



## Armenian National Committee of America | Western Region

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### **THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE** **Historical Background and the Aftermath of Genocide**

Armenians have inhabited their ancestral homeland in the TransCaucasus area where Europe and Asia meet between present-day Turkey and Russia for nearly 4,000 years.

Being the first nation to adopt Christianity as its state religion in 301 A.D., Armenians have been subjected to persecution throughout the centuries in large part due to their refusal to renounce their faith with the rise of Islamic states in the region. This persecution culminated in the Armenian Genocide of 1915, whereby the Ottoman Turkish government, in its pan-Turanistic quest to unite all Turkic peoples from the Mediterranean Sea into Central Asia, executed a plan to annihilate the indigenous Christian population which stood in its way.

As the Committee of Union and Progress, also known as "The Young Turks," came to power in 1908 led by Minister of the Interior Talaat Pasha, Minister of War Enver Pasha and Minister of the Naval Djemal Pasha, they joined World War I on the side of the Central Powers against the Allies and primarily Britain and Russia.

On April 24, 1915, under cover of war, the Young Turk government rounded up Armenian political, cultural and religious leaders in Constantinople and executed them. This was followed by mass murders of Armenian men in the interior cities, towns and villages, then by deportations and massacres of defenseless Armenian women, children and elderly as they were marched into the desert to die after their belongings were pillaged, their homes destroyed and they were subjected to rape and other brutalities.

Armenian massacres were widely reported in the U.S. press at the time. During 1915 alone, the New York Times published over 140 articles about the mass murder of the Armenian people, describing the massacres as "systematic and "organized by the government."

The Allied Powers, England, France, and Russia, jointly issued a statement in May of 1915 explicitly charging the Ottoman Turkish Empire with committing "a crime against humanity and civilization" and pledging to punish the perpetrators. While the Young Turk leaders were in fact tried in absentia and sentenced to death shortly after the War ended, none of these sentences was carried out by the Allied Powers. Instead, many of the remaining war criminals were later acquitted and exchanged for British prisoners of war by the new Turkish government led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

In 1918, Theodore Roosevelt called the Armenian massacres "the greatest crime of the war."

In President Herbert Hoover's memoirs, he wrote, "Probably Armenia was known to the American school child in 1919 only a little less than England ... of the staunch Christians who were massacred periodically by the Mohammedan Turk and the Sunday School collections of over fifty years for alleviating their miseries. . . ."

President Woodrow Wilson, who advocated a mandate over Armenia, stated, "At their hearts, this great and generous people [the Americans] have made the case of Armenia their own."

The media attention and pleas for help from U.S. Ambassador Henry Morgenthau and other diplomats resulted in a mass outpouring of U.S. humanitarian assistance through the congressionally-mandated Near East Relief that collected donations from millions of American families and entities through individual state committees throughout the country. With an initial fundraising goal of \$30 million, the NER raised over \$117 million between 1915 and 1930, the equivalent of \$2.8 billion in today's dollars. It established over 400 orphanages, refugee centers, hospitals, clinics and vocational schools throughout the region through which it rescued over 132,000 orphans of the Genocide. Many of those orphans and survivors eventually immigrated to Europe, the Middle East, and the United States and established the communities which today comprise the Armenian Diaspora currently numbering up to 4 million people.

As World War I came to an end and the territories of the vast Ottoman Empire were going to be partitioned amongst the victors, the Republic of Armenia declared independence on May 28, 1918. The fledgling Republic, having to deal with hundreds of thousands of refugees from the Armenian Genocide, famine, disease, poverty, and lack of resources, vigorously sought recognition, protection and assistance from the victorious Allied Powers.

In 1919, President Wilson launched an official investigation through the King-Crane Commission (officially called the 1919 Inter-Allied Commission on Mandates in Turkey) to determine how the Ottoman Empire should be partitioned. The Commission expressed support for the creation of an Armenian State to be recognized by the international community and insured by the Allies and rejected the idea that Turkey would respect the rights of its remaining Armenian population after suffering such horrific massacres by the Ottoman regime. The same arguments used by the King-Crane Commission to justify the creation of an Armenian State were later used to create the State of Israel following World War II and the Holocaust.

In 1920, the Supreme Council of the Allied Powers and the United States Government agreed to recognize the government of the new Armenian State on the condition that the recognition should not prejudice the question of borders. The Supreme Council of the Allied Powers requested that the United States assume a mandate over Armenia which needed protection from the Turks after suffering such a horrific trauma and that the U.S. President issue an Arbitral Award to fix the borders between Armenia and Turkey.

While the U.S. Senate rejected the proposed mandate over Armenia, it did approve the proposal for President Woodrow Wilson to issue an Arbitral Award fixing the borders between Armenia and Turkey, laying the groundwork for a legally binding and unappealable decision by which both Turkey and Armenia agreed to abide.

As President Wilson prepared to issue his award, his authority to do so was reaffirmed on August 10, 1920, when the Treaty of Sevres was signed between the Allied Powers and Ottoman Turkey to partition the Ottoman Empire. Article 89 of the Treaty reiterated the provision for President Wilson to issue a legally binding arbitral award setting the boundaries between Armenia and Turkey. While the Treaty was under negotiation and then signed by representatives of Britain, France, and the Ottoman Empire, a successful Turkish war for independence was led by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, who promptly stripped the Ottoman negotiators of their Turkish citizenship and doomed Turkey's ratification of the Treaty. Meanwhile, non-Turkish territories of the Ottoman Empire were divided up into mandates: Britain took mandates over Palestine and Iraq, while France assumed mandates over Syria and Lebanon, all of which remained in place until the end of World War II.



There was no mandate for Armenia, which struggled to maintain its independence against all odds, including continuing onslaughts by the Turkish army.

On November 22, 1920, President Wilson issued his final arbitral award which by its own terms was legally binding and non-appealable, conclusively and definitively setting the boundaries between Armenia and Turkey. The arbitral award gave Armenia full title and rights over the provinces of Van, Bitlis, Erzerum and Trebizond to give Armenia access to the port city on the Black Sea. The territory awarded to Armenia constituted less than half of the Armenian Homeland and was to be annexed to the newly independent Republic of Armenia which existed on the eastern frontier of former Russian-controlled territory. With the declaration of independence of the Republic of Turkey and Ataturk's rise to power, however, the Allied Powers were forced back to the negotiating table to sign the Treaty of Lausanne and abandoned their intent to protect Armenia in favor of adopting a policy of deeming Turkey to be a strategic ally. As President Wilson became debilitated by illness and incapable of following through his intentions and as the switch in American policy moved away from Armenia and toward Turkey, the Wilsonian Arbitral Award was never enforced. Nevertheless, it remains a legally binding decision to this day.

In 1921, having lost all protection from the U.S. and the Allied Powers, the independent Republic of Armenia succumbed to pressure to cede itself to the Soviet Union where it remained as the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic for seven decades. In 1991 when the Soviet Union dismantled, a second Independent Republic of Armenia was declared on one-sixth of the territory granted to Armenia by the Wilsonian Arbitral Award.

Twenty years after the Armenian Genocide, Adolf Hitler was emboldened by the world's failure to punish Turkey for its mass murder of Armenians. On ordering his commanders to attack Poland without provocation in 1939, he dismissed objections by asking, "Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?"

Prior to the Armenian Genocide of 1915, the territory of modern-day Turkey was home to a large, ancient, and indigenous Christian population, comprised of millions of Armenians, Greeks, Pontians, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Syriacs, and other Christian peoples. Now, the remaining Christians in Turkey face continued persecution and threats. In the past several years, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has consistently listed Turkey as a serial violator of religious freedom, listing it either on its watch list or tier one violator, along with Iran, Sudan and North Korea.

Today, as a result of the Genocide, the Armenian homeland is devoid of its native population. Its millenia-old churches, monasteries and other structures are desecrated and often converted into mosques. Of the over 2,000 Armenian churches which existed in the early 1900s, only 38 now remain. Christians now account for less than 0.1% of Turkey's population, and survivors of the Genocide and their descendants have been dispersed all over the world. Many of the survivors who were captured or kidnapped by the Turks were converted to Islam and Turkified. Today, estimates of Islamized or "Hidden" Armenians living on their ancestral lands range up to 2 million people. While these Hidden Armenians have been subjected to silent oppression for decades since the Genocide, increasing numbers of them have recently begun to acknowledge their true ethnic identities and should be encouraged to return to their roots as part of any reparations process that may develop.

Not having been held legally or morally responsible for its crimes during World War I, the modern-day Turkish Government continues to act with impunity as it engages in a well-financed campaign of denialism and distortion of history.



Internally, it is unlawful under Turkish Penal Code Section 301 to mention or write about the Armenian Genocide as being an insult to Turkishness. Many brave Turkish scholars and journalists have served prison sentences for doing so. Turkish students are deceived into believing that the Christian Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire was relocated for its own protection during war time, and that some Armenians rose up against their government by joining forces with the Russians.

Externally, the Turkish Government invests millions of dollars each year to hire lobbyists and pay for journalists, politicians and scholars to go on junkets to Turkey where they are spoon-fed with historical revisionism and deceived into believing that the Armenian claims of Genocide are fabricated.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union and the independence of Armenia in 1991, Turkey has blockaded its landlocked neighbor by closing off its border and strangulating its economy. At the same time, Turkey has partnered with its Turkic brethren in Azerbaijan to blockade Armenia and the Armenian Republic of Nagorno Karabakh from their eastern borders, insisting that any peace process between Turkey and Armenia must necessarily include the surrender of the independent Republic of Nagorno Karabakh to Azerbaijan.

Despite the best intentions of President Woodrow Wilson to protect Armenia and to dispense justice to its People by punishing the perpetrators of the Genocide, the legacy of the failed Treaty of Sevres, the unenforced Wilsonian Arbitral Award, and the Allied Powers' refusal to ensure its protection, Armenia to this day remains vulnerable and under constant threat of attack, while the consequences of the Genocide remain unpunished even 100 years later.

