

Before the Shoah: a blueprint for genocide

One hundred years ago this Friday, Ottoman authorities started rounding up Armenian community leaders and intellectuals. Over the next few years, 1.5 million Armenians were killed. **Nikki Marczak** considers the first genocide of the modern era.

MASSACRES, death marches, concentration camps. Destruction of religious buildings. Looting and plundering. Separation of families. Forced labour, killing squads and medicalised torture. The attempted obliteration of a longstanding ethnic and religious minority, perpetrated under cover of a global war.

The genocide of the Armenians by the Ottoman authorities, which is being commemorated around the world this week, comprises so many parallels with the Holocaust that when Jewish lawyer Raphael Lemkin coined the term “genocide” and advocated an international system for holding perpetrators accountable, he had both the Armenian and Jewish cases in mind.

It is little known that the causes and implementation of Armenian Genocide represented important precedents for the Holocaust, indeed that the Nazis expanded on several elements that had their origins in the Armenian case. Together, they constitute two of the most systematic and modern genocides, each committed against a minority group considered an internal enemy and a threat to the purity of the longed-for nation.

For thousands of years, Christian

Armenians had lived in Anatolia, the north-eastern part of current-day Turkey. By the early 20th century, their society, like that of European Jews, had developed into a complex kaleidoscope of economic, cultural, religious and family life. And like the Jews, religious and cultural difference coupled with socio-economic advancement, had rendered the Armenian community vulnerable to persecution.

Against the backdrop of a crumbling Ottoman Empire and a fanatic desire for an ethnically and religiously homogeneous state, the Young Turk government set out to create a nation that was “Armenian-free” – a “Turkey for the Turks”. Participation by local populations in the escalating violence was encouraged by dehumanising the targeted community, in a chilling precursor to Nazi propaganda against Jews. The Ottoman government even had several of its very own “Dr Mengeles”, such as Dr Mehmed Resid, who after the war said: “Even though I am a physician, I cannot ignore my nationhood ... Armenian traitors had found a niche for themselves in the bosom of the fatherland; they were dangerous microbes. Isn't it the duty of a doctor to destroy these microbes?”

Like the early massacres of Jews by the Nazis, the initial killing of community leaders and battle-aged men led to a blurring of the lines between war and genocide, until it was accepted that all Armenians – because they were Armenian – had to be eradicated.

As the American ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, Henry Morgenthau, said at the time, the government's actions were a “campaign of race extermination ... under the pretext of



Soldiers purportedly standing over skulls of victims from the Armenian village of Sheyxalan in the Mush valley, on the Caucasus front, 1915. Photo: AFP Photo/Armenian Genocide Museum Institute.

reprisal against rebellion.”

The use of bureaucracy, law and technology are distinct features of modern genocide and the Ottoman authorities were pioneers of these instruments in mass killing before the Nazis perfected them. They established killing squads known as “chetes”, a sort of crude version of Einsatzgruppen, composed of criminals released from prison specifically for the task. Historian Vahakn N. Dadrian has written of groups of infants poisoned or drowned, and others killed in a kind

of elementary gas chamber, not with Zyklon B, but with steam.

Meanwhile, local villagers and government officials happily plundered Armenian belongings, supported by both legislation and the establishment of the Abandoned Property Commission which was responsible for the distribution of stolen Armenian property.

Next came the forced deportations, sometimes in cattle cars, and more often in large convoys, on foot. Prodded by the gendarmes' bayonets, denied water and food, and forced to march naked under the searing sun,

the deportees walked for weeks or months on end, under constant threat of looting and violence.

Some of those who survived these initial death marches were kept in camps in the desert, under conditions as appalling as any Nazi concentration camp. Sickness and starvation were rife; those who did not succumb were simply murdered.

Rouben Adalian, Director of the Armenian National Institute, has written of Deir Zor, the desert town where some victims ended up, “In this final

“Children were smashed against rocks, women were torn apart with swords, men were mutilated, others thrown into flames alive.”

Rouben Adalian

Director, The Armenian National Institute

carnage, children were smashed against rocks, women were torn apart with swords, men were mutilated, others thrown into flames alive.” Deir Zor has come to represent the essence of the Armenian tragedy, with some calling it an Armenian Auschwitz.

By 1917, between half and two-thirds of the Armenian population had been killed – or up to 1.5 million people. To consolidate the physical annihilation of the Armenians, the Ottoman Turks also erased all memory of their history and heritage, destroying Armenian art and literature, and burning down churches.

When the Nazis razed synagogues to the ground and threw books into bonfires, they were not the first to attempt wiping out a whole people, along with all signs of its prior existence.

Unlike Germany, however, successive governments of Turkey have neither apologised for, nor even admitted to, the crimes committed against the Ottoman Armenians. But with the Vatican and the European Parliament recognising the genocide in recent days, the tide appears to be turning.

Closer to home, the Executive Council of Australian Jewry has stated that the atrocities against the Armenian population were committed with genocidal intent, while Executive Director of the Armenian National Committee of Australia, Vache Kahramanian, attended Yom Hashoah events last week, saying, “Jewish and Armenian communities have both been affected by the scourge of genocide. We are partners in raising awareness, in the hope that future atrocities against ethnic and religious minorities can be prevented.”

As the 100 year anniversary of the Armenian Genocide is commemorated, now is the right time to acknowledge how our communities are linked by our respective tragedies, our mutual determination to fight prejudice wherever it persists, and ultimately, by our common humanity.

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The deportation of Armenians on the Baghdad railway.



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