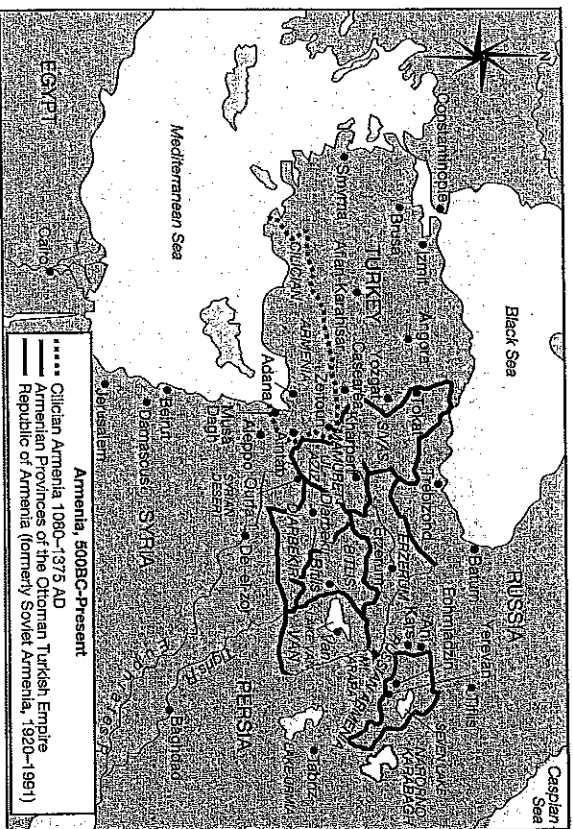


Genocide: On the Origins of the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust. His speech to the House of Representatives, "The United States Training on and Commemoration of the Armenian Genocide Resolution," offers suggestions for looking at this event and other instances of genocide.

The Armenian Genocide: Context and Legacy

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Between 1915 and 1918 the Ottoman Empire, ruled by Muslim Turks, carried out a policy to eliminate its Christian Armenian minority. This genocide was preceded by a series of massacres in 1894–1896 and in 1909, and was followed by another series of massacres beginning in 1920. By 1922 Armenians had been eradicated from their historic homeland.

There are at least two ways of looking at the Armenian experience in the final days of the Ottoman Empire. Some scholars regard the series of wholesale killings from the 1890s to the 1920s as evidence of a continuity in the deteriorating status of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. They maintain that, once initiated, the policy of exposing the Armenians

to physical harm acquired its own momentum. Victimization escalated because it was not countermanded by prevailing outside pressure or attenuated by internal improvement and reconciliation. They argue that the process of alienation was embedded in the inequalities of the Ottoman system of government and that the massacres prepared the Ottoman society for genocide.

Other scholars point out that the brutalization of disaffected elements by despotic regimes is a practice seen across the world. The repressive measures these governments use have the limited function of controlling social change and maintaining the system. In this frame of reference, genocide is viewed as a radical policy because it reaches for a profound alteration of the very nature of the state and society. These scholars emphasize the decisive character of the Armenian genocide and differentiation between the periodic exploitation and occasional terrorization of the Armenians and the finality of the deliberate policy to exterminate them and eliminate them from their homeland.

Like all empires, the Ottoman Empire was a multinational state. At one time it stretched from the gates of Vienna in the north to Mecca in the south. From the sixteenth century to its collapse following World War I, the Ottoman Empire included areas of historic Armenia. By the early part of the twentieth century, it was a much shrunken state confined mostly to the Middle East. Yet its rulers still governed over a heterogeneous society and maintained institutions that favored the Muslims, particularly those of Turkish background, and subordinated Christians and Jews as second-class citizens subject to a range of discriminatory laws and regulations imposed both by the state and its official religion, Islam.

The failure of the Ottoman system to prevent the further decline of the empire led to the overthrow of the government in 1908 by a group of reformists known as the Young Turks. Formally organized as the Committee of Union

and Progress, the Young Turks decided to Turkey the multiethnic Ottoman society in order to preserve the Ottoman state from further disintegration and to obstruct the national aspirations of the various minorities. Resistance to this measure convinced them that the Christians, and especially the Armenians, could not be assimilated. When World War I broke out in 1914, the Young Turks saw it as an opportunity to rid the country of its Armenian population. They also envisioned the simultaneous conquest of an empire in the east, incorporating Turkish-speaking peoples in Iran, Russia, and Central Asia.

The defeat of the Ottomans in World War I and the discrediting of the Committee of Union and Progress led to the rise of the Turkish Nationalists. Their objective was to found a new and independent Turkish state. The Nationalists distanced themselves from the Ottoman government and rejected virtually all its policies, with the exception of the policy toward the Armenians.

This essay focuses on three aspects of the Armenian genocide that have broader applicability to any study of genocide: (1) distinction between massacres and genocide; (2) use of technology in facilitating mass murder; and (3) the legacy of genocide.

DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN THE MASSACRES AND THE GENOCIDE

From 1894 to 1896, Sultan Abdul-Hamid II carried out a series of massacres of the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire. The worst of the massacres occurred in 1895, resulting in the death of thousands of civilians (estimates run from 100,000 to 300,000) and leaving tens of thousands destitute. Most of those killed were men. In many towns, the central marketplace and other Armenian-owned businesses were destroyed, usually by conflagration. The killings were done during the day and were witnessed by the general public.

This kind of organized and systematic brutalization of the Armenian population pointed to the coordinating hand of the central authorities. Widespread violence erupted in towns and cities hundreds of miles apart over a matter of weeks in a country devoid of mass media. At a time when the sultan ruled absolutely, the evidence strongly implicated the head of state.

Intent of Massacres

The massacres were meant to undermine the growth of Armenian nationalism by frightening the Armenians with the terrible consequences of dissent. The furor of the state was directed at the behavior and the aspirations of the Armenians. The sultan was alarmed by the increasing activity of Armenian political groups and wanted to curb their growth before they gained any more influence by spreading ideas about civil rights and autonomy. Abdul-Hamid took no account, however, of the real variation in Armenian political outlook, which ranged from reformism and constitutionalism to separatism. He hoped to wipe away the Armenians' increasing sense of national awareness. He also continued to exclude the Armenians, as he did most of his other subjects, from having a role in their own government, whether individually or communally. The sultan, however, did not contemplate depriving the Armenians of their existence as a people. Although there are similarities between Abdul-Hamid's policies and the measures taken by the Young Turks against the Armenians, there are also major distinctions.

The 1915 Measures

The measures implemented in 1915 affected the entire Armenian population: men, women, and children. They included massacres and

deportations. As under the sultan, they targeted the able-bodied men for annihilation. The thousands of Armenian men conscripted into the Ottoman army were eliminated first. The rest of the adult population was then placed under arrest, taken out of town, and killed in remote locations.

The treatment of women was quite different. ... Countless Armenian women lost their lives in transit. Before their tragic deaths, many suffered unspeakable cruelties, most often in the form of sexual abuse. Many girls and younger women were seized from their families and taken as slave-brides.

During the time of the sultan, Armenians were often given the choice of converting to Islam in order to save themselves from massacre. However, during the genocide years, this choice was usually not available. Few were given the opportunity to accept Islam as a way of avoiding deportations. Most Armenians were deported. Some lives were spared during deportation by random selection of involuntary conversion through abduction, enslavement, or the adoption of kidnapped and orphaned children.

The Cover of War

A second distinguishing feature of the genocide was the killing of the Armenians in places out of sight of the general population. The deportations made resistance or escape difficult. Most important, the removal of Armenians from their native towns was a necessary condition of maintaining as much secrecy about the genocide as possible. The Allies had warned the Ottoman government about taking arbitrary measures against the Christian minorities. The transfer of the Armenian population, therefore, was, in appearance, a more justifiable response in a time of war.

When the Ottomans entered World War I, they confined journalists to Istanbul, and since

the main communications system, the telegraph, was under government control, news from the interior was censored. Nonetheless, the deportations made news as soon as they occurred, but news of the massacres was delayed because they were done in desolate regions away from places of habitation. Basically, this provided cover for the ultimate objective of destroying the Armenian population. Inevitably the massacres followed the deportations.

State of Confiscation of Armenian Goods and Property

A third feature of the genocide was the state confiscation of Armenian goods and property. Apart from the killing, the massacres of 1895 and 1909 involved the looting and burning of Armenian neighborhoods and businesses. The objective was to strike at the financial strength of the Armenian community which controlled a significant part of the Ottoman commerce. In 1915 the objective of the Young Turks was to plunder and confiscate all Armenian means of sustenance, thereby increasing the probability of extinction.

Unlike the looting associated with the massacres under Sultan Abdul-Hamid II, the assault against the Armenians in 1915 was marked by comparatively little property damage. Thus, the genocide effortlessly transferred the goods and assets—homes, farms, bank accounts, buildings, land, and personal wealth—to the Armenians to the Turks. Since the Young Turk Party controlled the government, the seizure of the property of the Armenians by the state placed local party chiefs in powerful positions as financial brokers. This measure escalated the incentive for government officials to proceed thoroughly with the deportation of the Armenians.

The Young Turks did not rely as much on mob violence as the sultan had. They implemented the genocide as another military

operation during wartime. The agencies of government were put to use, and where they did not exist, they were created. The Young Turk Party functionaries issued the instructions. The army and local gendarmes carried out the deportations. An agency was organized to impound the properties of the Armenians and to redistribute the goods. "Butcher battalions" of convicts released from prisons were organized into killer units. The Young Turks tapped into the full capacity of the state to organize operations against all 2 million Armenian inhabitants of the Ottoman Empire, and did it swiftly and effectively.

THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY FOR MASS KILLINGS

The Armenian genocide occurred at a time when the Ottoman Empire was undergoing a process of modernization. Apart from the new weapons of war, the telegraph and the railroad were being put to expanded use. Introduced in the second half of the nineteenth century, the networks of transport and communication reached the areas of heavy Armenian concentration by the early part of the twentieth century. Whereas the telephone system was largely confined to the capital city of Istanbul, telegraph lines extended throughout the empire. The rail system connected many of the largest towns in the Ottoman Empire, but it was less extensive than the rail networks in the European countries.

The Telegraph

Coordination of the massacres during the reign of Abdul-Hamid II, and of the deportations under the Young Turks, was made possible by the telegraph. Of all the instruments of the state government, the telegraph dramatically increased the power of key decision-makers

over the rest of the population. The telegraph system allowed for the kind of centralization that heretofore was impossible.

During the 1895 massacres, the telegraph in the Ottoman Empire was a government service. It was managed by a separate ministry. Therefore, all the communicating during the massacres was done by the Ottoman government. During the genocide of 1915, the telegraph was controlled by the Minister of Interior, Talat, who was in charge of the government agencies that implemented the genocide. Talat began his government career as a telegrapher, and he had a telegraph machine installed in his office so that he could personally send messages across the Ottoman Empire. This gave Talat immediate connection, literally and technologically, with the enforcement of mass death. His ability to use the telegraph gave him unsurpassed access to subordinates and allowed him to circumvent other government officials and agencies in Istanbul. For the most part a telegram from Talat was sufficient authorization to proceed with the decimation of the Armenians.

Modern states rely on their bureaucracies in order to handle the paperwork involved in carrying out a policy affecting vast portions of their population. The same applies to the policy of genocide. The more modernized the state, the greater the mountain of paper generated. If not destroyed, a monumental record is left behind. In the case of the Armenians, it might be said that their genocide was carried out not so much bureaucratically as much as telegraphically, thus minimizing the record keeping and leaving behind a great deal of confusion about the degree of individual responsibility.

The Trains

To expedite the transfer of Armenians living in proximity of the railways, orders were issued instructing regional authorities to transport

Armenian deportees by train. Instructions were explicit to the point of ordering the Armenians to be packed to the maximum capacity in the cattle cars which were used for their transport. The determination of the government to complete this task is demonstrated by the deportation of the Armenians in European Turkey who were ferried across the Sea of Marmara to Anatolia and then placed on trains for transport to Syria.

The removal of Armenians from Anatolia and historic Armenia was carried out mostly through forced caravan marches or by the use of trains. Although a large portion of the Armenians survived the horrific conditions of the packed cattle cars, they were not able to endure the Syrian desert where they were to die of hunger and thirst. In contrast, the majority of the Armenians in the caravans never reached the killing centers in the Syrian desert; many were murdered by raiding groups of bandits or died from exposure to the scorching days and cold nights. Most of those who were able to endure the "death marches" could not survive the starvation, exhaustion, or the epidemics that spread death in the concentration camps of the Syrian desert.

LEGACY OF THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

All too often the discussion of genocide centers on the numbers killed and fails to consider the wider implications of uprooting entire populations. Genocides are cataclysmic for those who survive because they carry the memory of suffering and the realization of the unmitigated disaster of genocide. Genocides often produce results and create conditions that make it impossible to recover anything tangible from the society that was destroyed. Let alone permit the subsequent repair of that society. From this standpoint, it can be argued that the ultimate objective of genocide is a permanent alteration of the course of a people's history.

Losing a Heritage

In a single year, 1915, the Armenians were robbed of their 3000-year-old heritage. The destruction of churches, the burning of libraries, the ruination of towns and villages—all erased an ancient civilization. With the disappearance of the Armenians from their homeland, most of the symbols of their culture—schools, monasteries, artistic monuments, historical sites—were destroyed by the Ottoman government. The Armenians saved only that which formed part of their collective memory. Their language, their songs, their poetry, and now their tragic destiny, remained as part of their culture.

The Scattering of a People

Beyond the terrible loss of life (1,500,000), and the severing of the connection between the Armenian people and their historic homeland, the Armenian genocide also resulted in the dispersion of the survivors. Disallowed from resettling in their former homes, as well as stateless and penniless, Armenians moved to any country that afforded refuge. Within a matter of a few decades Armenians were dispersed to every continent on the globe. The largest Armenian community is now found in the United States.

By the expulsion of the Armenians from those areas of the Ottoman Empire that eventually came to constitute the modern state of Turkey, the reconfiguration of Armenia took a paradoxical course. Whereas the genocide resulted in the death of Armenian society in the former Ottoman Empire, the flight of many Armenians across the border into Russian territory resulted in compressing part of the surviving Armenian population into the smaller section of historic Armenia ruled by the Russians. Out of that region was created the present country of Armenia, the smallest of the republics of the USSR.

The contrast on the two sides of that frontier spotlights the chilling record of genocide. Three and half million Armenians live in Soviet Armenia. Not an Armenian can be found on the Turkish side of the border.

The Absence of Justice and Protection in the Postwar Period

During the genocide, the leaders of the world were preoccupied with World War I. Some Armenians were rescued, some leaders decided what was happening, but the overall response was too little too late.

After the war, ample documentation of the genocide was made available and became the source of debate during postwar negotiations by the Allied Powers. It was during these negotiations for a peace treaty that the Western leaders had an opportunity to develop humanitarian policies and strategies that could have protected the Armenians from further persecution. Instead of creating conditions for the prevention of additional massacres, the Allies retreated to positions that only validated the success of ideological racism. The failure at this juncture was catastrophic. Its consequences persist to this day.

With the defeat of their most important ally, Germany, the Ottomans signed an armistice, ending their fight with the Allies. The Committee of Union and Progress resigned from the government and in an effort to evade all culpability soon disbanded as a political organization. Although many of the Young Turk leaders, including Talat, had fled the country, the new Ottoman government in Istanbul tried them in absentia for organizing and carrying out the deportations and massacres. A verdict of guilty was handed down for virtually all of them, but the sentencing could not be carried out.

The Istanbul government was weak and was compromised by the fact that the the capital was under Allied occupation. Soon it lost

the competence to govern the provinces, and finally capitulated in 1922 to the forces of Nationalist Turks who had formed a separate government based in Ankara. As for the sentences of the court against the Young Turk leaders, they were annulled. The criminals went free.

The postwar Ottoman government's policies toward the Armenians were largely benign. They desisted from further direct victimization, but rendered no assistance to the surviving Armenians to ease recovery from the consequences of their displacement. Many Armenians returned to their former homes only to find them stripped of all furnishings, wrecked, or inhabited by new occupants. Their return also created resentment and new tensions between the Armenians, filled with anger at their mistreatment, and the Turks, who, because of their own great losses during the war, believed they had a right to keep the former properties of the Armenians. In the absence of the Ottoman government's intervention to assist the Armenians, this new hostility contributed to increasing popular support for the Nationalist movement.

RISE OF THE TURKISH NATIONALISTS

The armistice signed between the Allies and the Ottomans did not result in the surrender of Turkish arms. On the contrary, it only encouraged the drive for Turkish independence from Allied interference. Organized in 1919 under the leadership of an army officer, named Mustafa Kemal, the Turkish Nationalist movement rejected the authority of the central government in Istanbul and sought to create an exclusively Turkish nation-state.

As the Kemalists brought more and more territory under their control, they also began to drive out the surviving remnants of the Armenian population. The Nationalist Turks did not resort to deportation as much as to measures designed to precipitate flight. In a number of towns with large concentrations of

Armenian refugees, massacres again took a toll in the thousands. With the spread of news that the Nationalist forces were resorting to massacre, Armenians selected two courses of action. In a few places some decided to resist, only to be annihilated. Most chose to abandon their homes once again, and this time for good.

The massacres staged by the Nationalist forces so soon after the genocide underscored the extreme vulnerability of the Armenians. Allied troops stationed in the Middle East did not attempt to save lives. Even if the Turkish Nationalist forces could not have been stopped militarily, the failure to intervene signified the abandonment of the Armenians by the rest of the world.

Silence and Denial

For the Allies, their failure to protect the Armenians had been a major embarrassment, one worth forgetting. For the Turks, their secure re-assumption of sovereignty over Anatolia precluded any responsibility toward the Armenians in the form of reparations. All the preconditions were created for the cover-up of the Armenian genocide. The readiness of people on the whole to believe the position of legitimate governments meant that the suggestion that a genocide had occurred in the far reaches of Asia Minor would be made the object of historical revisionism and, soon enough, complete denial.

For almost fifty years, the Armenians virtually vanished from the consciousness of the world. Russian Armenia was Sovietized and made inaccessible. Diaspora Armenians were resigned to their fate. The silence of the world added to the denial of the Turkish government only added to their ordeals.

The insecurities of life in diaspora further undermined the confidence of Armenians in their ability to hang on to some form of national existence. Constant dispersion, the threat of complete assimilation, and the humiliation of such total defeat and degradation contributed to their insecurities.

The abuse of their memory by denial was probably the most agonizing of their many tribulations. Memory, after all, was the last stronghold of the Armenian identity. The violation of this "sacred memory," as all survivors of the genocidal devastation came to enshrine the experience of traumatic death, has reverberated through Armenian society.

The persecution and later the abandonment of the Armenians left deep psychological scars among the survivors and their families. Sixty years after the genocide, a rage still simmered in the Armenian communities. Unexpectedly it exploded in a wave of terrorism. Clandestine Armenian groups, formed in the mid-1970s, sustained a campaign of political assassinations for a period of about ten years. They were responsible for killing at least two dozen Turkish diplomats.

Given the Armenian genocide and Turkey's refusal to admit guilt as their justification, the terrorists were momentarily successful in obtaining publicity for their cause. They were unsuccessful in gaining broad-based support among Armenians or in wrenching any sort of admission from Turkey. Rather, the government of Turkey only increased the vehemence of its denial policy and embarked on a long-range plan to print and distribute a stream of publications questioning or disputing the occurrence of a genocide and distorting much of Armenian history.

Seeking International Understanding for the Armenian Cause

During these years of great turmoil other Armenians sought a more reasonable course for obtaining international understanding of their cause for remembrance. In the United States, commemorative resolutions were introduced in the House of Representatives, and in the Senate as recently as February 1990. These resolutions hoped to obtain formal U.S. acknowledgment of the Armenian genocide. But,

the intervening decades had seen a close alliance develop between the United States and Turkey. The State Department opposed passage of these resolutions. The Turkish government imposed sanctions on U.S. businesses and military installations in Turkey. In the final analysis the resolutions failed to muster the votes necessary for adoption.

Terrence Des Pres observed: "When modern states make way for geopolitical power plays, they are not above removing everything—nations, cultures, homelands—in their path. Great powers regularly demolish other peoples' claims to dignity and place, and sometimes, as we know, the outcome is genocide." These words are important in establishing the context in which peoples, Armenians and others, seek congressional resolutions, and perform other commemorative acts. It is part of the continuing struggle to reclaim dignity. The reluctance of governments to recognize past crimes points to the basic lack of motivation in the international community to confront the consequences of genocide.

Conclusion

It is helpful to distinguish between the attitudes and policies of the Ottoman imperial government, the Young Turks, and the Nationalist movement. The Ottoman government, based on the principle of sectarian inequality, tapped into the forces of class antagonism and promoted the superiority of the dominant group over a disaffected minority. It made rudimentary use of technology in the implementation of its more lethal policies.

The Young Turks, based on proto-capitalism and chauvinism, justified their policies on ideological grounds. They marshaled the organizational and technological resources of the state to inflict death and trauma with sudden impact. When the Young Turks deported the Armenians from Anatolia and Armenia to Syria, the result was more than simply

transferring part of the population from one area of the Ottoman Empire to another. The policy of exclusion placed Armenians outside the protection of the law. Yet, strangely, because they were still technically in the Ottoman Empire, there was the possibility of repatriation for the survivors given a change in government.

The Nationalists tapped the popular forces of Turkish society to fill the vacuum of power after World War I. Their policy vis-à-vis the Armenians was formulated on the basis of racial exclusivity. They made the decision that even the remaining Armenians were undesirable. Many unsuspecting Armenians returned home at the conclusion of the war in 1918. They had nowhere else to go. With the expulsion from Nationalist Turkey, an impenetrable political boundary finally descended between the Armenians and their former homes. The possibility of return was canceled.

Genocide contains the portents of the kind of destruction that can erase past and present. For the Armenian population of the former Ottoman Empire, it meant the loss of homeland and heritage, and a dispersion to the four corners of the earth. It also meant bearing the stigma of the statelessness.

At a time when global issues dominate the political agenda of most nations, the

Armenian genocide underlines the grave risks of overlooking the problems of small peoples. We cannot ignore the cumulative effect of allowing state after state to resort to the brutal resolution of disagreements with their ethnic minorities. That the world chose to forget the Armenian genocide is also evidence of a serious defect in the system of nation-states which needs to be rectified. In this respect, the continued effort to cover up the Armenian genocide may hold the most important lesson of all. With the passage of time, memory fades. Because of a campaign of denial, distortion, and cover-up, the seeds of doubt are planted, and the meaning of the past is questioned and its lessons for the present are lost.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Describe the two ways of looking at the Armenian experience in the final days of the Ottoman Empire, according to Rouben Adalian.
2. What is the distinction between genocide and massacre?
3. How did technology facilitate mass murder?
4. Describe the short-term and long-term consequences for the Armenian people.
5. Characterize the Turkish state's position regarding the genocide.

The Armenian Genocide and Patterns of Denial

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The admission of genocidal operations by the perpetrator government or its immediate successor is rare in modern times, unlike the boastful inscriptions of ancient tyrants. The post-World War II admission and acceptance of guilt by the West German government stand

out in stark contrast with all other cases in the twentieth century. But even in Germany, which made itself answerable for the guilt of the Nazi regime and engaged in various compensatory acts, thousands of implicated individuals claimed innocence or ignorance in the face of the incriminating evidence. Still, the post-war German governments, whether of free will, through coercion, or a combination of the two, extended reparations to the survivors, the families of the victims, and the state of Israel. Discussion of the moral and political implications of the Holocaust has now found a place in the educational curricula, literature, mass-media productions, and the scholarly forums of Germany.

No similarities exist in the Turkish response to the Armenian genocide. There has been neither candid admission nor willing investigation, neither reparation nor rehabilitation. On the contrary, state-sponsored attempts to suppress discussion of the Armenian genocide have reached unprecedented proportions. Presumably, the underlying cause for the Turkish attitude is political, for there still exists an aggrieved party, however disorganized and scattered, that demands some form of compensation. While many of the aggrieved would be satisfied with a simple Turkish admission of wrongdoing and the granting of dignity to the hundreds of thousands of victims by an end to efforts to erase the historical record, there are others who insist upon financial and even territorial restitution, thus adding to Turkish anxieties and attempts to obscure the past.

This political dimension at once raises the point that fundamental differences exist between the Armenian experience in World War I and the Jewish experience in World War II. Although comparative studies rightly draw parallels between the two tragedies, they cannot lose sight of the fact that the Armenians were still living in their historical homelands, had passed through cultural and political movements to the formulation of programs of

social, economic, and administrative reforms in the Ottoman Empire, and were perceived as an obstacle to the realization of the designs espoused by some members of the ruling Turkish Union and Progress party. This observation in no way diminishes responsibility for the genocide or mitigates its effects. In fact, to question whether or not genocide occurred only serves to cloud the issue. Rather, a more appropriate direction of investigation lies in the study of the causes for the genocide, its implementation and dimensions, its consequences, and its relevance today.

At the time of the deportations and massacres beginning in 1915, there was virtually universal condemnation of the act and of its perpetrators. The accounts of eyewitnesses and officials of many nationalities as well as the testimony of the survivors themselves were too detailed and corroborative to doubt the systematic nature of the operation. Being born into the targeted group was in and of itself sufficient to mark an individual for elimination. United States Ambassador Henry Morgenthau testified that the deportations to the Syrian and Mesopotamian deserts were unquestionably meant to annihilate the Armenian population:

The Central Government 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 rehabilitating 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 deportations 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.

Armenian Genocide

