

# A Brief History of the Assyrian Genocide

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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 were approximately 500,000 people.<sup>1</sup>

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

<sup>1</sup> Population estimates from David Gaunt (2015) 'The Complexity of the Assyrian Genocide' Genocide Studies International 9(1).

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 18<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 massacres. 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 Khan in 1847 following Assyrian pleas for European aid.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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

<sup>2</sup>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](http://seyfocenter.com/english/180th-anniversary-of-the-nestorian-massacre).

<sup>3</sup>Rouben Paul Adalian (1999) 'Hamidian Massacres' and 'Adana Massacres', *Encyclopedia of Genocide*, ed. Israel Charny, available through Armenian National Institute, [www.armenian-genocide.org](http://www.armenian-genocide.org).

Map: 'The Ottoman Empire: 1350-1918', The Islam Project, available at [www.theislamproject.org/education/Ottoman\\_Empire.html](http://www.theislamproject.org/education/Ottoman_Empire.html).

and Armenian communities.

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.<sup>4</sup> 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 by May 1915, 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup>

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

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<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> Travis 2006:332.

<sup>6</sup> Gaunt 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Travis 2006: 334.

Shimun, leader of the Church of the East. Assyrian troops were outnumbered and 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.

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.

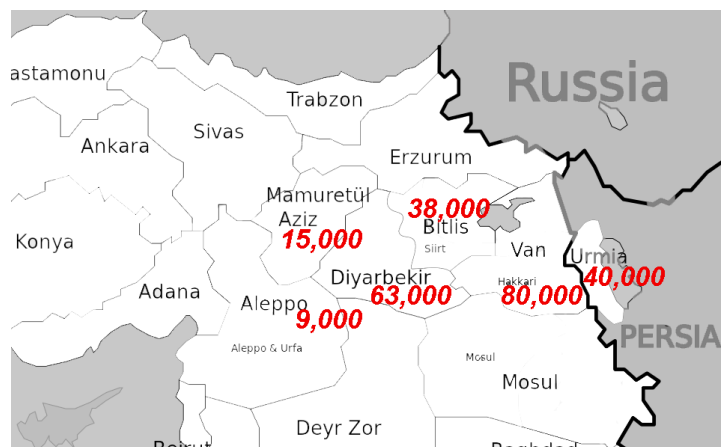
West of Hakkari, the governor of the Diyarbakir region personally perpetuated massacres, organizing death squads to attack Christians living in his district, in some cases, giving amnesty to outlawed tribes in exchange for carrying out such violence.<sup>8</sup> Reports from 1915 describe multiple Assyrian and Armenian villages in Diyarbakir as having been “exterminated.”<sup>9</sup>

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 more than 30,000 Assyrians ultimately finding refuge in a camp established by the British military in Baquba, Iraq. An estimated 7,000 people 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 were orphaned.<sup>10</sup> 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. Approximately 1,000,000 Armenians and 100,000 Greeks were also killed during this period, all victims of concurrent genocidal policies by the Ottoman Empire.

Region <sup>11</sup>	Assyrian victims
Persia	40,000
Van	80,000
Diyarbakir	63,000
Harput	15,000
Bitlis	38,000
Urfa	9,000
Additional regions	5,000
<i>Total</i>	<i>250,000</i>



<sup>8</sup> Gaunt 2015: 89.

<sup>9</sup> Travis 2006: 336.

<sup>10</sup> Arianne Ishaya (2022) 'Rise from the Ashes: Overpowered But Unbroken: Children in the Assyrian Genocide', Lecture, California State University Stanislaus.

<sup>11</sup> 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.

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.

## 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.<sup>12</sup>

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 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many others, unable to ever return home, were forced to build new lives in the diaspora.

## 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* (sword), 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 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

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Joel Werda (1924) *The Flickering Light of Asia, Or, The Yoosemational* 9(1). ef (2017) *Assyria and the Paris Peace Conference*, Nineveh Press.

**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.

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, Australia, Germany, and, most recently, France. Several US states, including Arizona and California, have also passed recognitions.