



The Geopolitics of Nationalism and the Armenian Genocide

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Abstract

What factors led to the eventual decision by the Ottoman Empire to commit genocide of its Armenian population? This paper argues that there were three main influences behind the Empire's targeting of this part of its population. Firstly, Ottoman leaders fostered resentment of the Armenians and eventually came to view their increasing wealth and power as a type of internal threat to the Empire. Secondly, Russia, the Ottoman Empire's greatest international threat, was increasing in power and giving more aid to the Ottoman Armenians during the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth. Lastly, the Ottoman Armenians started to form political parties and advocated for an independent Armenia. As the Empire was weakening, the Ottoman leaders feared that any more loss of land or population could be detrimental to the Empire. By acknowledging the complexity of these factors, their effects on each other, and the historical context in which they unfolded, we can gain a deeper understanding of the Armenian Genocide as well as the ongoing implications of this genocide in modern times.

Keywords: Armenian Genocide, Ottoman Empire, Armenia, Muslim, Christian.

INTRODUCTION

On August 10, 1915, Vahram Dadrian, a 15-year-old Armenian boy living in what is now Çorum, Turkey, was deported with his family. Dadrian's family and many other Christian families traveled in a crowded carriage with little water. As they left Alaca, a town just south of Çorum, Dadrian's father pointed from the window of the carriage to a house the family owned. "He told us that we also owned another house, right behind it," Dadrian wrote.¹ His family owned two houses, a bakery, and a vineyard back in Çorum as well, where Dadrian's father had been a merchant. "What's the use!" Dadrian continued. "We were going away and leaving everything behind. Our only concern at the moment was saving our lives."² The group traveled 432 miles, and along the way, they met many thieves, were beaten mercilessly, and paid ransom numerous times in exchange for their lives. Many died from disease and exhaustion. After five gruesome weeks, the carriage arrived in Qatmah, a refugee station located near the town of Aleppo, a town in modern-day Syria. Corpses and human excrement covered the ground, and every tent had an ill person inside. "My pen is unable to describe the poverty that reigns over the place," Dadrian wrote in his diary. "...The life of an Armenian is not even worth as much as the life of a chicken."³

Dadrian's story illustrates the horrific turn of events that Armenian Christians faced during the final years of the Ottoman Empire. At the end of the 19th century, Armenians were viewed as one of the wealthiest populations in the

Ottoman Empire. In Constantinople, there was a large *amira* class, which consisted of merchants, bankers, moneylenders, and industrialists. They were incredibly wealthy and funded Armenian schools and religious institutions.⁴ Since they were a Christian minority in a Sunni Islamic majority empire, the Armenians had amicable relations with Europe and Russia especially. As they grew wealthier, the quality of education in Armenian schools improved, and there was an intellectual "awakening" within the community. As a result, the Ottoman Armenians started to form political parties. These parties were centered on Armenian nationalism and what would become known as the "Armenian Question": whether Ottoman Armenians should stay in the Empire or create their own independent state. Although their ideologies conflicted with Ottoman interests, some parties had good relations with the Ottoman State.

All of this would change in the final years of the 19th century when, despite their wealth and power, Christian Armenians would increasingly find themselves the victims of numerous massacres during the 1890s.⁵ These massacres continued into the early twentieth century, and on May 27, 1915, the Ottoman Empire issued the Tehcir Law, or the Deportation Law. This law gave authority to army corps, division commanders and representatives, and commanders of fortified posts to immediately take preventative measures against any sort of aggression in any situation of armed resistance to government orders. In effect, it was a mandate

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that paved the way for the eventual deportation of nearly all of the Ottoman Armenians, and the law would lead to the first genocide of the 20th century: the Armenian Genocide.

In the years following the issue of the Deportation Law, the Ottoman Empire would kill upwards of 1.2 million Armenians. During this same time, thousands of Armenian women and children would be kidnapped and converted to Islam. The Ottomans massacred the Armenians in waves, starting with Armenian intellectuals, leaders, and soldiers. Later, as Dadrian's story illustrates, the Ottomans would begin mass deportations of Armenian citizens. Women, children, and old men were deported, forced to walk through treacherous terrain in death marches, and held in concentration camps. Witnesses reported seeing rapes, physical mutilations, and massacres of women, children, and babies. Others were herded into caves, thrown into the Euphrates River, and burned alive. Despite this, very few of the survivors returned to Anatolia after the war. Today, less than one-third of the current Armenian population lives in the Republic of Armenia, and modern-day Armenia does not encompass Anatolia. "Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?" Adolf Hitler said in August 1939.⁶ As Dadrian wrote in 1945, "One million dead could never have imagined, even for a fraction of a moment, that they would have been forgotten so soon."⁷

Why did the Ottoman Empire come to turn on one of its wealthiest and most educated populations? What processes stood behind the eventual decision to issue the Deportation Law and ostracize such an important group within the Empire? While many studies on the Armenian Genocide focus on the crimes committed against the Armenians and the horrible loss of life, the present study explores the processes behind the eventual decision to commit genocide. The crimes committed by the Young Turks against the Armenians did not arise in one day. Rather, the genocide was the culmination of tensions that stemmed from previous massacres, a rise in Armenian power and nationalism, and the realities associated with increasing threats from the Russian Empire. Examining this genocide from a long-term perspective elucidates the different mechanisms and processes that eventually led to the systematic murder of one of the Empire's most influential ethnic groups. Such a perspective shows that the combination of three factors stood behind the eventual decision of the Ottoman Empire to target its Armenian population: anxiety over the increasing wealth and power of the Armenian community, the increasing role that Russia was playing on the international stage in the build-up to World War I, and clashes between Armenian nationalistic aspirations and the rise of the Young Turks.

The Role of Geopolitics

In order to understand the outbreak of hostilities between Turks and Armenians at the end of the Ottoman Empire, one should begin by looking at the broader history of Armenia and Anatolia. This requires understanding the relationship

between religion, economic power, and geopolitics. Christianity was introduced to Greater Armenia from two directions: from Nusaybin in Mesopotamia from the south and from Edessa, the capital of the Osereone kingdom, from the west. Both cities had large Armenian populations that likely converted to Christianity before the rest of the Armenian population. Southern Greater Armenia quickly adopted Christianity with help from Assyrian priests. It was the Graeco-Roman form of Christianity, however, that eventually spread and became the prevalent religion in Armenia. Grigor Lusavorich, a member of the Armenian nobility, urged King Trdat IV to convert to Christianity. The king declared Christianity the official religion of Armenia in the early fourth century CE. This decision, however, was controversial, as the Armenians were in between the Roman and Sasanian Empires. The Sasanians saw the conversion of the Armenians to Christianity as a threat to their empire. The Romans tolerated this decision because they also saw it as opposition to the Sasanian Empire.⁸

In Persian Armenia, which at this point was part of the Byzantine Empire, the clergy invented the Armenian alphabet in order to preserve Armenian culture and prevent assimilation. Christian priests translated Greek and Syriac Christian texts into Armenian, solidifying the church's control over Armenian culture and history. In 379, the Treaty of Ekeghiats divided Armenia between Theodosius I, the Emperor of the Byzantine Empire, and Shapur III, the King of the Sasanians. Neighboring kingdoms continued to fight with Armenia's kings for control of the land until the Ottomans conquered the territory. Many Armenians were subjects of Muslim rulers, but Christianity helped them to resist assimilation.⁹

Over the course of the 15th century, the Ottoman Empire would become the next empire in line to establish political control over Armenia. The Empire was once seen as a cosmopolitan empire that included people of many different religions. The people were split into different millets, or groups based on their religions. The Armenian millet was not the only Christian millet, as Greeks and Assyrians, who were later the target of genocide by the Ottomans as well, had their own separate millets. These millets were ruled by a patriarch, who was the leader of the community. The patriarch administered schools, clergy, family laws, and taxes.¹⁰

At the beginning of the Ottoman Empire, Armenians flourished economically as trade between the Mediterranean Sea and the Black Sea was controlled mostly by Armenian merchants. By the late eighteenth century, the Constantinople Armenian community was dominated by the *amira* class. This class was essential for the function of the Ottoman financial structure as it worked in conjunction with the Ottoman state.¹¹ The Armenians also were often the best educated in the Empire and brought to the Empire the latest technology from Europe, such as photography and mechanics.¹² Because they were

Christian, however, the Armenians faced discrimination and were second-class citizens in the Ottoman Empire. Many converted to Islam and adopted Turkish customs in order to escape religious discrimination. Those who chose not to assimilate were forced to pay heavy taxes, comply with *devshirme* (the forced collection of Christian children to serve in the Ottoman army), and were subject to many restrictions under religious laws.¹³

A major factor in the increase of animosity between Armenians and Turks occurred with the Anglo-Ottoman Convention of 1838. This convention marked a shift from predominantly Muslim control of Black Sea trade to an increase of Armenian control over trade. In the 18th century, trade in the Black Sea was mainly controlled by Muslim merchants. As trade between the West and the Ottoman Empire increased, however, the Armenians began to acquire the upper hand because the Europeans preferred to trade with non-Muslims.¹⁴ Furthermore, many Turks also began to believe that commerce and craft professions were beneath them and preferred political and military professions. The selection process for the Sublime Porte, or Ottoman government, factored in a candidate's national and religious identity, meaning the majority of police, military officials, and court officials were Muslims. The result of these factors was the increasing turnover of the economy to non-Muslims in the Empire.¹⁵

The increasing wealth of the Armenians would eventually be felt by both the Ottoman and Russian political classes. In July 1843, General Neidgardt warned the tsarist government about the Armenians: "[Armenians] are more educated, care for the education of children, even making donations, but all of their intellectual abilities, all their activity, is directed at [financial] acquisition."¹⁶ He said that Armenians "hold the trade in their hands" and that "to eliminate all competition, [Armenian merchants] support each other through guarantees and money."¹⁷ These quotes illustrate the increasing awareness that political leaders in the Ottoman and Russian Empires were showing toward the control that Armenians held over the economy. Meanwhile, many Turks were still earning minimum wage.¹⁸ These economic disparities only worsened tensions between the two groups.

Many Armenian merchants also began moving to coastal towns on the Mediterranean and Black Sea, which only further solidified their power over the Ottoman economy.¹⁹ The Crimean War turned Trebizond, a city in present-day Turkey, into a powerful commercial center. This primarily benefited the Armenian merchants, who began to dominate foreign trade. In a British document recording Ottoman trade, 3 of the 32 exporter merchants were Turks, while 16 of the 32 were Armenians.²⁰ In Sivas, present-day Turkey, 141 out of the 166 commercial importers and 127 out of 150 importers were Armenian. While Armenians were only 35% of the population in Sivas, they made up 85% of the traders, 70% of the craftsmen, and 80% of the manufacturing

houses.²¹ Although many Ottoman Turks felt threatened by the increased wealth and power of the Armenians, the Armenians were still second-class citizens. The Ottomans had more control politically and would eventually use this power to commit numerous crimes against the Armenians.

The Tanzimat reforms (1839-1878) further strengthened the grip that Ottoman Armenians had on Black Sea trade. The reforms called for equality between all citizens. Many Muslims saw this as violating Islamic law and continued to view the Armenian millet with suspicion.²² The reforms also called for a more secular leadership. Despite this, the Armenian patriarch was still in charge of administering schools. Armenian schools taught in the Armenian language and emphasized the history and culture of the community. In Trebizond, the first Armenian school opened in 1803. The number of schools grew throughout the nineteenth century. By 1914, there were 800 Armenian schools in the Empire with a total of 81,000 students. These schools taught the French, Armenian, and Ottoman languages, as well as science and religion. They also taught specialized business courses, giving Armenians an even larger advantage in Western trade.²³

All of these processes would culminate in the 19th century in the increasing wealth of Armenian communities, the rise of Armenian control over much of the Ottoman Empire's economic relations with Western states, and an awakening within the community that led to the formation of powerful political parties advocating for an independent Armenian state. These new parties threatened the reign of the sultan, who ordered numerous massacres against the Armenians at the end of the nineteenth century. Russia, the Empire's greatest enemy, would also begin to notice the increasing wealth of the Armenians.

The Role of Russia on the International Stage

Understanding the eventual outbreak of violence between the Ottoman Empire and Armenians also hinges on Russia's relationship with this Christian community. Historically, Russia had positive relations with Armenians because both peoples were Christian, but beginning in the 18th and 19th centuries, this bond would grow stronger. Over the course of these two centuries, this increase in positive relationships between Russia and Armenia would come to be seen as a threatening betrayal in the eyes of Turkish Ottomans. Modern Russian-Armenian relations began in the mid-seventeenth century. In 1667, Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich (1645–1676) gave Armenians, among a select few other ethnic groups, advantageous rates in trade with Russia. When Persian Armenians asked Peter the Great (1682–1725) to free them from the shah (king), he agreed, although he never fulfilled his promise. Despite this, many young Armenians began to look to the Russian Empire for liberation. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the bond between the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Russian Orthodox Church grew stronger.²⁴ Viceroy Mikhail Semyonovich

Vorontsov (1823–1854) said that “throughout the region [of Tiflis], the Armenians are entirely devoted to [the Russians].” He praised the “unquestionable loyalty and even affection toward [Russia] of all Armenians.”²⁵ Vorontsov also advocated for Armenian youth to be educated in the Empire’s best schools, supported the construction of new Armenian churches, and listened to the requests and suggestions of the Tiflis Armenian merchants. The Armenians served as tsarist messengers, translators, and negotiators.²⁶

By the late eighteenth century, the Russian Empire started to advocate for more protection for the Christian Armenian population in the Ottoman Empire. The Treaty of KüçükKaynarca (1774), which ended the Russo-Ottoman War of 1768-1774, demanded that the Sublime Porte, the Ottoman government, would firmly protect the Christian religion and churches,²⁷ as well as grant “the Ministers of the Russian Imperial Court [the right] to protect all interests” of Christians.²⁸ Baron Rosen, the Caucasus high commissioner (the Russian ruler in the Caucasus region), worked with the Russian Foreign, Interior, and War Ministries to achieve the Ottoman acceptance of an Ejmiatsin nuncio (a Roman Catholic ambassador to a foreign government) in Constantinople. During the Russo-Ottoman wars, Armenians from Kars, a city in present-day Turkey, reported the movement and composition of Ottoman officers to the Russians.²⁹

As a strong empire, Russia’s very existence threatened the weakening Ottoman Empire, making the Armenians’ relationship with the Russians treacherous in the eyes of the Ottomans. European forces began to offer support to “infidel” (in this case, non-Muslim) groups in the Empire. The French supported the Catholics, the British protected the Protestants and sometimes the Jews, and the Russians protected the Armenian Christians. In 1875, there was an uprising against Ottoman rule in the Balkans led by Bosnia and Herzegovina and Bulgaria, which the Empire suppressed. News of the worsened Ottoman oppression against Christians in the Balkans reached Russia, which came to Bosnia and Herzegovina’s and Bulgaria’s aid. Russia declared war on the Ottoman Empire in April 1877, thus starting the last Russo-Turkish war.³⁰ The British provided no support to the Ottomans, and the Russians were able to easily win. Given the little resistance they faced, the Russians were only six miles from the Sublime Porte when they were stopped. Russia managed to annex border regions in the Caucasus, and Serbia, Montenegro, and Romania gained independence. Russia pledged to withdraw from annexed Ottoman territory only when reforms targeting Armenian grievances were put in place.³¹ The Ottomans had lost most of their Christian population through territorial losses due to war and independence movements, and they thought Russia wanted to weaken the Empire by supporting Christian independence efforts. The Ottoman authorities knew that the Empire was weakening and therefore saw the Russian-Armenian relationship and the Armenian independence effort as a betrayal to the sultan.

The Rise of Armenian Nationalism

At the end of the 19th century, the Armenians were still known as the “most loyal community” among Ottoman Christians. Within a few decades, however, all of this would change. The Armenians had been demanding for reforms since the end of the 19th century, with little to no success. They were starting to grow restless, and Armenian nationalism began to grow. As noted earlier, the Armenians’ rise in education and power, coupled with the rise in Armenian nationalism, led to an “intellectual awakening.”³² That many Armenians lived in the same area led to a stronger sense of nationhood and common identity, making it easier to forward demands as a unified community in the face of discrimination.³³

In 1885, the first formal Armenian political party—the Armenakan Society—was established. The party believed that the Armenians had to be nationalized and strengthened before they could liberate and govern themselves. It was established by the students of Mekertich Portukalian, an Armenian teacher and journalist, in the city of Van. They viewed terrorism and military demonstrations with disfavor and advocated for Armenian self-rule and self-defense. They focused more on preparing the Armenian population to defend against persecution rather than fighting for independence. While the party itself was nonviolent, some members were involved in the political assassinations of certain Turkish and Kurdish officials. The party started to weaken after a few years and had no real power by the early 1900s.³⁴

The Hunchakian Social Democrat party, founded in 1887, believed that Armenia’s independence was only possible with European interference. This belief went directly against Ottoman interests. The party was founded in Geneva by seven Russian Armenian students and was socialist in ideology. They were impatient with Portukalian’s hesitation toward revolution and created their own party in response. They demanded the independence of Ottoman Armenia. As the most radical Armenian political party, the Hunchakians mostly used propaganda and education to spread its ideology, although some members also used more violent methods such as mass protests and assassination. Members of the party participated in the Sasun, Zeytun, and Van rebellions. The party was active and organized in the early 1890s, but a lack of results from their efforts weakened the party. In 1896, the party started to split, with some members abandoning the idea of a socialist state, believing socialism distracted from the more important notion of a free Armenian state. The party is still active today, although it is only active within the Armenian diaspora.³⁵

The Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF, also known as the Dashnaks) was much more aggressive than older parties in terms of the methods they used to fight for independence. They initiated foreign intervention in internal Ottoman affairs and engaged in multiple acts of violence that the Ottomans considered terrorism. The main objective of the party was

the economic and political independence of Turkish Armenia by means of rebellion. By the late 1890s, it was one of the most powerful Armenian revolutionary political parties, with active branches within both the Ottoman and Russian Empires.³⁶ The last decade of the nineteenth century saw the growth and consolidation of the party. The Dashnaks dispatched organizers to the Ottoman Empire to spread propaganda and prepare the local Armenian communities for rebellion. In 1892, an underground base for the party was established in Constantinople.

The ARF knew that Europe wanted to find new markets to exploit in the East and took advantage of that. This meant that their goals aligned with the desire of the Great Powers to interfere with domestic Ottoman affairs. On August 26, 1896, 26 armed ARF members occupied the Imperial Ottoman Bank. 150 people inside were taken hostage, and four people were murdered while another five were wounded. This event resulted in clashes between Turks and Armenians on the streets of Constantinople. The Ottoman government would encourage clashes between the two groups and then absolve itself of responsibility. These clashes attracted the attention of Europe, specifically the attention of journalists, tabloid writers, and political adventurers. The ARF collaborated with political parties that opposed the sultan and engaged in more terrorist acts. After the Young Turks overthrew Sultan Abdul Hamid II, Armenian political parties gained more power. The Armenians were optimistic that the reforms they had been demanding for the last few decades would finally be realized without the help of foreign powers.³⁷

The Rise of the Young Turks and the Escalation of Tensions

Initially, the Armenian situation would seem to improve drastically with the rise of the Young Turks. When they rose to power in 1908, they dealt with the Armenians peacefully. The new government “agreed with the idea of establishing autonomous Armenia: she was not to be separated from Turkey but could have a European governor... Ahmed Riza and others expressed readiness to meet Armenian requirements on the condition that Hunchaks assist in resolving general state problems.”³⁸ The Young Turks believed that the Armenians were an important component of Ottoman national identity, and they had the full support of the Hunchakians and Dashnaks.³⁹ Armenians received seats in Parliament as full Ottoman citizens rather than as a representative for their millet. Schools and libraries opened, and Armenian newspapers were allowed to circulate. Kurdish raids and violence were scaled down, and exiled nobles were welcomed home. Enver Pasha, Talaat Pasha, and other Young Turk leaders paid respects to fallen Armenians from the anti-sultan struggle. They made speeches alluding to cooperation between Turks and Armenians, saying they were now to live with each other as “brothers and sisters” and that they were “all Ottomans.”⁴⁰ All the Armenian political parties had good relations with the Young Turks, and Armenian demands for autonomy were not seen as unreasonable or problematic.⁴¹

The reforms that the Young Turks promised did not come as fast as the Armenians had hoped, however. As a result, tensions between the groups escalated and turned violent. The Adana massacre in April 1909, coupled with the slow response to promises made by the Young Turks, worsened relations between the two parties. It seemed as though nothing had changed. On September 3, 1911, the ARF stated “that it had cut off all its relations with the CUP due to the reemergence of clashes between Kurds and Armenians, that it did not wish to have any links with the CUP, and that it would attain its autonomy through its own efforts.”⁴² The ARF would look to foreign powers, specifically Russia, for support in its independence efforts.

The Armenians’ desire for foreign intervention worsened their relations with the Young Turks. Furthermore, in October 1912, Serbia, Montenegro, Greece, and Bulgaria declared war on the Ottoman state. The Ottoman Empire fought fourteen battles and lost thirteen of them. It lost 40% of its landmass and 25% of its population. Bulgaria declared independence, and Austria-Hungary annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina, meaning the Ottomans were no longer in Europe. The Balkans had been the “heart of the Empire, its provinces being by far the most advanced and the most productive. They had always provided much of the Empire’s wealth and had long been the recruiting ground for the army and the bureaucracy.”⁴³ The majority of the Empire was now Turkish. The apocalyptic defeat made the Young Turks more wary of external security concerns, suspicious of any secessionist activity in the homeland, and more narrowly nationalistic. An independent Armenian state was now impossible, as the Young Turks feared losing any more territory.⁴⁴

These military losses drove Ottoman political officials to heightened concerns over the level of foreign intervention in Ottoman affairs. One US ambassador noted: “Of all the new kingdoms which had been carved out of the sultan’s dominions, Serbia... is the only one that has won her own independence.”⁴⁵ Russia, France, and Great Britain aided the other Christians in the Empire in their quests for independence. This new reality meant that the Young Turks began insisting that European powers stop interfering with domestic affairs. At the same time, Armenians continued to look toward Russia in order to achieve the independence that they had demanded for so many years.

The Mandelstam Plan only heightened tensions between the Ottoman Empire, the Armenians, and the Russian Empire regarding foreign involvement in internal Ottoman affairs. The plan was designed by Russia for reforms for the Ottoman Armenians. After a year of negotiations between Russia, the Ottoman Empire, Germany, France, and Great Britain, the Russian and the Ottoman Empires signed the plan in February 1914. The plan created two Armenian “zones,” one in the six eastern Armenian vilayets and one in Trebizond on the Black Sea. It was to be administered by two neutral European inspectors serving in the Ottoman government, nominated by European powers and the Empire for a five-year term.

The police were drawn from the local population, and half of the police force had to be Christian. Official Kurdish militias were disbanded, and Christian and Muslim communities were granted elected assemblies that they could nominate representatives for.

Each party had vastly different goals in mind. Russia wanted to expand its influence and placate its Armenian minority, while the Ottoman Empire wanted to minimize foreign involvement in its domestic affairs. Germany wanted a foothold in the region, and Britain wanted to make sure Russia and Germany didn't gain too much power.⁴⁶ The Ottoman leaders were unhappy about the external involvement in internal affairs that the Mandelstam Plan outlined. They blamed the Armenians for internationalizing a domestic issue and embarrassing the Empire, especially in the weak and vulnerable state the Empire found itself in after the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913.⁴⁷

That the Dashnaks had returned to their pre-1908 policy of looking to Europe for assistance only further complicated tensions between the Armenians and the Young Turks. The party believed that Armenian independence could only be achieved with the help of the Russians. When the Ottoman Empire entered the Great War, the ARF pledged to fight with the Russians. One official said, "It is in our national interests to work with the Russian[s]... The Russian flag will fly over the Istanbul and Dardanelles Straits. The Russians must free the subject nations that are under the Turkish yoke."⁴⁸ The Young Turks would come to see these efforts by the Dashnaks as a great betrayal on the part of the Armenians.

Eventually, all of this would culminate in the belief by the Young Turks that all Armenians were pro-Russian traitors. In terms of policies, this meant that during the years of the war, Armenians increasingly came to be viewed as a security threat that needed to be controlled. Ottoman-Armenian relations had completely deteriorated at this point. Armenian representatives rejected the Young Turks' offers to cooperate. After the war started, Ottoman authorities received reports that Armenians were collaborating with approaching Russian forces. The number of Armenian soldiers deserting the Ottomans and joining the Russians was increasing. The Young Turks fired old officers and replaced them with those loyal to the CUP to increase their control over the military.⁴⁹

As the Empire faced the danger of attack from all directions, the Young Turks increasingly felt that the Armenians' disloyalty was a major weakness. According to historian Ahsan Butt, "The Fourth Army in Syria and the Sixth in Mesopotamia were both in danger of being cut off owing to partisan attacks... in the worst position of all, however, was the Third Army facing the Russians, who were advancing against a beaten and battered enemy on both the northern (Erzurum) and southern front (Dilman-Van)."⁵⁰ The Young Turks feared that any Armenian disloyalty would give western powers an opportunity to attack Anatolia. As a result, they began to deport Armenians in the area.

Although the deportations of Armenians started as early as February 1915, April 24 of that year is often seen as the start of the Armenian Genocide. Armenians had been living in Constantinople since the sixth century, and the city was still predominantly Christian. Because the city had been the capital of the Christian Byzantine Empire, it was an important spiritual and intellectual place for the Christian community. On April 24, 1915, 2,345 Armenian intellectuals in the city were arrested and deported. They were eventually sent to the province of Diyarbekir, approximately nine hundred miles from Constantinople. Many were killed and tortured in Diyarbekir; few were ever released. Some were tried in the city of Diyarbekir, the capital of the province of the same name, the governor of which was infamous for his hostility toward Christians.⁵¹

The events at Van in April-May 1915 were not intended to be a violent rebellion, but they ended up being used by the Ottoman leaders as another example of Armenian treason. At the time, relations were good between the local governor (Hasan Tahsin Uzer) and the leaders of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF). They began to deteriorate, however, when Cevdet Bey Belbez (brother-in-law of Enver Pasha) was appointed as governor in March 1915. He arrived with Circassian irregular soldiers and added Kurdish bands to his army.⁵² The government demanded that the Armenians hand over four thousand men for labor battalions. The Armenian leaders asked for the men to be used for combat duty because most Armenians in labor battalions throughout the Empire were killed. This request, however, was ignored. The Armenians offered four hundred men, but the governor of the Van province continued to demand four thousand men.⁵³

The escalation of violence in the southern part of Van on April 11 would lead many Young Turks to believe that Armenians were conspiring with Russia against the Ottoman government. One ARF leader traveled to the region and was killed, while another was arrested. Cevdet's troops attacked surrounding Armenian villages, often resulting in massacres. On April 20, some Muslims were trying to rape two Armenian women when they were killed by members of the Armenian Self-Defense Committee. This prompted a military attack on Aygestan (a neighborhood in present-day Armenia). The committee prepared for self-defense, which escalated into destructive warfare between government forces and the committee fighters. The fighting lasted until May 18, when the advancing Russian army, aided by Russian and Ottoman Armenians, arrived.⁵⁴ Many people, including those sympathetic to Armenians and the Young Turk government, claimed that this was proof that the Armenians were conspiring with the Russians against the Ottoman government.⁵⁵ Supposedly, contact between the Van Armenians and Russian forces started after the struggle began.⁵⁶ In June 1915, US ambassador Morgenthau said, "Because Armenian volunteers, many of them Russian subjects, have joined Russian Army in Caucasus ... and others

have been helpful to Russians in their invasion of Van district, terrible vengeance is being taken.”⁵⁷ After the uprisings, the entire Armenian population of Van was deported.⁵⁸

The violence in the Van region in April 1915 would lead the Ottoman Empire to issue the Tehcir Law, or the Deportation Law, on May 27 of that same year. The law gave immediate authority to army corps, division commanders and representatives, and commanders of fortified posts to take preventative measures against any sort of aggression in any situation of armed resistance to government orders. They were allowed to use military force in the most severe manner in order to implement and regulate the defense of the country and protect public order. Although the first deportations of Armenians took place several months before this in February 1915, the systematic confiscation of Armenian property began only on May 17 of the same year.⁵⁹ In June and July, more uprisings meant more deportation orders. The Young Turks ordered deportations in Samsun, Sivas, Trabzon, Mersin, and Adana.⁶⁰

CONCLUSION

As the above has demonstrated, several factors built upon each other in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century that ultimately crystallized in the decision by the Young Turks to massacre a minority population. Focusing exclusively on the rise in Armenian nationalism as the reason why the Young Turks targeted the Armenians during this time does not factor in the influence that Russia played on the international level. It also does not account for the perceived security threat the Armenians posed to the Ottoman Empire as a Christian minority. All of these factors played important parts in the eventual declaration of the Tehcir Law and the deportation of Armenian communities. Understanding this tragedy requires understanding the many different factors that came into play, as well as their relationships with each other. Realizing that this was a process that spanned multiple years helps us understand how this tragedy ensued, as well as the processes that stood behind this genocide. By acknowledging the complexity of these factors and the historical context in which they unfolded, we can gain a deeper understanding of not only the Armenian Genocide but also the ongoing implications of this genocide in modern times and the role that nationalism and nationalistic aspirations often play in eventual decisions to commit genocide.

This approach also paves the way for the prevention of the unfolding of such processes in future political and ethnic struggles. Taking a long-term perspective to the genocide allows for a deeper understanding of historical trends and structural factors that contributed to the violence. Because the Armenians were second-class citizens in the Ottoman Empire, they wanted to declare independence and form their own nation. Political instability and international relations contributed to the Ottoman Empire’s response to this desire. A long-term perspective helps us understand how political

and geopolitical processes can influence and bring about a genocide. It ensures that the history of the genocide is not oversimplified and cannot be possibly manipulated to serve a political agenda. Ultimately, recognizing the relationships between these elements is crucial for preventing such atrocities in the future and ensuring that the voices of the victims are not forgotten.

Endnotes

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3. Ibid, 32.
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