Model Curriculum

for Human Rights and Genocide

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The Armenian Genocide

The "forgotten genocide"

The general public and even many historians know very little about the genocide of Armenians by the government of the Ottoman Empire. Civilian populations have often fallen victim to the brutality of invading armies, bombing raids, lethal substances, and other forms of indiscriminate killings. In the Armenian case, however, the government of the Ottoman Empire, dominated by the so-called Committee of Union and Progress or Young Turk Party, turned against a segment of its own population. In international law there were certain accepted laws and customs of war that were aimed in some measure at protecting civilian populations, but these did not cover domestic situations or a govemment's treatment of its own people. Only after World War I1 and the Holocaust was that aspect included in the United Nations' Genocide Convention. Nonetheless, at the time of the Armenian deportations and massacres beginning in 1915, many governments and statespersons termed the atrocities as crimes against humanity.

Except for the Young Turk leaders, no government denied or doubted what was occurring. The governments of Germany and Austro-Hungary, while allied with the Ottoman Empire, received hundreds of detailed eyewitness accounts from their officials on the spot and privately admitted that the Armenians were being subjected to a policy of annihilation. In the United States charity drives began for the remnants of the "starving Armenians." Examples of headlines from the *New York Times* in 1915 read: "[Ambassador Morgenthau] Protests Against the War of Extermination in Progress" (September 16); "Only 200,000 Armenians Now Left in Turkey: More than 1,000,000 Killed, Enslaved, or Exiled" (October 22); "Five Missionaries Succumb to Shock of Armenian Horrors" (November 3); "Million Armenians Killed or in Exile: American Committee on Relief Says. Victims . . . Steadily Increasing" (December 15). Between 1915 and 1918, hundreds of declarations, promises, and pledges were made by world leaders regarding the emancipation, restitution, and rehabilitation of the Armenian survivors. Yet, within a few years those same governments and statespersons turned away from the Armenian question without having fulfilled any of those pledges. And, after a few more years, the Armenian calamity had virlually become "the forgotten genocide."

History of the Armenians

The Armenians are an ancient people. They Inhabited the highland region between the Black, Caspian, and Mediterranean seas for nearly years. They are noted in Greek and Persian sources as early as the sixth century B.C. On a strategic crossroad between East and West, Armenia was sometimes independent under its national dynasties, sometimes autonomous under native princes who paid tribute to foreign powers, and sometimes subjected to direct foreign rule. The Armenians were among the first people to adopt Christianity and to develop a distinct national-religious culture.

The Turkish invasions of Armenia began in the eleventh century A.D.. and the last Armenian kingdom fell three centuries later. Most of the territories that had once formed the ancient and medieval Armenian kingdoms were incorporated into the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth century. The Armenians were included in a multinational and multireligious realm, but as a Christian minority they had to endure official discrimination and second-class citizenship, including special taxes, inadmissibility of legal testimony, and the prohibition on bearing arms.

Despite these disabilities. most Armenians lived in relative peace so long as the Ottoman Empire was strong and expanding. But as the empire's administrative, fiscal, and military structure crumbled under the weight of internal corruption and external challenges in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, oppression and intolerance increased. The breakdown of order was accelerated by Ottoman inability to modernize and compete with the West.

The decay of the Ottoman Empire was paralleled by cultural and political revival among many of the subject peoples. The national liberation struggles, supported at times by one or another European power, resulted in Turkish loss of Greece and most of the Balkan provinces in the nineteenth century and aggravated the Eastern Question; that is. what was to happen to the enervated empire and its constituent peoples. A growing number of Ottoman liberals came to believe that the empire's survival depended on effective administration reforms. These men were movers behind several significant reform measures promulgated between 1839 and 1876. Yet time and again the advocates of reform became disillusioned in the face of the entrenched, vested interests that stubbornly resisted change.

Of the various subject peoples, the Armenians perhaps sought the least. Unlike the Balkan Christians or the Arabs. they were dispersed throughout the empire and no longer constituted an absolute majority in much of their historic homelands. Hence, most Armenian leaders did not think in terms of independence. Expressing loyalty to the sultan and disavowing any separatist aspirations, they petitioned for the protection of their people and properly from corrupt officials and marauding bands. The Armenians had passed through a long period of cultural revival. Thousands of youngsters enrolled in elementary and secondary schools, and hundreds of students traveled to Europe for higher education. Many returned home imbued with ideas of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution to engage in teaching, journalism. and literary criticism. As it happened, however, this Armenian self-discovery was paralleled by heightened administrative corruption and exploitation. It was this dual development, the conscious demand for enlightened government and security of life on the one hand and the growing repression and insecurity on the other, that gave rise to the Armenian Question as a part of the larger Eastern Question. Some Armenians gave up hope that reforms could be achieved peaceably. They organized underground political parties and encouraged the population to learn to defend itself.

Massacres: Preface to genocide

During the reign of Sultan Abdul-Hamid II (1876-1909), a new reform measure relating specifically to the Armenians was promulgated under pressure from the European powers. However, European interest was inconsistent,

and foreign intervention unsustained by effective measures to oversee the implementation of the reforms only compounded Armenian troubles. Beginning in the mountainous district of Sassun in 1894 and then spreading to every province inhabited by Armenians in 1895 and 1896. pogroms organized by the sultan's agents resulted in the deaths of up to 200,000 Armenians. the flight into exile of thousands more, and the looting and burning or forced conversion of hundreds of towns and villages.

Lord Kinross. the author of several books on the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, has described how the organizers of the massacres exploited religious sentiment:

> Their tactics were based on the Sultan's principle of kindling religious fanaticism among the Moslem population. Abdul Hamid briefed agents, whom he sent to Armenia with specific instructions as to how they should act. It became their normal routine first to assemble the Moslem population in the largest mosque in a town, then to declare, in the name of the Sultan, that the Armenians were in general revolt with the aim of striking at Islam. Their Sultan enjoined them as good Moslems to defend their faith against these infidel rebels . . . .Each operation, between the bugle calls, followed a similar pattern. First into a town there came the Turkish troops, for the purpose of massacres: then came the Kurdish irregulars and tribesmen for the purpose of plunder. Finally came the holocaust, by fire and destruction. which spread, with the pursuit of fugitives and mopping-up operations. throughout the lands and villages of the surrounding province. This murderous winter of 1895 thus saw the decimation of much of the Armenian population and the devastation of their property in some 20 districts of eastern Turkey.

The sultan's use of violent methods was a desperate attempt to maintain the status quo in the face of severe external and internal challenges. In this regard, a major difference between Abdul-Hamid and his Young Turk successors was that he unleashed massacres in an effort to preserve a state structure in which the Armenians would be kept submissive and unable to resist tyrannical rule, whereas the Young Turks were to employ the same tactics on a much grander scale to bring about fundamental and far-reaching changes in the status quo and create an entirely new frame of reference that did not include the Armenians at all.

The Young Turk dictatorship

Disillusion weighed heavily on the Armenians after the calamities of 1894-1896. yet some comfort was found in the fact that various non-Armenian elements were also trying to organize against the sultan's tyranny. Several of those opposition groups merged into the Committee of Union and Progress, popularly referred to as the Young Turks. In 1908 a military coup led by the Young Turks forced Abdul-Hamid to become a constitutional monarch. The Armenians hailed the victory of Young Turks amid manifestations of Christian and Muslim Ottoman brotherhood.

From 1908–1914 the seemingly egalitarian Young Turks became xenophobic nationalists bent on creating a new order and eliminating the Armenian Question by eliminating the Armenian people. European exploitation of Turkish weaknesses after the 1908 revolution and the Turkish loss of more territory in the Balkans contributed to this process. In 1909 more than 20,000 Armenians were massacred in the region of Cilicia. The Young Turks blamed

Abdul-Hamid and deposed him, but there were strong indications that adherents of the Young Turks had themselves participated in the carnage. The crisis prompted the Young Turks to declare a state of siege and suspend constitutional rights for several years.

It was during this period that the concept of Turkism" and exclusive nationalism attracted several prominent Young Turks, who began to envisage a new, homogeneous Turkish state in place of the enervated and exploited multinational Ottoman Empire. With the ideology of Turkism expounded by writers such as Zia Gokalp. the Young Turk extremists began to contemplate ways to abandon multinational "Ottomanism" for exclusivist "Turkism" and so transform the Ottoman Empire into a homogeneous Turkish domain.

In a study of the development of Turkish nationalism, Uriel Heyd notes that in "replacing the belief in God by the belief in nation," for Gokalp, "nationalism had become a religion." Regarding the nation, Gokalp wrote:

I am a soldier; it is my commander
I obey without question all its orders
With closed eyes I carry out my duty.

Professor Robert Melson has summarlzed this attitude: "Simply put. the good without limit is the good of the nation and for its sake all is permissible." Despite the ominous circumstances, Armenian leaders continued to hope that satisfactory reforms and equality could be achieved within the structure of the Ottoman Empire.

The outbreak of World War I in the summer of 1914 deeply alarmed the Armenians. If the Ottoman Empire entered the conflict on the side of Germany. the Armenian plateau would become the inevitable theater of another Russo-Turkish wars. Inview of the fact that the Armenian homelands lay on both sides of the frontier, the Armenians would suffer severely no matter who might eventually win the war. For these reasons, Armenian spokespersons implored the Young Turk leaders to maintain neutrality and spare the empire from disaster. Despite these appeals, the Germanophile Young Turk faction, led by Minister of War Enver Pasha and Minister of Internal Mairs Talaat Pasha, sealed a secret alliance with Berlin and in return for joining the war against Great Britain, France, and Russia, looked to the creation of a new Turkish realm extending into Central Asia. The Armenians were now seen as an obstacle to the realization of that goal. Turkism was to supplant Ottomanism and give purpose and justification to unlimited violence for the greater good of producing a homogeneous state and society. In *Accounting for Genocide*, Helen Fen concluded:

> **The victims of twentieth century premeditated genocide—the Jew, the Gypsies, the Armenians—were murdered in order to fulfill the state's design for a new order. . . .war was used in both cases. . .to transform the nation to correspond to the ruling elite's formula by eliminating the groups conceived as alien, enemies by definition.**

The genocidal process

On the night of April 23-24, 1915, Armenian political, religious, educational, and intellectual leaders in Constantinople (Istanbul) were arrested, deported into Anatolia, and put to death. In May, after mass deportations had

already begun, Minister of Internal Affairs Talaat Pasha, claiming that the Armenians were untrustworthy, could offer aid and comfort to the enemy, and were in a state of imminent rebellion, ordered *ex post facto* their deportation from the war zones to relocation centers—actually the barren deserts of Syria and Mesopotamia. The Armenians were driven out, not only from areas near war zones but from the length and breadth of the empire, except in Constantinople and Smyrna, where numerous foreign diplomats and merchants were located. Sometimes Armenian Catholics and Protestants were exempted from the deportation decrees, only to follow once the majority belonging to the Armenian Apostolic Church had been dispatched. Secrecy, surprise, and deception were all part of the process.

The whole of Asia Minor was put in motion. Armenians serving in the Ottoman armies had already been segregated into unarmed labor battalions and were now taken out in batches and murdered. Of the remaining population, the adult and teenage males were, as a pattern, swiftly separated from the deportation caravans and outright under the direction of Young Turk agents, the gendarmerie. and bandit and nomadic groups prepared for the operation. Women and children were driven for months over mountains and deserts. Intentionally deprived of food and water, they fell by the thousands and the hundreds of thousands along the routes to the desert. In this manner the Armenian people were effectively eliminated from their homeland of several millennia. Of the refugee survivors scattered throughout the Arab provinces and the Caucasus, thousands more were to die of starvation, epidemic, and exposure. Even the memory of the nation was intended for obliteration, as churches and cultural monuments were desecrated and small children, snatched from their parents, were renamed and given out to be raised as non-Armenians and non-Christians.

The following excerpt from a report of the Italian consul-general at Trebizond typifies the hundreds of eyewitness accounts by foreign officials:

> The passing of gangs of Armenian exiles beneath the windows and before the door of the Consulate; their prayers for help, when neither I nor any other could do anything to answer them; the city in a state of siege, guarded at every point by 15,000 troops in complete war equipmentt, by thousands of police agents, by bands of volunteers, and by the members of the "Committee of Union and Progress"; the lamentations, the tears, the abandonments, the imprecations, the many suicides, the instantaneous deaths from sheer terror; the sudden unhinging of men's reason; the conflagration; the shooting of victims in the city; the ruthless searches through the houses and in the countryside; the hundreds of corpses found every day along the exile road; the young women converted by force to Islam or exiled like the rest; the children tom away from their families and from the Christian schools and handed over by force to Moslem families, or else placed by the hundreds on board ship in nothing but their shirts, and then capsized and drowned in the Black Sea and the River Deyirnen Dere-these are my last ineffaceable memories of Trebizond, memories which still, at a month's distance, torment my soul and almost drive me frantic.

Henry Morgenthau, Sr., the American Ambassador to Turkey at the time, tried to reason with the Young Turk leaders and to alert the United States and the world to the tragic events. but, except for some donations for relief efforts, his actions were in vain. His description of the genocide begins:

> The Central Government now announced its intention of gathering the two million or more Armenians living in the several sections of the empire and

transporting them to this desolate and inhospitable region. Had they undertaken such a deportation in good faith, it would have represented the height of cruelty and injustice. As a matter of fact, the Turks never had the slightest idea of reestablishing the Armenians in this new country. . . .The real purpose of the deportation was robbery and destruction; it reallyrepresented a new method of massacre. When the Turkish authorities gave the orders for these deportations,they were merely giving the death warrant to the whole race; they understood this well, and, in their conversations with me, they made no particular attempt to conceal the fact.

Ambassador Morgenthau concluded:

I am confident that the whole history of the human race contains no terrible episode as this.

Estimates of Armenian dead vary from 600,000 to two million. A United Nations Human Rights subcommission report in 1985 gives the figure of "at least one million,"but the important point in understanding a tragedy such as this is not the exact and precise count of the number who died-that will never be known- but the fact that more than half the Armenian population perished and the rest were forcibly driven from their ancestral homeland. Another important point is that what befell the Armenians was by the will of the government. While a large segment of the general population participated in the looting and massacres, many Muslim leaders were shocked by what was happening, and thousands of Armenian women and children were rescued and sheltered by compassionate individual Turks, Kurds, and Arabs.

Although the decimation of the Armenian people and the destruction of millions of persons in Central and Eastern Europe during the Nazi regime a quarter of a century later each had particular and unique features, there were some striking parallels. The similarities include the perpetration of genocide under the cover of a major international conflict, thus minimizing the possibility of external internention; conception of the plan by a monolithic and xenophobic clique; espousal of an ideology giving purpose and justification to racism, exclusivism, and intolerance toward elements resisting or deemed unworthy of assimilation; imposition of strict party discipline and secrecy during the period of preparation: formation of extralegal special armed forces to ensure the rigorous execution of the operation; provocation of public hostility toward the victim group and ascribing to it the very excesses to which it would be subjected; certainty of the vulnerability of the targeted groups (demonstrated in the Armenian case by the previous massacres of 1894-1896 and 1909); exploitation of advances in mechanization and communication to achieve uprecedented means for control, coordination, and thoroughness; and the use of sanctions such as promotions and incentive to loot or, conversely, the dismissal and punishment of reluctant officials and the intimidation of persons who might consider harboring members of the victim group.

The aftermath

The defeat of the Ottoman Empire and its allies at the end of 1918 raised the possibility of enacting the numerous pledges concerning the punishment of the perpetrators and the rehabilitation of the Armenian survivors. After the Young Turk leaders had fled the country, the new Turkish prime minister admitted that the Turks had committed such misdeeds "as to make the conscience of mankind shudder forever." United States General James G.

Harbord, after an inspection tour of the former Armenian population centers in 1919, reported on the organized nature of the massacres and concluded: "Mutilation, violation, torture, and death have left their haunting memories in a hundred beautiful Armenian valleys, and the traveler in that region is seldom free from the evidence of this most colossal crime of all the ages." The Paris Peace Conference declared that the lands of Armenia would never be returned to Turkish rule, and a Turkish military courtmartial tried and sentenced to death in absentia Enver, Talaat, Kjemal, and Dr. Nazim, notorious organizers of the genocide. No attempt was made to carry out the sentence, however, and thousands of other culprits were neither tried nor even removed from office. Within a few months the judicial proceedings were suspended, and even accused and imprisoned war criminals were freed and sent home.

The release of the perpetrators of genocide signaled a major shift in the political winds. The former Allied Powers, having become bitter rivals over the spoils of war, failed to act in unison in imposing peace or in dealing with the stiff resistance of a Turkish nationalist movement. They concurred that the Armenians should be freed and rehabilitated but took no effective measure to achieve that objective. They hoped that the United States would extend a protectorate over the devastated Armenian regions, but the United States was recoiling from its involvement in the world war and turning its back on the League of Nations. Unable to quell the Turkish nationalist movement, which rejected the award of any territory for an Armenian state or even unrestricted return of the Armenian refugees, the Allied Powers in 1923 made their peace with the new Turkey. No provision was made for the rehabilitation, restitution. or compensation of the Armenian survivors. Western abandonment of the Armenians was so complete that the revised peace treaties included no mention whatsoever of "Armenians" or "Armenia." It was as if the Armenians had never existed in the Ottoman Empire. All Armenians who had returned to their homes after the war were again uprooted and driven into exile. The 3,000-year presence of the Armenians in Asia Minor came to a violent end. Armenian place-names were changed, and Armenian cultural monuments were obliterated or allowed to fall into disrepair. Attempts to eliminate the memory of Armenia included change of the geographical expression "Armenian plateau" to "Eastern Anatolia." The Armenian sunrivors were condemned to a life of exile and dispersion, being subjected to inevitable acculturation and assimilation on five continents and facing an increasingly indifferent world. With the consolidation of totalitarian regimes in Europe during the 1920s and 1930s, memory of the Armenian cataclysm gradually faded, and in the aftermath of the horrors and havoc of World War 11, it virtually became the "forgotten genocide."

In recent years, growing awareness of the Holocaust and commitment to the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide has again raised the Armenian Genocide to the level of consciousness among educators, scholars, and defenders of human rights. The transgenerational trauma of the Armenian people is beginning to be understood, and various official and unofficial bodies have called on the present government of the Republic of Turkey to recognize the injustice perpetrated against the Armenians by previous Turkish governments.

Why remember?

Students must learn the importance of and reasons for remembering the genocide of the Armenians by the government of the Ottoman Empire. They

should consider whether it is possible for dispossessed peoples who have no sovereign state or government of their own to place their case before national and international bodies that operate within the framework of nation-states. How is it possible to seek legal recourse, to have truth prevail over perceived national interests. and to liberate history from politics?

In a thoughtful essay, Terrence Des Pres, author of *The Survivor:An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* and member of the United States Holocaust Council, has captured the importance of remembering:

> Milan Kundera, the exiled Czech novelist, has written that "the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting." This single remark, in my view, sums up the human predicament today and puts the burden of responsibfity exactly where it falls—on writers, and now more than ever, on scholars. . . . National catastrophes can be survived if (and perhaps only if) those to whom disaster happens can recover themselves through knowing the truth of their suffering. Great powers, on the other hand, would vanquish not only the peoples they subjugate but also the cultural mechanism that would sustain vital memory of historical crimes.

When modem states make way for geopolitical power plays, they are not above removing everything—nations, cultures, homelands- in their paths. Great powers regularly demolish other peoples' claims to dignity and place, and sometimes, as we know, the outcome is genocide. In a very real sense, therefore, Kundera is right: Against historical crimes we fight as best we can, and a cardinal part of this engagement is "the struggle of memory against forgetting."