gENOCIDE

modern crimes against humanity

brendan january

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introduction
approaching genocide

This book recounts the most inhumane acts people have committed against their fellow human beings. It describes how individuals planned, organized, and built a vast machinery that had one purpose—the extermination of another group because of who it was. It tells of those who suffered, died, or resisted, and it discusses how one person summarized this process with a word that today represents history's greatest crimes—*genocide*.

In essence, genocide is murder. But more precisely, it is the result of a process that sets one group against another. This process has its roots in the way people see themselves and others.

"No man is an island," wrote English poet John Donne in the seventeenth century. Each individual is bound into a larger fabric of family, tribe, and nation. This is not always obvious to the individual—like a fish that never realizes it's in water. But many social interactions—the way individuals say hello, say good-bye, whom they care about and why, whom they fear, and whom they trust—is often dictated by an invisible web of social rules. These rules are necessary and typically beneficial, and they have existed since humans first came together to form societies. At their deepest level, the rules tell us who we are.

But this can have darker implications. A society can tell us who we are but also who we are not. In this sense, being part of a group means focusing on its differences from others: skin

color, culture, history, religious or political beliefs, gender, or economic status.

Once again, this recognition of differences is natural and usually harmless. Sometimes, however, it becomes much more negative. Instead of just observing the differences in others, a group starts to label them as dirty, destructive, or evil. When this occurs, societies may organize to remove or segregate the differences. And in some cases, societies decide to get rid of those who are "different" altogether.

This book is about the process that is called genocide. Any description of genocide usually focuses on its extraordinary violence. However, history is filled with bloody battles, acts of cruelty, and broken promises. Armies have destroyed cities. Prisoners have been tortured and starved to death. Nations have bullied or cheated other nations. In each instance, innocent people were killed or mistreated. Even today, murder is common and stories about how one person took the life of another—often in an act of brutality—are regular features in the media. Why is genocide so different?

The crucial difference lies within the minds of those who commit genocide. They seek to destroy not just people—men, women, and children—but entire cultures. The perpetrators of genocide can do this by burning schools, libraries, and houses of worship; seizing homes and possessions; renaming streets; and paving over graveyards.

"Genocide is a crime on a different scale to all other crimes against humanity and implies an intention to completely exterminate the chosen group," wrote Alain Destexhe in *Rwanda and Genocide in the Twentieth Century*. "Genocide is therefore both the gravest and greatest of the crimes against humanity."

* * *

Few words in our language seem to provoke the same furor, passion, and debate as *genocide*. It is used in mourning by survivors in annual ceremonies to commemorate their suffering. It is hurled at opposing groups during press conferences. It appears in books and newspapers regularly and is used in reference to subjects as diverse as abortion, discrimination, and animal rights. Academics and scholars argue endlessly over its precise definition.

Anyone who approaches the topic of genocide should be aware that determining the victims of genocide is a contentious and emotional issue today. The word has been used in connection with slavery in North and South America, the displacement of Native Americans, and Israeli policy and actions toward Palestinians. Genocide has also been used to describe famine in Ireland and Josef Stalin's rule in the Ukraine.

At their best, debates about genocide challenge conventional thinking, open history to different perspectives, and sharpen the meaning of words. They prevent any complacency and they maintain a focus on our capacity for inhumanity. However, these debates can also be unproductive. Saying that one group was a victim of genocide can be interpreted as a denial of another's suffering. At their worst, groups seem to jockey for a position on a kind of scale of victimhood. Politicians, concerned citizens, and scholars criticize one another for devoting too little or too much attention to any one group's experience.

Anyone who writes about genocide, regardless of his or her position, cannot avoid taking part in this debate. For example, simply including the Holocaust (the genocide against European Jews) alongside other genocides will be interpreted by some as an attempt to make the Holocaust appear to be less important—just another one of history's bloody events. Others may argue

that additional groups suffered from genocide and that they should have been included or described in greater detail. No single exploration of this subject can address these concerns to everyone's satisfaction. The author encourages the reader to do more research on this subject, to seek out other opinions and views, and to arrive at his or her own conclusions.

This book is structured to describe the context and consequences of six genocides—the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire, the Jews of Europe, the Cambodians in the "killing fields," the Tutsis of Rwanda, the Muslims of Bosnia, and the Darfur tribes of Sudan. It also focuses on the efforts of a single individual to have the world recognize the monstrous crime genocide represents. All the genocides share common elements—the victim, the perpetrator, the rescuer, the survivor, and the witness. Whenever possible, the descriptions of genocide in this book are cited in the words of those who saw it firsthand.

However, no words or photographs can truly explain what happened or fully describe the impact genocide has on the individuals who experienced it. Dow Lewi, who was among the millions persecuted by the Nazis in World War II, wrote to his sister in Palestine shortly after the war ended. "I realize that you, over there, cannot imagine even a hundredth part of the suffering, fear, humiliation, and every kind of bullying that we lived through. People who live and think as normal people cannot possibly understand."

chapter one

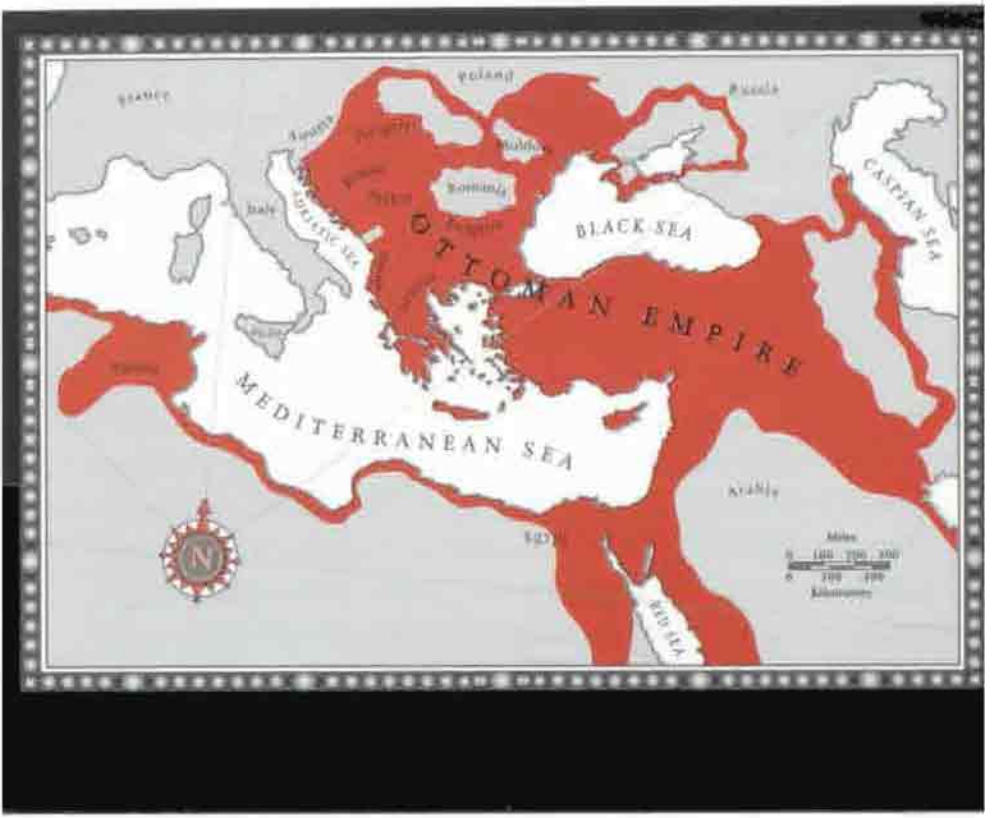
the armenians of the ottoman empire

Few empires in history could rival the glory of the Ottoman Empire in the 1500s. After the conquests of Suleiman I (the Magnificent), the empire's territory stretched along the coast of North Africa, into southern Europe, and across the heart of the Middle East to the Persian Gulf. Its capital was Constantinople, an ancient city on the Bosporus Strait that stood as a gateway between Europe and Asia.

The Ottoman Turks ruled many peoples, each with its own culture. The Ottoman Turks were Muslims who practiced the religion of Islam. Jews and Christians were allowed to practice their faith and customs, since Islam acknowledged its roots in those two religions. However, many Muslims regarded these groups with suspicion because they had never converted to Islam, and non-Muslims often didn't have the same rights or privileges Muslims enjoyed.

One of the subject peoples in the Ottoman Empire were the Armenians, a Christian group. For one thousand years, the Armenians had lived in the rugged mountain region of central Asia—now in eastern Turkey. The harsh landscape and long winters helped insulate the Armenians from outside invaders. Although they were ruled by the Ottoman Turks, they kept their language, culture, and identity intact.

Over time, the Armenians prospered. A middle class emerged, and Armenians took on important positions in



commerce and trade. Though officially second-class citizens, the Armenians became envied by other Turks and distrusted by those in the Ottoman government, who were uneasy because the Armenians held so much power in the empire.

This unease grew as the Ottoman Empire went into decline. Leadership of the empire was often contested with violence. Former areas of the empire—such as Greece and large areas of the Balkans—won their independence. Enemies, sensing the empire's weakness, struck at its borders. By 1834 Russia was pushing hard from the northeast, and France invaded Algeria, a region ruled by the Ottomans in North Africa.

The rulers of the Ottoman Empire were shaken by these events. In the 1500s, the Ottoman armies had threatened Europe. Now the situation was reversed. Everywhere, it seemed,

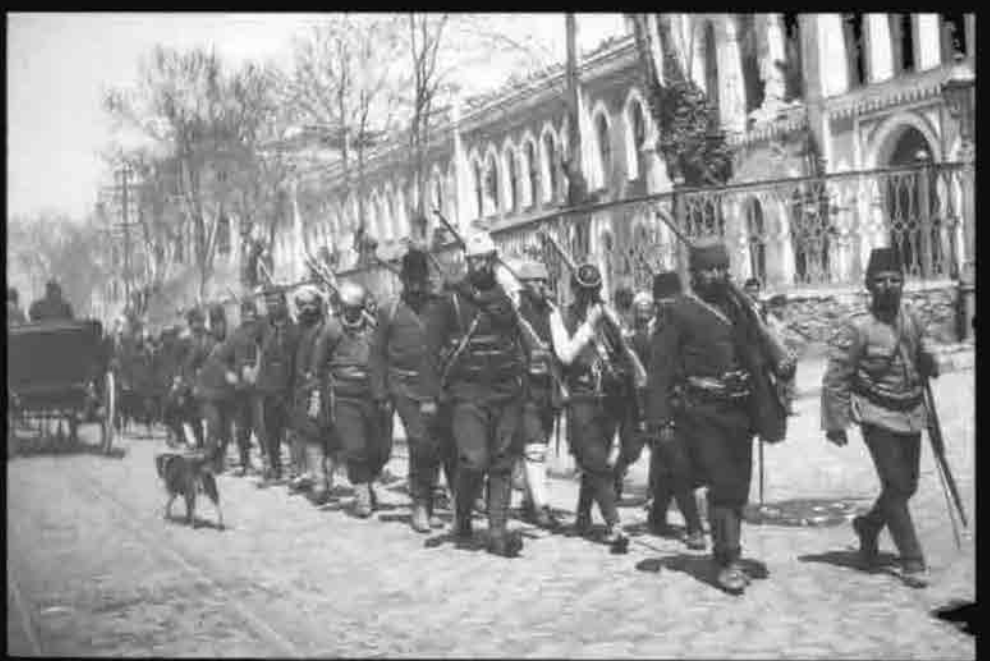
non-Turkish, non-Muslim people were rising up to challenge Ottoman rule and authority. As the Armenians grew stronger, they also began to agitate for reform. They resented that one man—the sultan—ruled their affairs. They didn't like their second-class status within the empire. They were also angered that other groups in the empire, such as the Kurds, attacked them and seized animals and crops for bribes, while the Ottoman authorities did nothing.

To the Ottoman Turks, the Armenian challenge was a serious one. The Armenians lived in the eastern half of what the Ottoman Turks regarded as their homeland. Turks had displaced Armenians and lived among them for generations. To grant the Armenians any power over their affairs was humiliating enough; to give them territory for their own state was unthinkable. Consequently, the Ottoman Turks conceded nothing to the Armenians. In response, the Armenians grew more restless and their demands became louder. And with each new sign of Armenian power and independence, the Ottoman Turks grew more fearful, angry, and determined to solve the "Armenian Question." The late 1800s and early 1900s were rocked by revolts and sudden spasms of large-scale violence against the Armenians. In 1892 Turkish forces crushed an Armenian rebellion in the Sassun region. Turkish leaders believed large portions of the Armenian population actively supported the rebels, so the Turks continued their attacks. By 1896 it is estimated that between 200,000 and 300,000 Armenians had beeen killed.

In the early 1900s, there was a moment of hope when a group of leaders called the Young Turks seized power. The Young Turks were determined to reform the empire, and at first it seemed that they would reach out to the empire's minorities. One of the Young Turks, Ismail Enver, declared, "Henceforth we

are all brothers. There are no longer Bulgars, Greeks, Romanians, Jews, Muslims. Under the same blue sky we are all equal, we glory in being Ottomans." But soon the Young Turks took on the same views as the sultan they had replaced. Minorities such as the Armenians were seen as enemies from within, sucking the energy and strength from the empire.

Moreover, the Ottoman Turks were deeply concerned that the Armenians occupied important positions, which made Armenian demands for independence appear much more sinister. The Armenians also guarded their culture through their tight knit communities and network of schools. They were Christians who had never accepted Islam, and so, to the Ottoman Turks, they seemed to be rejecting their rule and culture. For the Young Turks, the Armenian Question took on darker and darker implications. Only when the treacherous



elements were removed from within could they face their enemies beyond the borders.

In 1914 the world was engulfed by war. The spark that began the conflict occurred in July, when a young Serbian shot the crown prince of Austria-Hungary and his wife as they were riding in an open car through the streets of Sarajevo. Both were killed instantly. The incident ignited World War I, one of the worst wars in history. Austria-Hungary attacked Serbia. In defense of Serbia, Russia threatened Austria-Hungary. Germany came to the aid of Austria-Hungary by warning Russia to back down. France, bound by alliance with Russia, threatened Germany. Orders were sent to army units and everywhere young men scrambled to gather their weapons, uniforms, and equipment. Frantic telegrams were exchanged between the nation's leaders, pleading for peace or blustering about war. Finally, German armies marched into Belgium to begin the invasion of France. Great Britain promptly came to the aid of France. Across Europe, the roads were choked full of marching soldiers, all headed to battle.

For the Ottoman Turks, the war was seen as a challenge and an enormous opportunity, and the Ottoman Empire joined the war on the side of Germany. The Ottoman Empire was now fighting for its very survival, and the Young Turks had a window of opportunity to do what they wished without foreign influence. The Armenians, already in a precarious position within the empire, soon found themselves regarded as part of the enemy. Many Armenians lived across the Ottoman border in Russia, and tens of thousands of them enlisted in the Russian army, a fact that Turks would later cite to justify their view that the Armenians were a mortal enemy who had to be destroyed.

Ismail Enver, who had earlier said ". . . we are all brothers," had become the minister of war. He led a 100,000-man army

to attack Russia and slice through to India, where he believed he would be greeted as a liberator and establish the foundation for an empire of Turkic-speaking peoples. However, Enver's men were ill equipped for the bitter winter. Trapped on icy paths and struggling through snowdrifts in the mountains, thousands died from exposure. When the ill-conceived offensive ground to a halt, Enver had only 10,000 men left, and his forces had achieved nothing of significance.

Answering the Armenian Question

Against the backdrop of this disaster, the Armenian Question took on new urgency. The Ottoman Turks believed the Armenians would help the Russian army invade. Dr. Nazim, a high-ranking Turkish official, told a group of leading Ottoman Turks that even one Armenian still in the empire represented a dire threat. A series of orders came out of Constantinople that said the Armenian people were to be resettled. The process started in early 1915.

"Word came that they were going to transfer us," recalled Takouhi Levonian, a fourteen-year-old Armenian at the time. "Every household began preparing by making kete [an Armenian bread], preparing chickens, other meats, and so on. My father told my mom not to bother with any of these preparations. He said to just take our bedding on the mules and not to bother burying anything, like so many others had done who thought they would return to them. He said that if we ever returned, he would be glad to come back to four walls. He was farsighted."

In many instances, the Ottoman Turks summoned the men separately or by official notice. They were told that they were to be resettled and that the government did not intend to harm