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Armenian Genocide | History, Causes, & Facts

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Armenian Genocide, campaign of deportation and mass killing conducted against the Armenian subjects of the Ottoman Empire by the Young Turk government during World War I (1914–18). Armenians charge that the campaign was a deliberate attempt to destroy the Armenian people and, thus, an act of genocide. The Turkish government has resisted calls to recognize it as such, contending that, although atrocities took place, there was no official policy of extermination implemented against the Armenian people as a group.

Armenians in Eastern Anatolia

For centuries the great mountain plateau of Eastern Anatolia—in present-day eastern Turkey—was inhabited primarily by Christian Armenians who shared the area with Muslim Kurds. In antiquity and the Middle Ages the area was ruled by a succession of Armenian dynasties, although it often faced incursions by outside powers. Armenian political independence was largely brought to an end by a wave of invasions and migrations by Turkic-speaking peoples beginning in the 11th century, and in the 15th and 16th centuries the region was secured by the Ottoman Turks and integrated into the vast Ottoman Empire. Armenians retained a strong sense of communal identity, however, embodied in the Armenian language and the Armenian Church. That sense of distinctiveness was fostered by the Ottoman millet system, which accorded non-Muslim minorities significant administrative and social autonomy.

At the beginning of the 20th century, there were about 2.5 million Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire, mostly concentrated in the six provinces of Eastern Anatolia. A significant number of Armenians also lived beyond the eastern border of the Ottoman Empire, in territory held by Russia. In Eastern Anatolia Armenians lived intermixed with the dominant Kurdish nomads. Armenians did not constitute a majority in any of the regions in which they lived, although they often resided in homogeneous villages and neighborhoods within towns and cities.

Life for Armenian villagers and townspeople in the Ottoman Empire was difficult and unpredictable, and they often received harsh treatment from the dominant Kurdish nomads. Because local courts and judges often favoured Muslims, Armenians had little recourse when they were the victims of violence or when their land, livestock, or property was taken from them.

The great majority of Armenians were poor peasants, but a few found success as merchants and artisans. Armenians' involvement in international trade led in the 17th and 18th centuries to the establishment of significant Armenian settlements in Istanbul and other Ottoman port cities and as far away as India and Europe. Although Ottoman society was dominated by Muslims, a small number of Armenian families were able to attain prominent positions in banking, commerce, and government. For several generations in the 18th and 19th centuries, for example, the chief architects of the Ottoman court were in the Armenian Balian family. The prominence and influence of the well-educated and cosmopolitan Armenian elite had a drawback, however, in that it became a source of resentment and suspicion among Muslims. In the 19th century Armenians struggled against the perception that they were a foreign element within the Ottoman Empire and that they would eventually betray it to form their own independent state.

Young Armenian activists, many of them from Russian Caucasia, sought to protect their compatriots by agitating for an independent state. They formed two revolutionary parties called Hēnchak ("Bell") and Dashnaktsutyun ("Federation") in 1887 and 1890. Neither one gained wide support among Armenians in Eastern Anatolia, who largely remained loyal and hoped instead that sympathizers in Christian Europe would pressure the Ottoman Empire to implement new reforms and protections for Armenians. The activities of the Armenian revolutionaries, however, did stoke fear and anxiety among the Muslims.



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Anti-Armenian feelings erupted into mass violence several times in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. When, in 1894, the Armenians in the Sasun region refused to pay an oppressive tax, Ottoman troops and Kurdish tribesmen killed thousands of Armenians in the region. Another series of mass killings began in the fall of 1895, when Ottoman authorities' suppression of an Armenian demonstration in Istanbul became a massacre. In all, hundreds of thousands of Armenians were killed in [massacres](#) between 1894 and 1896, which later came to be known as the [Hamidian massacres](#). Some 20,000 more Armenians were killed in urban riots and [pogroms](#) in [Adana](#) and Hadjin in 1909.

The Young Turks and World War I

In 1908 a small group of Ottoman revolutionaries—the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), an organization within the broader [Young Turks](#) movement—came to power. Armenians welcomed the restoration of the Ottoman constitution, and the promise of elections led Armenians and other non-Turks within the empire to cooperate with the new political order. Over time, however, the ambitions of the Young Turks became more militant, less tolerant of non-Turks, and increasingly suspicious of their Armenian subjects, whom they imagined were [collaborating](#) with foreign powers. Increasingly [authoritarian](#), the Young Turks consolidated power and sidelined their more liberal opponents, and in January 1913 the most militant members of the party, [Enver Paşa](#) and [Talat Paşa](#), came to power in a [coup d'état](#).

[Antipathy](#) toward Christians increased when the Ottoman Empire suffered a humiliating defeat in the [First Balkan War](#) (1912–13), resulting in the loss of nearly all its remaining territory in Europe. Young Turk leaders blamed the defeat on the treachery of Balkan Christians. Furthermore, the conflict sent hundreds of thousands of Muslim refugees streaming eastward into Anatolia, intensifying conflict between Muslims and Christian peasants over land.

Fearful Armenians capitalized on the Ottoman defeat to press for reforms, appealing to the European powers to force the Young Turks to accept a degree of autonomy in the Armenian provinces. In 1914 the European powers imposed a major reform on the Ottomans that required supervision by inspectors in the east. The Young Turks took that arrangement as further proof of the Armenians' collusion with Europe to undermine the [sovereignty](#) of the Ottoman Empire.

As World War I began in the summer of 1914, the Young Turks joined the [Central Powers](#) ([Germany](#) and [Austro-Hungary](#)) against the [Triple Entente](#) ([Great Britain](#), [France](#), and [Russia](#)). Because Armenians and Assyrians lived along the Russian-Ottoman front,

both the Russians and the Ottomans attempted to recruit the local Christians in their campaigns against their enemies. The Young Turks proposed to the Dashnaksutyun, by then the leading Armenian political party, that it convince Russian Armenians as well as those in Ottoman lands to fight for the Ottoman Empire. The Dashnaks replied that Armenian Russian and Ottoman subjects would remain loyal to their respective empires. That was seen by powerful Young Turks as an act of treachery.

Armenians in the Ottoman Empire fought alongside the Ottomans, while Armenian volunteer units made up of Russian subjects fought on the Russian side. In the areas where Ottoman and Russian troops faced each other, there were massacres of both Christians and Muslims.