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1

Genocide as Process

A HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK (1878–1923)

THE TERM “Armenian Genocide” is most commonly used to describe the massacres and deportations that took place in Anatolia and Syria during the war years of 1914–1918. While many scholars acknowledge the deeper historical roots of these events, the genocide is nevertheless often interpreted as a discrete episode—albeit one extending over four years—and analyzed accordingly. This perspective, however, remains overly narrow. Although it is valid for the period in which the destruction was most concentrated, it fails to capture the broader historical trajectory within which the genocide unfolded.

In this chapter, the Armenian Genocide is approached not as a singular event but as a historical process. It is examined within a long-term framework that begins with the Treaty of Berlin in 1878 and concludes only with the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. These dates should not be understood as rigid temporal boundaries; rather, they function as symbolic markers of major political transformations and indicate a gradually unfolding trajectory of violence, exclusion, and destruction. This perspective allows the genocide to be situated within broader imperial, political, and social transformations that shaped the late Ottoman world, highlighting continuities that cannot be captured through a narrow wartime lens alone.¹

1. In recent years, conceptualizing genocide not as a single event but as a process unfolding over time has become increasingly common in the scholarly literature. One important reason for this shift is the analytical difficulty of treating cases such as the destruction of Indigenous nations in North America or Aboriginal populations in Australia as isolated events. In these contexts, genocide took the form of a prolonged and cumulative process extending over decades, making it more appropriate to speak of a gradual trajectory of destruction rather than

Reforms in the Empire as Macro Framework

The decision to begin this historical account in 1878 is not arbitrary. That year's Treaty of Berlin represents a critical juncture in the long arc of Ottoman reform, particularly concerning the status of Christian communities within the empire. With this treaty, the so-called "Armenian reform question" was formally placed on the agenda of international diplomacy. It was the first time the issue ceased to be purely internal and became subject to the oversight and intervention of the Great Powers.

To be sure, the roots of this question reach much further back. They lie in a series of reform efforts—beginning with the Imperial Edict of 1839 (Tanzimat Fermanı), followed by the 1856 Reform Edict (Islahat Fermanı), and culminating in the 1876 Constitution. Each of these initiatives emerged from a mixture of internal and external pressures. While they were, in part, a response to domestic demands for modernization and legal equality, they were also driven—often decisively—by the geopolitical calculations of the Ottoman state and the demands of the European powers.²

The 1839 Imperial Rescript, formally known as the Tanzimat Edict, marked the beginning of structural reform in the Ottoman Empire and directly challenged the Islamic foundations of its sociopolitical order. While shaped by an emerging Ottoman reformist elite, it was also prompted by mounting international pressure, particularly amid the crisis with Mehmet Ali Pasha of Egypt. In seeking a diplomatic resolution to the conflict, the Ottoman leadership hoped to demonstrate to the Great Powers that it was capable of internal reform and thus deserving of support.³

a single catastrophic episode. For selected discussions in the literature, see Sheri P. Rosenberg and Everita Silina, "Genocide by Attrition: Silent and Efficient," in *Genocide Matters: Ongoing Issues and Emerging Perspectives*, ed. Joyce Apse and Ernesto Verdeja (Routledge, 2013), 106–27; Sheri P. Rosenberg, "Genocide Is a Process, Not an Event," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* 7, no. 1 (2012): 16–23.

2. For a summary of important events in Ottoman history, see Erik J. Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History* (I. B. Tauris, 2017). For the history of nineteenth-century reforms, see Roderic H. Davison, *Reform in the Ottoman Empire, 1856–1876* (Gordian Press, 1963); Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (Oxford University Press, 1961); and Heather J. Sharkey, "The Ottoman Empire in an Age of Reform: From Sultan Mahmud II to the End of the Tanzimat Era, 1808–1876," in *A History of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Middle East*, ed. Heather J. Sharkey (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

3. For a study of how Armenian communities experienced the Tanzimat reforms and their aftermath, see, Talin Suciyan, *Outcasting Armenians Tanzimat of the Provinces* (Syracuse University Press, 2023).

The 1856 Reform Edict expanded upon the promises of Tanzimat by more explicitly committing the empire to legal equality for non-Muslims. This decree was issued in the wake of the Crimean War (1853–1856), and was intended, above all, to secure continued political and military support from the Western powers, especially against Russian influence. For Ottoman leaders, the path to preserving the empire's territorial integrity increasingly ran through the approval of Europe's capitals.

The third major initiative, the 1876 Ottoman Constitution, also arose under intense diplomatic pressure. In response to the 1875 Bosnian uprising and the brutal suppression of the 1876 Bulgarian revolt, the Great Powers convened the Istanbul (Constantinople) Conference to press for reforms in the Balkans. Hoping to preempt foreign intervention, the Ottoman government proclaimed a Constitution on December 23, 1876—while the conference was still in session—arguing that the establishment of a constitutional regime rendered further negotiations unnecessary. But when the Ottomans rejected the proposals put forward at the conference, diplomatic talks broke down, and war with Russia soon followed.

Although short-lived, the 1876 Constitution marked a pivotal moment in Ottoman political life. Elections were held, and Parliament convened in March 1877, but the outbreak of the Russo-Ottoman War gave Sultan Abdülhamid II the pretext to suspend the assembly in February 1878. He established an autocratic regime that would last until 1908. Despite its brief lifespan, the Constitution set the stage for ongoing debates about reform and governance.

The war ended in a decisive Ottoman defeat. On March 3, 1878, the Treaty of San Stefano was signed with Russia, confirming substantial territorial losses in the Balkans and along the empire's northeastern frontier. One of its most consequential provisions—Article 16—required the Ottoman government to enact reforms in the eastern provinces, referred to in the treaty as “Armenia,” in order to protect the local Christian population from Kurdish and Circassian violence. This marked the first time “Armenia” was recognized as a geographical entity in an international agreement. The clause sparked alarm among the other Great Powers, particularly Britain, which viewed the treaty as an overextension of Russian influence.

In a secret agreement concluded with the Ottoman Empire, Britain obtained control of Cyprus in exchange for offering diplomatic support and using its influence to persuade Russia to accept a new round of multilateral negotiations in Berlin. The resulting Treaty of Berlin, signed on July 13, 1878, replaced Article 16 with Article 61. Although the term “Armenia” was removed, the new clause

committed the Ottoman state to implement the promised reforms and introduced the principle of international oversight by the treaty's signatories. Article 61 stipulated as follows: "The Sublime Porte undertakes to carry out, without further delay, improvements and reforms demanded by local requirements in the provinces inhabited by the Armenians, and to guarantee their security against the Circassians and Kurds. It will periodically make known the steps taken to this effect to the Powers, who will superintend their application."⁴ From this point forward, the so-called "Armenian question" ceased to be a purely domestic issue and became a permanent fixture of international diplomacy.

Importantly, Armenians were not merely passive recipients of reform; they were also its protagonists. From the Tanzimat Edict of 1839 through the reform efforts of 1856 and 1876, the Armenian community engaged in profound internal transformation. Inspired by the ideals of the French Revolution and supported by a newly emergent middle class, young Armenian intellectuals challenged the authority of traditional institutions, particularly the church. These efforts unfolded alongside mounting tensions between the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Protestant communities established by Western missionaries. Together, these forces catalyzed a wave of secularization that closely paralleled the broader Tanzimat-era modernization.

This transformation culminated in the 1863 Armenian National Constitution (*Nizâmname-i Millet-i Ermeniyân*), which introduced a modern framework of communal self-governance. One of its key innovations was the establishment of the Armenian National Assembly, whose administrative and reporting mechanisms brought the Armenian reform issue into sharper focus, both within the community and at the level of the Ottoman state.⁵ The 1863 code would later serve as a model for the 1876 Ottoman Constitution. The reformist energy generated within the Armenian millet significantly shaped the empire's broader modernization trajectory. The Ottoman Armenian jurist Krikor Odian (1834–1887), who played a leading role in drafting both the Armenian and Ottoman constitutions, stands as a powerful symbol of this interconnection.⁶

4. *American Journal of International Law*, supplement, *Official Documents* 2, no. 4 (October 1908): 422.

5. For discussions of reform within the Armenian community, see Louise Nalbandian, *The Armenian Revolutionary Movement: The Development of Armenian Political Parties Through the Nineteenth Century* (University of California Press, 1963), 30–60.

6. Krikor Odian's role in the writing of both documents has been mentioned in numerous works. See, for instance: François Georgeon, *Sultan Abdülhamit* (Homer Yayınclılık, 2006), 70–71; Y. Çark, *Türk Devleti Hizmetinde Ermeniler, 1453–1953* (Yeni Matbaa, 1953), 133; Vartan

Reframing the Road to Genocide

It is possible to analyze the trajectory from 1878 to 1923 through two distinct but overlapping interpretive frameworks. The first sees this period as a sequence of violent episodes targeting the Armenian population. The second situates these episodes within the broader arc of Ottoman state policy toward its Christian subjects, viewing the Armenian case as part of a longer-term strategy of demographic and political transformation.

Across this forty-five-year period, three major waves of anti-Armenian violence occurred, along with several smaller atrocities. The principal events were: a) the Hamidian massacres (1894–1897), in which between 33,000 and 74,000 Armenians were killed; b) the Adana massacres (1909), which claimed approximately 20,000 lives;⁷ and c) the wholesale deportation and extermination of Armenians during World War I (1914–1918), resulting in around one million deaths. Other massacres, such as those in Sasun (1904) and Marash (1921), punctuate this history. While these events are often treated as isolated and unconnected, there have also been attempts to interpret them as parts of a broader continuum. Yet this raises key questions: How are these episodes linked? Along which axes—ideational, institutional, or structural—can we trace continuity or rupture? And how can we make these connections without flattening their historical specificity?

One approach interprets the pre-1915 violence as a prologue to the genocide, presenting each episode as a preliminary step. These connections are often drawn through the actors involved: different individuals, institutions, and groups are portrayed as forming an unbroken chain of historical agents across time. These narratives tend to read like an episodic account of a monolithic and unchanging identity—for example, a continuous “Turkishness,” in which actors, regardless of political context, are depicted as motivated by identical intentions. Continuity is traced not through shifting historical developments, but through supposedly inherent ideological, cultural, or even civilizational attributes ascribed to the dominant group.⁸

Artinian, *The Armenian Constitutional System in the Ottoman Empire, 1839–1863: A Study of Its Historical Development* (Isis, 1988).

7. For a detailed discussion of the estimated death tolls during the Hamidian and Adana massacres, see chapter 3 of this book.

8. The works of Vahakn N. Dadrian come to mind as examples of this type of teleological history writing. Dadrian discusses this thesis in detail in “The Armenian Genocide and the

This portrayal—continuing with our example—can take many forms, grounded in Islamism, Turkism, or cultural stereotypes such as a “militarist mind-set” or an alleged predisposition to violence. It constructs a version of history in which a dominant identity—for example, a continuous Turkishness—is imbued with fixed traits that reappear in every historically significant moment—for example, during outbreaks of anti-Armenian violence. The significant political and institutional differences between, for instance, Abdülhamid II’s autocracy and the Committee of Union and Progress’s (CUP) revolutionary centralism are often ignored. This essentialist view may offer coherence, but it does so at the expense of historical complexity, reducing dynamic developments to the unfolding of a predetermined script.

Such interpretations are fundamentally ahistorical. They focus narrowly on one group and attribute to it a stable set of characteristics, rendering all other actors passive or invisible. But the relationship between historical events and ideological-cultural traits is never unidirectional. Historical behavior—whether by individuals or groups—cannot be explained by immutable characteristics alone. Ideological positions matter, of course, but so do the specific contexts in which people act. Human behavior is shaped not only by beliefs but also by situational contingencies, and the two influence each other in a dynamic, reciprocal relationship.

Social psychologists have long debated this interplay between cognitive dispositions and situational factors. Rather than opposing forces, they are understood as mutually shaping.⁹ Conditions do not merely trigger preexisting beliefs—they reshape them. Situational factors influence behavior, and behavior, in turn, modifies the situation. A historically informed analysis must therefore consider both ideational and contextual factors to understand why actors chose the paths they did.

A brief comparison with Holocaust scholarship helps clarify this point. In the 1980s and 1990s, two schools of thought emerged: the “intentionalists,” who traced the Final Solution back to Hitler’s early ideology, and the “functionalists,” who

Pitfalls of a ‘Balanced’ Analysis,” *Armenian Forum* 1, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 73–130. For a general overview of his arguments, see, Taner Akçam, “When Was the Decision to Annihilate the Armenians Taken?,” *Journal of Genocide Research*, 21, no. 4 (2019): 457–80.

9. Leonard S. Newman, “What Is a ‘Social-Psychological’ Account of Perpetrator Behavior? The Person Versus the Situation in Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*,” in *Understanding Genocide: The Social Psychology of the Holocaust*, ed. Leonard S. Newman and Ralph Erber (Oxford University Press, 2002), 325–45.

emphasized the contingent decisions made under wartime conditions. The debate reached its extreme with Daniel Goldhagen's claim that a uniquely "eliminationist" antisemitism embedded in German culture was the driving force behind the Holocaust.¹⁰ Today, a more balanced consensus prevails: both ideology and circumstance played crucial roles. The Holocaust was shaped by preexisting beliefs, but also by the conditions that activated and reshaped those beliefs.

This insight is directly relevant to the Armenian case. A full understanding of the genocide must be grounded in a similar approach—one that seeks continuity not through fixed ethnic or cultural traits, but through the dynamic interaction between ideological dispositions and historical contingencies. The violence between 1878 and 1923 cannot be reduced to a single essence. It must be analyzed as the product of shifting actors, ideas, and circumstances—connected, yes, but not predetermined.

Continuity, then, must be sought not in the immutable essence of a group or culture, but in structural dynamics—particularly in the evolving institutional, ideological, and geopolitical frameworks within which decisions were made. One such structural thread was the "Armenian reform question," which served as a central axis around which many of these developments turned. From the 1894–1897 massacres through the 1909 Adana violence to the annihilation of 1915–1918, the demand for reform, and the resistance it provoked, was a persistent feature of Ottoman political life.

All major actors in the period from 1878 to 1923—state officials, civil society segments, ethno-religious groups such as the Kurds, the various Armenian political, cultural, and ecclesiastical organizations, and the Great Powers—engaged with the Armenian reform question, though their positions often shifted and contradicted one another. These stances were not static; they evolved in response to internal developments and external pressures. The choices made by these actors were shaped by a confluence of political, social, and economic conditions within the empire and in the broader international arena.¹¹

A telling example is Enver Pasha's public appeal to Armenians in the aftermath of the 1909 Adana massacres. Writing in a Paris-based Armenian-language

10. Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1996).

11. For an attempt to explain the period of 1878–1923 as a structural continuum, see Taner Akçam, "Den Völkermord an den Armeniern verstehen: Ein Experiment aus einer Makro-Perspektive," in *Das Deutsche Reich und der Völkermord an den Armeniern*, ed. Rolf Hosfeld and Christin Pschichholz (Wallstein, 2017), 67–81.

journal, he addressed Armenians as “compatriots” and “brothers,” calling on them to join the shared struggle for Ottoman constitutionalism.¹² Just a few months later, in August of the same year, the Committee of Union and Progress and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaksutyun)¹³ reached an agreement “to defend the Constitution against reactionary movements.”¹⁴

Thus, rather than positing a continuous line of unbroken ideological intent, we must attend to the interplay of reform demands, state responses, and shifting alliances. The genocide, in this reading, is not the culmination of an ancient hostility, an ontological feature of Islam or inevitable civilizational clash rooted in religion, but the outcome of a long and conflict-ridden process, structured by institutional dynamics, political opportunism, and deeply embedded fears—above all, the fear that genuine reform would unravel the very foundations of Ottoman political order itself.

Reading the 1878–1923 Period as an Anti-Christian Genocide

The second framework for understanding the genocidal process of 1878–1923 involves the broader anti-Christian policies of the Ottoman leaders. The measures implemented against the Armenians can be better grasped when viewed as part of the overall policies directed at the Christian population during that period. In this sense, the period of 1878–1923 should be seen as one of a genocidal process against all Ottoman Christians. The massacre of

12. *Keghouni* [Venice, Italy], no. 6, June 1909, 44.

13. The Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF, or T/Dashnaksutyun), founded in 1890 in Tiflis (Tbilisi), has been the most influential political party in modern Armenian history. A self-described “socialist, democratic, and revolutionary” movement, it cooperated with the Committee of Union and Progress against Sultan Abdülhamid II and supported constitutional restoration. Despite heavy losses during the genocide, the ARF led the establishment of the first independent Armenian state in May 1918. For further information, see Gerard J. Libaridian, *Modern Armenia: People, Nation, State* (Transaction Publishers, 2004), 89–113; Hratch Dasnabedian, *History of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaksutyun), 1890–1924* (Grafiche Editoriali Ambrosiane, 1990); and Nalbandian, *The Armenian Revolutionary Movement*, 150–79.

14. For the full text, see Dikran Mesrob Kaligian, “The Armenian Revolutionary Federation Under Ottoman Constitutional Rule, 1908–1914” (PhD diss., Boston College, 2003), 71–73.

Syriac Christians¹⁵ during the periods of 1894–1897 and 1915–1918, the ethnic cleansing of Anatolian Greek Orthodox Christians during the 1912–1913 Balkan Wars and their aftermath, the forced deportation and massacres of the Greeks in Anatolia, the genocide directed at the Pontic Greeks of the Black Sea region in 1921–1922, the 1922 massacre and burning of Smyrna, and the 1924 Turkish-Greek Population Exchange are some of the larger and better-known examples of this.

Crucially, the demographic policies implemented between 1913 and 1918 were only attainable due to the conditions and possibilities produced by these crisis years, particularly the First World War. The aim and essence of these policies were to save the rapidly crumbling empire from dissolution by giving it a homogenous character centered around a collective ideological identity that has been termed a “Turkish-Islamic synthesis.” A Turkish nationalism undetached from Islam, combined with a Sunni interpretation of Islam formed the two main pillars of this homogenizing ideology. Such a vision had no room for non-Muslims or “non-Turks,” and would necessitate the forcible deportation and, in lieu of that, extermination of the former, while the latter (especially the large Kurdish minority) would be subjected to assimilation.

As a result of these demographic policies, the roughly 17.5 million inhabitants of Anatolia would experience decades of enormous social, political, and economic upheaval, in which at least one third would be either be liquidated or “voluntarily” or forcibly displaced, often beyond the borders of Anatolia.¹⁶ By the year 1918, the ethnic makeup of Anatolia had been thoroughly transformed, and the subsequent establishment of the Turkish “nation-state” made possible. Indeed, this process cannot be fully understood through the policies of the Ottoman state toward its various ethno-religious groups during this period. Instead, the changing dynamics of intercommunal relations must also be taken into account—in particular, the crucial role played by Kurdish communities and their relations with their Christian neighbors, as well as the relations between the various Christian communities of the empire.

15. “Syriac Christians” is a term used to cover the different religious denominations of Asur people, such as Arameans, Assyrians, and Chaldeans. In English literature, however, there is a tendency to use “Assyrians” as a term that covers all these different denominations. We will do likewise, as the term “Assyrians” is frequently used in Ottoman documents.

16. On the Unionists’ demographic policies during the years 1913–1918, see Fuat Dündar, *Modern Türkiye’nin Şifresi: İttihat ve Terakki’nin Etnisite Mühendisliği (1913–1918)* (İletişim Yayınları, 2019).

Regardless of which of the aforementioned contexts we employ, the genocidal process of 1878–1923 must consider four critical factors that shaped the trajectory of events during this period. First, the general Muslim-Turkish intolerance of non-Muslims, which imprinted its character on the entire cultural atmosphere of the time. Second, the shift in Muslim-Christian relations observed in the nineteenth century, which, as a natural consequence of the first factor, gave rise to an environment of envy, hatred, and resentment. Third, the experience of decline and eventual collapse of the three major European empires of the time—Austria-Hungary, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire—along with the related attempts to establish nation-states. And fourth, as a direct consequence of the third factor, we must also consider the historical reality that, beginning with the Serbian uprising of 1804, several Christian communities within the empire—most notably the Serbs, Greeks, and Bulgarians—successfully seceded from Ottoman rule and established independent nation-states. These separations followed a recognizable pattern that became deeply inscribed not only in the institutional memory of the Ottoman state but also in the collective perceptions of Muslim society at large.

As will be discussed further below, these experiences gradually coalesced into an accumulated body of knowledge embedded within the very logic of state thinking and widely internalized by the broader public. This framework—one might describe it as a form of state memory or strategic paranoia—led increasingly to the interpretation of reform demands, especially those articulated by Christian subjects, not as calls for inclusion or justice, but as concealed projects of secession. This perception would prove decisive in shaping the mindset that ultimately culminated not only in the decision to commit genocide but also in the systematic denial of that crime throughout the Republican period.

Muslim-Turkish Intolerance

The roots of Muslim-Turkish intolerance find their origins in Islamic jurisprudence, which calls for non-Muslims monotheists (i.e., Christians, Jews, etc.) to be placed under the “protection” (*dhimma*) of the Islamic state. In exchange for the freedom to practice their faith and run their internal affairs, they must give tacit recognition of Islam’s superiority. This relationship is confirmed by their pledge of faithfulness and loyalty to the state and the communal payment of a poll tax. This was not a relationship between equals, but one of tolerance in exchange for submission. Thus, when calls for equality of all subjects began to emerge, both from Europe and from their own Christian minorities, neither the

Muslim ruling class nor the Muslim masses looked on them warmly. Such a disruption of the social fabric was unthinkable and thus unacceptable.

To better understand the genocide process from 1878 to 1923 and the extermination process from 1915 to 1918, it is beneficial to briefly explore the concept of “tolerance” and its boundaries within Islamic law, which shaped the legal and societal framework of the Ottoman Empire.¹⁷ Under Ottoman rule, the various Christian communities (as well as the Jews) were administratively divided into various confessional groups called *millets*. A significant level of internal administrative and social autonomy was granted to each, whereby the group not only enjoyed freedom of religious worship and practice, and communal aid, but also education and all aspects of civil law concerning marriage, divorce, and inheritance. Apart from serious criminal offenses, which were subject to the imperial courts, the Ottoman rulers were content to let each community administer cases between members, judge them, and collect taxes.

Nevertheless, the separate freedoms and possibilities allowed by communal autonomy were seen by no one as denoting equality with Muslims. On the contrary, there were a series of political and legal limits on the freedoms of non-Muslims within greater Ottoman society. For instance, Christian males were forbidden from marrying Muslim women and in Islamic law (*shariʿa*, hereafter *Sharia*) courts the testimony of non-Muslims against Muslims was either not accepted or worth half the testimony of a Muslim. There were also inequalities in regard to criminal law. A Muslim who killed a Christian, for instance, would rarely be given a death sentence.

Apart from the legal inequality, non-Muslims were also subject to a number of humiliating social restrictions. They were obliged to conduct their worship services in a manner that would not disturb Muslims or make them uncomfortable, including the ringing of bells or the construction of new houses of worship. Even the repair of existing buildings could only be performed through special permission. They were also forbidding from riding horses (as opposed to donkeys), bearing weapons, and remaining on the sidewalk when passing or being approached by a Muslim. The color and fabric quality of their clothing, shoes, and headgear had to be different, and in various periods imperial edicts (*fermans*) were issued reaffirming the types and colors of clothing that non-Muslims were forbidden from wearing.

17. For a fuller discussion of this subject, see Taner Akçam, *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility* (Metropolitan Books, 2006), 19–47; Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (Princeton University Press, 1984), 3–67.

A sixteenth-century decree, for instance, declared collared kaftans, clothing made from expensive fabrics—especially silk, delicate headscarves, furs, and turbans—as off-limits to non-Muslims. Other imperial decrees outlined the various colors allowed to each community. Armenians, for instance, were to wear red headgear and shoes, the Greeks black, and the Jews light blue. They needed to paint their houses a different color as well. They were forbidden from wearing wooden clogs into the steam baths, and their bath towels needed to have small bells attached.

Non-Muslims were forbidden from building their houses and places of worship higher than Muslims, and their houses could not have windows that looked out onto Muslim quarters. Additionally, although there was no specific prohibition on non-Muslims living within Muslim quarters, in practice it was not looked on warmly. One encounters numerous *fermans* ordering the sale of such houses by Christians. Persons not abiding by these restrictions would be hit with monetary fines or imprisonment, and in the reigns of stricter sultans might even be executed for their transgressions.

In short, the “pluralistic” model adopted by Islam was based on the legal and cultural humiliation of and contempt for non-Muslims. For their part, non-Muslims were expected to accept their “protected” (*dhimmi*) status. So long as this system was accepted and observed, there were few problems. But as dissent and calls for reform began to be voiced in the nineteenth century, these were seen by the powers that be, and by Islamic society as a whole, as a “breach of [social] contract.” Demands by Christian groups, both at home and abroad, for social equality and political rights were seen as impossible and rejected out of hand.

Article 61 of the 1878 Treaty of Berlin, which raised the question of Armenian social and political reform, emerged as a product of and response to this essential inequality in Ottoman society. It was a question that would preoccupy a significant part of Great Power diplomacy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the end, the 1915 decision to commit genocide was the response by the Ottoman state and its Muslim majority to the demands for Christian reform.

In the current “official version” of Turkish history promoted by successive regimes, one of the principal explanations offered for the misfortunes that befell the Ottoman Empire’s non-Muslim populations is their alleged refusal to accept the place assigned to them within the imperial order—in blunt terms, that they “did not know their limits.” As shown in chapter 4, this formulation later became a central pillar of denialist rhetoric, serving to shift responsibility from state policy to the supposed transgressions of the victims themselves.

None of what has been described so far should be taken to imply a direct causal relationship between this social, cultural, and legal mindset and the mass violence that later unfolded. It would be a serious mistake to suggest that massacres were the inevitable or automatic outcome of such an outlook. Rather, this mindset should be understood as part of a broader cultural atmosphere—one that, while not causing mass violence in itself, created a background that made such acts easier to justify, carry out, or tolerate. The transition to organized massacre and genocide required a separate set of political decisions, structural conditions, and ideological radicalization.

Envy, Hatred, and Resentment

Two significant phenomena disrupted the classical Muslim-Christian balance in Islamic society and initiated the process of changing the status of Christians within the community. The first was the quest for equal citizenship, which began with the French Revolution and found practical application in the Tanzimat (1839) and Islahat (1856) reforms. The second was the economic transformations resulting from rapid industrialization. Many Muslims were actually aware that these developments undermined their position as the “Millet-i Hakime” (ruling nation). They experienced this process as a profound loss of status, generating subjective anxieties that deeply shaped their emotional world. Norbert Elias has shown with particular clarity how rapid social change and shifting balances of power produce profound emotional and psychological transformations that, in turn, affect broader social and political processes. Differences in status, the tensions arising from them, and the fear of social decline can generate a deep sense of humiliation and injury to collective self-esteem. Societies often struggle to reconcile themselves to such losses, and these moments can open the way to violence. As Elias observed:

Only in rare cases when others are growing stronger and they are growing weaker do powerful social formations submit peacefully to a narrowing of their power, to a lowering of their social status and, with it, to a change in their self-image, their we-ideal, their identity. . . . Like wild animals, powerful nations or other powerful social formations are at their most dangerous when they feel concerned—when they have the feeling that the balance of power is going against them, that the power resources of potential rivals and enemies are becoming greater than theirs, that their values are threatened and their superiority slipping away. Under past and

present conditions of human social life, developments of this kind are one of the most typical and frequent situations in which people are driven to the use of violence.¹⁸

The Ottoman case was no exception. The subjective anxieties generated by these status transformations created an emotional climate among Muslim communities in which ethnic and religious tensions increasingly turned violent. Urban riots in Aleppo (1850), Mosul (1854), Nablus (1856), Jidda (1858), and Damascus (1860) may all be understood within this broader context.¹⁹

The status changes created an emotional world among Muslim communities that can be explained by the triad of “envy, hatred, and resentment,” which had the potential to turn ethnic and religious tensions into violence.²⁰ Whether such violence should be understood as irrational behavior or, alternatively, as a rational collective response by ordinary people to social, economic, and political pressures, constitutes a separate debate in itself. What is beyond dispute, however, is that these emotions played a significant role in mobilizing groups and in facilitating violence.²¹ Ronald Suny subsumes these emotions under the broader concept of “affective disposition” and argues that they constituted one of the central emotional dynamics driving the Armenian Genocide.²² This concept might serve as a key explanatory category for the genocidal

18. Norbert Elias, *Studien über die Deutschen: Machtkämpfe und Habitusentwicklung im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Suhrkamp, 1989), 13. For more information on this topic, see Roger D. Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1–85; Thomas Brudholm and Johannes Lang, eds., *Emotions and Mass Atrocity: Philosophical and Theoretical Explorations* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

19. For a broader discussion of how status differentiation contributed to violence in Armenian–Turkish relations, see Taner Akçam, *From Empire to Republic: Turkish Nationalism and the Armenian Genocide* (Zed Books, 2004), 39–59; Stephan Astourian, “Genocidal Process: Reflection on the Armeno-Turkish Polarization,” in Richard Hovannisian, *The Armenian Genocide: History, Politics, Ethics* (St. Martin’s Press, 1992).

20. For a discussion of the topic specifically regarding the Greeks, see George Shrinian, “Collective State Violence Against Greeks in the Late Ottoman Empire, 1821–1923,” in *Collective and State Violence in Turkey: The Construction of a National Identity from Empire to Nation-State*, ed. Stephan H. Astourian and Raymond H. Kévorkian (Berghahn Books, 2021), 174–233.

21. Ali Sipahi discusses this topic specifically in the context of the 1895 Harput massacres in “Narrative Construction in the 1895 Massacres in Harput: The Coming and Disappearance of the Kurds,” *Études arméniennes contemporaines* 10 (2018): 63–95.

22. Ronald Suny, *“They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else”: A History of the Armenian Genocide* (Princeton University Press, 2015).

process, not only for the 1915–1918 genocide but also for the Hamidian massacres (1894–1897) and the Adana massacre (1909).²³ Additionally, the interventions of foreign states to improve the situation of Christians, along with the intensive educational and aid campaigns by Christian missionaries, further fueled these feelings of envy and hatred.

The Collapse of Empires and the Birth of Nation-States

The third crucial factor for explaining the genocidal process of 1878–1923 is to see it as a byproduct of the decline and fall of the three large Central and Eastern European empires: Austria-Hungary, Russia, and the Ottomans. Ever since the French Revolution, the winds of equality and freedom had swept across the continent and beyond, challenging the foundations of various multiethnic and multireligious empires with calls for individual human rights and national self-determination. While these empires were determined to suppress national awakenings within their own borders, they were equally quick to support such movements in neighboring empires to weaken their rivals and expand their influence and territory at their expense. Consequently, movements of national awakening within these countries became subject to the power struggle between different empires and would become the focus and direct cause of a number of inter-imperial clashes.

From the various imperial wars and power struggles, it was the Ottomans who fared the worst. The Czar's 1854 characterization of the Ottomans as the "Sick Man of Europe" reflected a general sentiment, due to their economic and military weakness vis-à-vis the other powers. This weakness left them vulnerable to interference in their internal affairs and even outright invasion, actions that only served to weaken them further. Throughout the nineteenth century, Great Britain and Russia, whose geopolitical rivalry extended to the Middle East and the Balkans, took the lead in these interventions.

23. Bedross Der Matossian, for instance, places special emphasis on Suny's concept of "affective disposition" in explaining the Adana massacre and considers it one of the main explanatory categories. See Bedross Der Matossian, *The Horrors of Adana: Revolution and Violence in the Early Twentieth Century* (Stanford University Press, 2022), 13–16. For Ümit Kurt "envy and resentment" were influential factors in both the 1895 and genocide periods in Antep. See Ümit Kurt, *The Armenians of Aintab: The Economics of Genocide in an Ottoman Province* (Harvard University Press, 2021), 29–30, 38–39, and 56–57.



MAP 2. The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire from 1807 to 1924. Information sourced from “Dissolution of the Ottoman Empire,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2021.

The main pretext for most of these interventions was the need to “reform” the status of Ottoman Christians. Yet because the vast majority of Christians lived under a system shaped by Islamic law and culture—one that did not recognize them as political, social, or religious equals—efforts to establish genuine equality repeatedly failed. Demands for “the assurance of the security and happiness of Christians through equal representation in government” appeared frequently in international treaties and diplomatic agreements of the period.²⁴

24. Letter from Sir P. Currie (Istanbul) to Kimberley Kontu (British Foreign Office), April 10, 1895, in *Blue Book: Turkey, 1896*, part 1, *Correspondence Respecting the Introduction of Reforms in the Armenian Provinces of Asiatic Turkey* (Harrison and Sons, 1896), 19.

The Ottoman state was both unable and largely unwilling to grant Christians equal status with Muslims, given its Islamic institutional structure and prevailing cultural norms. This disparity was further complicated by foreign interventions, driven by the combined pressures of European humanitarian sentiment and the realpolitik of the Great Powers, particularly Britain and Russia. These interventions contravened the Islamic theoretical foundations of the Ottoman state and were widely perceived as adversely affecting the lives of Muslim subjects. At the same time, they signaled the emergence of a new geopolitical principle: humanitarian intervention.²⁵

The Great Powers approached the problems between the Ottoman state and its Christian citizens primarily through the lens of European security rather than humanitarian concerns, but also due to the fear that unresolved internal issues within the Ottoman Empire could easily escalate into a broader European conflict. European security concerns were thus considered a key justification for intervention. The ultimate solution envisioned by the Great Powers was the division of the Ottoman Empire into various spheres of influence. It was only the failure of the Great Powers to reach an agreement on partition that allowed the empire to survive for a longer period.²⁶

In summary, the various nineteenth-century “humanitarian interventions” that oscillated between the imperial interests and *raison d’état* of the Great Powers and the moral responsibility to improve the living conditions of Christians within the Ottoman Empire also contributed to paving the way for the Armenian Genocide. This constant meddling and weakening of the Ottoman administrative structure and the status of its Muslims in the name of “reform” were rightly perceived as threats to the territorial integrity and even the very existence of their state, and ultimately played a crucial role in the decision of Ottoman rulers to commit genocide against the Armenians. In this light, the genocide can be seen as a negative by-product of these interventions. This perceived threat did not emerge suddenly but was the result of a century-long buildup.

25. For a valuable account of the challenges faced by the Ottoman Empire throughout the nineteenth century in relation to humanitarian intervention, see Davide Rodogno, *Against Massacre: Humanitarian Interventions in the Ottoman Empire, 1815–1914* (Princeton University Press, 2012).

26. See Donald Bloxham, *The Great Game of Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism, and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians* (Oxford University Press, 2005), on Great Power politics and the Ottoman Empire.

The Ottoman Accumulated Experience

The worldview of the late Ottoman ruling elite was largely formed and influenced by the accumulated experience of Great Power attempts at “humanitarian intervention” in the empire, itself often a reaction to the demands its various Christian communities (e.g., Serbian, Greek, Rumanian, and Bulgarian) to enhance their social and political status by seeking equal legal and social standing with the empire’s Muslim subjects. These demands were met with sharp reaction by the central government, which often responded with massacres, in turn opening the door to Great Power interventions.

Although the Ottoman state would loudly and bitterly complain about such interventions, claiming that they constituted “a blatant attack on the sovereign rights” of the empire, their weakness vis-à-vis the other European powers left them powerless to prevent such interventions, and they would inevitably submit to foreign pressure and vow to undertake the necessary reforms. But once the immediate threat had passed, the reforms would be half-heartedly implemented, at best, and often fully ignored. This process often led to the other powers, whether alone or in combination, intervening militarily on behalf of the Christian communities, actions that would, in turn, invariably lead to successful attempts at autonomy or full independence from the Ottoman Empire.

Beginning with the Serbian Revolt of 1804 and continuing until the Bulgarian uprising of 1875, this recurring pattern of “reform demands, massacre, foreign intervention, secession” became a defining feature of the Ottoman Balkans. This process laid the groundwork for two divergent historiographical traditions that have endured to the present day.

One narrative depicts the Christian communities within the Ottoman Empire as having achieved their hard-won freedom and independence from Ottoman oppression and misrule. Within this framework, massacres are attributed to the delayed, insufficient, or altogether absent interventions of the Great Powers. Conversely, from the perspective of Ottoman rulers and the Muslim majority they represented, the same developments produced severe territorial losses and a sustained influx of Muslim refugees into Anatolia. In this reading, foreign intervention in Ottoman internal affairs is understood as a principal factor accelerating imperial decline and eventual collapse.

The ample experience with this cycle over the course of the nineteenth century would increasingly help to form a shared worldview among the Ottoman ruling class, a view still held by many within Turkey’s ruling circles, namely, that behind the Christians’ demands for reform and equality lay the desire to achieve political

independence. What was ultimately desired, then, was not a reformed status *within* the Ottoman polity but complete separation *from* it. As such, demands for “reform” were inevitably interpreted as a serious threat to the state’s security and continued existence. Thus, the Ottoman agreement to the Armenian reforms promised in the Berlin Treaty and subsequent agreements was given grudgingly and without any intention of seeing them through.

Both Abdülhamid and the Unionist Committee that overthrew him tended to look upon the demand for Armenian reforms through this lens and could only perceive it as a grave threat to the empire’s security. The Great Powers’ note on Armenian reforms delivered to the Porte in 1895 was seen by the sultan as a direct threat to the Ottoman Empire’s survival. This perception contributed to the Armenian massacres that had already begun in the fall of 1895 and continued until 1897. In a well-known quote attributed to him, Abdul Hamid “solemnly swore that under no circumstances would he yield to the unjust Armenian pressure, and that he would rather die than introduce far-reaching reforms in Armenia.”²⁷

Despite their promises of Armenian reforms after coming to power in 1908, the leaders of the Committee of Union and Progress largely followed the line laid out by their predecessor. In the immediate wake of the Balkan Wars (1912–1913), during which the Ottoman Empire suffered the loss of nearly 80 percent of its European territory, the Armenians again pressed their demand for political and social reforms that would grant them equality with their Muslim fellow citizens. Meetings were begun with the Great Powers already in 1913 and a memorandum for reform was published. Already on the ropes, the Unionist leaders saw this attempt too as a mortal danger to the empire’s continued existence. The fact that the 1895 reform packet, which had triggered the massacres of the time, was used as the starting point for the 1913 talks simply strengthened their fear.

A significant example of this worldview at work can be seen in the May 12, 1915, conversation between Armenian parliamentary deputy Vartkes Serengülyan (subsequently arrested and murdered) and his close friend, Interior Minister Talat Pasha. During the visit, Talat told the deputy, “You have taken advantage of our weakness . . . you have your hand on our throat and have demanded reform. We will now do the same thing to you. . . . We will use the situation in which we find ourselves and crush your nation so [badly] that you will not even be able think about the idea of reform for 50 years.” Vartkes then asked him, alluding to the

27. Vahakn Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide: Ethnic Conflict from the Balkans to Anatolia to the Caucasus* (Berghahn Books, 1995), 163.

1894–1897 massacres, “Do you wish to continue those things done by Abdülhamid?” Talat replied simply, “Yes.”²⁸

The 1913 reform talks would result in the signing of an agreement in February 1914 and would force the Unionists to confront the very real possibility that this time might be the last. How could the “reform” threat be eliminated entirely, and the security of the state be achieved? In the heady and stressful atmosphere of the First World War, efforts were made to find a permanent solution for the Armenian reform question, for which only fleeting half-measures had been devised in the past, and to finally attain some final answer to the ongoing security question that it posed.

What the Unionists sought “was not just temporary security in a military emergency [but] what Nazi elites called permanent security.” The factor distinguishing the genocide from more ordinary attempts at attaining security is “the end of politics,” namely the rupture of negotiation and compromise, one in which the different actors grant concessions in an attempt to reach a solution to the problem. The permanent security that is desired is achieved through the permanent elimination of the thing threatening that security; and in this case, genocide.²⁹

In summary, the Armenian Genocide can be understood as a culmination of the Ottoman Empire’s accumulated experiences with the recurring pattern of “reform demands, massacre, foreign intervention, and secession” that characterized much of the nineteenth century—a period often remembered as a “century of trauma.” Regarded for centuries as the most loyal of the non-Muslim communities (*millet-i sadıka*), by the end of the nineteenth century, Armenians came to be perceived as part of the broader group of “disloyal” Christians.³⁰ To prevent a recurrence of the traumatic experiences associated with these patterns,

28. Johannes Lepsius, *Der Todesgang des Armenischen Volkes* (Der Tempelverlag, 1919), 195–96.

29. A. Dirk Moses, contribution to review of Taner Akçam, *The Young Turks’ Crime Against Humanity: The Armenian Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton University Press, 2012), *Journal of Genocide Research* 15, no. 4 (2013): 493.

30. “Millet-i Sadıka” (the loyal community) or “Tebayı Sadıka” (the loyal subjects) were Ottoman terms generally used for Armenians. It has become a custom in recent decades for Turkish scholars who are uncomfortable with the efforts of Armenian circles to advocate for “genocide recognition” and embrace Turkey’s “official version” of events—namely, genocide denial—to begin their work with these terms, even adding them into the title. Two examples are Sabahattin Özel’s *Millet-i Sadıka Ermeniler* (Tasam Yayınları, 2005); and Haluk Selvi, *Millet-i Sadıka’da İsyen* (Timaş Yayınları, 2011).

Ottoman leaders ultimately decided to implement the “preemptive measure” of extermination.

The official letter written when the deportation and murders were in full swing by then–Interior Minister Talat Pasha to the Grand Vizier’s Office on May 26, 1915, holds significant historical importance and, in many ways, encapsulates the issue at hand. In the message, Talat explains the rationale behind the Armenian deportations, stating that the problem stems directly from the “Armenian reform question” that prompted the Great Powers’ intervention in Ottoman internal affairs. According to Talat, the main challenge was to prevent foreign states from intervening in a manner that would lead to Ottoman disintegration.

Talat then goes on to describe the Armenian reform question “as a disaster [that has come] upon the state” and admits that, even before the start of the war, thought had been given to the Armenian problem—namely that it “should be brought to fundamental end, that the means should [be] prepared and put in place toward its total elimination,” but the war had intervened and certain temporary measures were taken instead. Now, the time had come “for a proper re-ordering [of these measures] in regard to/on the basis of suitable rules and principles.”³¹

There is a crucial fact revealed here: The decision to commit the Armenian Genocide was not merely a consequence of the First World War or a direct product of wartime exigencies. Rather, it was a deliberate choice aimed at resolving the long-standing issue of Armenian reforms. The primary objective was to prevent further intervention by the Great Powers and the consequent loss of additional territory. Thus, the Armenian reform question and the Armenian Genocide must be viewed not only within the context of the Ottoman Empire’s internal conditions but also as part of European history, particularly the humanitarian intervention policies of the Great Powers.

31. This important memorandum by Talat Pasha is not preserved in the Ottoman Archives. The full text of the document was published in *İleri* newspaper on February 24, 1920 [no. 766], 5.

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