



*“There has been no war, no conflict between the two contending powers, but a pitiless tornado of bloody ruin....Has it come to this, that in the last days of the nineteenth century humanity has placed itself on trial?”*

—U.S. Senator Shelby Collum

## Chapter 2

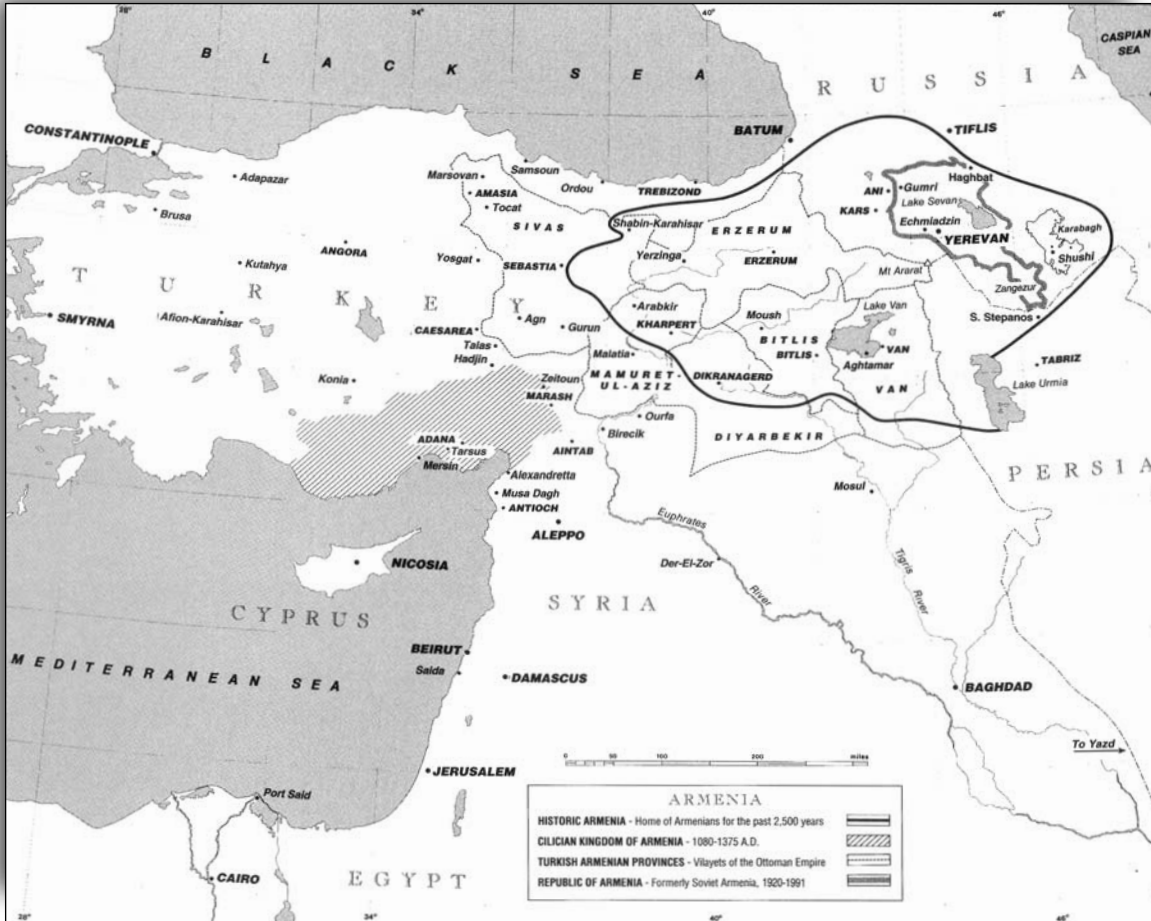
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# WE AND THEY

*Armenians in the Ottoman Empire*

THROUGHOUT HISTORY MANY PEOPLE HAVE ESCAPED PERSECUTION AND VIOLENCE IN THEIR HOMELANDS and taken refuge in countries that have provided them an opportunity to start again. This book is about the twentieth-century genocide of the Armenians. In every history, some stories are particular, while others connect universally. The first chapter of this resource book examined the power of historical memory to shape identity. It looked at how Armenians today are influenced by stories of the Armenian past and the impact those stories have on their identity. Most of those stories were told by families who settled in the United States as refugees. This chapter begins a case study of the choices that ultimately resulted in the genocide of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire and forced those families from their homes. As we tell this story our focus will be on the responses by individuals, groups, and nations—inside and outside of the Ottoman Empire—to the treatment of Armenians before and during the genocide. The readings focus on the roots of violence, the roles of leaders, the power of stereotyping, and the creation of the “other.” It is important to study the steps that led to violence. If we can recognize how a conflict escalates, perhaps we can prevent future genocides.

The case of the Armenians under Ottoman rule offers insight into the problems faced by advocates for humanitarian causes. These problems become especially grave when there are no common rules for the



## HISTORIC ARMENIA

*This map of historic Armenia shows the general area that Armenia once encompassed, notable in comparison to the much smaller area delineated as the Republic of Armenia at the end of World War I.*

protection of human rights. Many people wanted to protect the Armenians by including them in what Helen Fein calls “the Universe of Obligation”<sup>17</sup>—a circle of individuals and groups toward whom obligations are owed, to whom rules apply, and whose injuries call for amends. Without an international system for the protection of human rights, advocates of the Armenians met stiff resistance and, in the face of unfulfilled promises, left the Armenians even more vulnerable.

The Armenians are an ancient people that have lived on much of the same land for more than two thousand years. For some of that time, they ruled their own kingdom. During long periods of Armenian history, however, they have been a subject population, ruled by others. By the sixteenth century the Armenians were subjects in the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman sultan ruled not only as a monarch but also assumed the title of Caliph—the official leader of the Islamic faithful. Ottoman law conformed in many ways with Islamic law and was overseen by the Sheikh-ul-Islam (a religious leader who was appointed by the sultan). Christians and Jews, including Armenians, Bulgarians, Croatians, Greeks, Romanians, Serbs, and others, were classified as *dhimmi* (protected subject non-Muslims). The *dhimmi* were granted considerable religious freedom, but they were not subject to Islamic law and therefore were without equal legal standing. Codes also prohibited non-Muslims from certain professions—including service in the Ottoman army—and subjected them to additional taxes. Despite their second-class status, as the empire prospered the Armenians fared reasonably well.

During the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire’s fortunes declined. The economy stagnated, and corruption was rampant. In addition, the empire was in debt to the European powers, especially France, England, and Belgium. Life for Armenians and other non-Muslims became progressively more difficult. Burdened by increasing taxation and without legal means to protect themselves or their families from exploitation, the subject populations looked for a way to improve their conditions.

Nationalism—the belief in a collective identity and destiny determined by membership in an ethnic, linguistic, or religious group—influenced the various groups of the empire. While the Greeks and others sought to break from the empire, Armenians were not concentrated in a single area that could easily become an independent state. Instead, they placed their hopes on promised reforms of the Ottoman administration. While waiting for the reforms to materialize, Armenians organized in a movement for civil rights. The sultan, however, responded to Armenian protests with repression and massacre. Some Armenian leaders now believed that help had to come from the outside.

There was a precedent for intervention on the behalf of Ottoman minorities. After the Greek revolution of 1821, the Great Powers—England, France, and Russia—became increasingly involved in Ottoman affairs. Describing the conditions of the Empire to a British envoy, Czar Nicholas I of Russia explained: “What we have on our hands is a sick man—a very sick man.” What to do with the sick man became the obsession of European journalists and diplomats. Sometimes the European powers supported the independence struggles of Ottoman subjects as opportunities to achieve their own strategic interests

under the guise of “humanitarian intervention.” At the same time, the growth of the media and a burgeoning concern for human rights made it possible for ordinary people, thousands of miles from the Ottoman Empire, to read about the suffering of the Armenians. In the United States, a movement for Armenian relief began in Christian churches but soon spread to communities at large and eventually to Congress.

By the late nineteenth century Armenian activists worked cooperatively with Turkish groups who were also advocating change. One of those groups, the Young Turks, a revolutionary organization promising equality for all, forced the sultan to enforce the Ottoman constitution and submit to constitutional rule in 1908.

This chapter traces that history by addressing several guiding questions.

- ❖ How do groups, nations, and empires define their “universe of obligation”?
- ❖ Who is responsible for protecting the vulnerable from being mistreated inside a sovereign state?
- ❖ When does humanitarian intervention make a difference on behalf of the vulnerable? What kinds of intervention leave the vulnerable population even more exposed?
- ❖ What is the difference between resisting oppression, advocating change, and revolution?
- ❖ What tensions emerge in the transition from a traditional society to a constitutional state?



***This postcard depicts Armenian women at work knitting socks in Ada-Pazar, Ottoman Empire. It was sent to the Armenian Church of Gedikpasha.***

## Reading 1 — THE OTTOMAN ARMENIANS

By the sixteenth century, Armenians were one national group within the vast Ottoman Empire. Over time, borders had changed and a portion of the traditional Armenian homeland had become part of the neighboring Russian Empire. Ottoman Armenians, like the rest of the population, were divided into millets, semi-autonomous communities organized by religion. Leaders of the millet ran most of the administration of the group including education and tax collection. While the sultan oversaw the Muslim millet—including Turks, Arabs, and Kurds—Christian patriarchs ran the Greek and Armenian millets, and the grand rabbi headed the Jewish millet. The leaders of the millets were held accountable for the behavior of the members of the group.

Under this system, Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire were second-class citizens.

Richard Hovannisian, the principal author of the 1988 California model curriculum for teaching about human rights explains: “Despite these disabilities, most Armenians lived in relative peace so long as the Ottoman Empire was strong and expanding.” He continues:

*But as the empire’s administrative, fiscal, and military structure crumbled under the weight of internal corruption and external challenges in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, oppression and intolerance increased. The breakdown of order was accelerated by Ottoman inability to modernize and compete with the West.*

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

*Of the various subject peoples, the Armenians perhaps sought the least. Unlike the Balkan Christians or the Arabs, they were dispersed throughout the empire and no longer constituted an absolute majority in much of their historic homelands. Hence, most Armenian leaders did not think in terms of independence. Expressing loyalty to the sultan and disavowing any separatist aspirations, they petitioned for the protection of their people and property from corrupt officials and marauding bands. The Armenians had passed through a long period of cultural revival. Thousands of youngsters enrolled in elementary and secondary schools, and hundreds of students traveled to Europe for higher education. Many returned home imbued with ideas of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution to engage in teaching, journalism, and literary criticism. As it happened, however, this Armenian self-discovery was paralleled by height-*

*ened administrative corruption and exploitation. It was this dual development, the conscious demand for enlightened government and security of life on the one hand and the growing repression and insecurity on the other, that gave rise to the Armenian Question as a part of the larger Eastern Question.*<sup>18</sup>

Even though conditions for Armenians continued to deteriorate, many Muslims felt that the sultan's reforms went too far. In *The Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought*, Serif Mardin writes that with reform came a backlash. After the 1856 law of nationalities was introduced: "Many [Muslims] began to grumble: 'Today we lost our sacred national rights which our ancestors gained with their blood. While the Islamic nation used to be the ruling nation, it is now bereft of this sacred right. This is a day of tears and mourning for the [Muslim] brethren.'"<sup>19</sup>

## CONNECTIONS

- ❖ Many Europeans called the Ottoman Empire the "sick man of Europe." What makes a country sick?
- ❖ What minimum protections do individuals and groups need for safety and security?
- ❖ In the Ottoman Empire, religious affiliation determined the rules of membership in the larger society. In your community, what factors influence participation in the larger society?
- ❖ The Armenians, as Christians, were promised tolerance as "people of the book" under the Islamic law of the Ottoman Empire. Create a working definition of the word "tolerance"? What are the strengths of the idea of tolerance? What are the limitations of the idea?
- ❖ Richard Hovannisian notes, "as the empire's administrative, fiscal, and military structure crumbled under the weight of internal corruption and external challenges in the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries, oppression and intolerance increased." What is the relationship between the health of a society and its treatment of minorities?



**This postcard is of a silk factory in Brossa that belonged to the Bay brothers, who were Armenian, 1890.**

- ❖ Psychologist Ervin Staub studies genocide and the prevention of collective violence. He notes that economic problems and widespread violence threaten individuals on a personal level. Staub suggests those forces influence the way people view the "other." How did the Ottoman "universe of obligation" change as the economic situation became worse? How do you explain the changes?

William Ramsay, a British ethnographer, described the impact of prejudice and discrimination on the Armenians in graphic terms:

*Turkish rule . . . meant unutterable contempt. . . . The Armenians (and the Greek) were dogs and pigs . . . to be spat upon, if their shadow darkened a Turk, to be outraged, to be mats on which he wiped the mud from his feet. Conceive the inevitable results of centuries of slavery, of subjection to insult and scorn, centuries in which nothing that belonged to the Armenian, neither his property, his house, his life, his person, nor his family, was sacred or safe from violence—capricious, unprovoked violence—to resist which by violence meant death! I do not mean that every Armenian suffered so; but that every one lived in conscious danger from any chance disturbance or riot.<sup>20</sup>*

- What tools do people need to survive when living in “constant danger”?
- The authors of the California curriculum note a period of “Armenian self-discovery” during a time of increased discrimination. What is the relationship between ethnic and national awareness and discrimination? Under what conditions do individuals stress the importance of their group identity?

Successful movements for national liberation within the Ottoman Empire led to a huge loss of territory. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* defines nationalism as follows:

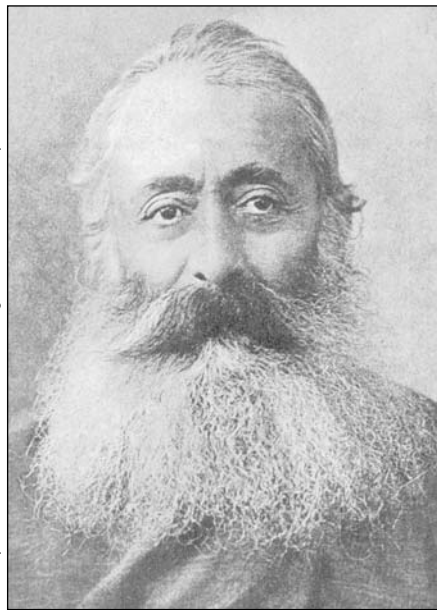
1. Devotion to the interests or culture of one’s nation.
2. The belief that nations will benefit from acting independently rather than collectively, emphasizing national rather than international goals.
3. Aspirations for national independence in a country under foreign domination.<sup>21</sup>

- Why do you think some people view nationalism as a positive ideal while others believe it is dangerous? Should every national group have the right to form its own country? What problems might be resolved? What new challenges would you anticipate?
- Considering the recent loss of Greece and much of the Balkans, why would many Ottoman leaders believe that “Armenian self-discovery” was a threat? Why might many Armenians have considered “self-discovery” necessary for survival?
- When Ottoman rulers promised equal rights to the all nationalities of the empire, many Muslims interpreted these measures as a loss of their own status. How do people behave when they feel that their status is threatened? Why do you think many Muslims would have interpreted equal protection for all as a loss of their own rights?

## Reading 2 — IRON LADLES FOR LIBERTY STEW

Throughout the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire fought several wars over territory. In 1877, Russia and the Ottoman Empire fought in the Balkans and in the traditional Armenian provinces of the empire. As the war went on, Armenians, who were legally forbidden from serving in the Ottoman military, faced a dilemma. Should they support the Russians, Christians, who promised the Armenians would be treated fairly under the Czar's rule, or should they remain loyal to the empire that treated them as second-class citizens? In a pastoral letter, the Armenian Patriarch—the official leader of the Armenian millet—called on his people to pray for the victory of the empire. Despite the loyalty of Armenians, Kurds (a Muslim nationality that lived in the Ottoman Empire), fighting as irregular soldiers, looted and burned several Armenian villages. In the aftermath, many Armenians greeted Russian troops, led by Russian Armenians, as liberators.

In January 1878, the Ottoman government asked Russia for an end to fighting, and peace negotiations began. Negotiations soon collapsed, and the Russian army moved towards the Ottoman capital. Their actions set off alarms through the capitals of Europe, and the British government sent a squadron to prevent the Russians from taking Constantinople [Istanbul]. At a meeting in San Stefano, on the outskirts of the Ottoman capital, a second attempt was made to come to terms for a lasting peace. The resulting treaty granted independence to Serbia, Montenegro, and Romania, and autonomy to Bulgaria. It also awarded Russia several districts in the Caucasus with large Armenian populations and warned that Russian troops would not leave the western Armenian districts until reforms were enacted to ensure the security of the Armenian population.



Courtesy of Azed Ozzie Aslanian, Antronig Shalimian, and Harry Dickran

**Archbishop Mkrtych Khrimian.**

Russian gains were too much for the European powers. They pressured Russia into renegotiating the treaty in Berlin during July, 1878. To the disappointment of the Armenian delegation, led by Armenian Archbishop Mkrtych Khrimian, Russia was pressured into withdrawing its troops from the Armenian providences and the Armenians were once again offered promises of reform without a means to guarantee their enforcement.

Upon returning from the Berlin negotiations, Archbishop Khrimian shared his disappointment in a sermon at the Armenian cathedral in Constantinople.

*You know that according to the decision of Patriarch Nerses and the National Assembly we went as delegates to Berlin in order to represent the Armenian Case to the*



*Great Powers attending the Congress. We had great hopes that the Congress would grant peace to the world and freedom to the small and oppressed nations—among them our own. The Congress convened and the statesmen of the Great Powers assembled around a diplomatic table covered with green cloth while the delegates of the small and oppressed nations were waiting outside the Congress. In the middle of the Congress on the table covered with a green cloth was placed a big cauldron of Liberty Stew (Harriseh) from which big and small nations and states were to receive their share. Some of the participants were pulling towards the East, others were pulling towards the West and after a long argument they began to call in order one by one the delegates of the small nations. First the Bulgarian walked in followed by the Serb and Gharadaghian [Montenegrans]; the rattling and clinking of the sabres dangling from their sides attracted the attention of those present. After much talking these three delegates drew their sabers and using them as iron ladles dipped them in the cauldron of the Liberty Stew, took their portion and departed proud and dauntless. It was now the turn of the Armenian delegate. I drew near with the paper petition given to me by the National Assembly imploring them to fill my plate with Liberty Stew, too. The officials standing around the cauldron at the time asked me: “Where is your iron ladle? It is true that the Liberty Stew is being distributed here but one who doesn't have an iron ladle can't approach it.” Hearken this if in the near future should the Liberty Stew again be distributed at that time, don't come without a ladle, you will go back empty-handed.*

*Ah! Dear Armenian people, could I have dipped my Paper Ladle in the cauldron it would sog and remain there! Where guns talk and sabers shine, what significance do appeals and petitions have?*

*... I had been given a piece of paper, not a saber, and for that reason we were deprived of Liberty Stew. In spite of all, in view of the future, going to the Congress of Berlin was not useless.*

*People of Armenia, of course you will understand what the gun could have done and can do. Therefore, dear and blessed Armenians, upon returning to your fatherland, each of you take a gun as a gift to your friends and relatives. Again and again, arm yourselves! People, place the hope for your liberation on yourselves. Use your intellect and muscle. Man must toil himself in order to be saved. . . .<sup>22</sup>*

Not all Armenians were as pessimistic as Archbishop Khrimian. The Armenian Patriarch Nerses Varzhapetian remained hopeful that the sultan would implement reforms that would provide meaningful change in the life of Armenians living within the empire.

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## CONNECTIONS

- Khrimian was disappointed by the terms of the Treaty of Berlin. What is a treaty? How is a treaty created? How is it enforced?

- ❖ List the metaphors that Khrimian used in his speech. How do you interpret their meaning? What does Khrimian mean by iron ladles and the paper ladle? How were the nations with iron ladles different from the Armenian nation?
- ❖ According to Khrimian, how did the European diplomats define their “universe of obligation”? What recourse do victims of oppression have for violations of their safety?
- ❖ What is the difference between a reformer and a revolutionary? Based on your understanding of those terms, how would you describe Khrimian? How do you think the Ottoman government would have understood Khrimian’s call?
- ❖ What was the major conclusion that Khrimian made about the outcome of the Congress of Berlin? Why does he say that the attendance of Armenians was not completely useless?
- ❖ What advantages do you see in following Khrimian’s path for change? What are the disadvantages?

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Project SAVE Armenian Photograph Archives, Inc., Courtesy of Rose Babigian Koobattian.

**Members of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (c. 1912-1913) that was created in 1890 in a desire to advance Armenian civil rights.**

## Reading 3 → ORGANIZING FOR CHANGE

From 1878 until 1881, the European powers issued collective warnings reminding the sultan and the Ottoman government of their obligations under the Treaty of Berlin. Despite the protests, conditions for Armenians in the empire did not improve. Armenians on the frontier were still subject to violent raids from local tribes. The Christians were still second-class subjects, victims of elevated taxation and unable to seek legal recourse in the courts. Inspired by Khrimian's example as well as by efforts of Christian groups in the Balkans to organize, some Armenians now believed that change had to come from within.

In the book, *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America's Response*, Scholar Peter Balakian writes about the founding of Armenian political parties and their strategies to bring reform to the Ottoman government.

*In Turkish Armenia, the rising tide of progressive ideas about liberty, human rights, and equality came both from the Armenian intellectuals in Russia and from a long-standing intellectual relationship with Europe and its Enlightenment. Western ideas had come to Armenians either in the course of travel or study in Europe, if their families were well-to-do, or because they had been educated at one of the many American Protestant schools in Anatolia, where they were instilled with the egalitarian ideas of the American Revolution.*

*But the formation of three political parties gave voice to Armenian aspirations in ways that were unprecedented for them and their Turkish rulers. The fall of 1885 saw the founding of the Armenakan Party in Van—that Armenian cultural center near the Russian border. It was a secret society and literally had its first meetings underground in a burrow used for pressing grapes. The party espoused Armenian self-defense in the face of violence and it affirmed Armenia's right to self-rule, trusting that the Powers would finally come to Armenia's aid. More vociferous and centralized was the Hunchak Party, which was founded in 1887 by a group of Russian Armenians in Geneva. A socialist party with a strong Marxist orientation, they sought change and emancipation for Armenia through a socialist program, and they believed that a new and independent Armenia would initiate a worldwide socialist revolution.*

*By the summer of 1890 Dashnakstutium (Armenian Revolutionary Federation) was founded in Tiflis. Dedicated to a revolutionary struggle for Armenian advancement and freedom, the party evolved into a more nationalist platform that involved a commitment to engage in armed struggle in the face of wholesale violence and oppression, and before long would become the best known and most controversial of the these.*

*As the political parties evolved so did civic protest. And by the summer of 1890 in Erzeroum about 200 Armenians met in the cathedral church yard to draw up a petition to protest the conditions under which Armenians were living throughout the Empire. But, as the rally began the police interceded, and before*

long an Ottoman battalion was dispatched to Erzurum. Before it was over, the Armenian quarter was attacked and looted, and there were more than a dozen dead and 250 wounded. A month later in Constantinople, Armenians demonstrated outside their cathedral in the Kum Kapu section of the city, and again violence broke out between the police, some soldiers and the Armenian demonstrators. Of the fracas that followed, the British Ambassador, Sir William White, noted what seemed to him the historical importance of the occasion by referring to it as “the first occasion since the conquest of Constantinople by the Turks on which Christians have dared resist soldiers in Stamboul.”

By 1893, Armenian activists were placing *yaftas*—placards—on the public walls of certain towns in western and central Anatolia. The placards were addressed to Muslims around the world asking them to stand up to the sultan, an incompetent oppressor. Instead of instigating Muslim rebellion, however, the plan, which had come from Hunchak cells throughout Anatolia, instigated a mass of arbitrary arrests and torture across the empire. Nonetheless, by the early nineties the Armenians were making themselves heard, which further enraged the already paranoid sultan.<sup>23</sup>

Repression was not limited to the Armenians alone. Balakian describes the sultan’s attempt to stamp out all reform.

*He declared numerous words and subjects taboo and illegal. Beyond his strict censorship of all words and references to Armenia, he ordered a ban on any form of expression that referred to regicide or the murders of heads of state. The name of the deposed Sultan Murad V was banned; and the king and queen of Serbia were reported to have died of indigestion; Empress Elizabeth of Austria was said to have died of pneumonia, French President Carnot of apoplexy, and President McKinley of anthrax. So far did his paranoia carry him that he ordered his censors to expunge all references to H<sub>2</sub>O from science textbooks because he feared the symbol would be read as meaning “Hamid the second is nothing.”*

*The French writer Paul Fesch in 1907 summed up the state of the press under the sultan: “For thirty years the press has ceased to exist in Turkey. There are indeed newspapers, many of them even, but the scissors of the censorship cut them in so emasculating a manner that they no longer have any potency. If I dare, I would call them gelded newspapers—or rather, to keep the local colors, eunuchs.” Correspondingly, intellectual freedom and book publishing were also under strict censorship.*

*It is not surprising, then, that Armenian political activism was met with rage by the sultan. Anyone suspected of sedition—which meant a genuine part of the population, in a society which was enveloped in the sultan’s network of espionage and surveillance—was arrested, tortured, killed or exiled. It was in this climate that a group of liberal Turkish intellectuals...created a movement that demanded reform and constitutional government. As it grew in power, Abdul Hamid did what he could to tighten the muzzle on all political opposition. But the empire-wide corruption and the sul-*

*tan's own paranoia had corroded even the military, so that what was supposed to be the army of the sultan's protection became the seat of discontent and the seed ground for the Young Turk movement.*<sup>24</sup>

## CONNECTIONS

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- Between 1878 and 1881 the European powers warned the sultan that there would be consequences for the treatment of minorities in the Ottoman Empire. Despite those warnings, conditions for the Armenians did not improve. What lessons might the sultan have taken away? What lessons do you think the Armenians learned?
- Peter Balakian characterizes the Armenian protests in this reading as acts of *civil disobedience*. In the mid 1800s American writer Henry David Thoreau popularized the concept of civil disobedience. Since that time, it has been invoked by such notable activists as Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. What does the term *civil disobedience* mean? What attributes would you use to characterize actions taken by those engaged in civil disobedience?
- Armenian civic protest and civil disobedience were repressed by the Ottoman government. In the United States the First Amendment is meant to protect the rights of individuals and groups to protest, petition, associate, and voice outrage. Why are those protections necessary in a democracy?
- Armenians engaged in civil disobedience were often met with collective punishment—looting and massacre. What did the sultan's forces hope would happen as a result of those measures?

Scholar Vartan Gregorian explains that there are many factors that contributed to the decline of the Ottoman Empire. Among several other factors, he highlights the challenges in creating a collective identity. Gregorian notes:

- *Among Ottoman rulers, there also developed a sense of complacency and a belief in the infallibility of Ottoman institutions and the inferiority of the "infidels."*
- *The failure of the empire to integrate various nations, peoples and regions into a cohesive whole. As a result, the empire remained a collection of different ethnic and religious populations (millets), such as Greek Orthodox, Armenian and Jewish, as well as semiautonomous regions (Arabia, Lebanon, North Africa and the like) without a common, unifying identity or unity of purpose.*
- *Perhaps most important of all, the rise of 19th-century nationalism in all the regions of the Ottoman empire, involving Christians at first and then, later, even Muslim peoples within the empire, such as Arabs and Turks.*<sup>25</sup>

- Who decides the rules of membership in a society? How can nations and empires create a cohesive identity? What obstacles get in the way? How can those obstacles be overcome?
- What do you think the Sultan feared would happen if the Armenians were to publicly air their grievances?

- Paul Fesch observed the intense censorship under the rule of Sultan Abdul Hamid II. He declared:

*For thirty years the press has ceased to exist in Turkey. There are indeed newspapers, many of them even, but the scissors of the censorship cut them in so emasculating a manner that they no longer have any potency.*

- What is the purpose of the press? How does censorship deprive the press of its potency? Why is censorship such a powerful tool in resisting social change?

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## Reading 4 — HUMANITY ON TRIAL

The tensions between the Ottoman government and the Armenians erupted in 1894 after the Hunchak party in Sassun encouraged ordinary Armenians—farmers, peasants, and merchants, frustrated by their second-class status as symbolized by double taxation—to withhold their taxes. Ottoman troops were sent in to stop the protest. Instead of restoring the peace, the soldiers began massacres that would spread throughout the Turkish Armenian provinces during the winter of 1895-1896. The semi-regular *Hamidye* regiments of Kurdish and Circassian horseman carried out the campaign. In all nearly 200,000 Armenians were killed in the massacres. Reports of the massacre were smuggled out of Turkey and later collected as part of an official investigation conducted by the British, French, and Russian governments. The first public mention of the massacre to an outside source came on September 26, 1894. In published accounts of the massacres, names were withheld or replaced with initials in an effort to prevent retribution:

*Troops have been massed in the region of the large plain near us. Sickness broke out among them, which took off two or three victims every few days. It was a good excuse for establishing quarantine around, with its income from bribes, charges, and the inevitable rise in the price of already dear grain. I suspect that one reason for placing a quarantine was to hinder the information as to what all those troops were about in that region.... The sickening details are beginning to come in . . . it has been the innocent who have been the greatest sufferers. Forty-eight villages are said to have been wholly blotted out.*

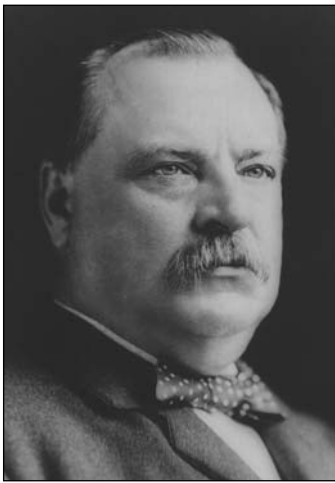
By late October more details of the massacres were known.

*We have word from Bitlis that the destruction of life in Sassoun, south of Moosh, was even greater than supposed. The brief note that reached us says: "Twenty more villages annihilated in Sassoun. Six thousand men, women, and children massacred by troops and [Kurds]. The awful story is just beginning to be known here, though the massacre took place early in September. The Turks have used infinite plans to prevent news leaking, even going to the length of sending back from Trebizond many hundreds from the Moosh region who had come this way on business." The massacre was ordered from Constantinople in the sense that some [Kurds] having robbed Armenian villages of flocks, the Armenians pursued and tried to recover their property, and a fight ensued in which a dozen [Kurds] were killed. The slain were semi-official robbers, "i.e. enrolled as troops and armed as such, but not under control." The authorities then telegraphed to Constantinople that Armenians had "killed some of the Sultan's troops" and they did it; only, not finding any rebellion, they cleared the country so that none should occur in the future.<sup>26</sup>*

It was common for Ottoman officials to describe the massacres of the Armenians as a justified response to armed rebellion. Despite those claims, British historian Lord Kinross observed that each

massacre followed a similar pattern.

*First into town came Turkish troops, for the purposes of massacre; then came the Kurdish irregulars and tribesmen for the purposes of plunder. Finally came the holocaust, by fire and destruction, which spread, with the pursuit of fugitives and mopping-up operations, throughout the lands and villages of the surrounding provinces. This murderous winter of 1895 saw the decimation of much of the Armenian population and the devastation of their property in more than twenty districts in eastern Turkey. Often the massacres were timed for a Friday, when the Muslims were in their mosques and the myth was spread by the authorities that the Armenians conspired to slaughter them at prayer.<sup>27</sup>*



**U.S. President Grover Cleveland**

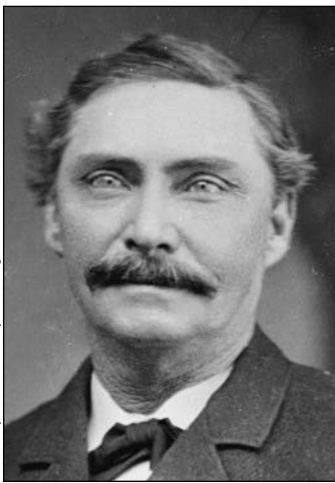
Ottoman soldiers recorded their participation in the massacres in letters they sent home. These letters offer a glimpse of the way Armenians had become dehumanized in the eyes of the soldiers. One soldier wrote:

*My brother, if you want news from here we have killed 1,200 Armenians, all of them as food for the dogs . . . Mother, I am safe and sound. Father, 20 days ago we made war on the Armenian unbelievers. Through God's grace no harm befell us. . . . There is a rumor that our battalion will kill all the Armenians there. Besides, 511 Armenians were wounded, one or two perish every day.<sup>28</sup>*

Reports of the massacres horrified members of the United States Congress. In December 1895, Senator Wilkinson Call, a Democrat from Florida, proposed a resolution calling for the creation of an independent Armenian state protected by the “civilized” nations of the world. Although the resolution proved too radical for the Committee on Foreign Affairs, the Committee did support the resolution of Senator Shelby Collum of Illinois condemning the massacres. Senator Collum urged President Grover Cleveland to take a stand:

*Destruction and rapine have been and now are the orders obeyed in the beautiful valleys and on the rugged hills of Armenia. There has been no war, no conflict between the two contending powers, but a merciless, pitiless tornado of bloody ruin. . . .*

*Has it come to this, that in the last days of the nineteenth century humanity itself is placed on trial?<sup>29</sup>*



**U.S. Senator Wilkinson Call**

Although Congress passed Collum's resolution, President Cleveland



refused to support the measure, fearing the military and economic repercussions such an action would have on relations between the Ottoman Empire and the United States. Without U.S. support, the European and Russian governments continued to pressure the sultan to implement the reforms promised in The Treaty of Berlin. While diplomats talked, massacres of Ottoman Armenians continued intermittently until January 1896.

## CONNECTIONS

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- ✦ Turkish officials commonly characterized protests by Armenians and other minority groups within the Ottoman Empire as rebellion. The government spread false rumors to confuse the facts and justify slaughter. Without an independent press, official fabrications often went unchallenged. It is often said that a lie repeated over and over again becomes the truth. How does that happen? How do you think those distortions influenced the way Turks thought about Armenians?
- ✦ Lord Kinross writes: “Often the massacres were timed for a Friday, when the Muslims were in their mosques and the myth was spread by the authorities that the Armenians conspired to slaughter them at prayer.” What is the danger when religious differences are exploited to reinforce a “we” and “they”? How do you learn about people who practice other religions? What can be done to build trust across religious divisions?
- ✦ Richard Hovannisian believes the Ottoman massacres were “the way traditional regimes respond to calls for change and equality.” Why would traditional regimes respond to calls for change with slaughter? How is a democracy supposed to respond to dissent? What protections are there for those that advocate for change in your community? School? Country?
- ✦ In a letter to his family, an Ottoman soldier writes: “We have killed 1,200 Armenians, all of them as food for the dogs. . . . Father, 20 days ago we made war on the Armenian unbelievers.” How do explain his attitude toward the victims? How do individuals and groups become dehumanized?
- ✦ In the 1890s the massacres of Armenians were often described as a *holocaust*, literally a destruction by fire. At the time, the word holocaust did not have the same associations and meaning that it has throughout much of the world today. Today, the word *Holocaust*, with a capital H, is most frequently used to describe the Nazis’ attempt to destroy all of European Jewry during the 1930s and 1940s. At times there has been intense debate about whether it is appropriate to use the word *Holocaust* to describe other events. For example, some people refer to the Armenian Genocide as the Armenian Holocaust. Why does the language matter?
- ✦ How is it possible for a group to become so dehumanized that the local population would allow them

to be massacred in broad daylight? What are the small steps that lead to dehumanization? *After the First*, a video resource available in the Facing History and Ourselves library, explores some of the ways individuals may become accustomed to violence.

- The reading describes the struggle of politicians in the United States to find an appropriate response to the massacres of Armenians. Samantha Power, a scholar of U.S. foreign policy, describes those options as a “tool box.” What tools are turned to most frequently? Think creatively. What other tools are available to those who believe that governments should intervene to protect human rights?

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## Reading 5 — THE SULTAN RESPONDS

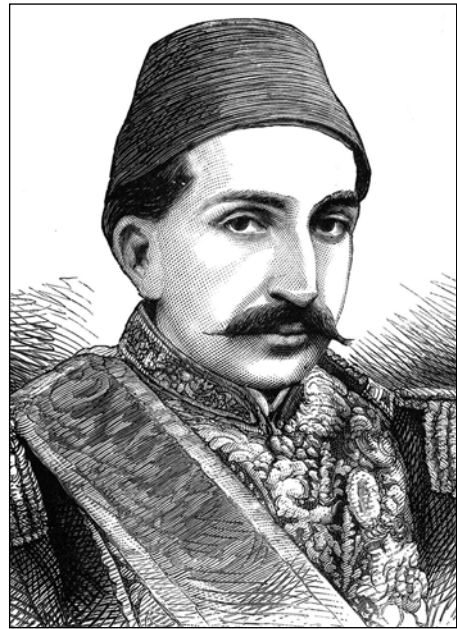
In Europe, the popular press reported stories of the Armenian massacres. Newspapers featured cartoons of the “Bloody Sultan,” a name coined by British Prime Minister William Gladstone. The press called upon the “civilized” world to do something to stop the bloodshed. Descriptions of “Turkish tyranny” and “outrages” against Christians written by Christian missionaries excited concern for the Armenians while reinforcing anti-Muslim stereotypes. After Sir Philip Currie, the British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, rebuked Sultan Abdul Hamid II for the Armenian massacres, the sultan felt compelled to defend his position. This is his response:

*His Majesty states that he is well aware of your Excellency’s friendly disposition towards himself and the Empire, and he does not for a moment imagine that in bringing these matters to his notice Your Excellency wishes to raise the Armenian Question.*

*His Majesty continues by stating that just as in other countries there are Nihilists, Socialists, and Anarchists, endeavoring to obtain from the government concessions and privileges which it is impossible to grant them, and just in the same manner steps had to be taken against them, so it is with the Armenians who, for their own purposes, invent these stories against the Government, and finding that they receive encouragement from British officials, are emboldened to proceed to open acts of rebellion, which the government is perfectly justified in suppressing by every means in its power.*

*His Majesty says that your Excellency will remember that the Bulgarians concocted the same stories against the government and proceeded just as the Armenians do, and that the British government extended a certain protection to the Bulgarians, who have now been formed into separate provinces. This cannot possibly, however, happen in the case of the Armenians. The Armenian population is spread over a large extent of the country and no place are they the majority. Their expectations, therefore, can never be realized, and all the exaggerated stories of oppression and persecution, got up with the object of exciting European sympathy to enable them to obtain an impossible end, should not be relied upon.*

*Naturally the Ottoman government was bound to take strong measures to put down sedition, and when the people were found with arms in their hands resisting the authorities, it was only natural that the government should mete*



**Sultan Abdul Hamid II**

*out to them summary punishment. Only a short time ago, in Italy, the Italians put down disorder with a strong hand. England herself had in India, resorted to the strongest measures to stamp out rebellion, and even in Egypt, England had put down disorder with a high hand. His Imperial Majesty treated the Armenians with justice and moderation, and as long as they behaved properly, all toleration would be shown to them, but he had given orders that when they took to revolt or to brigandage the authorities were to deal with the Armenians as they deal with the authorities.*

*His Majesty had read the account which your Excellency had given to him with horror and sorrow. His Majesty had had no knowledge of these facts, and yesterday morning, when he read the report, he immediately instructed the Minister of the Interior to make inquiries and cause a telegram to be sent to Zeki Pasha, Commandant of the Fourth Corps d'Armee, instructing him to report at once.<sup>30</sup>*

Despite European pressure to implement long-promised reforms for the Armenians, the sultan resisted. Without any signs of progress the Armenians grew increasingly frustrated.

## CONNECTIONS

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- The sultan explains: “His Imperial Majesty treated the Armenians with justice and moderation, and as long as they behaved properly, all toleration would be shown to them, but he had given orders that when they took to revolt . . . the authorities were to deal with the Armenians as they deal with the authorities.” Scholar Henry Theriault argues that “the Sultan’s characterization of what the Armenians were asking for—‘concessions and privileges’—suggests that the Sultan was explicitly aware that they were reformers, not revolutionaries in the true sense. Indeed, at the time and after, Armenian political activity strove toward full integration of Armenians into an egalitarian Ottoman state, not the destruction of the state or its government.” Why is the distinction between revolution and reform important? Regardless of the motivation of the protesters, would massacre ever be a legitimate response? Why would the sultan suppress movements for change with radical violence?
- The sultan suggests that “the Ottoman Government was bound to put down sedition.” What is sedition? U.S. President Thomas Jefferson once wrote that “a little rebellion now and then is a good thing . . . it is a medicine necessary for the sound health of a government.”<sup>31</sup> How would you describe the Armenians’ actions? Were they acts of rebellion? Are there times when rebellion is justified?
- Why do you think the sultan goes to great lengths to point out the policy of the British government in Egypt and India? Do the comparisons with European colonialism influence the way you think about the massacres?
- Often efforts to draw attention to the plight of the Armenians reinforced cultural stereotypes about

Muslims. Is it possible to call attention to injustice without further reinforcing attitudes of “we” and “they”? How can advocates for victims distinguish between the perpetrators, their supporters, and cultural attitudes about the victims, without depicting the conflict as a clash of civilizations?

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## Reading 6 → SEEKING CIVIL RIGHTS

While massacres of Armenians continued throughout the Ottoman Empire, Armenian leaders worked to find a strategy that finally would bring about the protections they had sought for so long. Although other minorities in the Ottoman Empire were able to break free into protected provinces or even separate countries, Armenians were scattered throughout the empire. Hopes for safety and security did not rest as much on independence as they did on real changes in the way they were governed. The two largest Armenian political parties—the Hunchaks and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation—planned direct action in an attempt to educate the world about their situation.

On October 1, 1895, 2,000 Armenians gathered in the Ottoman capital to demand civil rights. Peter Balakian describes how a non-violent protest turned into a slaughter.

*As the sultan stalled on the new demands for reform in the Armenian provinces, the frustration among Armenians grew. By the summer of 1895, the Hunchak Party was planning a demonstration in the capital. The mass rally took place at noon on October 1, 1895, as nearly 2,000 Armenians gathered in the Kum Kapu section near the Armenian patriarchate to march to the Sublime Porte. Their goal was to deliver a petition, a “Protest-Demand” which decried the Sasun massacre, the condition of Armenians throughout the empire, and the inaction of the central government.*



**Palace of the Ottoman Sublime Porte, Constantinople.**

*The petition was—especially given its time and place—an extraordinary statement about civil rights. In clear language the Armenians protested “the systematic persecution to which our people has been subjected, especially during the last few years, a persecution which the Sublime Porte has made a principle of government with the one object of causing Armenians to disappear from their own country.” They protested the “state of siege” under which Armenians were forced to live and the recent massacres at Sasun. Peace and security were essential, the text went on, “to a nation which desires to reach by fair means a position of comparative prosperity, which it has certainly a right to aspire to, and to reach the level of progress and civilization towards which other peoples are advanc-*

ing.” The list of Armenian demands was broad and basic: fair taxation; guarantees of freedom of conscience; the right of public meetings; equality before the law; protection of life, property, and honor (and this meant the protection of women). The petition also demanded the cessation of mass political arrests and the brutal torture that most often followed them, as well as the right to bear arms for self-defense. The Armenian authors of the petition underscored that the Armenians had waited patiently for the reforms promised them in the Treaty of Berlin in 1878. As one historian put it, it was “the first time in Ottoman history that a non-Muslim, subject minority had dared to confront the central authorities in the very capital of the empire.”

As the rally commenced there was tension all over the city. The Sublime Porte was surrounded by cavalry and police, as the huge crowd made its way into the center of the city and approached the Porte. Copies of the Protest-Demand had already been delivered to various embassies. As the Hunchak leaders were about to deliver the petition at the Porte, they were stopped by Maj. Servet Bey, the adjutant to the minister of police, who ordered them to disband. As the soldiers and the police let loose on the protestors, about twenty people were bludgeoned to death and hundreds were wounded. Major Servet was killed, fights broke out and shots were fired, and a massacre began in the clear daylight on the streets of the capital. Foreigners and European diplomats looked on in horror....

During the first week of October, massacres continued throughout Constantinople day and night. Horrified by what they were witnessing, the foreign diplomats sent a collective message to the Porte asking for an end to the massacres. British ambassador Philip Currie telegraphed the grand vizier [the chief minister of the Ottoman government] to tell him that conditions were deteriorating by the day and that Armenians were being massacred in the city and throughout the suburbs. As the number of dead piled up on the streets and the hospitals filled with wounded, 2,400 Armenians stayed locked up inside their churches throughout the many sections of the city. Finally, on October 10, with assurances from all six foreign embassies, they agreed to come out into the open air. But by then the Constantinople massacre had set off a new wave of violence against Armenians throughout the empire.<sup>32</sup>

## CONNECTIONS

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- What demands did the Hunchaks make in their petition? What arguments did they make to support their positions?
- Balakian writes that the Hunchak petition was, “given its time and place—an extraordinary statement about civil rights.” What are civil rights? Where do civil rights come from? How are they protected? What is the difference between a civil right and a human right?
- Throughout the nineteenth century, Armenians tried many strategies to bring about change in the

Ottoman Empire. Some worked within the system, while others organized into political parties and suggested alternatives. Still others looked for help from abroad. Despite promises, significant change never came. What obstacles did Armenians confront as they sought safety and security? What other strategies were still available to Armenians?

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## Reading 7 — HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION

By the mid 1890s the “Armenian Crisis” received prominent coverage in the popular press of the United States. The *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, and *San Francisco Examiner* featured stories on the situation nearly every week. At the same time, activists around the country began to raise money for food and clothes for distribution through networks set up by Christian missionaries in Ottoman Armenia. Although the missionaries played a prominent role, the movement was not limited by religion or politics. In the United States Christians and Jews, liberals and conservatives, took up the issue of Armenian relief.<sup>33</sup>

Activists lobbied Clara Barton, the American founder of the Red Cross, a national symbol of humanitarian activism, to take up the cause. Impressed by extensive relief efforts in New York and Boston, Barton, who had become a household name for her work during the American Civil War, soon agreed. The 75-year-old humanitarian decided that it was time to take her work to Ottoman Armenia. She explained her decision by saying that “immediate action was urged by the American people. Human beings starving could not be reached, hundreds of towns and villages had not been heard from since the fire and swords went over them.” Barton argued that her intervention was justified on the basis that Turkey was one of the signers of the Red Cross Treaty of Geneva, and consequentially it had to be familiar with its humanitarian objectives.

Balakian believes that American intervention on the behalf of the Ottoman Armenians had a profound impact on the way Americans viewed their responsibility to those that lived beyond their borders.

*Although the United States sent money...to aid Greece during the Greek War of Independence in 1824-25, and Americans aided Ireland during the potato famine of the 1840s, the movement for humanitarian intervention for the Armenians in Turkey in 1896 commenced what I believe can be called the modern era of American international human rights relief.... In many ways Barton's mission anticipated the kind of work the Peace Corps would do in the second half of the twentieth century. Barton's voyage to Turkey was also another part, and a bright one, of America's growing global involvement during the decade that would bring the*



Clara Barton

Courtesy of the Library of Congress

*United States a new international identity...*

*In many ways, American women played a crucial role in the movement for Armenian relief, and their work helped to give shape to a new vision of what might be called global sisterhood. As survivor accounts and eyewitness reports came to public knowledge through the press, the magnitude of sexual violence committed against Armenian women—rape and sexual torture, abduction, slavery, and imprisonment in harems—appeared to be unprecedented in modern Western history, and it affected Americans deeply.<sup>34</sup>*

The activism of American women did not take place in a vacuum. The treatment of minorities in the Ottoman Empire galvanized a growing international movement for humanitarian intervention—a belief that states, not just individuals and groups, have a responsibility to take action, using diplomacy or force, to prevent or end the abuse of human rights in a separate sovereign nation. Human rights expert Paul Gordon Lauren writes that efforts to intervene in the name of persecuted Ottoman minorities during the nineteenth century “contributed heavily to the growing theory of humanitarian intervention and its slow but steady acceptance as an increasingly important component of international law.” In practice, Lauren explains, those efforts raised many questions about the tension between human rights, politics, and national sovereignty—questions that are still with us.

*Humanitarian intervention both in theory and practice also helped to identify serious and troubling problems created when trying to transform visions of international human rights into reality. Even at this early stage, for example, it became evident that humanitarian intervention in the name of “humanity” might well be genuinely beneficent and justified, but at the same time always carried the dangerous potential of providing a convenient pretext for coercion or a guise for masking more suspicious motives of national self-interest and aggrandizement. Similarly, difficulties arose as to precisely what nations or group of nations could legitimately or precisely define the “laws of humanity,” “the conscience of mankind,” and the meaning of “human rights” for the world as a whole while still avoiding accusations of having arbitrary standards that applied to some but not all. The Great Powers who demonstrated such eagerness to protect the rights of the persecuted in the Ottoman Empire, for example, also happened to be the same ones known to persecute and discriminate against indigenous peoples within their own overseas empires. In addition, whereas carefully negotiated and solemn treaty provisions concerning human rights indicated a strength of desire, the lack of enforcement provisions revealed a lack of will.... Humanitarian intervention always carried the risk that it could provoke even worse reactions against the very people that it wanted to protect. Even more serious in terms of international relations, such intervention could create the risk of a dangerous precedent that might be turned against those who employed it and thus threaten their own independence, domestic jurisdiction, territorial integrity, and national sovereignty. Each of these difficult problems would continue to confront those who struggled to advance international human rights for many years to come.<sup>35</sup>*

## CONNECTIONS

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- Balakian writes: “Looking back at the twentieth century, it seems clear that no international human rights movement ever obsessed or galvanized the United States as did the effort to save the Armenians.” As you read about the treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman empire, what grabs your attention? What does it take for another group of people to become part of your “universe of obligation”? How do you express your concern?
- Paul Gordon Lauren highlights a series of dilemmas for those acting in the name of “humanity.” He notes, “it became evident that humanitarian intervention in the name of ‘humanity’ might well be genuinely beneficent and justified, but at the same time always carried the dangerous potential of providing a convenient pretext for coercion or a guise for masking more suspicious motives of national self-interest and aggrandizement. Similarly, difficulties arose as to precisely what nations or group of nations could legitimately or precisely define the ‘laws of humanity,’ ‘the conscience of mankind,’ and the meaning of ‘human rights’ for the world as a whole while still avoiding accusations of having arbitrary standards that applied to some but not all.” How can those dilemmas be resolved? Do the tensions need to be resolved before any action is taken?
- Does the international community have a moral duty to intervene when human rights are being violated? If so, what standards should be used to determine when to act? How should nations determine when to respond diplomatically and when to use force?
- What human rights stories are in the news today? What obstacles need to be negotiated as individuals, groups, and nations respond?
- Lauren warns that intervention may provoke unexpected consequences: “Humanitarian intervention always carried the risk that it could provoke even worse reactions against the very people that it wanted to protect.” How can those that plan humanitarian actions minimize the risk of a backlash?

## Reading 8 — SHOWDOWN AT BANK OTTOMAN

In August of 1896 leaders of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation decided they needed help from the European powers to stop the anti-Armenian massacres. Attempts to organize nonviolent protests often ended with the sultan's forces brutally breaking up the protests. In the aftermath, protesters were blamed for their own fate, and often the Armenian community was collectively held responsible. A small group of desperate Armenian leaders felt that it was time to try something else. Nearly two dozen members of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation plotted to take over Bank Ottoman, a European-controlled bank in Constantinople, the capital of the Ottoman Empire. Before they took over the bank, the organizers of the operation, Armen Garo, Papken Siuni, and Haig Tiryakian, issued several public declarations outlining their objectives. The plotters made it clear that they did not want to harm anyone or even to rob the bank. One manifesto was addressed to the Turkish public at large.

*For centuries our forbears have been living with you in peace and harmony . . . but recently your government, conceived in crimes, began to sow discords among us in order to strangle us and you with greater ease. You, people, did not understand this diabolical scheme of politics and, soaking yourselves in the blood of our brothers, you became an accomplice in the perpetration of the heinous crime. Nevertheless, know well that our fight is not against you, but your government, against which your own best sons are fighting also.*<sup>36</sup>

The plotters also addressed a letter to the European powers. The attitude of the Europeans, the letter claimed, tolerated “Turkish tyranny...Sultan Hamit’s murderous vengeance. Europe has beheld this

crime and kept silence. . . . The time of diplomatic play is passed. The blood shed by our 100,000 martyrs gives us the right to demand liberty.”<sup>37</sup> Another letter explained “it is the criminal indifference of humanity which has pushed us to this extreme.”<sup>38</sup>

After a shootout leaving both Armenians and bank guards dead and wounded, over a dozen Armenian revolutionaries stormed the bank. Armen Garo, one of the leaders of the operation, later wrote that his fellow Armenians were so inexperienced in handling weapons that several of them blew themselves up while trying to evade gunfire. Once the bank



Courtesy of the library of Congress

**Bank Ottoman, Constantinople.**

was secure, he went to the second floor to talk to the bank personnel. Armen Garo recalled:

*In my hoarse voice, I began to explain to them that they did not need to fear us, that we were Armenian revolutionaries who had occupied the bank to compel the European ambassadors to intervene in order to end the massacre of Armenians. I even reminded them: "Do you hear that howling outside? The Turkish mob has resumed the massacre of Armenians. . . ." In very courteous language, I explained to them what our aim was. I told them, unless we received guarantees that no more Armenians would be killed and the promised reforms would be enacted, we were not getting out of the bank. Should they try from outside to recapture the building by force, we would resist to the last bullet and the last bomb, and in the end blow up the building not to surrender ourselves. Therefore, it would be in their interest as well to bring about the European intervention as soon as possible, before our ammunition was exhausted.*

*They all started to look at each other and then at me with terrified eyes. Their elemental terror of a short while ago was followed by a new one, more definite, and all together began asking how they could help us to bring about the European intervention as soon as possible.<sup>39</sup>*

The Armenian revolutionaries spelled out their demands in a message to the ambassadors of the European powers.

*We are in control of the Bank Ottoman and we will not leave until the following conditions are met:*

- 1. To stop immediately the massacre now on in Constantinople;*
- 2. To stop the armed attack on the bank, otherwise we shall blow up the building when our ammunition is exhausted;*
- 3. To give written guarantees concerning the enactment of Armenian reforms with the amendment suggested by the Central Committee of the A.R.F. [Armenian Revolutionary Federation] in a special communication to you;*
- 4. To set free all Armenian revolutionaries detained because of current events;*

*In the contrary situation, we shall be forced to blow up the building with everyone inside.<sup>40</sup>*

To prevent further violence, the European ambassadors negotiated a deal. The sultan promised to end the massacres, and the Armenian revolutionaries agreed to leave the building and go into exile. The European powers pledged to press the Ottoman government for reforms to ensure the Armenians would be protected. Although the Armenians boarded a ship to France without further incident, neither of the sultan's promises were kept. Instead, 6,000 more Armenians were massacred in the streets of the capital shortly afterward.

## CONNECTIONS

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- Leaders of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation decided they needed help from the European powers to stop the anti-Armenian massacres. Attempts to organize nonviolent protests often ended with the sultan's forces brutally breaking up the protests. In the aftermath, protesters were blamed for their own fate, and often the Armenian community was collectively held responsible. What options did leaders of the Armenian community have as they worked for change? Earlier attempts by Armenians to advocate for their rights did not elicit the responses they desired. Armenians were still treated as second-class citizens. What happens to groups and individuals when they feel they are not safe and are not able to protect themselves and their families?
- Protests are often staged as attempts to educate the public by drawing attention to a situation. Whom were the Armenian revolutionaries trying to educate? What lessons did they try to teach with their public declarations? What lesson did they teach when they took over the bank?
- What is terrorism? What is the difference between terrorism and civil disobedience? What factors influence your understanding of the distinctions between the terms?
- Some publicists and many European diplomats denounced the seizure of the Bank Ottoman as a foolish act of terrorism. Others, however, commended the Armenian revolutionaries for their bravery. One British historian wrote that "as young men of ideals inexperienced in the wiles of political agitation, they had failed to benefit their friends and had played into the hands of the enemy." Reflect on this statement. What do you make of the actions taken by the Armenian revolutionaries at Bank Ottoman? How did their actions both help and hurt the Armenian cause?

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## Reading 9 → THE RISE OF THE YOUNG TURKS

By the 1890s it was not just minorities within the Ottoman Empire who were calling for change and in some cases revolution. Christians, Muslims, and Jews were now joined by Turks and even members of the nobility—including the sultan's nephew, Prince Sabaheddin. At his home in Paris, the prince hosted a wide range of Ottoman dissidents in February of 1902 as the Congress of Ottoman Liberals. At the conference, 47 delegates, representing Turkish, Arab, Greek, Kurdish, Armenian, and Jewish groups, formed an alliance against the sultan. Together the groups called for equal rights for all Ottoman citizens, self-administration for minorities, and restoration of the suspended Ottoman constitution.

Despite their broad agreements, there were still tensions between the factions. Among the points of conflict was an intense debate about outside intervention. Many Armenians favored a resolution calling for European protection of all ethnic and national groups within the empire. Ahmed Riza, one of the leaders of the Young Turks—a coalition of Turkish groups that proposed transforming the empire into a representative constitutional government—believed that the Armenians and other minorities deserved equal rights and fair treatment, but he chafed at the suggestion that help from outside was necessary. According to Riza and others, many of the problems they were facing were partially the results of foreign intervention. Yet some Armenians worried that without help from the outside, they would be left with empty promises.

In 1907 the prince, with the support of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, organized the second Congress of Ottoman Liberals. At the meeting representatives called for immediate overthrow of the sultan.

While the prince was organizing dissident groups in exile, military forces representing the Committee of Union and Progress (a branch of the Young Turk movement) found themselves on the brink of being exposed by the sultan's forces. Not knowing what else to do, they went public. The committee representatives demanded restoration of the Ottoman constitution and marched toward the capital. As they traveled from town to town, the mutiny picked up public support. Without sufficient troops to put down the uprising, the sultan gave in to the demands of the Committee of Union and Progress on July 24, 1908. The Young Turk revolution was greeted with broad support. Newspapers reported scenes of Christians, Jews, and Muslims embracing in the streets.

Upon taking power, the Young Turks issued a proclamation outlining their plan to reform the Ottoman Empire.

*Provided that the number of senators does not exceed one-third the number of deputies, the Senate will be named as follows: one-third by the sultan and two-thirds by the nation, and the term of senators will be of limited duration.*

*It will be demanded that all Ottoman subjects having completed their twentieth year, regardless of whether they possess property or fortune,*



**A crowd of Armenians celebrating the Young Turk Revolution in 1908.**

From the private collection of Berj Fenecci

*shall have the right to vote. Those who have lost their civil rights will naturally be deprived of this right.*

*It will be demanded that the right freely to constitute political groups be inserted in a precise fashion in the constitutional charter, in order that article 1 of the Constitution of 1293 A.H. (Anno Hegira, 1876 C.E.) be respected.*

*The Turkish tongue will remain the official state language. Official correspondence and discussion will take place in Turkish.*

*Every citizen will enjoy complete liberty and equality, regardless of nationality or religion, and be submitted to the same obligations. All Ottomans, being equal before the law as regards rights and duties relative to the State, are eligible for government posts, according to their individual capacity and their education. Non-Muslims will be equally liable to the military law.*

*The free exercise of the religious privileges which have been accorded to different nationalities will remain intact.*

*Provided that the property rights of landholders are not infringed upon (for such rights must be respected and must remain intact, according to law), it will be proposed that peasants be permitted to acquire land, and they will be accorded means to borrow money at a moderate rate.*

*Education will be free. Every Ottoman citizen, within the limits of the prescriptions of the Constitution, may operate a private school in accordance with the special laws.*

*All schools will operate under the surveillance of the state. In order to obtain for Ottoman citizens an education of a homogenous and uniform character, the official schools will be open, their instruction will be free, and all nationalities will be admitted. Instruction in Turkish will be obligatory in public schools. In official schools, public instruction will be free. Secondary and higher education will be given in the public and official schools indicated above; it will use the Turkish tongue. Schools of commerce, agriculture, and industry will be opened with the goal of developing the resources of the country.<sup>41</sup>*

## CONNECTIONS

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- ✦ The Young Turk proclamation describes rights that were to be given to citizens of the Ottoman Empire. What is a citizen? What is the difference between being a citizen of a country and being a resident of a country? What responsibilities come with citizenship?
- ✦ After reading the Young Turk proclamation for the Ottoman Empire, which platforms stand out? Why? Compare your selections with those of your classmates.
- ✦ How do the Young Turks' proposals address the challenges facing the empire? Which platforms might have created discomfort with their partners from the Congress of Ottoman Liberals? How do you anticipate supporters of the sultan would perceive these changes?



- ✦ Research the constitutions of emerging democracies. How do they try to protect individual freedoms while creating or maintaining a national identity?

Facing History and Ourselves online module *The Weimar Republic: The Fragility of Democracy* and Chapter 3 of *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior* explore the challenges Germany faced in building democracy after World War I.

## NOTES

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28. Vahakn N. Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide* (Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1996), p. 159.
29. For a full copy of the Congressional Resolution, see *The Statutes at Large of the United States of America, from December, 1895, to March, 1897, and Recent Treaties, Conventions, and Executive Proclamations, with an Appendix containing the concurrent resolutions of the two houses of Congress*, Vol. XXIX (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1897), as cited in *The Armenian Genocide and America's Outcry: A Compilation of U.S. Documents 1890–1923* (Washington, D.C.: Armenian Assembly of America, 1985).
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31. Thomas Jefferson, “Letter to James Madison” [Paris, January 30, 1787], in Merrill D. Peterson ed. *The Portable Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Penguin), pp. 416–417.
32. Balakian, *The Burning Tigris*, pp. 57–59.
33. *Ibid.*, pp. 63–80.
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 63–65.
35. Paul Gordon Lauren, *The Evolution of International Human Rights: Visions Seen* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), pp. 69–70.
36. Vahakn Dadrian, *History of the Armenian Genocide*, p. 139.
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*, p. 140.
39. Simon Vratzian, ed., *Bank Ottoman: The Memoirs of Armen Garo*, trans. Haig T. Partizian (Detroit: Armen Topouzian, 1990), pp. 119–122.
40. *Ibid.*, 122.
41. “The Young Turks,” trans. A. Sarrou, in Rondo Cameron, ed., *Civilization since Waterloo* (Paris, 1912), pp. 40–42; and <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1908youngturk.html>.