



The Genocide of the Christians, Turkey 1894–1924

Benny Morris and Dror Ze'evi

We set out in 2010 to look afresh at the massacre of Turkey's Armenians in 1915. While most of the world's historians accepted the narrative that the Ottoman Turkish government had carried out a deliberate, pre-planned, systematic "genocide," there were some—especially in Turkey—who disputed this. So, having no real knowledge or opinion either way, we decided to take a look at the vast, accessible documentation, in Turkey, the United States and Western Europe, and make up our own minds.

What we discovered was that the story was much deeper and wider. The campaign of mass murder and ethnic cleansing was carried out, in staggered fashion, over a thirty-year period, between 1894 and 1924. It encompassed not only Turkey's Armenians but also all the other Christian communities in the country, primarily the Greeks, but also the various Assyrian sects. The process of ethnic-religious cleansing was characterized by rounds of deliberate large-scale massacre, alongside systematic

B. Morris (✉) • D. Ze'evi
Ben Gurion University, Be'er Sheva, Israel
e-mail: zeevi@bgu.ac.i; morrisbenny8@gmail.com

© The Author(s) 2024
T. Kühne et al. (eds.), *Documenting the Armenian Genocide*,
Palgrave Studies in the History of Genocide,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-36753-3_13

expulsions, forced conversions, and cultural annihilation that together amounted to genocide. At the beginning of this period, Christians had constituted about 20 percent of the population of Asia Minor; by 1924 the proportion of Christians in Turkey had fallen to 2 percent.¹

The destruction of the Christian communities was the result of the deliberate policy of three successive Ottoman and Turkish governments—Abdülhamid II in 1894–1896, the CUP (the Young Turks) from 1914–1918, and the Nationalist regime under Atatürk during 1919–1924—a policy that most of the country's Muslim inhabitants did not oppose, and many enthusiastically supported.² The murders, expulsions, and forced conversions were ordered by government officials and carried out by other officials, soldiers, gendarmes, policemen and, often, tribesmen and the civilian inhabitants of towns and villages. All of this occurred with the active participation of Muslim clerics and the encouragement of the Turkish-language press. This, we believe, is the inescapable conclusion to be drawn from the massive documentation we consulted, some of it seen and used for the first time.

The number of Christians slaughtered between 1894 and 1924 by the Turks and their helpers—chiefly Kurds but also Circassians, Chechens and, on occasion, Arabs—cannot be accurately tallied. For decades, Armenian spokesmen and historians have zoomed in on World War I and have referred to 1–1.5 million Armenians murdered during 1915–1916, the core genocidal event during the thirty years. Recent research, including by Armenian historians, has revised that figure substantially downward. There

¹ Ronald Suny, *They Can Live in the Desert*, 209. By 2016 Turkey's population, according to official data, was 99.8 percent Muslim, due to lower Christian birthrates and, more importantly, steady Christian emigration, especially after the anti-Greek pogrom in Istanbul in 1955 (see Speros Vyronis, *The Mechanism of Catastrophe*).

² Since Turkey itself was only formally founded in 1923, our use of the designation "Turks" here may seem anachronistic. But there are several reasons for this usage. One is that the term (or its contemporary rival, "Turanian") was used by the empire's elite as a name for itself as early as the end of the nineteenth century. The answer to the question "who is a Turk?" was vague at the time in terms of geography, ethnicity and language, even to early ideologues of Turkish nationalism such as Ziya Gökalp (a Kurd by birth). Members of the political elite often defined "Turk" as a cultural category comprising almost all the Muslim inhabitants of Anatolia, including Kurds, Azeris, Laz, and Circassians and other Dagestanis. Many in the elite who were ethnically non-Turkish were patriots of an emerging Turkish state. Such were Talât, who hailed from a Pomak-Romani family, Enver, whose ancestry was mostly Albanian, and the Circassian-born governor of Diyarbakır, Reşid, who believed he was fulfilling a patriotic duty by eliminating the Christians.

is no agreed figure as to the number of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire in 1894 or 1914. Nor was a proper count made after the thirty-year period of the number of Armenians who survived and reached foreign lands. Most historians estimate that on the eve of World War I, there were 1.5–2 million Armenians in the empire, mostly in Anatolia, and that between 800,000 and 1.2 million of them were deported. Raymond Kevorkian has written that 850,000 were deported and that “the number of those who had perished [by late 1916] exceeded 600,000.”³ Presumably he believes that more died during the following years. In a work based mainly on Ottoman and British sources, Fuat Dundar was criticized for factual errors. Fuat Dündar maintains that about 800,000 were deported and that altogether 664,000 were dead by the end of World War I, consisting of those who were slaughtered in place, died during the deportation marches, or died in their places of resettlement.⁴ Taner Akçam has estimated, mainly on the basis of Talât’s calculations in late 1917, that some 1.2 million Armenians were deported. Of these only 200,000 or so were alive by late 1916, implying that one million were murdered in 1915–1916.⁵

But none of these estimates include the number of Armenians killed before and after World War I. There is general agreement that about a quarter of a million Armenians fled the empire during the war, most of them to Russia, and that a similar number survived the deportations. Moreover, about 300,000 Armenians remained in Turkey through the war and were never deported; a hundred thousand of them were in Constantinople and smaller numbers lived elsewhere, mainly in Smyrna, Edirne, and Konya.⁶ Looking at the whole 1894–1924 period, in addition to those murdered during the Great War, at least 200,000 Armenians died during and as a result of the massacres of 1894–1896 and their aftermath. Another 20,000–30,000 were slaughtered in 1909 during the Adana pogroms. The Turks slaughtered many thousands more during 1919–1924. It is therefore probable that the number of Armenians killed over the 1894–1924 period exceeded one million, perhaps substantially. In this number we include not only those murdered outright but also those

³ Raymond Kevorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History*, 693.

⁴ Fuat Dundar, *Crime of Numbers: The Role of Statistics in the Armenian Question, 1878–1918*, 150–151.

⁵ Taner Akçam, *The Young Turks’ Crime Against Humanity: The Armenian Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in the Ottoman Empire*, 258–261.

⁶ Dundar, *Crime of Numbers*, 150–151. The number presumably includes converts to Islam.

deliberately placed in circumstances of privation and disease that resulted in death.

The number of Asia Minor and Edirne province Greeks murdered during 1894–1924 is also uncertain. Most historians speak of 1.5 to 2 million Greeks living in Asia Minor and Edirne in 1913. Almost no Greeks were killed in the massacres of 1894–1896. But hundreds, and perhaps thousands, died during the first half of 1914 as the Turks tried to ethnically cleanse the Aegean coast and western Asia Minor of Greeks. During the following years of the Great War, the Turks murdered many tens of thousands, and perhaps hundreds of thousands, in the course of the brutal deportations inland of Greek coastal communities and in the army's labor battalions. Subsequently, hundreds of thousands of Greeks were murdered during 1919–1924, when the Turks systematically massacred army-age males and deported hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children to the interior and then, in a second stage, to the coasts, from which the survivors were shipped off to Greece. Prominent among the victims in 1920–1922 were those deported from the Pontic coast and Smyrna.

Tessa Hofmann, a historian of the ethnic cleansing of the Ottoman Greeks, has argued that there were 2.7 million Greeks in the Ottoman Empire before 1914, and 1.2 million of them reached Greece in 1922–1925; hence, 1.5 million were murdered.⁷ But the figure 2.7 million is likely an exaggeration. Moreover, several hundred thousand Ottoman Greeks fled to Russia and other countries during 1914–1924, and several hundred thousand escaped deportation altogether. Most Greek historians accept the League of Nations' estimate from 1926 that about half of Asia Minor's estimated 2,000,000 Greeks died during 1914–1924.⁸ At the opposite extreme, Justin McCarthy, a pro-Turkish demographer and historian, has written that “between 1912 and 1922, approximately 300,000 Anatolian Greeks were lost ... from starvation, disease and murder.”⁹ This phrasing omits from the count Greeks murdered

⁷Tessa Hofmann, “Cumulative Genocide: The Massacres and Deportations of the Greek Population of the Ottoman Empire (1912–1923),” in Hofmann, Bjornlund and Meichanetsidis, *The Genocide of the Ottoman Greeks: Studies on the State-Sponsored Campaign of Extermination of the Christians of Asia Minor (1912–1922)*, 104.

⁸For example, see Nikolaos Hlamides, “The Smyrna Holocaust: The Final Phase of the Greek Genocide,” in Hofmann, Bjornlund, and Meichanetsidis, *Genocide of the Ottoman Greeks*, 224–225, especially note 120.

⁹Justin McCarthy, *Death and Exile: The Ethnic Cleansing of Ottoman Muslims 1821–1922*, 292.

before 1912—admittedly, a very small number—and those killed after 1922, a larger number. McCarthy's estimate also omits altogether what befell Greeks in Thrace, Constantinople, and the Caucasus. *En fin*, what is not in dispute is the inevitable conclusion that between 300,000 and one million Greeks died at Turkish hands during 1913 and 1924.

The number of Assyrian (or Syriac) Christians murdered during 1894–1924 is also uncertain. Donald Bloxham has estimated that “perhaps 250,000” Anatolian and borderland Assyrians, of a total population of 619,000, were massacred by the Turks and their helpers during World War I.¹⁰ But his estimate does not appear to take account of Assyrians massacred before the world war or during 1919–1924. The preceding assessments suggest that the Turks and their helpers murdered, straightforwardly or indirectly through privation and disease, between 1.5 and 2.5 million Christians between 1894 and 1924.¹¹

In recent decades historians have written persuasively about the Armenian Genocide of 1915–1916. But what happened in Turkey during the period 1894–1924 was the mass murder and expulsion of the country's *Christians*—Armenians, Greeks, and Assyrians. All suffered massive loss of life, all were equally shorn of their worldly goods, and nearly all who survived—save the Christians of Constantinople—were expelled from the country. In the wake of their demise, the ethno-religious infrastructure and culture of all three groups were erased, their homes, neighborhoods, towns and villages, churches, schools and cemeteries demolished or appropriated and converted to Muslim use. In the end, no denomination was shown “favoritism”; all suffered the same fate.

It is true that the ruling Muslim Turkish elite was consistently most hostile to the Armenians, who suffered the largest number of fatalities during the thirty-year period. And the purge of Christians began in 1894–1896 with the mass murder of Armenians, although some Assyrians were also caught up in the massacres. During the following decades the Turks and their helpers intermittently killed and expelled Armenians *en*

¹⁰ Bloxham, *The Great Game of Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians*, 98.

¹¹ Rudolph Rummel, an American political scientist and statistician, estimated that the Turks and their helpers killed “from 3,500,000 to over 4,300,000 Armenians, Greeks, Nestorians and other Christians” between 1900 and 1923 (Rummel, *Statistics of Democide: Genocide and Mass Murder Since 1900*, 78). He did not include in his estimate those murdered before 1900 or in 1924. In any event, his total seems vastly inflated and at odds with the estimates of most historians and statisticians.

masse, while designating them a disease that deserved and necessitated extirpation. (The Turks' language—"cancer," "microbes"—would be echoed years later in the Nazis' description of the Jews.) Even in 1922, when few Armenians remained in the country and the Greek Army had just massacred Muslims in its helter-skelter retreat to the Ionian coast, the Turks initially and deliberately murdered thousands of Smyrna's Armenians and only subsequently turned their guns and knives on the city's Greeks. Overall, during 1894–1924, the Turks seem to have murdered most of the empire's Armenians while expelling rather than murdering most of its Greeks.

Another indication of the overriding animosity toward the Armenians is that, through much of this period, they were barred from leaving the country—and marched to destruction—whereas Greeks were generally encouraged to expatriate. There were several reasons for this differential treatment rooted in specific circumstances of time and place, as well as more general reasons. Most importantly, the Armenians posed one of the first nationalist challenges to the Ottoman Empire and to the Turks, and they did so in the empire's Asiatic core. The Armenian intellectual elite took to nationalism a decade or two earlier than the Ottoman Greek elite (and, for that matter, the intellectual fathers of Arab nationalism). Moreover, there were several Armenian nationalist organizations, and most of them called for autonomy or even independence in the Turks' Anatolian heartland, not in its coastal peripheries. And the Armenians resorted to terrorism. This terrorism was no doubt a consequence of the Armenians' desperation, a desperation partly resulting from the blighting vassaldom of their rural masses. Unlike the Ottoman Greeks—who, since 1830, had the Kingdom of Greece to look to—the Armenians had no homeland to offer succor or haven. The area known as the Armenian Highland, now called Eastern Anatolia, perhaps including Cilicia, was their homeland, as the Turks understood. And these were also, of course, parts of the Turkish homeland. So, from the start, the Turks viewed the Armenian nationalists as a dire threat to the empire's territorial integrity, indeed existence. The Turks' worries may have been exaggerated, even paranoid. But many felt them sincerely, much as many Nazis were later to take seriously the absurd notion of a Jewish "mortal threat" to Germany.

To these underlying reasons must be added the Turks' (somewhat absurd) feeling, from 1914 on, that the Armenians had "betrayed" them—a feeling that makes little sense given the Turks' prior massacre of hundreds of thousands of Armenians. But there was a grain of logic to this

sense of betrayal. Armenian politicians, who had also sought Abdülhamid's removal, had been allies of the rebellious Young Turk leadership in the years before the CUP seized power, and even in the first years following their successful power-grab. At the same time, in the 1890s and early 1900s, Armenian spokesmen had often pleaded for Russian or Western diplomatic, political, and even military intervention on their behalf—and the Turks regarded their pleas as treasonous. And in 1914–1916, the CUP trumpeted the Armenians' alleged aid to the Russian armies fighting Turkey in the east, beginning with the Battle of Sarıkamış.

On the other hand, the Turks' attitude toward the Ottoman Greeks was, at least initially, ambivalent. True, in the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913 the Kingdom of Greece had fought against Turkey, and this had given the Ottomans a serious scare. But the Ottoman Greeks had posed no significant threat to the empire, having, before 1919, produced in Anatolia no operative national movement or terrorism. To be sure, some Ottoman Greeks during the Balkan Wars had openly displayed pro-Greece sentiments. But that was it: no rebellion, no terrorism. Moreover, the Ottoman Greeks were to a degree a protected species. Before World War I, the Turks worried that massacres of Ottoman Greeks might lead to war with Greece and to retaliatory Greek persecution of Muslims. And during August 1914– May 1917, the Turks' desire to maintain Greek non-belligerence was even stronger, as Greece's entry into the world war on the Allied side might have tilted the odds against them.¹²

In any event, during World War I there was no internal Ottoman Greek insurgency against Istanbul. Nonetheless, in the first half of 1914 and during the Great War itself, the Turks made centrally orchestrated efforts to rid Anatolia of at least some of its Greeks, and hundreds of thousands were indeed hounded into the interior or out of the country, or killed. Then in 1919, against the backdrop of the war against the invading Greek army (which had landed in Smyrna/Izmir in May), the gloves came off. The Greek seizure of that coastal city and the repeated pushes inland—almost to the outskirts of Ankara, the Nationalist capital—coupled with the largely imagined threat of a Pontic Greek breakaway, triggered a widespread, systematic four-year campaign of ethnic cleansing in which hundreds of thousands of Ottoman Greeks were massacred and more than a million expelled to Greece.

¹² Henry Morgenthau, *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story*, 325.

Whereas during the Great War the Ottomans could march the Armenians to empty marchland deserts, afterward, there were no such places at hand. The Greek “problem” had to be solved within the boundaries of the newborn Turkish republic, by mass murder or forced assimilation (conversion), or else by expatriation to Greece. Initially the Greeks of the littoral, especially in the Pontus, were deported inland, with genocidal intent and praxis. Adult men were usually first taken aside and murdered, while the convoys consisting of women, children and the elderly were brutally marched to extinction hither and thither across the sunbaked plateaus and snow-covered mountains, or dispersed in Muslim villages. Then in late 1922–1923, nationalist policy changed. While the Turks continued killing many thousands of men from Ionia and the Pontus, women, children, and the elderly were driven from the interior and the coastal towns and deported to Greece. This last stage meant ethnic cleansing through exile rather than through genocide. But throughout 1914–1924, the overarching aim was to achieve a Turkey free of Greeks.

The dispatch of the Armenians began earlier and was more thorough, partly because they enjoyed no concrete foreign protection. Throughout 1894–1924, the Western Powers and Russia, while often intervening diplomatically, failed to send troops or gunboats to save Armenians. The Turks were, and felt, free to murder or deport them at will. The repeated Russian invasions of the Van-Urmiya-Erzurum areas during World War I probably saved some Christian lives, but this was incidental to the Russians' war-making. Their objective was strategic rather than humanitarian. The Armenians were abandoned to their fate, as the Turks, since 1894–1896, understood they would be. British war-making in the Middle East, similarly, in no way was geared to saving Armenians though a handful were certainly, incidentally, saved by Britain's conquest of Iraq, Palestine and Transjordan in 1916–1918.

Historians of the period have tended, as we have said, to focus on what befell the Armenians, specifically in the years 1915–1916. But although German genocidal acts—and those of other colonial powers—were not uncommon in non-European colonies, the mass murder of the Armenians in the Great War was not an aberration—as, say, the Holocaust of 1940–1945 was in the course of modern German history. The Turks systematically murdered Armenians *en masse* before, during, and after 1915–1916. We believe that what happened must be viewed as a whole, beginning in 1894 and ending in 1924, and that one needs to look at the whole thirty-year period in order to properly understand the events of

1915–1916. Looking at the Armenian segment of what unfolded, historian Richard Hovannisian has written, accurately in our view, that there was a “continuum” of genocidal intent and a “continuum of ethnic cleansing,” aiming at the “de-Armenization of the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey,” stretching from 1894 to the 1920s, even if “it is unlikely that the sultan [Abdülhamid II in the 1890s] thought” in terms of complete extermination.¹³

We would add, however, that it was not so much “de-Armenization” as de-Christianization that the Ottoman and Nationalist Turks were after.¹⁴ Viewed in retrospect, the 1894–1896 massacres pointed the way to 1915–1916, and 1915–1916 pointed the way to 1919–1924. On various levels 1894–1896 was a trial run. Abdülhamid was once quoted as saying, “The only way to get rid of the Armenian question is to get rid of the Armenians.”¹⁵ What happened in the 1890s persuaded the next generation of Muslims and Christians that genocide was possible—the populace and troops would do the job, the great powers would not interfere, the

¹³ Richard Hovannisian, ed., *The Armenian Genocide: Cultural and Ethical Legacies*, 6–7.

¹⁴ By that time the definition of Turkishness came into sharper focus and the country’s leaders were also eager to “Turkify” the state, which accounts for the successive anti-Kurdish campaigns of the CUP and Kemal during World War I and the 1920s and 1930s. These campaigns, though also guided by the lights of social or demographic engineering, fall outside the remit of this essay. But, in brief: hard on the heels of the vital Kurdish assistance rendered to the government in destroying the Armenians, the Turks in 1916–1918 deported hundreds of thousands of Kurds from eastern to central and western Anatolia. Turkification was the goal, as defined in the secret statutes or bylaws of the Directorate for the Settlement of Tribes and Refugees, headed by Şükrü Kaya Bey. The directorate orchestrated the deportations. Many Kurdish deportees died on the roads or were slaughtered by Turkish troops and police. But here, unlike with the Armenians, the main aim was to assimilate—Turkify—rather than exterminate, though killing Kurds was also acceptable. As Enver reportedly told a session of the CUP Central Committee after the defeat at Sarıkamış, “Though we are outwardly defeated ... in actuality we are triumphal because we left the dead bodies of several tens of thousands young Kurds on the roads from the forests of Sarıkamış to Erzurum.” But the westward transplantation of the Kurds was far more difficult than the destruction of the Armenians, which explains why it was drawn out and only partially successful. Firstly, the Turks didn’t enjoy the service of Kurdish helpers, as they had with the Armenians. Secondly, the Kurds were by and large warlike and well-armed (Vahan Baibourtian, *The Kurds, the Armenian Question, and the History of Armenian-Kurdish Relations*, 214–216). Moreover, being largely nomads, the Kurdish tribesmen proved more resilient and were able, in many cases, to make their way back to the Kurdish heartland in the east. See also Uğur Ümit Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913–1950*, 107–169.

¹⁵ Quoted in Marjorie Housepian Dobkin, *Smyrna 1922, The Destruction of a City*, 34.

Armenians would not resist—and conditioned the Muslims for the next stage by dehumanizing and marginalizing the Armenians. In 1915–1916 the Turks were killing what some of them referred to as “infidel dogs.”¹⁶ The killing and massive confiscation of Christian property during World War I, by individuals and the state, were merely a repetition, albeit expanded, of what had happened in the 1890s, as was the rape and acquisition of Armenian women for immediate or long-term use. During the Great War the Young Turk leadership understood and acknowledged the connection between 1915–1916 and 1894–1896, and, indeed, saw themselves as improving on what Abdülhamid had begun. “I have accomplished,” Talât reportedly told friends, “more toward solving the Armenian problem in three months than Abdul Hamid accomplished in thirty years.”¹⁷ On May 12, 1915, as the mass Armenian deportations were getting under way, Vartkes Serengulian, the Armenian parliamentarian, anticipating massacres, asked Talât, “Will you continue the work of Abdul Hamid?” Talât replied, “Yes.”¹⁸ Likewise the Armenian massacres of 1915–1916 paved the way for the anti-Greek (and anti-Armenian) atrocities of 1919–1924, in which many of the earlier measures were replicated: mass arrest of local leaders, the initial killing of adult men, the use of lethal convoys, and so on.

What drove the successive Ottoman and Turkish governments and the Turkish people in 1894–1896, 1914–1918, and 1919–1924 to “de-Christianize” the Ottoman Empire and Turkish Republic? To be sure, there was a common political impulse and motive during the reigns of Abdülhamid, the CUP, and Mustafa Kemal. Most Muslim Turks, including the country’s leaders, genuinely feared that the Christian minorities, especially the Armenians, were destabilizing the empire and, later, Turkey. The Turks believed the Christians’ actions threatened their country with dismemberment, through a combination of internal subversion and precipitation of Western and Russian intervention.

¹⁶See extracts from a letter written by Hafiz Mehmet, 23 November 1895, *UKNA FO 195/1944*; memorandum by Consul Barnham respecting the Zeitoun Insurrection, 1895–96,” 18 June 1896, attached to Barnham to Salisbury, 21 June 1896, *Turkey No. 8* (1986), 213–214; and Greek Patriarchate, “Persecution of the Greeks in Turkey, 1914–1918,” undated but probably from 1919, Bodl. MS Toynbee Papers, 19–29.

¹⁷Morgenthau, *Morgenthau’s Story*, 342.

¹⁸Quoted in Taner Akçam, *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility*, 123.

Another key factor was the ideology of Muslim supremacy. All three regimes, and the Muslim populace, regarded Christian subservience as a state of nature. That had been the empire's experience for centuries. Christian victories and depredations against Muslims—as had occurred in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in North Africa, the Balkans, Crete, and the eastern marchlands—were unintelligible subversions of the worldview Muslims had been brought up with. And Christian iterations of equality with Muslims, as prompted and backed by the Christian great powers and embodied in nineteenth-century Ottoman imperial firmans and legal reforms, were seen as an affront to Allah's will and the natural order, based on the time-honored traditions of Christian dhimmitude. As aggrieved Turkish notables from Kastamonu put it in 1920—against the backdrop of the Franco-Turkish war in which Armenians, too, periodically fought the Turks—“The Armenians, whom we have always protected, now rise against their former masters, they massacre and plunder the [Muslim] inhabitants. . . . We just wonder if an instance of this kind has ever been witnessed in the history of Islam.”¹⁹

After the ethnic cleansing of the Christians, Kemal came to be identified in Western Europe with secularism and modernity. But Kemal, like the CUP leaders, had been brought up Muslim and shared an Islamic world view, as well as a history of familial dispossession and refugeedom at Christian hands in the Balkans. During the Great War, and in the years immediately before and after, Turkey's leaders shared with the Muslim population at large a deeply ingrained feeling that the natural order had somehow been overthrown and that matters had to be put right. Such sentiments also underpinned the repeated abuses of the minute Christian communities living in Turkey during the later republican years, from the “wealth tax” of the 1940s to the pogroms of the 1950s and 1960s.

Those who orchestrated the mass murder and expulsions, from Abdülhamid through the CUP triumvirs—Talât, Enver and Cemal—to Mustafa Kemal, were motivated by the desire to maintain the territorial integrity of the empire and then of the Turkish state. Imperial, religious, and nationalist considerations motivated them to roll back foreign control, interference, and influence. Their memories comprehended the gradual diminution of Ottoman-Turkish domains as a result of internal Christian rebellion (Greece, Serbia, Crete), external Christian invasion

¹⁹Cheikh Ziaddin, Abdullah and Hajji Mehmed to? 1 February 1920, USNA RG 84, Turkey (Constantinople), vol. 419.

(Russia in the western and eastern marchlands, Britain in Egypt-Palestine-Syria-Iraq, France in Algeria and Tunisia, and lately Italy in Libya) and the occasional partnership between foreign intervention and pressure and internal Christian subversion or rebelliousness. This political-religious motive shifted from “imperial” to “nationalist” during the years immediately preceding the outbreak of World War I, when the Turks, under the CUP, adopted nationalism as a unifying principle, gradually replacing Ottoman imperialism. The subsequent anti-Greek and anti-Armenian campaigns, leading to expulsion and mass murder, were in large measure driven by this nationalism and its exclusionist (“Turkifying”) mentality. But the nationalism that drove the murderous campaigns of 1909 and 1914–1924 also had a religious undertone, as nationalism in most Muslim Middle Eastern countries in the twentieth century always had.

To put it another way, given the non-separation of church and state in the Muslim Middle East, the nationalist politics of the region have often been underwritten by, and are inseparable from, Islamic beliefs. Hence in the anti-Christian urban pogroms of 1894–1896 and 1919–1922, Muslim clerics and seminarians were prominent among the killers and jihadist rhetoric was prevalent, if not dominant, in sermons, billboards, and the Turkish press. Hence, too, religious conversion was often the desired result of depredations, and by becoming Muslim many of those who converted and survived, mainly women, were by and large incorporated into the nation. (It is perhaps worth noting that we have encountered no evidence, not one case, of Greeks or Armenians forcing Muslims to convert to Christianity anywhere in the Ottoman Empire during 1894–1924. We find no such instances even in the areas of western Anatolia and Cilicia where Christians—Greeks and Frenchmen—dominated during 1919–1922. Nor, it should be added, have we found cases of Christian priests leading the infrequent massacres of Muslims that occurred between 1894 and 1924).

To judge from the available documentation, among most of the actual perpetrators of the mass murder and mass expulsion of Christians throughout the thirty-year period, the overriding motivation was religious. The perpetrators viewed the Christians, of all denominations, as infidels who, insurgent or resurgent, should be destroyed. The perpetrators believed they were acting in defense of Islam and in defense of the sacred Islamic domain. For most, the slaughter of Christians, innocents as well as combatants, was imperative in a state of declared jihad. And, of course, the fact that conversion to Islam, in many cases, was sufficient to redeem potential

victims and take them into the fold is also proof of the religious impulse underlying Turkish Muslims' actions (although in many other cases even those who converted were massacred or deported). Indeed, some Western observers at the time situated the ethnic cleansing of Turkey's Christians within the wider context of a reborn clash of civilizations between the Muslim East and the Christian West.²⁰

The Thirty-Year Genocide can be seen as the most dramatic and significant chapter in the de-Christianization of the Middle East during the past two centuries. It was not the last, though. The destruction of Syria's and Iraq's significant Christian communities—which started with the Syrio-Lebanese pogroms in the mid-nineteenth century—is today nearing completion, as is the de-Christianization, demographically speaking, of Syria, Iraq, and Palestine. Bethlehem, once an overwhelmingly Christian town, is now majority Muslim. It is no accident that the Ottoman Empire declared jihad against the Allied powers in November 1914, days after entering World War I. Some of the CUP leaders may have been atheists, but even they could not imagine a state that was not based, to some extent, on Islamic solidarity, and they were keenly aware of what it would take to mobilize mass enthusiasm, hatred, and sacrifice. As Enver put it in early August 1914, "War with England is now within the realm of possibilities. . . . Since such a war would be a holy war . . . it will definitely be pertinent to rally the Muslim population . . . [and] invite everyone to come to the state's defense in this war."²¹ The Şeyhülislam's *fatwa* (*fetva*) calling for jihad against the Allied powers followed. That *fatwa* did not specifically refer to the empire's Christian minorities. But it didn't have to. By 1914 the Turkish masses had been conditioned to regard their Christian neighbors as potentially or actually subversive and rebellious, helpmates of their external enemies. It was only natural that removing or destroying them would be a necessary part of the holy war, which the Turkish leadership and masses viewed as a defensive, existential struggle.

Proofs that the Ottoman and Turkish leaders, from Abdülhamid to Mustafa Kemal, saw the problem as one of the Christians rather than of the Armenians or Greeks or Assyrians, are abundant, not only in their actions but also in their words. Abdülhamid II, according to his private secretary, believed that "within the limits of our State, we can tolerate but members of our own [Turkish] nation and believers in our own [Muslim]

²⁰Horton to Secretary of State, 26 September 1922, USNA RG 59, 867.4016, roll 47.

²¹Quoted in Suny, *They Can Live*, 215.

faith.”²² As to the CUP triumvirs, the German ambassador in Istanbul reported that in June 1915 Talât had told one of his embassy staff, “The Turkish Government intended to make use of the World War to deal thoroughly with its internal enemies, the Christians of Turkey.”²³ Ambassador Morgenthau lumped the three CUP leaders—Enver, Talât, and Cemal—together when he explained and defined their goal, in his wartime memoir: “Their passion for Turkifying the nation seemed to demand logically the extermination of all Christians—Greeks, Syrians, and Armenians. Much as they admired the Mohammedan conquerors of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they stupidly believed that these great warriors had made one fatal mistake, for they had had it in their power completely to obliterate the Christian populations and had neglected to do so. This policy in their opinion was a fatal error of statesmanship and explained all the woes from which Turkey has suffered in modern times.”²⁴ And Kemal, routinely careful in his public pronouncements, in September 1922, in the exhilaration of victory, told Western officials that the country’s Christians “had to go.” By then, of course, most had already “gone” under duress, either overseas or deep into Turkey’s soil.

The mass slaughter and expulsion during 1914–1924 of the Assyrians is the definitive “tell,” indicating that what the Turks sought was the elimination of Turkey’s Christians *in toto*, not the elimination of this or that ethnic group that happened to adhere to Christianity. The various and rival Assyrian sects—the Chaldean Catholic Church, the Assyrian Church of the East, the Chaldean Syrian Church, the Syriac Orthodox Church, the Jacobite Syrian Christian Church, and so on—had no “national” political agenda and were not thought by the Turks to have one. They did not engage in terrorism. And they were so dispersed and demographically insignificant as to threaten no one. Nonetheless they were murdered and expelled *en masse*.

Many in the West added a racial veneer to the explanation of Turkish behavior: their murderousness was an expression of the Turkish “character”; here was “the terrible Turk” unchained. Most memorable in this respect was the anti-Turk charge sheet drawn up in the 1870s by Gladstone in his pamphlet, “Bulgarian Horrors,” which alleged the massacre of tens of thousands of Christian innocents. Harold Nicolson, a cultivated British

²² Quoted in Suny, *They Can Live*, 134.

²³ Quoted in Dobkin, *Smyrna 1922*, 46.

²⁴ Morgenthau, *Morgenthau’s Story*, 290. See also 276–286.

diplomat, later put it very clearly: “Long residence in Constantinople had convinced me that behind his mask of indolence, the Turk conceals impulses of the most brutal savagery. . . The Turks have contributed nothing whatsoever to the progress of humanity; they are a race of Anatolian marauders.”²⁵

But whether or not one believes that a nation can have an inherent character and exhibit constant and predictable behavioral patterns, the destruction of Turkey’s Armenian, Greek, and Assyrian communities during 1894–1924, like most great historical events and processes, was multilayered in motivation. And somewhat different motives or emphases powered the different sectors of the Ottoman Muslim population. To be sure, religion and politics were prevalent among both the organizers and the perpetrators. But there were additional factors. Kevorkian and other historians have pointed to “the construction of a Turkish nation-state—the supreme objective of the Young Turks,” as an additional motive of the CUP leadership in the post-Hamidian massacres. Indeed, Kevorkian designates the 1915–1916 genocide “the act that gave birth to the Turkish nation,” the bloody handmaiden of the republic. And he rightly points to another major motive: expropriation of Christian property. This was one of “the major objectives of the Young Turk policy of ethnically homogenizing Asia Minor.”²⁶

Economics drove the Turks on two levels, national and personal. Nationally, the rulers, from Abdülhamid and the CUP through Kemal, all sought to lay their hands on the vast wealth Christians possessed—land, houses, money, businesses. In part, they hoped that the transfer of assets from Christian to Turkish hands would help empower Turks and foster a “national” and “modernized” Turkish economy.²⁷ By the *fin de siècle*, the minority communities appeared to have too much economic power and too many financial assets: in 1900, twenty of twenty-one metalworking factories in the empire were owned by Christians; in Bursa, thirty-three raw-silk manufactories were owned by Christians and only six by Muslims. (Two were owned by the government.)²⁸ But the Turkish leaders—especially Kemal—were also driven by other economic considerations. They

²⁵ Quoted in Stanford Shaw, *From Empire to Republic: The Turkish War of National Liberation 1918–1923, A Documentary Study*, vol. 2, 399–400.

²⁶ Kevorkian, *Armenian Genocide*, 1–2 and 810.

²⁷ Suny, *They Can Live*, xiv–xv.

²⁸ Suny, *They Can Live*, 52 and 56–57.

needed money to finance their successive, impoverishing wars, and they had to house and put on their feet the destitute Muslim *muhacirs* who had been cast out of the Balkans and Caucasus.

Alongside national considerations, there was the personal motivation of greed. Among the perpetrators—local officials, soldiers and gendarmes, mob members, and Kurdish tribesmen—there was envy of the better-off, or allegedly better-off, Christians and the desire to despoil them of their lands and houses, household possessions, money, and farm animals. Almost every attack on Christians during 1894–1896 and 1919–1923 was accompanied or followed by massive looting, and in some cases the assaults were actually preceded by a call to loot. During 1914–1916, too, a great deal of “neighborly” plunder accompanied the exit of the Greek and Armenian deportees.

Similarly a desire for revenge was operative on the national and personal levels. Destroying the Ottoman Christians was payback for the territorial losses and humiliations meted out to the empire and the Turks since the 1820s by the Christian powers and rebellious Christian minorities, from the Balkans to the Caucasus. And millions of Turks—including *muhacirs* and CUP leaders—had personal accounts to settle with Christians whose “cousins” had dispossessed them and their families and driven them to Anatolia.

Punishment and deterrence were also important motivators for those unleashing the anti-Armenian pogroms, especially in 1894–1896. Massacres would dampen Armenian enthusiasm to push for “reforms,” let alone independence, and for individual civil rights. Moreover, once embarked on genocide, the CUP leaders understood that there was no turning back, and the mission had to be completed; Armenians left alive would doubtless seek revenge.

The perpetrators included Ottoman and Turkish regular troops; Turkish irregulars, including Kurdish Hamidiye regiments; Kurdish tribesmen; Turkish, Laz, Arab, Chechen, and Circassian villagers; many Muslim townspeople, and *muhacirs*. In 1894–1896 the massacres were carried out initially by soldiers and Hamidiye cavalry, and then by a mix—different in different sites—of soldiers, gendarmes, and civilians. In 1909 the main perpetrators were Turkish and Kurdish civilians and army units sent “to restore order.” In 1915–1916 the murderers were a mix of Turkish soldiers and gendarmes; Kurdish, Turkmen, and, occasionally Arab tribesmen; Special Organization members; and Chechen and other irregulars.

In 1919–1923 the killers were soldiers and Nationalist irregulars, *gendarmes*, Kurdish tribesmen, and villagers and townspeople.

Among perpetrators and local officials alike, sexual gratification seems to have played a major role in the assault on the Christians, to judge by the sheer volume of rapes and abductions during the successive bouts of violence. It is probable that rape and the abduction of women and children also served as an assertion of social and religious mastery, especially in societies governed by traditional repressive sexual norms. Perhaps it was understood in some levels of Turkish officialdom that the production of babies thus engendered would enhance Muslim numbers and help in the destruction of the Christian communities. The bouts of violence were characterized by an atmosphere of absolute sexual permissiveness vis-à-vis Christians. We have encountered no evidence that any Muslim in the Ottoman Empire or Turkey was punished for raping, abducting, or enslaving a Christian during 1894–1924. Indeed, rape and abduction throughout the period seem to have been tacitly approved, if not promoted, by the Ottoman and Turkish authorities. Such acts were never publicized or condemned by Ottoman or Turkish spokesmen. Rather, as with the mass murders, the official line was consistently one of blanket denial while charging Christians with the very offences Muslims committed against them.

Following World War II, commentators compared the Armenian genocide to the Nazi destruction of European Jewry. Even the term “Holocaust”—from the Greek, meaning a sacrifice wholly consumed by fire—was occasionally used in descriptions of the 1894–1923 massacres of Christians; the massacres often saw Christians burnt to death in churches. Indeed, Hitler at one point reportedly referred to the “annihilation of the Armenians” when envisioning the coming destruction of Europe’s “lesser” peoples. And throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the German ultra-nationalists, especially the Nazis, revered Kemal. They held up the Turkish “purification” of Anatolia, of its Armenians and Greeks, as a model in achieving the desired *völkisch* state.²⁹

Without doubt the twentieth-century wars in which the Germans and Turks participated made both peoples more brutal, a precondition for implementing genocide. But the Holocaust and the Thirty-Year Genocide were different in important ways. For one thing, Hitler’s racist views led

²⁹ See Stefan Ihrig, *Ataturk in the Nazi Imagination*, especially 81–87, 206–208 and 223–225.

to the biological definition of the Jews and to their destruction. Jews who had converted, or whose parents had converted, to Christianity were not usually spared, and conversion did not offer a path to safety. In Turkey, by contrast, conversion sometimes assured salvation, and Turks and other Muslims willingly, indeed eagerly, took in Christian women and children and turned them into Muslim Turks, Kurds, or Arabs. Such integration or absorption of Jews into the German national body under the Nazis was unthinkable; the Nazis, indeed, treated sex between Aryans and Jews as a crime. The Turks, if anything, promoted cross-religious and cross-racial sex between Muslim men and Christian women, with the offspring automatically bolstering Muslim numbers.

The Nazis' anti-Jewish campaign was not based on personal sadism, of the sort exhibited by SS officer Amon Goeth in the movie "Schindler's List" (1993). Sadism and cruelty were pervasive, of course, and massive suffering was inflicted. But in most cases suffering was not the perpetrators' purpose. The process was impersonal and cold, and geared only to extermination. The Turks' mass murder and deportation of the Christians during 1894–1924, on the other hand, was highly upfront and personal and involved countless acts of individual sadism. Where the Nazis used guns and gas, many of the murdered Christians were killed with knives, bayonets, axes, and stones; thousands were burned alive (the Nazis generally burned corpses); tens of thousands of women and girls were gang-raped and murdered; clerics were crucified; and thousands of Christian dignitaries were tortured—eyes gouged out, noses and ears cut off, feet turned to mush—before being executed.

Another major difference between the two genocides was that many Armenians and Greeks—especially in 1894–1896, 1909, and 1919–1923—were murdered by civilians, not soldiers or gendarmes, and here and there women and children participated in the killings. Only in 1915–1916 was the murder of Armenians handled primarily by the military, paramilitary units, and gendarmes, though Turkish villagers and Kurdish tribesmen also took part. Throughout this period, the majority of Turkish civilians saw what was happening to their neighbors, or otherwise knew, and largely approved of it. During the Holocaust German civilians were almost never involved in the killing, which occurred mainly in Poland and the Soviet Union. They may have heard stories, and they certainly saw their Jewish neighbors being rounded up and carted off, but they rarely witnessed an actual killing. In Turkey the whole death-dealing process was routinely accompanied by robbery and looting for personal gain by townspeople,

villagers, and tribesmen. Huge convoys of emaciated, starving and dying people were often camped right outside the main cities. The number of Muslim civilians personally involved, directly and indirectly, in the deportation and mass murder of Christians during 1894–1924 must have been enormous.

Lastly, the two genocidal processes—against the Jews and against the Christians—occurred on very different time-scales. The murderous persecution of the Jews lasted five years or, if one begins the count from Kristallnacht in November 1938, seven years. The Christians of Turkey suffered three decades of persecution even though there were years of relative “quiet” between each murderous bout. This meant that the Armenians—less so the Greeks and Assyrians—underwent an almost unrelenting torment: an Armenian woman from eastern Anatolia, born in the 1880s, might well have seen her parents killed in 1895 and her husband and son massacred in 1915. If she survived, she probably would have been raped or murdered, or raped and murdered, in 1919–1924. Certainly she would have been expatriated in that last genocidal phase. For most Greeks and Assyrians, the period of acute persecution would have been restricted to a “mere” ten years, from 1914 to 1924.

Both the Nazis and the Turks benefitted from the docility of their victims. After the Holocaust, many Zionists in Palestine and later Israel blamed the Jews of Europe for going “like sheep to the slaughter,” almost unresisting collaborators in their own deaths. The anti-German uprisings in Warsaw, Bialystok, Treblinka, and several other sites, and the activities of a few Jewish partisan groups, were the rare exceptions rather than the rule. Likewise the vast majority of Armenians, Greeks, and Assyrians went to their deaths unresisting; the preemptive rebellions in Zeytun and Van, and the resisters on Musadağ, all in 1915, were also almost unique. In both cases the power of the state and the situation of the victim populations were such that effective resistance was impossible. Neither the Jews in Europe nor the Christians in Turkey were “nationally” organized or armed.

In the course of the massacres, both the Germans and the Turks employed deceit to smooth the path of murder, to stanch potential trouble and rebelliousness on the part of the victims. The Germans told the Jews they were being “resettled in the East” and that “work leads to freedom”; the Turks told the Armenians they were being resettled in the southeast or in Konya, and Greeks were often led to believe that they were merely being deported just before they were actually executed. In many

cases Armenians were told that bribes or conversion would lead to salvation, but they were often murdered after paying bribes or converting. Both the Germans and the Turks tried, during the years of massacre, to hide what they were doing from the prying eyes of outsiders. The Turks made sure that much of the killing was done well outside cities where consuls and missionaries roamed; the Germans sequestered their murderous enterprise in closed-off ghettos and camps, mostly in Poland and the conquered parts of the Soviet Union. Both perpetrator peoples subsequently tried to cover up and expunge the physical traces of the mass killings, by burial and with lime and fire. Both, in describing what happened and in the language used in operational orders and reports, they deployed euphemisms. It must be pointed out, though, that much of the original Turkish documentation is inaccessible; perhaps the Turks also used more explicit terms.

Both genocides witnessed the assembly of victims in concentration camps or special areas as a prelude to the *coup de grace*.³⁰ In the case of the Turks, these concentration camps were usually open fields, sometimes marked off by barbed wire, in which deportation convoys were halted for a night or a week or months. Often the camps located near railway terminals, were where the inmates died of disease, exposure, and starvation, much as many Jews died of the same causes in the ghettos and concentration camps of Central and Eastern Europe.

In the course of both genocides, the perpetrators looted the victims' property on a large scale; mass murder produced economic gain. In both, gold teeth, and occasionally swallowed jewelry, were extracted from the dead. But it would appear that German soldiers and civilians received less personal economic gain than did their Turkish counterparts. Looted Jewish property almost always went to the state or to the leadership, whereas during the Thirty-Year Genocide, plundered property was routinely "shared" between the state and countless Muslim civilians, officials, gendarmes, and soldiers.³¹

³⁰ See Khatchig Mouradian, "Internment and Destruction: Concentration camps during the Armenian Genocide 1915–1916," in Manzhong, Panayi and Stibbe. (eds.) *Internment During the First World War* (Routledge, 2020).

³¹ For a partial comparison between German and Turkish looting policies and practices, see Umit Kurt, "Legal and Official Plunder of Armenian and Jewish Properties in Comparative Perspective: The Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust," *Journal of Genocide Research* 17, no. 3 (2015), 305–326.

There were similarities also in the composition of the killing squads. Both Turks and Germans deployed special operations units, not just regular troops. During the Holocaust, initially, much of the killing was carried out in the East by specially formed *Einsatzgruppen*; in the Ottoman case, the shadowy Special Organization (*teşkilât-ı mahsusa*) served a similar purpose, though its operatives used local troops, gendarmes, and Kurdish hirelings to do the actual killing. During both genocides, the chief perpetrators—Germans and Turks—used other ethnic groups as auxiliaries—Poles, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, and Frenchmen; Kurds, Circassians, and Chechens—to round up the victims and murder them.

And, lastly, both nations, after defeat by the Allies and appropriate regime changes, tried some of the perpetrators, though the postwar Turkish governments very quickly abandoned the effort and punished almost nobody whereas the Germans, after initial hesitation, persisted. For decades, they tried and punished Nazi war criminals. Nonetheless, many Nazis, including actual perpetrators, were re-employed in the bureaucracies of East and West Germany and Austria in the decades after World War II. In the Turkish case, the most prominent World War I-era perpetrators were assassinated by Armenian avengers, but others often resurfaced in the state apparatus under Mustafa Kemal during the 1920s. And whereas the German people acknowledged collective guilt, expressed remorse, made financial reparation, tried to educate their young about what had happened, and strove to eradicate racism, successive Turkish governments and the Turkish people have never owned up to what happened or to their guilt. They continue to play the game of denial and to blame the victims.

We set out to discover what happened to the Armenians in Anatolia during World War I. Our investigation convinced us that the story cannot be confined to 1915–1916 or to the Armenians and that the Turks' genocidal ethno-religious cleansings were designed to deal with all the country's Christians and were implemented by successive governments over a thirty-year period.

Since the massive bouts of atrocity were committed under three very different ideological umbrellas, we must resist the temptation to attribute what happened to an aberrant ideology or to an evil faction or person. Clearly Islam was the banner under which, for a great majority of the executioners, the atrocities were perpetrated. But "Islam" in itself is not a sufficient explanation. After all, for centuries the Muslim Ottomans ran an empire that respected or at least tolerated religious minorities and protected and allowed them a measure of autonomy, as long as they accepted

subordination and obedience. As we have tried to show, it was the specific convergence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries of a declining, threatened Islamic polity and people and the rise of modern nationalisms and greed that brought forth this protracted evil.

We approached this study with no political agenda; indeed, we come from different ideological perspectives. Our sole purpose was to clarify and describe a fateful period of history. But in the years since we embarked on this journey, the true dimensions of the tragedy gradually unfolded before our eyes, file after file, document after document. We hope that this study illuminates what happened in Asia Minor in 1894–1924, and that it will generate debate and, among Turks, a reconsideration of their past.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

