

Armenian Genocide In The Turkish-Ottoman Empire And Turkish Tribunals

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Introduction

The Armenian genocide was the systematic destruction of much of the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire during the First World War. The original essay correctly connects the mass deportations and killings with the Committee of Union and Progress, the wartime emergency, and the postwar Ottoman military tribunals. It also contains errors that should be removed: the Ottoman Empire was not simply a “Turkish-Islamic regime” in which every Muslim resented prosperous Christians; Armenian political behavior was diverse; and responsibility cannot be assigned to an entire religion or population. Between spring 1915 and autumn 1916, Ottoman authorities and associated forces arrested community leaders, disarmed soldiers, deported civilians, carried out mass killings, and imposed conditions of starvation, exposure, disease, robbery, abduction, and sexual violence. The postwar courts-martial attempted to prosecute senior and local officials, but political collapse, weak enforcement, lost records, and the Turkish nationalist victory prevented durable accountability. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum)

Armenians in the Late Ottoman Empire

Armenians were an Indigenous Christian population of Anatolia with churches, schools, businesses, farms, political organizations, and communities spread across the empire. Like other non-Muslim subjects, they historically lived under unequal legal and fiscal arrangements, although reforms in the nineteenth century formally promised greater equality. Armenian life varied by region and class. Some people sought reform within the empire, some joined revolutionary organizations, and many remained primarily concerned with local security and livelihood. A responsible history avoids treating all Armenians as separatists or all Ottoman Muslims as perpetrators.

Mass Violence Before 1915

The genocide did not emerge without precedent. The Hamidian massacres of 1894–1896 killed large numbers of Armenians in several provinces, and violence in Adana in 1909 caused additional mass death. These episodes revealed how reform demands, imperial insecurity, local competition, and state-supported violence could converge. They were not identical to the centrally coordinated deportation policy of 1915, but they created fear, impunity, and administrative practices that made later destruction possible.

The Young Turk Revolution and the CUP

The 1908 Young Turk Revolution restored the Ottoman constitution and initially generated hope among many groups. The Committee of Union and Progress later concentrated power, especially after the 1913 coup. Its leaders faced territorial losses, refugee crises, military defeat, and intense nationalist pressure. These conditions do not excuse genocide. They help explain how a ruling circle came to identify demographic engineering and removal of Christian populations as instruments of security and state-building. (Akçam)

World War I and Collective Suspicion

The Ottoman Empire entered the war in late 1914 on the side of the Central Powers. Fighting against Russia in the Caucasus created genuine military danger, and a minority of Armenian volunteers fought with Russian forces. Ottoman authorities generalized from limited rebellion and collaboration to collective suspicion of an entire population. Armenian soldiers in the Ottoman army were disarmed and transferred to labor battalions, where many were killed. The state used isolated resistance, especially at Van, to justify deportations far beyond combat zones and against civilians who posed no individualized threat.

April 24 and the Destruction of Leadership

On 24 April 1915, Ottoman authorities arrested hundreds of Armenian intellectuals, clergy, professionals, and political figures in Constantinople and deported them. Many were killed. The date is commemorated as the beginning of the genocide because removing leadership weakened the community's ability to organize defense, communicate with foreign observers, or negotiate with the state. Arrest was followed by broader confiscation, deportation, and destruction across the empire.

Deportation as a Method of Destruction

The Temporary Law of Deportation provided administrative cover for forced removal. Convoys of women, children, older people, and surviving men were marched toward the Syrian desert under conditions that authorities knew were lethal. Food, water, shelter, and security were deliberately inadequate. Deportees were attacked by guards, irregular forces, criminal bands, and civilians; many were robbed, raped, abducted, or murdered. Death from exposure and starvation was not an accidental side effect of orderly relocation. It was part of a system that made survival unlikely. (Suny)

Property, Children, and Demographic Engineering

Armenian homes, farms, shops, and financial assets were catalogued and transferred through so-called abandoned property mechanisms. Tens of thousands of children were separated from families, forcibly converted, adopted, or absorbed into Muslim households and institutions. Women were subjected to abduction, forced marriage, and sexual violence. These policies demonstrate that the objective extended beyond military relocation. The state sought to eliminate an Armenian collective presence and redistribute people and property.

Central and Local Responsibility

Orders and demographic instructions originated in the central CUP leadership, while provincial officials, military units, the Special Organization, police, gendarmes, and local collaborators implemented them. Conduct varied. Some officials resisted, delayed orders, protected individuals, or were removed for refusing participation; some civilians helped deportees. Others used the policy for murder, theft, and personal enrichment. This variation does not undermine the organized character of the genocide. It shows how centralized policy depended on local institutions and choices.

Evidence

Evidence comes from Ottoman records, diplomatic correspondence, survivor testimony, missionary and relief reports, photographs, German and Austrian witnesses, property documents, and the records of postwar proceedings. No single document carries the entire case. The convergence of sources demonstrates intentional targeting, close monitoring of deportation numbers, confiscation of property, and awareness of mass death. Historical analysis must test individual sources for purpose and context while considering the overall pattern.

The End of the War

After the Ottoman defeat in 1918, the CUP's principal leaders fled. A new Ottoman government distanced itself from the wartime regime and established investigative commissions and courts-martial. Allied occupation, public outrage, and domestic political rivalry all shaped the proceedings. The fact that the trials served political purposes does not mean that the underlying crimes were invented. Courts used official documents, testimony, and administrative records to identify plans and perpetrators.

The Ottoman Courts-Martial

The courts-martial prosecuted several categories of cases, including the CUP leadership, the Special Organization, provincial deportations, and particular massacres. The main trial convicted leading officials, including Talât, Enver, Cemal, and Dr. Nazım, in absentia. Other defendants were tried in person, and some death sentences were carried out. The indictments described deportation and killing as organized acts rather than uncontrolled wartime excess. The proceedings are historically important because an Ottoman tribunal recognized criminal responsibility within the state's own former leadership.

Limits of the Tribunals

The tribunals did not create complete accountability. Many major defendants had escaped. Political authority changed rapidly, records were dispersed, Allied detention policy was inconsistent, and nationalist forces rejected the Istanbul government. Some convictions were reversed or prisoners released. The legal process also lacked many safeguards expected in modern international criminal trials. These limitations require careful use of the records, but they do not erase their value as evidence of official investigation and acknowledgment.

Malta Detentions and the Nationalist Victory

British authorities detained Ottoman suspects in Malta while considering prosecution, but no international tribunal was established. Evidence-gathering, jurisdiction, diplomacy, and prisoner exchanges complicated the effort. The Turkish nationalist movement prevailed militarily and founded the Republic of Turkey. The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne replaced the earlier Treaty of Sèvres and omitted provisions for Armenian territorial or criminal justice claims. Accountability was displaced by a new political settlement. (Dadrian)

Operation Nemesis

After formal judicial efforts failed, members of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation organized Operation Nemesis to assassinate several former Ottoman officials and collaborators held responsible for the genocide. The operation reflected survivors' frustration with impunity, but private assassination was not a substitute for a transparent court. Its history raises questions about justice when states fail to prosecute mass crimes, while also illustrating the danger of replacing legal accountability with clandestine violence.

From the Armenian Case to the Law of Genocide

The word “genocide” did not exist in 1915. Raphael Lemkin later cited the destruction of the Armenians as one influence on his effort to create an international law protecting groups. The 1948 Genocide Convention defined genocide as specified acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group. Most genocide scholars classify the Ottoman destruction of Armenians within that definition. Applying the later term is historical and legal analysis, not a claim that the 1948 treaty operated retroactively. (United Nations)

Denial, Memory, and Ethical Language

The events remain politically contested, and the Turkish state has rejected the genocide label. Historical debate is legitimate when it concerns evidence, numbers, local variation, or interpretation. Denial becomes different when it erases central policy, blames the victim population collectively, or presents wartime Armenian deaths as equivalent to ordinary mutual combat. Ethical writing should avoid hatred toward present-day Turks or Muslims, many of whom were not involved and some of whose ancestors resisted or rescued. Responsibility belongs to institutions and individuals supported by evidence.

Conclusion

The Armenian genocide developed from imperial inequality, earlier massacres, wartime fear, radical nationalism, and a CUP program of demographic transformation. Arrests, disarmament, deportation, mass killing, property seizure, forced assimilation, and lethal deprivation destroyed much of Ottoman Armenian life. Postwar Ottoman courts-martial made an important but incomplete attempt to name the plan and punish officials. Their work was weakened by escape, political upheaval, foreign occupation, nationalist victory, and the absence of a durable international tribunal. The case helped shape later thinking about genocide because it demonstrated both the capacity of a modern state to destroy a protected population and the consequences of allowing perpetrators to escape legal accountability.

Works Cited

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