**CHY4U Unit 4, Activity 3 - Armenian Genocide**

**Part of an essay by Ms. Gluskin**

**Background**

To understand the Armenian genocide, one must examine the period late in the Ottoman Empire’s history when there was tension between Armenians and the empire’s government. As a *dhimmi,* minority group within the multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire,the Christian Armenians were not subject to Islamic law and this made them and other minorities into somewhat second class citizens. They could practice their own religion but they faced more restrictions such as higher taxes. As the empire weakened the extra taxes became more of a problem and Armenians sought solutions to their plight[[1]](#footnote-1). At first they sided with the Committee of Union and Progress reformers who forced Sultan Abdul Hamid II to apply the rights guaranteed in the constitution[[2]](#footnote-2). Protests against the sultan were met with reprisals. Abdul Hamid became very paranoid and repressive of any criticism. In 1895 massacres of 200 000 Armenians occurred when protests urged Armenians not to pay their taxes[[3]](#footnote-3). Despite international criticism, the sultan defended his government’s actions and portrayed Armenians as stirring up seditious trouble that had to be put down[[4]](#footnote-4). However, only after the 1908 coup did Turkish nationalism begin to take on the ideology of race. Turkish nationalism (sometimes known as Turkism) became the new ideology following the 1908 Committee of Union and Progress coup against the sultan. Armenians couldn’t relate to this because religion was at the centre of being an Ottoman minority group[[5]](#footnote-5). This background in the later stages of Ottoman history sets the stage for the not too far off genocide against the Armenians.

Evidence from the time suggests that race was becoming a more central idea in Turkish thinking, especially toward the Armenians. Ideologue and Committee of Union and Progress Central Committee member Ziya Gokalp’s idea of Turkan – an extended Turkish entity reaching all the way to Central Asia and including Anatolia (home of the Armenians) – was a race-based form of nationalism that became popular at the time[[6]](#footnote-6). Armenians were now seen as having a competing nationalism to Turkism[[7]](#footnote-7). Gokalp contrasted the old idea of multi-ethnic Ottoman citizenship with that of a rather duty-bound Turkish national identity in his poetry: “I am a soldier it is my commander / I obey without question all its orders / With closed eyes I carry out my duty.” Given this view, Armenians could thus be seen as aliens[[8]](#footnote-8). The negative attitude toward others could also be seen in this 1916 editorial in the Turkish journal *Hilal* that displayed the new form of race-based and duty-oriented nationalism:

“The Turkish People, while it saw its own individuality develop, became conscious of its rights. It suddenly became evident to it that it was the only master in its own house and that nobody should exploit it or displace it in any field. The foreigners were in its eyes nothing but guests, who were entitled to its respect, but whose duty it was to become worthy of the hospitality they were enjoying. . . .[[9]](#footnote-9)”

This new racial type of nationalist thinking was setting up a mindset that could justify genocide.

**Genocide**

The genocide of up to 1.5 million Armenians in 1915-16 would, only a few years later, flow from this newfound and extreme form of Turkish nationalism. Many Ottoman government officials would have been influenced by and in sympathy with the spread of this “us versus them” ideology that allowed them to see Armenians as lesser beings worthy of vile treatment. In time a plan would form to carry out to the extreme limits this ideological view, and it would be easily veiled as a wartime emergency as it occurred during World War One.

Evidence from the time points to a plan to rid the empire of Armenians, a plan being a crucial component of genocide. For example, on July 10, 1915 US ambassador to the Ottoman Empire Henry Morgenthau sent this report from his officials in the Turkish provinces to Washington, D. C.:

“Persecution of Armenians assuming unprecedented proportions. Reports from widely scattered districts indicate systematic attempt to uproot peaceful Armenian populations and through arbitrary arrests, terrible tortures, whole-sale expulsions and deportations from one end of the empire to the other accompanied by frequent instances of rape, pillage, and murder, turning into massacre, to bring destruction and destitution on them. These measures are not in response to popular or fanatical demand but are purely arbitrary and directed from Constantinople in the name of military necessity, often in districts where no military operations are likely to take place.[[10]](#footnote-10)”

Planned deportations to various camps, many in the Syrian desert, were organized by the “special organization (SO)” indirectly controlled by the central committee of the Committee of Union and Progress. Orders came from the capital, Constantinople. Convoys of women and children travelling in parched conditions were harassed by murder, looting, rape and other crimes. In total only 600 000 survived of the 1.8 million Armenians who were living in 1914[[11]](#footnote-11). These deaths were tied to pre-meditated actions. As this was occurring, the government tried to validate its policy of deportation. The following May 1915 government justification of deportations blamed Armenians for agitating on the side of Russia (a member of the wartime Triple Entente which was fighting against the Triple Alliance of which the Ottomans were a member) and against the empire. Note also the racial component:

“Our Armenian fellow countrymen, who form one of the Ottoman racial elements, having taken up with a lot of false ideas of a nature to disturb the public order, as the result of foreign instigations for many years past, and because of the fact that they have brought about bloody happenings and have attempted to destroy the peace and security of the Ottoman state, of their fellow countrymen, as well as their own safety and interests, and, moreover, as the Armenian societies have now dared to join themselves to the enemy of their existence [Russia], our Government is compelled to adopt extraordinary measures and sacrifices, both for the preservation of the order and security of the country, and for the continuation of their existence and for the welfare of the Armenian societies.[[12]](#footnote-12)”

So began the plan to strip the empire of one of its racially designated nationalities.

1. Facing History and Ourselves, *Crimes Against History and Civilization: the Genocide of the Armenians*, 2015, <https://www.facinghistory.org/sites/default/files/Armenian_Genocide_ch2_0.pdf> (April 10, 2015) p. 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., p. 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., p. 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., p. 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., pp. 61-63; Robert Melson, *Revolution and Genocide: On the Origins of the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 138, 165 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Melson, *Revolution and Genocide*, p. 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., pp. 166-167, 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Facing History and Ourselves, the Genocide of the Armenians, p. 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., p. 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., pp. 84-86, 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., p. 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)