



ARMENIA 1915

BEFORE THE GENOCIDE

The Armenians are an ancient people whose home has been in the southern Caucasus since the 7th century BC. Mongol, Persian, Russian and Ottoman (Turkish) empires have fought on and over this region for many centuries. In the 4th century AD one of Armenia's kings became a Christian, and Christianity has been the Armenian state religion ever since. After Islam was founded in Arabia in the 7th century AD, it became the state religion in all the countries surrounding Armenia (including Iran, which was the strongest influence on Armenian culture). But the Armenians continued to cherish their Christian church, although politically they lived under a series of foreign regimes and as a result often experienced hardship, persecution, discrimination and abuse.

At the end of the 19th century, Turkey and Russia were recovering from a war with each other. In the west, 2.5m Christian Armenians were governed by the Turks; eastern Armenia was in Russian hands. A surge in Armenian nationalism gave the Armenian leaders confidence to demand political reforms. This was unwelcome to both Ottoman and Russian powers, afraid of armed partisan resistance or even the revival of interstate war. They began to repress Armenians even more harshly. In some Turkish Armenian provinces large-scale massacres were carried out from 1894 to 1896. In Russian Armenia, the Tsar closed hundreds of Armenian schools, libraries and newspaper offices, and in 1903 confiscated the property of the Armenian church.

In 1909 the Ottoman Sultan was overthrown by a new political group: the 'Young Turks', eager for a modern, westernised style of government. When the First World War broke out, the Young Turks supported Germany, which brought the country into conflict with Russia once again. It was easy for the Young Turks to expect Turkish Armenians to conspire with pro-Christian Russians against them (though many Turkish Armenians denied any such intention). As far as the Young Turks were concerned, what had long been 'the Armenian Question' had to be answered, now.

THE GENOCIDE

In 1915, under the cover of the war, the Ottoman government resolved to expel Turkey's Armenian population (at the time about 1.75m) entirely. Their plan included deportation to the deserts of Syria and Mesopotamia (now Iraq). Hundreds of thousands of Armenians were driven out of their homes and either massacred or force-marched into the desert until they died. The German ambassador to Turkey wrote home: 'The government is indeed pursuing its goal of exterminating the Armenian race in the Ottoman Empire'. Between 1915 and 1923 the western part of historic Armenia was emptied of Armenians. The death toll is reliably estimated to be over a million. Those who did not die fled to the Middle East, Russia or the USA.

The genocide was conducted in a well-organised way, making use of new technology available. Orders to begin the operation were sent to every police station, to be carried out simultaneously at the same time on the same day: April 20, 1915. Once it had begun, the perpetrators kept in touch by telegraph. They also made use of the Istanbul- Baghdad railway: the new line had already been laid as far as the Syrian desert. Tens of thousands of Armenians were packed into railway wagons and sent down the line into the desert, where they were left without shelter, water or food. Many of the workers laying the railway were Armenian, and thought they would escape; their turn for the death trucks came in 1916.

Genocide in wartime is relatively easy to conceal. When Hitler was planning the invasion of Poland in 1939, he gave the order to 'kill without mercy men, women and children of the Polish race or language. Only in this way will we get the living space we need. Who after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?'

AFTER THE GENOCIDE

After the First World War efforts were made to restore Armenian territory, but without success. Even USA's President Wilson did not stop the Turks from ignoring all treaties and hanging on to the Armenian provinces it had cleared. In 1920 Armenia finally renounced its claim to them. It took some time for the political status (and the boundaries) of Armenia to be sorted out. In 1922 Armenia became part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, under central Soviet rule, where it remained for 71 years. During this time Armenia was protected from hostile neighbouring countries, but the Soviet government (especially under Stalin) was harsh. Politicians, intellectuals and churchmen were suppressed. Workers on the land were forced to take up the communist 'collective farming' policy, becoming badly-paid labourers on the land they were no longer allowed to own individually.

In the 1920s, despite overwhelming evidence of the genocide provided by Western and Armenian eyewitnesses, Turkish officials effectively created a fog of denial. After a surge of American interest in the fate of Armenia during the 1914-18 war, there was post-war international reluctance to rock the boat, even when treaties were broken - after all, the Ottoman Empire had just been dismantled, and modern Turkey was not created until 1923.

One determined American nurse did persist in making her experiences known; she also exposed the new callousness at Istanbul's American Embassy (which in 1915 had tried hard to intervene). The new ambassador, driven 'obsessively' by commercial interests, was willingly colluding in Turkish denial. Allen Dulles, US Eastern Affairs chief (later to become director of the CIA), had a problem meeting the ambassador's urgent desire for cover-up. 'Confidentially,' said Dulles, 'the State Department is in a bind. Our task would be simple if the reports of the atrocities could be declared untrue or even exaggerated but the evidence, alas, is irrefutable. We want to avoid giving the impression that while the United States is willing to intervene actively to protect its commercial interests, it isn't

willing to move on behalf of the Christian minorities.' But few moves were made beyond offering a refuge for dispossessed Armenians.

Armenia has persistently called for the massacres of 1915 and after to be acknowledged as genocide. They have also asked Turkey to apologise for it. Turkey, however, has continued to deny genocide, claiming that the figures given are false: instead, 300,000 Armenians (and many thousands of Turks) were killed in the general carnage and turbulence of internal fighting during the First World War, with local massacres carried out by both sides. Both Armenia and Turkey have collected extensive documentary evidence to support their respective cases (with mutual accusations of forgery).

In 2001, when the first Holocaust Day took place in the UK, the national Assembly of France formally decided to acknowledge the Armenian killings as genocide, though not mentioning Turkey by name. All the same, it provoked a substantial row with Turkey, which suspended diplomatic relations, called off trade deals, toyed with imposing sanctions, and contemplated formally accusing France of genocide during Algeria's 1955-1962 war of independence.

The 70,000 or so Armenians who live in Turkey today have distanced themselves from the arguments, saying that the dispute should be left to historians.

WITNESS

From a letter sent by an American observer in Constantinople (Istanbul) in 1915:

' "Armenia without the Armenians" - that is the Ottoman Government's project. The Muslims are already being allowed to take possession of the lands and houses abandoned by the Armenians. The exiles are forbidden to take anything with them. In the districts under military occupation there is nothing left to take, as the military authorities have carried off, for their own use, everything that they could lay hands on. The exiles have to traverse on foot a distance that involves one or two months' marching and sometimes even more, before they reach the particular corner of the desert destined to become their tomb. We hear, in fact, that the course of their route and the stream of the Euphrates are littered with the corpses of exiles, while those who survive are doomed to certain death, since they will find in the desert neither house, nor work, nor food. It is simply a scheme for exterminating the Armenian nation wholesale, without any fuss. It is another form of massacre, and a more horrible form.

All the men between 20 and 45 have been sent to the front lines. Those between 45 and 60 are working for the military transport service, or have been exiled or imprisoned on one pretext or another. The result is that there is no one left to deport but the old men, the women and the children. These poor creatures have to travel through regions which, even in times of peace, were dangerous. Now that Turkish brigands, as well as the police and civil officials, enjoy the most absolute licence, the exiles are robbed on the road, and their women and girls dishonoured and abducted.

About a million Armenian inhabitants have been thus deported from their homes and sent southwards into exile. These deportations have been carried out very systematically by the local authorities. In every village and every town, the population was disarmed by the police (and by criminals released from prison for this purpose. On the pretext of disarming the Armenians, these criminals committed assassinations and inflicted hideous tortures.). Next, they imprisoned the Armenians en masse, on the pretext that they had found something incriminating in their possession. After that, they began the deportation. Any men who had not been imprisoned were massacred. The remainder - old men, women, and children - were placed at the disposal of the Muslim population. The highest official as well as the most simple peasant chose the woman or girl who caught his fancy. The rest were marched away. An eye-witness reports to us that the women deported from Erzerum were abandoned, some days ago, on the plain of Harpout, where they have all died of hunger (50 or 60 a day). The only step taken by the authorities was to send people to bury them, in order to safeguard the health of the population.

We are making great efforts to save at any rate the Armenians of Constantinople from this horrible extermination of the race, in order that, hereafter, we may have at least one rallying point for the Armenian cause in Turkey. The whole Armenian population of Turkey has been condemned to death, and this decree is being put into execution energetically in every corner of the Empire, under the eyes of the European Powers. So far, neither Germany nor Austria has succeeded in checking the action of their ally and removing the stain of these barbarities, which also attaches to them. All our efforts have been without result. Our hope is set upon the Armenians abroad.'

ISSUES

When nation oppresses nation, it stores up a future of oppression. It may well become oppressed itself. Here's an account of the attempt in Bulgaria to erase everything Turkish from its history:

'If there is one thing missing in Bulgaria, it is any sense of the country's Ottoman past. Even the word "Ottoman" is "not really one to use in Bulgaria". The centuries of Ottoman rule (1393-1878) are portrayed as Bulgaria's dark ages, "slavery under the Turkish yoke". This emotive, nationalistic spirit takes stone form at the Freedom Monument, which commemorates the decisive victory over the Turks at Shipka Pass. It can be seen for miles around from the surrounding plains, and it is here that we begin to understand how historical hatreds can be kept alive.

Nothing Ottoman has been preserved in the museums, and relics have been smashed. Turkish towns and villages were given Bulgarian names in 1940. From 1972 fierce campaigns were waged to make Turks adopt Bulgarian names - at least 50 Turks were killed. Muslim traditions were discouraged, mosques closed down, and speaking Turkish in public was prohibited. The few remaining mosques (as well as synagogues) are a target for skinheads.'

The denial of people's language, as a means of oppression, has been practised officially and unofficially in many other places - including the UK (Ireland and Wales).

No act of oppression is without long-term effects, including prejudice and tension between nationalities. This means that the chances of different national, religious and cultural groups living together are much lower, the likelihood of tension much higher. Consider what conflicts are taking place between Muslim and Christian communities in European countries today.

Mutual tolerance is threatened wherever there is a history of mutual conflict. There's a difficult balance to be reached: if people are 'assimilated' in a country not their traditional home, is there a line to cross beyond which their individual histories and heritage are, in effect, exterminated? How far can racial, religious, national observances be maintained without seeming defiant and aggressive?

People also become victims of conflicts between wider communities, as the Armenians became the victims of conflict between two rival empires, both requiring Armenian loyalty and support. On a small scale, in local communities, it is the same. Allegiances to factions and power groups always carry risks of bitter hostility that may break out in violence and the use of force.