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Get to Know...

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The Armenian Genocide

Armenians are one of the most ancient peoples of the Near East, having lived in the southern Caucasus region for as long as 3,000 years. Christianized early in the first millennium, they formed by the 19th century the largest non-Muslim population in the Ottoman Empire. Peaceful relations between Armenians and Ottoman Muslims had long been the norm: despite acts of discrimination, Armenians were referred to as "the loyal millet." This changed in the 19th century, as the forces of nationalism swept both the Ottoman realm and Armenians themselves, and as the Ottoman Empire -- "the sick man of Europe" -- began to crumble in the face of regional revolts. Calls by European powers for protection of the Armenian population had the opposite effect: the regime of Sultan Abdul Hamid II viewed such outside "intervention" as a threat to its sovereignty, and responded in 1896 with a massive campaign of killing, in which at least 200,000 Armenians died. Though one of the most atrocious imperial acts of the 19th century, it was merely a harbinger of the full scale genocide that was to descend two decades later.

In April of 1915 tens of thousands of Armenian men were rounded up and shot. Hundreds of thousands of women, old men and children were deported south across the mountains to Cilicia and Syria. On April 15 the Armenians appealed to the German Ambassador in Constantinople for formal German protection. This was rejected by Berlin on the grounds that it would offend the Turkish Government. By April 19 more than 50,000 Armenians had been murdered in the Van province.

Within nine months, more than 600,000 Armenians were massacred. Of the deported during that same period, more than 400,000 perished of the brutalities and privations of the southward march into Mesopotamia. By September more than a million Armenians were the victims of what later became known as the Armenian Genocide! A further 200,000 were forcibly converted to Islam to give Armenia a new Turkish sense of identity and strip the Armenian people of their past as the first Christian state in the world.

The Armenian genocide was one of the most massive "root-and-branch" exterminations ever carried out against a defenseless people.

In 1915, as World War I raged, the Turkish government (ruler of the Ottoman Empire) decided upon the systematic extermination of most of the male Armenian population, and the forced deportation of the remainder, mostly women, children, and the elderly.

The deportation became a death march, with extreme violence and deprivation leading to the death of most of the survivors of the initial genocide -- as was intended. By the time the exhausted and traumatized survivors reached refuge in neighboring countries, up to three-quarters of the entire Ottoman Armenian population had been exterminated.

