Curriculum: Introduction to the Assyrian Genocide

Sample Lesson Plans

Recommended Student Handouts

Supporting Documents for Lesson 1 (Teaching with Testimony)

Lesson: Introduction to the Assyrian Genocide

Grade-level: High School
Subject: World History

Length: This is designed as a 1-day introduction to the Assyrian genocide, with two suggested lesson plans that could also be combined into two days of instruction. The material can be taught as a stand-alone case study of the Assyrian genocide or taught adjacent to a lesson on the concurrent Armenian genocide to provide a full picture of the scope of Ottoman-led violence.

Rationale: Students will understand key events surrounding the Assyrian genocide, including how the Ottoman Empire carried out a policy of genocide against Assyrians living within the Ottoman Empire and Persia during the First World War and the continued impact of these atrocities on the Assyrian population today. The Assyrian genocide is lesser known than the concurrent Armenian genocide, and understanding the experiences of both Armenians and Assyrians provides a fuller understanding of this period.

Learning Objectives:

- HS.H1.6: Analyze the relationship among different regional, social, ethnic, and racial groups and explain how these groups' experiences have related to national identities.
- HS.H2.3: Evaluate the short- and long-term impacts of conflicts and their resolutions.
- HS.H4.4: Examine how a diverse society can be a force for unity and/or disunity.

Essential Questions:

- What was the Assyrian genocide?
- How and why did the Assyrian genocide happen?
- What happened to Assyrians after the genocide?

Learning Outcomes:
At the end of this lesson, students will understand:

- What genocide is and when it became international law.
- How the Ottoman Empire carried out a genocide against Assyrians in both the Ottoman Empire and Persia.
- The immediate and long-term impact of the genocide on Assyrians.
- Why these atrocities are understood to be genocide, even though the word did not yet exist when they took place

Students will also gain experience conducting analysis of oral histories and/or archival documents.

Teacher Preparation:
See 'Teacher Resources' document

Sample Lesson Plan 1: Teaching With Testimony

Student Materials:

- 'Assyrian Genocide Timeline'
- 'An Overview of the Assyrian Genocide'
- 'Key Terms'
- Personal Histories
- Optional: Oral History Video Excerpts

Lesson plan:

- Personal Testimonies:
    - Share written testimony with students (and, if appropriate, optional oral history video clips)
    - Student discussion (as a class or in groups):
        - What is being described?
        - What happened to their family during these events?
        - What happened to their family after?
        - What could have caused this?
        - Why might the descendants of genocide survivors be sharing these stories?

- Defining Genocide:
    - Students are reminded that when these atrocities occurred, the concept of genocide had not yet been created. These atrocities were referred to as the Seyfo, annihilation, race murder, massacres, slaughter, and other terms. Students are provided with a definition of genocide (the UN genocide convention definition is recommended).
    - Students discuss the meaning of this definition
    - Students discuss if anything shared in the personal histories sounds like what is described here

- Class Lesson:
    - Teacher provides students with material handouts (timeline, key terms, and brief overview of the genocide)
    - Teacher asks students what they know about the Assyrian population; and shares information to situate Assyrians in the Ottoman Empire
    - Teacher asks students to discuss the key terms, providing supplemental information on key events (optional - using slides with maps and images)

- Individual reflection and discussion:
    - Students write a reflection comparing how the Assyrian (and Armenian, if already studied) experiences during WWI fit with our understanding of genocide, drawing on testimonies and written materials
    - Students discuss their thoughts in groups or as a class

- Group discussion:
    - The text of AZ HCR 2044, which recognizes the Assyrian genocide within the

State of Arizona, is shared with students
- Working in groups, ask students to discuss the text of the resolution: What historical evidence does it share? What action does it encourage? What is the importance of resolutions like this?

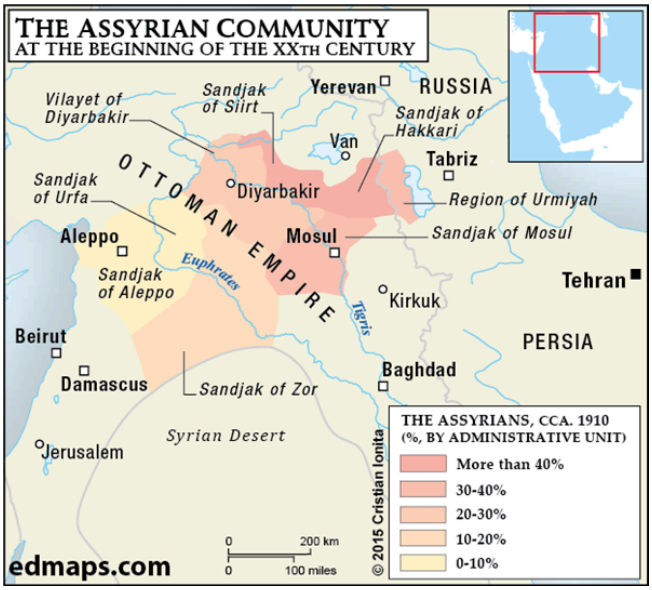
Assyrian Genocide: Timeline of Major Events

Late Nineteenth Century	The Assyrian population in the Ottoman Empire and Persia was approximately 600,000-800,000 (spanning present-day Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria).
1908	The Young Turk Revolution: The Committee of Union and Progress forces Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II to install a constitution and parliament, and hold multi-party elections. The Sultan was replaced in 1909 by his brother Mehmed V.
1913	Raid on the Sublime Porte: Hard-line Turkish nationalists within the Committee of Union and Progress consolidate power under the rule of the 'Three Pashas': Talaat Pasha, Interior Minister; Enver Pasha, War Minister; and Cemal Pasha, Naval Minister.
1914	The Ottoman Empire joins the WWI battlefield in late October as part of the Central Powers.
	October 26: Talaat Pasha issues a deportation order for Assyrians living in the Ottoman Empire near the Persian border.
	Ottoman troops and allied Kurdish militias attack Assyrian villages in Urmia, Persia, and in the Hakkari region of the Ottoman Empire. Thousands of Assyrians are murdered as violence begins to escalate towards genocide.
1915	Talaat Pasha states that "there was no room for Christians in Turkey".
	Violence against Assyrians in Urmia continues until May, when Ottoman troops are pushed out of Persia by Russian forces. It is estimated at least 70 villages are destroyed during this period and thousands killed.
	April 24: Approximately 250 Armenian leaders and intellectuals are executed in Istanbul. This date is now commemorated as Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day.
	May 10: Mar Benyamin Shimun XXI, Assyrian Patriarch of the Church of the East joins the Allied forces.
	May 27: The Ottoman Parliament passes the Tehcir Law, authorizing the deportation of all Ottoman Armenians. While Assyrians also experience genocidal violence, it is not similarly under deportation orders.

(1915 continued)	Diyarbakir massacres: Ottoman forces execute Assyrians and Armenians in the Diyarbakir region (Turkey), assault the women and children, and destroy towns.
	Siirt massacres (Turkey): 8,000 Ottoman soldiers, called "The Butchers' Battalion," kill an estimated 15,000 Assyrians, including women and children.
	Assyrians increasingly flee, with survivors seeking refuge in Persia, Russia, and elsewhere within the Empire.
1917	The Russian Revolution ends Russian participation in WWI and Russian protection of Assyrians in Persia. Ottoman forces soon reenter Persia and renew attacks on Assyrians, including Assyrian refugees from the Ottoman Empire.
1918	Khoi massacres: Patriarch Mar Benyamin Shimun arranges for 3,500 Assyrians from the Ottoman Empire to be resettled in Khoi, Persia. However, nearly the entire population is killed upon resettlement.
	Patriarch Mar Benyamin Shimun is assassinated in March by Kurdish chieftain Simko Shikak during a peace negotiation, along with more than 100 Assyrians who accompanied the Patriarch.
	Mass flight of Assyrians from Urmia. Thousands die from attacks by Kurdish militias, exposure, disease, and starvation. More than 40,000 Assyrian and Armenian survivors ultimately take refuge in the Baquba refugee camp opened by Britain near Baghdad, Iraq.
	October 30: The Ottoman government signs the Armistice of Mudros, ending the Empire's involvement in WWI.
1920	The Treaty of Sèvres is signed between the Ottoman Empire and Allied powers. It gives large territories to European rule and calls for the creation of an Armenian state and a Kurdish state, overlooking Assyrian demands for independence or autonomy, and protection under an Allied power. The treaty would be renegotiated in 1923 as the Treaty of Lausanne, which eliminated the proposed Armenian and Kurdish states.
1933	Simmel (Simele) Massacres: at least 3,000 Assyrians in northern Iraq are massacred by the Iraqi military less than a year after Iraq gained independence.
2007	The International Association of Genocide Scholars recognizes the Assyrian Genocide as a genocide.

A History of the Assyrian Genocide

Prepared by Dr. Erin Hughes and Professor Hannibal Travis
on behalf of the Seyfo Center Arizona Chapter, 2023



Assyrians are a unique ethnic group indigenous to the Middle East, with a homeland that spans the present-day states of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. Prior to the First World War, the homeland was divided between what was then the Ottoman Empire and Persia, and population estimates ranged from approximately 600,000-800,000 people.[1]

Assyrians traditionally speak Aramaic and their national roots trace back to the Assyrian Empire of Mesopotamia. Assyrian civilization is credited with spreading written language and literature, establishing written legal systems, advancing astronomy, and creating sculptures and architecture that are part of the rich Assyrian cultural heritage and are considered to be amongst the great cultural heritage of humanity.

Assyrians are amongst the earliest followers of Christianity, typically belonging to one of four unique churches: the Assyrian Church of the East (whose followers were sometimes called Nestorians until the early 20th century), the Chaldean Catholic Church (Chaldeans), the Syriac Orthodox Church (Syriacs, and who were also called Jacobites or Syrian Orthodox until the end of WWI), and the Syriac Catholic Church (Syriacs or Syrian Catholic prior to 1918). With the increased presence of Western missionaries in the Middle East and with more Assyrians living in the diaspora, Assyrians have also joined Presbyterian, Russian Orthodox, and Evangelical churches, amongst others, or may not practice a religion.

Religious leaders historically have held a significant role within the community. In part, this was shaped by the Ottoman Empire's millet system, in which recognized religious leaders served as both the spiritual and political heads of their followers. While this system allowed Armenians, Assyrians within the Chaldean and Syrian Orthodox millets, and other religious minorities to practice their religion and speak their language, it also placed members of millets as unequal, second-class citizens within the Empire. Although there is uncertainty if the Church of the East was officially recognized as a separate millet, it was able to maintain a strong degree of independence because of its geographic distance from the Ottoman government, at the far east of the Empire in the Hakkari Mountains, and because the position of the Church Patriarch was inherited and not appointed, which meant the Church's leadership was not subject to the approval of the Ottoman sultan.

Increasingly throughout the 19th century, foreign missions across the Ottoman Empire and Persia cultivated relationships with the Assyrian churches. Chaldean and Syriac Catholic

[1] Estimates in Sargon Donabed (2015) *Reforging a Forgotten History : Iraq and the Assyrians in the Twentieth Century*, Edinburgh University Press. Estimates are difficult for this period given challenges with censuses, territorial span, and other factors.

leadership, because of their communion with the Vatican, often had relationships with European states, especially France. Multiple missions, including Presbyterian, Anglican, and Russian Orthodox, established large presences in Persia to build relationships with the Assyrians therein, a role Russia especially used to advance its territorial and political interests as much as its religious goals.

Changes and Challenges within the Ottoman Empire

The Ottoman Empire, founded in 1299, was one of the world's largest and longest-lasting, at its peak spanning the Middle East, North Africa, and southeastern Europe. Starting in the 18th Century, however, the Empire began to lose territory as a result of European encroachment, unsuccessful military campaigns, and rising nationalist movements. Frequent warfare and military expenses pushed the Empire into debt. At the same time, the Empire also struggled to compete against the growing economic power of a fast-industrializing Europe.

Efforts at reform in the 19th century led then-Sultan Abdulmecid I to issue two edicts aiming to modernize the state, increase religious freedoms, and make subjects equal under the law. This period, known as the Tanzimat era, was soon followed by a movement for constitutional reform, which in 1876 successfully created a constitution and a parliament. Yet, just two years later, then-Sultan Abdul Hamid II suspended parliament and the constitution and consolidated his own power.

Also occurring during the Tanzimat era, however, were the Bedr Khan Beg massacres. Bedr Khan, a Kurdish tribal leader, conquered Assyrian villages from Hakkari to Tur Abdin, carrying out executions and forced conversions throughout the 1840s with the open support of the Ottoman government and local rulers until Ottoman forces exiled Bedr Khan in 1847 following Assyrian pleas for European aid.[2] Similarly, the Hamidian Massacres, including the Diyarbakir Massacres in 1895, and the Adana Massacres in 1909 targeted Assyrian and Armenian populations with extreme violence, killing an estimated 100,000 and 20,000 people, respectively.[3] These atrocities signaled the willingness of civilians and tribal leaders alike to participate in carrying out violence, as well as the increasingly vulnerable status of the Assyrian and Armenian communities.

[2]Anahit Khosroeva (2017) 'Assyrians In the Ottoman Empire and the Official Turkish Policy of their Extermination' in *Genocide in the Ottoman Empire*, ed. George Shirinian, Berghan Books; Hannibal Travis (2006) 'Native Christians Massacred' Genocide Studies and Prevention 1(3): 329; Sabri Atman (2023) '180th Anniversary of the Nestorian Massacre' Seyfo Center, available at seyfocenter.com/english/180th-anniversary-of-the-nestorian-massacre.

[3] Rouben Paul Adalian (1999) 'Hamidian Masscres' and 'Adana Massac re', *Encyclopedia of Genocide*, ed. Israel Charny, available through Armenian National Institute, ww.armenian-genocide.org. Map:'The Ottoman Empire: 1350-1918', The Islam Project, available at www.theislamproject.org/education/Ottoman_Empire.html.

In 1908, the potential for improved governance emerged when a group called the Young Turks successfully forced Sultan Abdul Hamid II to restore the 1876 constitution, bring back Parliament, and hold multi-party elections. Unfortunately, by 1913, hopes for progress faded as a group of extreme Turkish nationalists within the Young Turk Movement seized power. These individuals, led by Talaat Pasha, Minister of the Interior, Enver Pasha, Minister of War, and Cemal Pasha, Minister of the Navy, would bring the Empire into the First World War in October 1914 on the side of the Central Powers of Germany and Austria-Hungary, and would ultimately carry out genocide against Assyrians, Armenians, and Greeks.

The Genocide

Talaat Pasha, in October 1914, issued an order to deport Ottoman Assyrians living near the Persian border. This order took place even before Ottoman military engagement in the war began.[4] However, the Empire's first actions against Assyrians were not a relocation inland as stipulated in the order, but attacks on Assyrian civilians living in Urmia, Persia, that began in late 1914. Reports estimated that within just a few months, approximately 6,000 to 8,500 people in the Urmia region, about one-fifth of the Assyrian population, were killed or died of a cause related to the Ottoman invasion.[5] From village to village, accounts described the brutal murder of civilians, assaults of women, kidnapping of children, and theft and destruction of property. In some towns, all men were executed and women and children were enslaved; in others, women, children, and the elderly were also slaughtered. At times when military supplies were strained, the Ottomans turned to especially cruel methods of killing to save bullets for the war.[6]

Evidence of these atrocities includes extensive eyewitness and survivor accounts. The United States, prior to joining the war effort in 1917, maintained a diplomatic presence in the Ottoman Empire and accounts from missionaries and consular officials, including official State Department records, substantiated similar reports from German officials, Russian officials, British officials, Persian officials, members of the militaries, and foreign missionaries. These accounts, as indicated by the systemic targeting of Assyrian civilians in Persia, a neutral country, and later within the Ottoman Empire, disprove claims by Ottoman and later Turkish officials that such violence was carried out in the theater of war or as part of the conflict.

Although the Ottomans were forced from Urmia by Russian troops and Assyrian fighters in May 1915, violence instead came to target Assyrians who were Ottoman citizens, coinciding with the escalation of genocidal violence against Armenians. Accounts tell of militias entering villages and executing every Assyrian – or, in more diverse areas, every Christian - Assyrian, Armenian, and Greek alike. Laying siege to mountainous Assyrian villages, Ottoman forces and their Kurdish allies aimed to starve Assyrians from their homes, destroying crops and food supplies and preventing goods from entering the region. As forces reached the villages, the violence was often total: a report compiled by the British government noted that, across forty villages in one area of the Hakkari mountains, only seventeen survivors remained.[7]

Assyrians organized a military resistance led by General Agha Petros Elia of the Baz tribe, Malik Khoshaba of the Tyari tribe, and Dawid Mar Shimun, the brother of Patriarch Mar Benyamin Shimun, leader of the Church of the East. Assyrian troops were outnumbered and

[4] David Gaunt (2006) 'Massacres and Resistance: The Genocide of Armenians and Assyrians Based on New Evidence from the Archives', Lecture, National Association for Armenian Studies and Research, 7 December 2006.
[5] Travis 2006:332.
[6] Gaunt 2006.
[7] Travis 2006: 334.

under-equipped and sought outside assistance from Russia and Western Allied powers. In response to the atrocities his faithful experienced and in the hope of support from the Allied powers, Mar Benyamin Shimun declared war against the Ottoman Empire on May 10, 1915.[8]

Assyrian defenses could not long sustain the Ottoman and Kurdish onslaught and, by the fall of 1915, Assyrians in Hakkari fled, on foot, through the mountains to Urmia, where they sought protection under Russian troops who were still occupying the region, or to Russia itself. Russian protection provided temporary relief to the surviving population, but violence continued against Assyrians living in other parts of the Empire.

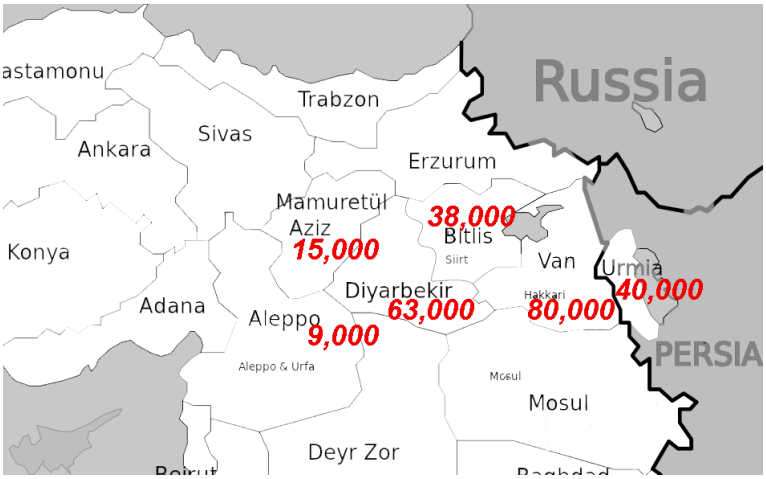
West of Hakkari, the governor of the Diyarbakir region personally perpetuated massacres, organizing death squads to attack Christians living in his district, in some cases, giving amnesty to outlawed tribes in exchange for carrying out such violence.[9] Reports from 1915 describe multiple Assyrian and Armenian villages in Diyarbakir as having been "exterminated."[10]

Tragically for those in Urmia, Russia withdrew from the war effort following the 1917 Russian Revolution. In March of 1918, Mar Benyamin Shimun, alongside more than 100 Assyrians, was assassinated during a peace negotiation with a Kurdish chieftain. Ottoman and Kurdish attacks escalated that summer and Assyrians were forced to flee, with approximately 30,000 Assyrians (and over 10,000 Armenians) ultimately finding refuge in a camp established by the British military in Baquba, Iraq. Thousands died during the trek to Baquba from violent attacks, exposure, and illness.

On October 31, 1918, the Empire officially surrendered to Allied powers, finally bringing an end to both the war and the genocidal violence.

In total, it is estimated that 250,000 Assyrians were killed in this genocide, and at least 4,000 children from the Hakkari region alone were orphaned.[11]

Region[12]	Assyrian victims
Persia	40,000
Van	80,000
Diyarbakir	63,000
Harput	15,000
Bitlis	38,000
Urfa	9,000
Additional regions	5,000
Total	*250,000*



[8] William Wigram (1920) *Our Smallest Ally: a brief account of the Assyrian nation in the Great War,* The MacMillan Company: New York, pg. 14. Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun (1945) "Petition on Behalf of the Assyrian Nation", Letter to Alger Hiss, Secretary of the United Nations, May 7, 1945, pg. 2.

[9] Gaunt (2015) 'The Complexity of the Assyrian Genocide' *Genocide Studies International* 9(1), pg. 89.

[10] Travis 2006: 336.

[11] Arianne Ishaya (2022)) 'Rise from the Ashes: Overpowered But Unbroken: Children in the Assyrian Genocide', Lecture, California State University Stanislaus.

[12] Figures provided at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 and shared in Gaunt 2015: 88. Map by Kathovo, Assyrian population 1914, Wikimedia Commons, modified by E. Hughes: commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Assyrian_population_1914.svg.

Exact figures are difficult because of several factors: uncertain population numbers before the genocide, an already-dispersed population, and the flight of refugees across the region. The chart and map on the previous page show the scale of the genocide by region. Van, where the Hakkari mountains are located, was home to the greatest loss of Assyrian life.

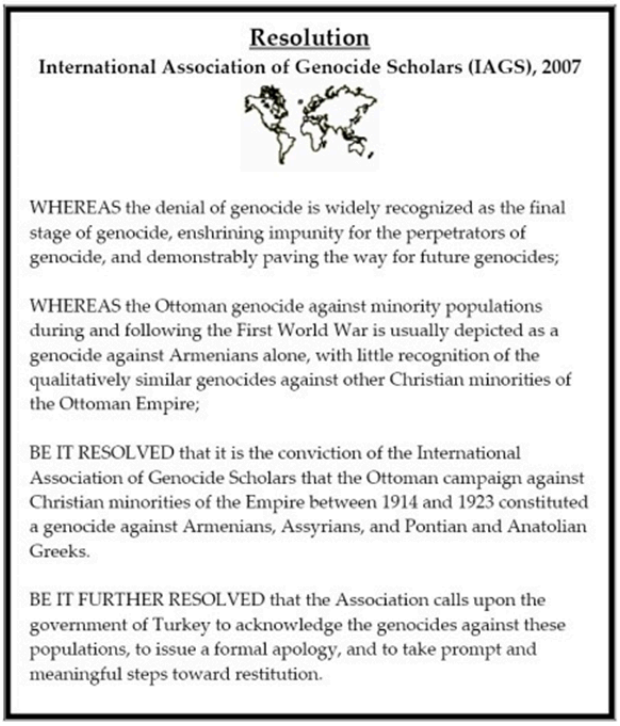
Approximately 1,000,000 Armenians and 100,000 Greeks were also killed during this period (with total Greek atrocities later totalling an estimated 1,000,000), all victims of concurrent genocidal policies by the Ottoman Empire.

After the Genocide

An immediate consequence of the genocide, atop the tremendous loss of life, home, leadership, and community, was the widespread displacement of survivors, who had fled to Iraq, Persia, the Soviet Union, Syria, and elsewhere into the diaspora.

A top priority of the Assyrian delegations at the post-war Paris Peace Conference was to secure the right to return home for any survivor wanting to do so. Delegates also advocated for the right of Assyrians to national self-determination, fitting with Woodrow Wilson's 14 Points and the redrawing of European empires into smaller nation-states. Moreover, Assyrians sought the protection of an Allied power over their homeland for at least the next two decades.[13]

The resulting 1920 Treaty of Sèvres between the Ottomans and the Allied Powers only made a passing mention of Assyrians, stating Assyrians living in Kurdish regions should have safeguards for their protection. In 1923, following the Turkish War of Independence and the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, Sèvres was renegotiated and replaced by the Treaty of Lausanne, which likewise did not address Assyrian demands for autonomy or protection. The new Turkish state prohibited the return of Assyrians who fled the genocide and, in 1924, forcibly expelled many who had returned. These decisions ultimately made tens of thousands of Assyrians permanent refugees, thousands of whom were stateless. Most remained in Iraq, Syria, Turkey, or Iran, although many later fled violence and persecution, as well as bad governance, in the latter half of the 20th century. Many others, unable to ever return home, were forced to build new lives in the diaspora.



Resolution

International Association of Genocide Scholars (IAGS), 2007

WHEREAS the denial of genocide is widely recognized as the final stage of genocide, enshrining impunity for the perpetrators of genocide, and demonstrably paving the way for future genocides;

WHEREAS the Ottoman genocide against minority populations during and following the First World War is usually depicted as a genocide against Armenians alone, with little recognition of the qualitatively similar genocides against other Christian minorities of the Ottoman Empire;

BE IT RESOLVED that it is the conviction of the International Association of Genocide Scholars that the Ottoman campaign against Christian minorities of the Empire between 1914 and 1923 constituted a genocide against Armenians, Assyrians, and Pontian and Anatolian Greeks.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Association calls upon the government of Turkey to acknowledge the genocides against these populations, to issue a formal apology, and to take prompt and meaningful steps toward restitution.

Recognition

At the time the genocide occurred, the word genocide did not yet exist. Eyewitness accounts and survivor testimonies often speak of slaughter, massacres, barbarity, cruelty, race murder, extermination, *Seyfo* (slaughter), and other terms hoping to capture the totality of these events.

By 1933, the Armenian, Assyrian, and Greek experiences would provide a foundation for Raphael

[13] See, for example, Joel Werda (1924) *The Flickering Light of Asia, Or, The Assyrian Nation and Church,* self-published; Abraham Yoosef (2017) *Assyria and the Paris Peace Conference*, Nineveh Press.

Lemkin in developing the word and concept of *genocide*, and laying the foundation for the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide that, since 1951, governs our international framework criminalizing genocide. Today, genocide is understood as an effort to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group.

Over the following decades, scholars, survivors, and their descendants, and committed activists have worked to raise awareness of the genocide and seek official recognition. Recognition honors and memorializes the victims, acknowledges the irreplaceable loss, and aspires to recommit humanity to ensuring such horrors do not happen again. It also pushes back against the continued denial of these events by the Turkish government. In 2007, the International Association of Genocide Scholars passed a resolution recognizing the Ottoman government carried out genocide against Armenians, Assyrians, and Greeks, affirming the overwhelming scholarly consensus that these genocides happened and that it is right to call them genocide. To date, 10 countries have recognized the Assyrian genocide, including Armenia, Germany, Sweden, and, most recently, France. Several US states, including Arizona, California, and Indiana, have also passed recognitions.

Assyrian Genocide: Key Terms

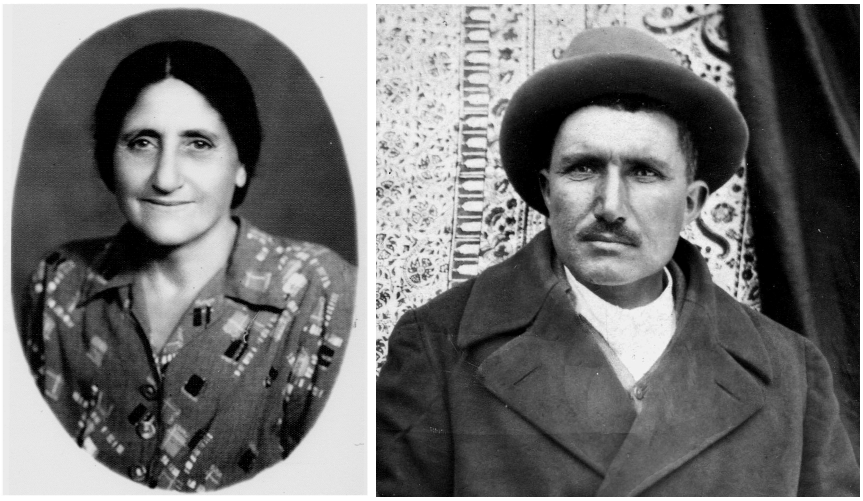
Student Handout

Assyrians	Assyrians are a distinct ethnic group whose homeland spans the current countries of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. Assyrians trace their heritage to the ancient Assyrian Empire and speak Aramaic (also called Assyrian, Syriac, and Sureth). Assyrians are traditionally Christian and have founded several churches throughout their history, including the Assyrian Church of the East, the Chaldean Catholic Church, the Syriac Catholic Church, and the Syriac Orthodox Church. Some Assyrians identify as Chaldean or Syriac.
Assyrian Genocide	The systemic murder and deportation of Assyrians throughout the Ottoman Empire and Persia was committed by the Ottoman Empire beginning in 1914. An estimated 250,000 Assyrians were killed, and witnesses estimated up to half of the Assyrian population died during this period due to murder, disease, starvation, and exposure. This genocide took place at the same time as the Ottoman genocides of Armenians and Pontic Greeks. As the word genocide did not yet exist, Assyrians initially used such terms as *ferman* [decree], *nakabat* [catastrophes], or *qaflat* [[deportation] convoys] and eventually referred to these atrocities as the *Seyfo* or *Sayfo* [slaughter].
Young Turks	A Turkish nationalist movement within the Ottoman Empire that came to power following the Young Turk Revolution of 1908. Although they first established a constitutional monarchy, by 1913, three figures, Talaat Pasha, Cemal Pasha, and Enver Pasha, effectively seized power and later were responsible for carrying out genocide against Assyrians, Armenians, and Pontic Greeks.
Hakkari	A portion of the Assyrian homeland in eastern Turkey (then-Ottoman Empire) near present-day Iraq and Iran. Although it is a mountainous region, Assyrians living in Hakkari were amongst those most targeted in the genocide. Survivors fled to Persia or Russia. Most Assyrians were banned from returning to Hakkari after the genocide.

Urmia	A region in northwest Persia (present-day Iran) between Lake Urmia and the Ottoman Empire (present-day Turkey) that comprises a portion of the Assyrian homeland. Although Assyrians living in Urmia were not part of the Ottoman Empire, Assyrians here were amongst the first genocide victims. Russian and Assyrian forces were able to push back the Ottomans, but the population again fell victim to violent attacks after Russia left the war effort in 1917. Most of the surviving population fled to Russia, Iraq, or elsewhere in Persia.
Baquba Camp	A refugee camp established by Great Britain during WWI near Baghdad, Iraq, to provide shelter and humanitarian aid for approximately 40,000 Assyrian and Armenian genocide survivors, largely from Hakkari and Urmia. After the camp closed, most survivors remained in what would become Iraq.
Simmel (or Simele) Massacres	The August 1933 massacres of Assyrian civilians in northern Iraq by the Iraqi military. Iraq gained its independence from Britain in 1932. An estimated 3,000 to 6,000 Assyrians were killed and over 60 Assyrian villages were destroyed.
Diaspora	A population dispersed from its homeland. Today, as a result of the genocide, Simmel, and continued persecution, more Assyrians live in diaspora than in their homelands.
Assyrian Martyrs Day (or Assyrian Remembrance Day)	Assyrian Martyrs Day (or Assyrian Remembrance Day) takes place on August 7 of each year to honour Assyrians lost to genocide, atrocities, and persecution.

Elishwa's Heroic Journey: The Exodus

Written by Shmouel Issa and Adrenna Alkhas (Elishwa's son and great-granddaughter)



(Elishwa, left, and her husband, Lazar, right)

When the supplies from the British and the Russians dried out the Assyrian armed men retreated to their villages to protect their homes and families. The reaction from Kurds and Turks was so overwhelming that the armed Assyrians had to fight off attacks on their villages, and help their families flee south alongside the Iraq/Iran border. Lazar decided to join the Exodus with his brothers, sisters, and families. His two sisters went missing. Using his beloved white horse, he went looking for them. He found one but the youngest went missing as dead or kidnapped. Meanwhile, Elishwa, waiting for Lazar to join the family group in the Exodus, panicked and left her baby behind. The cries of the baby were too unbearable, so she returned, fetched the baby, and in more panic joined the family group. Lazar delivered one of his sisters to the fleeing group and returned to join the men who were protecting the rear of the Exodus.

Ten thousand Assyrians fled to Russia and sought safety, and never returned. Some 80,000 men, women, and children from Urmia, and mountaineers from northern Iraq joined the exodus led by Dr. William A. Shedd and a group of Assyrian leaders over 500 miles from Urmia to Hamadan in Iran, and then to Bequbah in Iraq. Lazar joined the resistance at the rear of this exodus, Elishwa, and baby son Michael separated from Lazar, and marched with her sisters, parents, and Lazar's family members. Elishwa had one thing in mind and that was saving Michael. Lazar and Elishwa had the foresight to cater for a long haul and arranged to line up Elishwa's waistcoat with gold coins that Lazar had saved. She wore the coat next to her skin. The 500 miles was a treacherous journey. Some mothers with more than one child had to leave any sick one behind to save the other (s). The 80,000 fleeing Assyrians used horse-driven carriages, horses, mules, and donkeys to flee with some bare necessities. Some fled on foot with their children and bare necessities. Besides the armed Assyrians at the rear of the exodus stalling the advance of attacking footmen and mounted Muslims, selected leaders administered the fleeing population to

help them move in the right direction and along the best route possible leading them south where some British garrisons were located.

The weather was hot during the day and cold during the night; the terrain varied from plain, and arid to hilly, watery, and mountainous. Many died en route. Elishwa's father, and brother were some of many. The route taken by the exodus was marked by dead bodies. During the exodus there were cries of children abandoned by their parents and hopeless women and children whose body was giving up and could not keep marching; help was not available from the Russians and the British even though the Assyrians were their allies in the battles with the Turkish army. The Russians did send 200 Kazaks back to Urmia, but they were slaughtered by the Turks and Kurds on their arrival. The Assyrian leaders did not have enough basic supplies to help, and therefore everyone had to fend for him/herself. Food was obtained along the way from any village, unaffected by the Muslim fanatics.

Water became very scarce in parts of the route. Any rainwater collected in the ground was used when necessary. There are tales of women drinking horse urine, mistaken for water, in the horse hoof marks. Kurds and Turkish mounted men from some villages along the column of the exodus attacked the fleeing crowds, stealing their possessions, and kidnapping young girls whose parents helplessly saw their daughters disappear, and never to see them again dead or alive.

Elishwa, separated from Lazar, looked after her baby son Michael over the 500 miles of cruel track. Breastfeeding him and using every resource en route to keep her baby alive. The gold coins which lined her waistcoat came in handy at some friendly villages. This waistcoat became her savings bank over a long period. Lazar and all remaining fighting men were cut off from the exodus column for a long period. These men finally had to follow the exodus tracks. Dead bodies were clear markers of the route because 40,000 died on the route. Lazar, still riding his beloved horse, followed the track not knowing the fate of his young wife and all the other family members.

After six days the exodus arrived at a river where they rested, refreshed their supplies the best they could, and stayed overnight. But in the early hours of the morning under the pressure of approaching Kurds and Turks, the fleeing resumed. Some of the mountaineers herded their sheep amongst the fleeing crowds which created more congestion and dust in the heat of July. The sounds of the dying, wailing of women, and cries of children filled the air and induced more terror.

The survivors reached Saieen Kala where they met a small British garrison who was of some help with their limited supplies; a loaf of bread must have felt like manna from heaven. After a short respite, they had to flee again in a panic under the pressure of the attacking Turks and Kurds who were seen in the distance raising clouds of dust as they approached with their gleaming swords. The leaders with some help from the British garrison guided the survivors through difficult terrain through valleys surrounded by high mountains, and where there was no

sign of much vegetation. The intense heat, Asiatic cholera, and dysentery claimed many lives en route. A mother nursing her baby while leaning against a rock was seen by the surviving wife of a doctor. But on close examination, the mother was found to be dead, but the child was still nursing.

The terrorized fleeing crowds had no time to help each other. Elishwa clung to her baby son and used every resource to save him. The march continued over steep tracks and around the mountains until they reached BIJAR, a Kurdish town in Kermanshah, Iran. Bijar has lush and watery surroundings and is famous for its rugs. Fortunately, the British had a strong garrison in Bijar, and the town population was not affected by the fanatics of the attacking Kurds and Turks. Here the Assyrians felt much safer and camped in gardens and orchards made available by the British. The Assyrian Dr David Youhanan who attended to the sick of all nationalities fell ill and died in Bijar. He was buried on a hill with a tombstone provided by the British Captain Fisher at the pleading request of David‘s wife. Mrs. Youhanan had to leave Bijar with her three children and join the exodus to Hamadan, and from there she made her way to the USA and settled there. Her surviving son became a professor of English at New York University.

The survivors were led to Hamadan in Iran then to Baqubah northeast of Baghdad, Iraq where the British had a large presence. The British set up a refugee camp for all 40,000 surviving Assyrians, and a few thousand Armenians. Elishwa, her baby, and the surviving members of her family as well as Lazar’s family members settled in Bequbah Camp. By now, Elishwa, having lost her father and brother during the exodus, had three sisters and her mother left. Lazar had two brothers, one of whom, David, was married to an Armenian lady, Saroungul; they lost their three children en route to Baqubah. Saroungul was so heartbroken that she wore an incredibly sad face, and never smiled. David was as tall as Lazar with gentle manners. The other brother was Iskhak who was married to Ister and had six children, the oldest was Shawil who was killed by the German bombing of Habbaniya in 1941. Lazar’s sister Sarra was married to an Armenian man, Karow; they had no children. They all settled in the Baqubah refugee camp which was opened and funded by the British. For three months Elishwa, without her husband, shared a tent with her immediate family in a terror-free environment but a far cry from their home in Urmia, the Persian Paradise. She had no idea what her husband’s fate was. She kept nursing baby Michael in the hope that Lazar would turn up.


(Elishwa, c. 1985, Chicago)

Life of a Faithful and Altruistic Woman: Iniar (Ino) Jajoo (1902-1992)

Written by David Jajoo (her middle son) in Farsi in 1998

Abridged translation by Ramina Jajoo, MD (her granddaughter) in 2021

(Werda and Iniar Jajoo, and their child)

Iniar Saoul, also known as Ino Jajoo, was born in 1902 in the village of Birijeh in the district of Tkhuma in what is known today as southern Turkey. She was born to her father, Sawa, and mother, Dora. Sawa was well-versed in herbal and naturopathic remedies. Her family and the families of her two uncles all lived together. The inhabitants of this district were primarily farmers, growing various crops and raising farm animals. They lived peacefully in this beautiful mountainous region and followed the rules set by the village elders known as the "goziraya". The houses were built with rocks on the hillside, and the children recalled passing their days working, enjoying nature, and having many celebratory gatherings, such as the religious feasts, including regular prayer sessions and Lent. Children were taught to observe and follow these traditions.

At the age of 14, Ino was betrothed to the neighbor's son, Warda (Werda) Jajoo. A year later, due to ongoing persecution by the Ottoman Turkish forces (which started around 1914-1915), despite fierce resistance by the Assyrians of Hakkari, she and Warda were forced to flee for their lives. She always recalled how one of her cousins, Yalda, hid many Assyrian books in a copper pot, which he buried by the water mill in the hope that someday they would return and recover them. After the defeat, many had to escape to higher altitudes to hide behind rocks and witness their houses being burnt down. While fleeing on foot, she witnessed many dying from hunger, thirst, disease, and exhaustion. She was forced to abandon her sick and frail mother to save herself and her baby brother, Giwergis (George), whom she carried on her back. Until the day she died, Ino bitterly regretted leaving her mother behind, not knowing what happened to her, whether she was eaten by the wolves or met a fate even worse than that. During the death march, she witnessed many barbaric acts and saw many Assyrian women whose tongues and breasts were cut off by the Turkish army. At some point, they took refuge in a large sill (mill) and noticed that the ground they walked on was soft, only to discover that they were walking on corpses covered with crops.

Ino also told her family how, during this persecution, the much-beloved Church of the East's Catholicos-Patriarch, Mar Benyamin Shimun, was assasinated in the city of Kohneshar (Kohne-Shahr) in Iran. Several Assyrian men, including Warda and his younger brother, Yavela, went to retrieve the body of their Patriarch for proper burial. During this fight, Yavela and many others were killed, but the survivors were able to obtain Mar Benyamin's remains.

After several years of wandering, living in poverty, and even begging for food, in 1922,Warda and many Assyrian men enlisted in the British army, the Levies, in Iraq. They lived in refugee camps in Baqubah. Ino had 2 children, but both died in infancy. Warda was promoted to sergeant and eventually was honorably discharged in 1928 due to "reduction of the establishment". They moved to Mosul, and their daughter, Naimeh, was born there.

During these years of persecution, Ino and Warda lost many family members, one of whom was Ino's brother, Shimun, who died at the age of 24. Ino became weak and sick and was advised by the doctors to move to cooler climates as Mosul was too hot for her. So, they migrated to Hamadan in Iran. Moving to a foreign country, yet again, and not knowing the language was especially hard for them. They were mistreated, and she often recalled that she wasn't allowed to touch the groceries while shopping as she was told she was Najess (dirty) as she was Christian. Subsequently, Ino and Warda were blessed with three sons: George, David, and Thomas. Life remained very difficult for them, and finally, in 1955, they all moved to Tehran. A year later, Warda, having been ill for quite some time, passed away at the age of 55.

Ino continued to live with her family, who gradually started the immigration process to Australia beginning in 1984. She passed away in 1992 at the age of 90, surrounded by her sons, daughters-in-law, and grandchildren. She shared her heart-wrenching stories with her family members and would often cry herself to sleep, having lost more than 20 members of her family during the Assyrian genocide of 1915. She always fondly remembered her childhood days in her village. She is survived by her grandchildren: Ninva, Benipal, Ramina, Sabrina, Hanibal, Raman, Ramsin, and Rameil.

(The Jajoo family)

Assyrian Genocide Survivor: Rose Sargis (1914-2010)

June 2004 interview made available by Assyrian Information Management – Ator via YouTube
(abridged video transcription by Erin Hughes)

Image from Atour

Rose Sargis (RS): I'm Rose Sargis. I was born in Iran in 1914. War had just begun.

Interviewer (Q): What village were you born in?

RS: Abajalu was the name of our town. From our town, as I understand, doctors were educated by the Presbyterian missionary people. They are the ones who put up schools for us and taught teachers, taught ministers and theologians and so on and so forth. But it's 1914 and I was three months old -

Q: What was your mom's name?

RS: My mom's name was Eslye, her maiden name was David, and her married name to my dad was Agase.

Q: And your father's full name?

RS: Delazus (sp?) Agase… So anyway, we were in this barn with my – my mother was Armenian - with my mother's Armenian family, hiding from the enemy. I, as a three-month-old -

Q: Who were they hiding from?

RS: From the Kurds, or anyone else that was out there to kill anybody for no rhyme or reason. At the age of 3 months, I started crying. My uncle, my mother's uncle, said to my mother, "Throw her into that river 'cause they'll hear her cries and they'll come and kill all of us." And that was true. They would do that. They used to take people up against the barn and shoot them for no rhyme or reason. So anyways, this was 1914, at the age of 3 months, then the war subsided for…a short while. We went back to our homes for a while. Then, again, it began in 1917 – it ended in 1917, it started again earlier. We were thrown out of our homes, ransacked, and were fleeing on foot.

Q- How old were you then?

RS: I was by then 4 years old. My mother told me that I was 4 years old. We were barefooted, with no food, nothing really, just the clothes on our backs, and we were fleeing, not knowing where we were going, not knowing what would become of us. And then suddenly - I remember this myself at the age of 4 - the British army came and rescued us and took us to Iraq, and put up tents for us, and fed us, and clothed us until my father found where we were after the war. Because, as you all know, after the war, everybody's scattered. My dad was here in Chicago…he was with the Carter Westminster church that helped my dad, with the Presbyterian missionaries, find where we were in Iraq being taken care of by the British army. Then he did send for us.

Q: Do you remember anybody from your village that were also there with you?

RS: Yes. Some friends were there with us…there was one I know that was a cousin to my husband. Walter Jacobs. And his mother.

Q: Do you remember her name?

RS: Her name was…I'm forgetting her name now, it's been some time since I've used it. There were several people that we did know…While we were in camp, so to speak, my cousin had gone downtown in Iraq and bought each of us a rubber ball. There was one square area that was cemented like a sidewalk, and we were playing with our rubber ball, and all of a sudden about six high school kids – this was by the railroad tracks, and I remember right over the tracks were fields of poppy and my cousin said, 'give me the ball because the boys will take it away from you.' I said, 'No, I'll just put it behind my back.'

Well, before I knew it, one of those six high school kids came and grabbed it out of my hands. And the whole town that we're in, the tents there, ran after those six boys trying to get that ball back. That's how precious balls were in those days.

Q: This village, this was in Baquba, Iraq?

RS: Yeah, Baquba. They caught one of the boys and took a book away from him. I remember the next day – because books were precious in those days – the father and the son came begging for his book, and we gave it to him, but he said he didn't know who took the ball. So to this day, I love balls, I always used to buy balls for kids. That was in Iraq, until my dad discovered through the Presbyterian Church missionaries and our Iranian missionaries where we had land, and my dad sent for us. That was 1921 that we came to America.

Q: Prior to coming to America in 1921, did your mom tell you any stories and did you remember any stories that the elders told you?

RS: As I was a kid, it took us three months, three different ships, to come here… We finally got to America on Canal Street, and we got a cab, and we came to these flights of stairs on Oak Street in Chicago, and we climbed these stairs, and there was my dad who had never seen me. I had never seen him, of course, and my aunt and my uncle. The first thing my uncle said to my mother because he had become a barber on Chicago Avenue, he said to her, "I have to cut her hair", my mother started crying because people in Eastern countries, women don't cut their hair, the girls don't cut their hair. Anyway, he did cut my hair, and my mother wept like you wouldn't believe. He told her the reason he was cutting it was because the children would not play with me. I have a picture of that haircut, with the American flag, which I love dearly, and I cherish it because it's the only picture I have of myself as a young child of seven years old.

…

Q: Do you remember, if we go back to Urmia before you came here, do you remember anything about those marches, where you left from, the days of when you left Urmia?

RS: At the age of 4 – my mother used to [unclear] mention this, beg – because we had nothing – for food for me for 10 days they used to tell me. I remember seeing this, at 4 years old, fleeing, children that were left along the wayside. If a mother had more than one child, she could not have it. They would just sit them down on the ground, put some raisins on their lap, and carry on for their own lives. I remember that very distinctly. But beyond that, and being in Iraq those three years, and the things that helped, the British Army helped us to survive—another miracle.

…I don't know whether I fulfilled what you wanted to hear because somehow I think I was a little young for all these times of war and haven't been able to capture too much of it.

Q: It's remembering as much as you can, and that's all we hope for, that your stories reach the generations to come. This is why we're here and we're talking about this. Things of this nature need to be shown so these things don't happen again in the future.