruction was aimed at eliminating all traces of Armenian cultural and religious life from the Ottoman Empire.

Many medieval Armenian monasteries, such as Narekavank, Varakavank, Arakelots Vank, Surp Garabed and Surp Khach were demolished. The destruction served a dual purpose: it made appear that the Armenians had never existed, while ensuring that survivors, if any, had nothing to return to.

Tallaat's first orders concerned the deportation of the Apostolic Armenians. Then, as the summer of 1915 progressed, there was some confusion as to the definition of an Armenian. This led to the inclusion of Protestant and Catholic Armenians in the group to be persecuted, followed later even by Armenians who had converted to Islam. The Armenian identity was radicalized. The destruction became targeted at the abstract identity of the group: eventually every Armenian, whether loyal or disloyal, political or apolitical, was a target and a potential victim. So it was the forced loss of identity. Women and children had to renounce their Christian faith and convert to Islam, as part of largescale attack on Armenian culture. In cities like Konya and Beirut, Armenian children were placed in huge Muslim orphanages where they were given Turkish names and were only allowed to speak Turkish. As a result, many forgot their Armenian identity. The abductions and conversions were aimed at marginalizing the Armenians and eradicating their culture and collective identity.

The initial response of the international community was one of shock and incredulity and there were vehement protests against the events. The wave of persecutions in the spring of 1915 prompted the allies to make a joint declaration condemning the massacres. The declaration criticized the “crimes of Turkey against humanity and civilization and promised that they will hold personally responsible-all members of the Ottoman government and those of their agents who are implicated in such massacres”.¹

The full story of atrocities of this genocide is available in a bulky volume which was presented to the British Parliament by Vicount Bryce², and edited by Mr. Arnold Toynbee. It consists of the testimony of a large number of eye witnesses. This mass of first -hand evidence leads inevitably to the conclusion that the policy deliberately aimed at by the Turkish authorities was nothing than the extermination of the Armenian people.

Viscount Grey³, to whom Lord Bryce forwarded the document, wrote:

“It is a terrible mass of evidence, but I feel that it ought to be published and widely studied by all who have the broad interests of humanity at heart. It will be valuable not only for the immediate information of public opinion as to the conduct of the Turkish Government towards this defenceless people, but also as a mine of information for historians in the future”.

¹ middleeast.about.com/od/turkey/qt/me090318.htm

² Toynbee, Arnold J., Armenian atrocities. The murder of a nation. With a speech delivered by Lord Bryce in the House of lords. (London – New York – Toronto, 1915).

³ The treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, 1915-16 : documents presented to Viscount Grey of Fallodon, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, by Viscount Bryce. [Great Britain. Foreign Office.1916](#) .p.27.



In a preface, Lord Bryce explains that the book contains all the evidence that could be obtained up till July as – massacres and deportations of the Armenian Christians. It is presented primarily as a contribution to history, but partly also for the purpose of enabling the civilized nations of Europe to comprehend the problem of the destruction of the identity of an ancient nation, the destruction which formed “the victim stereotype”, a paradigm factor of modern Armenianness, and attempts to get rid of this ascribed fate of the nation.

The vast scales of these massacres and the pitiless cruelty with which the genocide was carried out may seem to some people to throw doubt on the authenticity of the narratives. Can human beings have perpetrated such crimes on innocent women and children?

Dr. Linda Woolf of Webster University has stated¹, “Mass violence, torture, violations of fundamental human rights, and the mistreatment of human beings is not a new aspect of humanity; documentation of such events spans the historical record. It is imperative that a greater understanding of the psychological, cultural, political, and societal roots of human cruelty, mass violence, and genocide be developed. We need to continue to examine the factors which enable individuals collectively or individually to perpetrate evil genocide and the impact of apathetic bystanders as fuel for human violence... we have an obligation to develop a model that highlights the warning signs and predisposing factors for human violence and genocide. With such information, we can develop policies, strategies, and programs designed to counteract their atrocities”.

Should we remember those terrible events? Is it not easier to forget they ever happened – after all, it was more than a hundred years ago? But the scale was so large, the suffering so great, the crime so terrible, that to forget, to overlook, or to condone is to deny our own humanity. Those events are and will remain important and relevant for as long as human beings concern themselves with basic concepts of justice and morality.

Summary

The destruction of the Armenians’ national identity in the Ottoman Empire between 1895 – 1923 is a classic example of the genocide which completely meets the *corpus delicti* defined by the UN Convention on the Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. The article reviews the stages of the implementation of the Armenian Genocide – from the murder of the national intelligentsia to the destruction of the cultural spiritual heritage of the whole nation.

¹ Annihilating Difference The Anthropology of Genocide, edited by Alexander Labom Hinton. University of California Press, LLD. London, England, 2002.



Геноцид Армян: уничтожение национальной идентичности

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Резюме

Ключевые слова: геноцид, национальная идентичность, уничтожение, резня, Младотурки, принять ислам, преступление против человечества, турецкая политика, искоренять культуру, депортированный.

Уничтожение армян, их национальной идентичности в Османской империи является классическим геноцидом, который полностью соответствует составу преступления, определенному Конвенцией ООН о предупреждении преступления геноцида и наказании за него. Статья рассматривает этапы осуществления геноцида армян – от убийства национальной интеллигенции до уничтожения национальной и культурной идентичности целого народа.

Հայոց ցեղասպանությունը. ազգային ինքնության ոչնչացում

Էլենորա Հայրապետյան

Ամփոփում

Բանալի բառեր՝ ցեղասպանություն, ազգային ինքնություն, ոչնչացում, կոտորած, Երիտասարդ թուրքեր, ընդունել իսլամը, մարդկության դեմ կատարված հանցագործություն, թուրքական քաղաքականություն, արմատախիլ անել մշակույթը, արքայազն:

Օսմանյան կայսրությունում հայերի ազգային ինքնության ոչնչացումը համարվում է իրական ցեղասպանություն, որն ամբողջությամբ համապատասխանում է ՄԱԿ-ի կողմից ընդունված ցեղասպանություն հանցագործությունը կանխելու և դրա համար պատժի մասին կոնվենցիային:

Սույն հոդվածում քննարկվում են հայերի ցեղասպանության փուլերը՝ ազգային մտավորականության սպանությունից մինչև մի ամբողջ ժողովրդի ազգային ու մշակութային ինքնության ոչնչացում: