

## COMPARATIVE STUDIES - 4

# The Armenian and Roma Genocides

By Dr. S. D. Stein

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**T**he 1948 Genocide Convention specifies that genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group as such.

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

The policies applied to persons defined as Jews in Germany, and in areas occupied by the Third Reich and its allies, during the years 1939-1945, covered all of the above, with the exception of the forcible transfer of the children of the group.

The two other peoples, whose fate has been most frequently compared with that of European Jewry, are the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire and Republican Turkey, and European Roma, colloquially referred to as Gypsies. Substantial segments of the Roma population in areas occupied by the Third Reich were annihilated during World War II.

In attempting to account for all three genocidal policies, that of the Armenians at the hands of the Turks during the First World War, and the Jews and Gypsy populations of Europe during the Second, it is necessary to look closely at the nature of the relations that existed between the host community and the minority groups that became their genocidal victims. In a previous lecture I discussed at some length the history of anti-Semitism and the relations between Jews and Christians in various European countries. Over a period of many centuries these were characterised by policies of exclusion that included social discrimination of a relatively minor sort, confinement to particular regions of settlement, disabilities relating to education, political participation, and employment, as well as mass violence and killings, banishment and, finally, genocide.

# Roma

Although the historiography of the Gypsy population of Europe is poorly documented, many of the same policies were applied at various times and places to them as well. Roma began migrating to Russia and Eastern Europe from northern India during the Middle Ages, although some sources maintain that there were signs of their presence in Europe much earlier than this; as early as the fifth century. Although until the fifteenth century they were not especially discriminated against, the basis for subsequent policies that were enforced respecting them were beginning to be quite widely disseminated. As Hancock notes, 'we can seek the historical basis of anti-Romani prejudice in a number of areas, in particular racism, religious intolerance, outsider status and the fact that Romamaintain an exclusivist or separatist culture.' (p.26)

In German-speaking Europe the first decree aimed at the Roma was introduced in 1416. This was the first step in centuries of discriminatory statutes that were introduced at periodic intervals, laws leading, as Bischoff noted in 1827, to 'this unhappy people' being 'persecuted, strung up without exception as thieves and robbers when caught and, guilty or innocent, destroyed by the thousands.' By 1500 they were banished from Germany and the populace were assured that killing them was not a punishable offence. In 1709 a law was passed in Germany allowing for the deportation of Roma to the American colonies, or their utilisation as galley slaves. A year later, King Frederick I condemned all Roma males to forced labour and introduced a policy of removing their children from Romani families, the aim being to bring about their cultural decline. (Hancock, p.25)

There is little point in referencing here the endless stream of extreme decrees that were the legal accompaniment of ecclesiastical, nationalist, and scholarly opinion about Romain pre-1933 Germany. Suffice it to allude to the fact that in 1721 'Emperor Karl VI ordered the extermination of all Roma everywhere, 220 years before the same directive was issued by Hitler,' whereas in 1725, 'King Frederick William I condemned all Roma of eighteen years and over to be hanged.' (*ibid*)

The situation of Gypsies in most other European countries was little better than that in the German lands. The conquest of the Balkans by the Turks increased the hostility of the official authorities toward Roma populations: 'In Royal Hungary, (for instance), Gypsies were increasingly seen as spies and something of a Turkish fifth column, which caused them to be increasingly subjected to restrictions on their lifestyle and trade. Though still valued for their metal working skills, particularly by the military, these efforts to regulate the Roma eventually forced them to adopt a nomadic way of life. In Bulgaria the Turks relegated Gypsies to the lowest social ranking, and differentiated between the predominantly nomadic Muslim Roma and the settled Christian Gypsies.' (*D M Crowe. A History of the Gypsies of Eastern Europe and Russia. London: I B Tauris, 1995, pp.xi-xii*)

In virtually every country where they were found in significant numbers, the Roma were found in the lowest social strata and had to contend with a multitude of discriminatory regulations. In 1899 the Germans established an agency that was entrusted with the task of compiling a register of all Roma over the age of six, and the collection of reports from the various territorial jurisdictions on their activities and movements. Similar restrictions and monitoring of Roma were enacted in other countries, including Hungary, France, and Switzerland. In Switzerland some Roma children were taken away from their families and put in foster homes, a policy that continued until 1973, only being brought to the attention of the general public in the 1980s.

After the Nazis assumed power in January 1933, various regulations, restrictions and policies that were enacted respecting Jews and the physically and mentally disabled, were frequently extended to the Roma population as well. As Hancock notes, many Roma were 'sent to concentration camps and made to undertake penal labor. From January 1934 onwards, Roma were being selected for transfer to camps for processing, which included sterilization by injection or castration. Over the next three years, such

centers were established at Dachau, Dieselstrasse, Sachsenhausen, Marzahn and Vennhausen.’(p.33) Under regulations issued in 1935, Roma were made subject to the provisions of the Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor, enacted that year at Nuremberg, which prohibited marriage or sexual relations between Aryan and non-Aryan peoples. Roma, along with Jews and Afro-Europeans were classified among the latter.

Given this seedbed of centuries old discriminatory legislation and widespread hostility and prejudice toward Roma, who were viewed as social misfits, spies and criminals, the adoption of a policy of widespread extermination was sealed with the legitimating seal of approval of elements of the German scientific community. Once the Nazis assumed power in January 1933, extensive funds were channelled to a variety of scientific institutes that were set up to conduct research into race and genealogical issues, or were already doing so. Among the now mainstream issues that they were investigating were the interrelationship of hereditary characteristics, racial purity, and the behaviours of the Roma peoples. Dr Ritter, who was employed in the Reich Department of Health in Berlin, and who had at his disposal information on 30,000 Roma registrations, concluded in 1940 that the Gypsy question ‘can only be considered solved when the main body of asocial and good-for-nothing Gypsy individuals of mixed blood is collected together in large labour camps and kept working there, and when the further breeding of this population of mixed blood is stopped once and for all. Only then will future generations of the German people be really freed from this burden.’ (Muller-Hill, p.57)

The Einsatzgruppen, which began operations in the conquered areas of the USSR after the invasion of the USSR, on June 22, 1941, were instructed, according to Muller-Hill, to kill Gypsies, along with Jews and commissars. On December 16 1942, Heinrich Himmler, Reichsführer-SS und Chef der deutschen Polizei, issued a decree that led to Gypsies being deported to the death camp Auschwitz-Birkenau. In early 1943, German Gypsies began being deported there. Of the 20, 943 who were registered in that camp, some 3461 were transferred to other camps. The rest ‘died of starvation disease or gas. After 2897 children, women and men (including former soldiers of the Wehrmacht) were driven into the gas chambers on the night of 2-3 August 1944, there were no more Gypsies in Auschwitz.’ (ibid, p.60)

The racist and intolerant ideology of the German Nazis was shared by other extremist groups in central and eastern Europe. There were significant fascist movements in Hungary, Croatia and Romania, all three of which eventually allied themselves with the Third Reich. During the course of the war they agreed to introduce policies that paralleled those that the Nazis promulgated for the Third Reich respecting Jews and Gypsies. As Crowe notes, ‘While initial efforts centered around registration and restrictions on nomadism, the German assault on the Soviet Union brought new efforts that paralleled the Nazi Final Solution for the Jews. By 1942, racial laws similar to those in the Third Reich were in place throughout Eastern Europe, and genocidal policies of mass murder were underway. The success of these efforts varied from country to country. In Bulgaria Gypsies and Jews were protected by the government of King Boris III and thus suffered few losses. Roma in Hungary and the rump state of Slovakia were spared from the worst genocidal indignities until Germany occupied both countries in 1944. The Roma in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, Romania, the Independent State of Croatia, and the Soviet Union suffered horrifying losses, while Gypsy deaths in Serbia were moderately high.’(ibid, p.xv) Gypsies had also been sent to the ghettos of Lodz and Warsaw in Poland, and shared the fate there of the more numerous Jewish captives. Like the Jews, the Gypsies were exterminated by means of gas vans in Chelmno.

There are no precise figures on the numbers of Gypsies that were murdered by the Third Reich and its allies. The range of estimates is between 250,000 and 500,000. (cf. *Holocaust: The Gypsies. Sybil Milton. In S Totten, W S Parsons, I W Charny (eds.) Century of Genocide. Eyewitness Accounts and Critical Reviews. New York: Garland, 1997*)

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# Armenians

The circumstances of the Armenian population of Ottoman and Republican Turkey were very different from that of the Gypsy population of Europe. First, they were concentrated in a relatively circumscribed geographical region. Secondly, unlike the majority of Roma who were nomadic, they were a sedentary population.

The Armenians are an Indo-European people with a very ancient culture, who were first referred to in writing by historians toward the end of the 7th century BC. They gradually occupied the region that today is situated in Northeastern Turkey and the Republic of Armenia in the former USSR. The Armenian language is Indo-European, having some elements in common with other Caucasian languages, and displaying Greek influences, but being quite distinct from the language spoken by the Muslim Turks. Another characteristic that differentiated them from the surrounding population in the Turkish Ottoman Empire, was their religion. The Armenians were the first people to embrace Christianity as a nation, doing so in the 3rd century. The Armenian Church, however, pursued an independent course. In 506 at the Council of Dvin, the Armenian Church rejected the ruling of the Council of Chalcedon (451) that the Person of Christ consists of two natures and became Monophysite, a view that claimed that Christ had only one nature. In the 7th century, the Georgian Church broke away from the Armenian, leaving the Armenians separated by faith from all those who surrounded them. [EB, *Micropaedia, Vol.1/Armenia*]

It seems to be the case that in all instances of large scale genocidal policies, important differences in terms of social and/or physical attributes separate perpetrator and victim groups, and that these help to account for the hostility that is mobilised by the former. In tracing the origins and implementation of these policies, it is usually instructive to explore in some detail the nature of the structural relations that pre-existed the genocide between the groups involved, as it is the matrix of these relations that helps to explain why such policies emerge and the reasons why particular groups are selected as victims.

The genocides of the Armenians, as those of the European Jews, the Gypsies and the Rwandan Tutsi, can be construed as an extreme form of ethno-political conflict, that is, of political conflicts between groups differentiated on the basis of ethnicity. Gurr and Harff define an ethnic group as 'psychological communities whose members share a persisting sense of common interest and identity that is based in some combination of shared historical experience and valued cultural traits [such as] beliefs, language, way of life, homeland.' (p.5)

With respect to the relations between Armenians and Turks in the Ottoman empire, differences of religion and language are important in accounting for some of the hostility and violence which the Armenians experienced over the centuries, particularly during the nineteenth and early twentieth. Their significance can be understood in the context of Esman's definition of communalism and Wyszomirski's analysis of the preconditions for the genesis of communal conflict.

## Communal Conflicts Defined

Esman defines communalism as "competitive group solidarities within the same political system based on ethnic, linguistic, racial or religious identities." [In Wyszomirski, p.431] Wyszomirski suggests that communal conflict during the last two centuries has arisen in four environments. The first of these was that of the emergence of nation states in the West, examples of which included the conflicts that arose between the English and the Welsh and Scots, and those that erupted in the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland and Canada. In these countries, the conflict was managed effectively and stable democratic governments resulted.

The second environment in which communal conflict emerges is that of post-colonial societies. In these societies, prior to independence competing communal elites played down their differences in the interest of winning freedom from the colonial

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powers. Once independence was achieved, the scarcity of resources to cope with conditions and aspirations rapidly led to the establishing of coalitions to ensure the maximum allocation of existing resources to members of their own ethnopolitical groups. The consequence has been that elites of communally based groups “engaged in tactics of outbidding. This in turn has fostered extremist positions, the disappearance of brokerage institutions, and the breakdown of former management and regulatory procedures.” (Wyszomirski) This characterised the situation in such multi-communal societies as Lebanon, Sri Lanka, India, Nigeria, Sudan, and Burundi, among others.

The third environment, in which communal conflicts have flourished over the last two centuries, has been that of former polyglot empires which have disintegrated. A contemporary example is the former USSR. There, the political authorities kept in check, submerged, or endeavoured to eliminate communal identities in the interest of the formation of an integrated national identity. The collapse of central communist rule was quickly superseded by the re-emergence of regional, ethnic, and religious identities. The disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire during the nineteenth century produced similar results in terms of an intensification of communal conflicts. Similar processes were set in train during the nineteen nineties in the former Yugoslavia. The disintegration of the Ottoman Empire during essentially the same time frame as that of the dissolution of Austria-Hungary also led to burgeoning of communally based conflicts in the Balkans as well as in the eastern provinces of Turkey, the region where the Armenian population was concentrated.

The fourth environment that Wyszomirski selects is that of certain post-industrial states. Here a quest for new forms of identity has in some instances given rise to communal conflicts and aspirations that until now have generally been managed effectively. The conflict between French and Anglo Canadians, and between Walloons and Flemings in Belgium, are instances of this category of communal conflict.

It is, however, probably necessary to add a fifth category to Wyszomirski’s list. This would include patterns of communal conflicts arising from flows of economic migration. Such flows have resulted in communal conflicts in certain countries of Western Europe, notably in Britain, Germany and France.

The burden of Wyszomirski’s argument is that communal conflicts are likely to erupt when common identities do not exist between communities coexisting in proximity to each other, or within the same socio-political system, because of the presence of basic divisions between them on the basis of language, religion, or race. It is necessary to stress the probabilistic element in all of this. Such divisions may lead to the eruption of communal conflict, but under certain circumstances may not do so. Thus, although there are divisions between communities in Switzerland on the basis of both language and religion, this has not been manifested in communal violence. Similarly, in Lebanon religious differences between Muslims and Christians were managed effectively until the eruption of the Lebanese civil war in the nineteen-seventies. The potential for communal conflict, however, is always present in social systems where significant divisions on the basis of race, language, or religion exist. In Wyszomirski’s view “religion, language, and race, singly or in combination, form the core of communal identities and values. It is these elements of the communal identity which are ‘non-compromisable’. As long as they retain political salience, they cannot be traded or bargained with.” (434-435)

The Armenians were divided from the Turks of the Ottoman Empire by both language and religion. Although they resided relatively peaceably within the Ottoman system so long as the empire prospered, once the processes of disintegration accelerated, and the empire began to contract rapidly, something which gathered pace from the middle of the nineteenth century onward, Armenians increasingly became the targets of violent massacres.

#### **Relative characteristics of the Armenians**

What was it about the Armenians that made them viable targets for sporadic outbursts of violence? In other words, what characteristics of the Armenians relative to the surrounding communities made them suitable targets for victimization? In addition to the cleavages on linguistic and religious grounds, certain segments of the Armenian population were differentiated from the Turks by economic function, as well as by

cultural values, orientations and aspirations. Like the Jews of the Ottoman Empire, the Armenians were organized in millets, semi-autonomous geographical administrative units that were headed by ethnically indigenous leaders. Although this allowed them a degree of autonomy at the local level, they were barred from holding high government office. Sections of the Armenian population were differentiated from the predominantly agrarian, peasant population of Ottoman Turkey by economic position. Like certain segments of European Jewry, some Armenians were heavily involved in finance and commerce, travelled extensively in the West, and were economically prosperous. This applied particularly to those who resided in the cities.

There differences from the Ottoman population along these significant social fault lines, were a source of friction. Some Ottoman officials particularly resented them because their assistance in financing the activities of the state was necessary. Armenians involved in such activities, much like European Jewish bankers and financiers, were, of course atypical of the Armenian community as a whole. Most Armenians were peasants too. They did, however, differ significantly from others tilling the land. They had tended to adopt western methods of cultivation and husbandry and were, therefore, more prosperous than their Turkish counterparts. This was a further source of resentment. The “poverty-stricken Turkish peasants and nomadic Kurds regarded the relatively prosperous Armenian peasants as a “standing insult” and an inducement for plunder.” (*ibid*, pp.450-451)

Their earlier adoption of Western education and values, their contact with the West, and their relative economic prosperity, all went towards inclining their leaders to a heightened sensitivity to their communal identity. As Wyszomirski summarises the situation: “the status of the Armenian communities in the Ottoman Empire was precarious at best. Racially, linguistically, and religiously different from the Ottoman Turks, they occupied an economic elite position in society; they began to modernize earlier than the Turks; not only was there no common value or identity between the two groups, but each had developed a brand of nationalism which excluded the other. Such a situation was so potentially explosive that even the smallest incident could result in violence.” (p.451)

There are certain similarities, therefore, with the situation of the Jews in Western Europe during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, particularly with the Jews in Germany. They, too, were early modernizers, educationally and economically advanced, and important handmaidens in the emergence and growth of the state administrative and economic system. Another important similarity was that they were dispersed in more than one nation state.

Armenians resided on both sides of the Turkish-Russian border. At the beginning of the First World War there were approximately 1,700,000 Armenians on the Russian side of the border, and some 2,100,000 million on the Turkish. Their loyalty to the state, as that of Jewish citizens and residents in Europe states, could easily be brought into question by those who found it to their interests to manipulate communal violence for political purposes. Parallels can also be drawn between both groups and Europe’s Gypsy population. Linguistically, ethnically, and culturally separated from sedentary populations, they were also mobile across state boundaries. Frequently they were considered, and probably were, within the state, but not of it. There were few bonds of communal identity between them and the population groups amongst whom they moved or resided, not least because of the discrimination and repression that they experienced. In addition, Gypsies were perceived as socially and economically dangerous; a potential infestation to be kept at a distance.

Bands of Kurds, Circassians, Chaldeans, and others had for centuries preyed upon Armenian villagers and peasants. These were largely raids of pillage, and the killings, although they occurred frequently, were a subordinate consideration to the main objective of economic expropriation. The marauding bands relied on being able to return and replenish their bounty subsequently. However, over the course of the nineteenth century the intensity of conflict in the Caucasus increased significantly with the expansion of the Russian empire southward. The Russians enlarged their Armenian population following the Russo-Persian War of 1826-27 and the Russo-Turkish war of 1828-29. As the Armenians resided on both sides of the border with Russia, they

increasingly came to be identified as enemies. As Reid notes: “What had really occurred was the dissolution of all bonds between Ottoman Muslims and Ottoman Christians as the result of the Russian war, and the declaration of jihad. Ottoman Christians” increasingly were identified as belonging to the “domain of war, the sphere of the enemy.” (p.2056)

### **A Critically Important Development**

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century there occurred a development that was probably critically important in radically altering the basis of communal hostility towards the Armenian population of the Ottoman empire. Widespread massacres had followed the defeat of the Turks in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78. The leaders of the Armenian community appealed to the Russians to incorporate into the Treaty of San Stefano of 1878, provisions ensuring protection for the Armenian population. Under Article 16 the Sultan undertook “to carry out into effect, without further delay, the improvements and reforms demanded by local requirements in the provinces inhabited by the Armenians, and to guarantee their security from Kurds and Circassians”. (Hovannisian, p.14) These provisions were never carried out due to the intervention of the British government, which ensured a renegotiation of the San Stefano Treaty. Under Article 61 of the Treaty of Berlin, which superseded the Treaty of San Stefano, the Sublime Porte merely agreed to implement the necessary reforms and to report back to the European powers. The reforms were never in fact implemented.

Massacres by Kurds and Circassians continued. The Ottoman authorities did nothing, and the Great Powers turned their attentions elsewhere. However, the attempt by the Great Powers to intervene directly in Ottoman affairs at the behest of one of its minority populations was a portentous development. The Great Powers had sought to intervene in the domestic affairs of another country on behalf of one of its communal minorities. The Ottoman authorities, understandably in the context of the normal conduct of foreign affairs at that time, resented this.

Nor was this the only occasion for such intervention. In 1895 the Great Powers demanded, inter alia, that the various Armenian provinces be amalgamated into one administrative unit and that political prisoners be released. Although the Sultan, Abdul-Hamid, agreed to introduce reforms, albeit on a lesser scale than was originally demanded, he again failed to do so: “Even as Abdul-Hamid seemed to acquiesce in the reform programme in October 1895, the Armenians in Trebizond were in the throes of massacre. In the following months, systematic pogroms swept over every district of Turkish Armenia. The slaughter of between 100,000 and 200,000 Armenians, forced conversion of scores of villages, the looting and burning of hundreds of settlements, and the coerced flight into exile of thousands of Armenians became Abdul-Hamid’s actual response to European meddling.” (Hovannisian, p.17)

The next important development was the assumption of power in Turkey in 1908 of the Committee of Union and Progress, usually referred to as the Young Turks, known also as the Ittihadists. A counter-coup staged by the conservatives in 1912 (?) failed, and in the immediate aftermath widespread massacres of Armenians occurred throughout Cilicia, where some 20,000 were massacred. The Young Turks rise to power, suggests Melson, was brought about because the regime of Abdul-Hamid “was not able to deal with pressure from the great powers, the challenges of modernization, and with the demands for self-determination of the minorities.” The CUP, however, had limited success in introducing domestic reforms, and prior to the First World War their military ineptitude resulted in the loss of nearly half the territory of the Ottoman Empire, (p.2043)

These reverses, and the modernization strains effecting the empire, moved the leadership of the Young Turk’s to embrace a pan-Turkic nationalism. As Melson notes: “By 1912, the Young Turk’s had rejected not only the Ottomanism and Pan-Islam of their predecessors, they also turned against liberalism and pluralism and became convinced Turkish nationalists. [They] became intent on creating a new empire stretching from the Caucasus all the way to central Asia that would be dominated by Turks and in which minorities would have only nominal rights.”(2043) This change in the constituents of Ottoman/Turkic national identity had important repercussions for their relations with the Armenians: “They ceased being perceived in religious terms as a millet and came to be viewed as a rival nationality occupying the same land claimed by Turks.” The

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Armenians, moreover, occupied a critical portion of territory in the path of the imperial aspirations of the new political leadership.

### **The fate of the Armenian population of Turkey was sealed**

The fate of the Armenian population of Turkey was sealed with the decision of the Turkish government to enter the war on the side of Germany and Austria-Hungary. This meant that Turkey was fighting against its traditional enemy, Russia, with the Armenians straddling both sides of the border region. At exactly the time that war broke out, in August 1914, the Armenian Dashnak Party was holding its Eighth World Congress in Turkey, at Erzurum. It established a committee to make recommendations concerning the response that Turkey should make. It recommended that Turkey remain neutral. The CUP sent an emissary to the Congress to discuss a proposal with the leaders of the Dashnak Party. He recommended that the Dashnak Party, in the event of war with Russia, should foment subversion among Russia's Armenian population. The Armenian negotiators "rejected the proposal, reaffirmed their Party's vow of neutrality and guaranteed Armenian loyalty in the event that the conflagration should reach Turkey. These offers were later renewed to Armenian deputies in the provinces. But each time, Dashnak Party political leaders declined the offer." (*Ternon, p.97*)

The CUP emissary pointed out that the Russians had made a similar proposal to their compatriots over the border, and that this had been accepted. It was also claimed by the Ittihad that Russia had promised to hand over conquered Armenian Turkish territory to an independent state: "In this Turkish version of events, it was claimed that the Dashnak committee had decided to remain in the shadows until war was declared. If war broke out, they would incite the Armenians to revolt against the Ottoman armies as soon as the Russians crossed the border." (*Ternon, p.97*) Although there was no truth to these allegations, certain developments made it appear a plausible account. In any event, it constituted an adequate justification for the action taken against the Armenians in the eyes of the Turkish leadership, members of the CUP, and many other Turks.

The Turkish campaign against the Russians in the latter part of 1914 and the early months of 1915, proved disastrous. Enver Pasha, Minister of War, "sacrificed an entire army to his militarily unsound obsession to break through to Baku and the Caspian Sea in the dead of winter". (*Hovannisian, p.19*) In order to achieve this objective he sought to surround the town of Sarikamish in order to cut the Kars-Sarikamish railway. As Ternon notes one of the units arraigned against him was the Armenian 4th Legion. His army was repulsed with a loss of 90,000 men killed and 12,000 captured, largely due to inadequate logistical preparation for the harsh winters of the Armenian plateau. (*p.100*) The Russian Armenians had organised a Volunteer Corps of Armenians, as they had done during the wars with Turkey in 1827 and 1877. Many of those who volunteered had been former Ottoman subjects who had fled from previous massacres.

Consequently, "It cannot be denied that in the first few months of the war the majority of the Russian Armenians were driven by strong anti-Turkish feeling which found its expression in the formation of these volunteer corps." (*ibid, p.98*) Given that the Russians were fighting with the assistance of Russian Armenians, some of whom had formerly been citizens of the Ottoman empire, it was not difficult for the authorities and the CUP to convince others that Turkish Armenians constituted an active Fifth Column, and that they were providing information to enemies of the state.

In addition, there is probably little doubt that even though the overwhelming majority of Turkish Armenians did not actively support the Russians, they hoped for a Russian victory. They knew that their conditions would be better under Russian rule, than under that of the Turks. The Turkish administration considered that proof of this was provided by the events that took place at Van during April and May 1915.

### **Turkish troops sacked some 80 Armenian villages,**

Between 15 and 18 April, Turkish troops sacked some 80 Armenian villages, massacring their inhabitants. The troops were preparing to do the same to the Armenian population of Van, some 30,000 out of a total population of 50,000. These Armenians, however, prepared themselves for defense. They were shelled by Turkish artillery for a month. The Armenian volunteer corps fighting with the Russians persuaded the Russian officer to relieve the siege, and they crossed the border on May 4. By the 16th, the Turkish troops

were withdrawing. In July the Turks launched a counter-offensive and the Russians retreated.

The Russian army ordered the Armenians to flee. Some 150,000 left for Transcaucasia, many dying on route from starvation and the predations of Kurdish bands. The most important immediate consequence was that a major area of Armenian concentration was emptied of its inhabitants. Although this was perceived as advantageous by the Turkish administration, one positive consequence was that at least a large proportion of the Armenian population of this region survived the war. A more important and far-reaching consequence of what the Turks referred to as the Van ‘revolt,’ was that at this juncture that the leadership in Constantinople gave the decision to exterminate the Armenian population of Turkey.

I noted earlier that for various reasons relations between the Turkish and Armenian communities over the latter half of the nineteenth century had been characterised by outbreaks of violence and large-scale massacres. Many hundreds of thousands of Armenians were slaughtered during the nineteenth century. The circumstances of the First World War, which resulted in Armenians on either side of the Russian-Turkish border fighting in opposing armies, coupled with the enmity felt by the Turks to the Armenians, and the sympathies of the Armenians for the Russians, created conditions which enabled a genocidal thought to be translated into a genocidal policy. The genocidal thought had been part of the collective representations of leading Turks for some time. In the 1870s Abdul-Hamid had said that the “sensible thing to do is to destroy and eliminate any and all elements which may some day give rise to the same danger, afford the opportunity for foreign intervention and serve as its tool. Thus, we must eliminate, leave behind no traces of that Armenian nation”. (*Wyszomirski, p. 452*) Now the conditions allowed for the translation of thought into state policies.

The war provided a context that enabled a policy to be followed through that it would have been difficult to pursue to its limits in peacetime. Armed conflicts provide circumstances, as Melson notes, which facilitate the formulation and implementation of the decision to commit genocide. First, wars aggravate feelings of threat and vulnerability. Secondly, during wars leaders, officials, and administrators need be less concerned about the attitudes of their citizens at home; they are frequently given much greater license, on the pretext of national emergency, to dispense with established freedoms and rights. Also, the opinions of the leaders and publics of other states recede in significance. Finally, Melson notes, “wartime conditions may close off other policy options, leaving genocide as a strong choice for an already radicalized regime.” (p.2045) All of these points apply equally respecting the emergence, formulation and implementation of genocidal policies during World War II respecting the Jewish and Roma populations of Nazi controlled Europe.

There is no doubt that the authorities took a deliberate decision to exterminate the Armenians, that they transmitted this decision to the relevant officials, political [the party], administrative, and military. Those who were not keen to comply were removed from post. This was the fate of the Governors-General of Kastamuni and Ankara. (*Libaridian, p.52*) Similar policies were pursued in most areas of Armenian concentration over vast territorial tracts.

As a preliminary to wide-scale massacre, it was necessary to disarm the Armenian population of Turkey. Some 300,000 were serving in the army. From the middle of March onward most of the Armenian soldiers were disarmed. First, they were used by the Turks as porters and in other menial jobs. Then, as Hofmann notes, “they were taken in groups of 80 to 100 and shot, beaten to death or killed in some other way by soldiers or police, acting under orders from their officers. Subsequently, in many towns and villages, men not liable for military service and aged between 16 and 70 were rounded up, supposedly for conscription, and were then shot without any form or trial, or else were literally worked to death in the sappers units.” (p.72)

#### **The deportation of the Armenian population from the war zone**

A secret organization was established with a view to organising what was passed off as the deportation of the Armenian population from the war zone and adjacent areas. Most of the organizational work was conducted via the party apparatus. Initially, leading

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Armenians: intellectuals, lawyers, and doctors, were ordered to report to the police. They were then jailed, and later executed. Then, after the young men in the military, and the leadership cadres of the Armenian people had been dealt with, the major phase of the campaign was undertaken.

Deportation notices were posted and the local Armenian community was assembled, and marched from the towns and villages towards Aleppo, still then a Turkish city, from where they were to be dispersed to resettlement areas. The two main areas chosen were Syria, southwards, and east, towards the deserts of Mesopotamia.

Most of the deportees never arrived at their destinations. They were subjected to incredible atrocities by the soldiers who accompanied them, and marauding bands of Kurds and Chetes. In many villages the inhabitants were simply massacred, without the formalities of the lengthy deportation marches. In other cases the “convoys were wiped out as soon as they were outside the town. Others continued, decimated by repeated attacks.” (*Ternon, p.107*) The local population, roused to action by the call to jihad, carried out the killings. In the regions that were inhabited by Kurds, “nomadic groups attacked and looted convoys, carrying off women and children. The most sinister role was played by the bands of Chetes, who sometimes massacred entire convoys.” (*ibid.*)

The atrocities committed were numerous and barbarous. The bands of Kurds and Chetes, had, along with other various groups of Turkish irregulars, been waging a form of total war throughout the nineteenth century in the Caucasian border regions. The Ottoman army found it cheaper to provide these bands with weapons to patrol the frontier regions, and grant them *carte blanche* to forage, than to provide regular military units for that purpose. A form of anarchic warfare prevailed in the areas that were inhabited by some of the Armenian population. As Reid notes, “soldiers were encouraged to commit even more terrible deeds, because corrupt generals refused to issue supplies, so that they could sell them back to the government for profit. This corruption, plus the government’s intention to economize, created the circumstances that encouraged plundering and eventually murder.” (*p.2053*)

### **The character of the Turkish troops facilitated its implementation.**

Whilst the circumstances I outlined earlier translated the genocidal thought into a planned genocide, the character of the Turkish troops facilitated its implementation. This applied particularly to the irregular fighting bands in the Eastern region. Reid concludes that the “cause of all the atrocities and finally the genocide of 1915-18, was the aggressive personality moulded by the experience of the perpetual offensive raid.” These troops developed an ideology and sentiments of total hatred towards the Christian inhabitants of the area. Their aggressiveness, their total disregard of any norms of civilized discourse, of any notions of morality, and their failure to draw a line between the permissible and impermissible regarding this outgroup, is not dissimilar from the conditions that prevailed during the American civil war in the border regions of Kansas, Texas and Missouri. The conditions in both areas spawned a similar type of warrior-character. As Richard Brownlee noted in his *Gray Ghosts of the Confederacy*, in these border areas there emerged gangs of irregulars: “Led by desperate men such as William C Quantrill, Bill Anderson, George Todd the guerrillas, most of them only boys, fought a total war. West of the Mississippi they plunged a fairly stable, congenial, and conservative society into intense partisan conflict that was felt by every man, woman and child. This was not a war of great armies and captains; this was bloody local insurrection, a war between friends and neighbours. Here organized bands of men killed each other and the civil population”. (*pp.3-4*)

So was it, too, in the border areas of the Caucasus. The only major difference being that in the latter region there was a complete absence of restraints. At least during the American Civil War the marauding bands of guerrillas generally left the women and children alone. Describing a raid by a Kurdish chieftain in 1877-78, Reid noted: “At every Christian village along the way [the] band committed atrocities. The Kurds raped women and children trapped in the church of Avgugli. Women were raped at Latwantz and Shhabbaghi. At one place, the new bride of a priest was raped repeatedly by the raiders, while her husband, the priest watched her torment. The priest saw her die before his eyes, and then he himself was killed after being mutilated terribly.” (*pp.2055-56*)

This pattern was repeated in the 1915-18 massacres. Women were repeatedly raped. Some were carried off into slavery. Hofmann notes that the treatment of pregnant women with new-born babies was particularly pitiless. This seems to be a characteristic killing mode of many situations of mass killings, including the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, the killings of communists in Indonesia in the 1960s, and elsewhere.

Anyone could attack the Armenians en route with impunity. A German who witnessed events at Aleppo, “reported corpses of violated women, lying about naked in heaps on the railway embankment at Tell-Abiad and Ras-el-Ain. Many of them had clubs pushed up their anus. Another had seen Turks tie Armenian men together, fire several volleys of small shot into the human mass with fowling pieces and go off laughing while their victims perished in frightful convulsions. Other men had their hands tied behind their backs and were rolled down steep cliffs. Women were standing below and they slashed at those who had rolled down with knives until they were dead. The German consul from Mosul related that in many places on the road from Mosul to Aleppo, he had seen children’s hands lying hacked off in such numbers that one could have paved the road with them. At the German hospital at Urfa there was a little girl who had had both her hands hacked off”. (Hofmann, pp.77-78) Other groups were herded into caves, having been soaked in petrol. This was then ignited. Children today still search in these caves, hoping to find gold, either wedding rings or teeth. (Ternon, p.119) These witnesses spared their readers and listeners details of the worst atrocities.

The deportees were sent to areas where there were few places of settlement, and where the land could not possibly sustain the numbers despatched there. It was expected that most of them would die. A League of Assistance report described their plight: “The suffering of these poor people, most of whom are ill because of lack of food and ill-treatment, can hardly be conveyed in mere words. The living leapt into a mass grave, begging to be buried too and thus be spared such terrible suffering. At the same time people suffer the most brutal ill-treatment at the hands of the Turkish gendarmes who have no compunction about extorting from their unfortunate victims anything which is of any value in their eyes”. (Hofmann, p.79) In many of the camps, the inmates were systematically slaughtered. The German Consul in Aleppo reported that at the Ras-ul-ain concentration camp about 300 to 500 persons were taken 10 km from the camp and slain. The bodies were then thrown into the river.

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## Conclusions

Thus ended the Armenian problem in Turkey. In the course of the First World War two thirds of Turkey’s 2,100,000 Armenians were killed. Of the remainder, many were exiled, and the rest lived in fear. Although the victorious allies had pledged to try the Turkish leaders responsible, little was done in comparison with the scale of the atrocities that had been encouraged and permitted. Some sixty-odd high-ranking officials were prosecuted before a military tribunal established by the Turkish government. Kemal-Bey, who had been a provincial governor, was sentenced to death and publicly hanged in Constantinople. Four of the leaders of the war-time government were sentenced to death in absentia. They had fled to either Russia or Germany. (*New York Review of Books*, October 7, 1993/Istvan Deak)

A connection between the Armenian massacres of the First World War, and the policies pursued in the Second, has been alluded to by some scholars. The Armenian Genocide demonstrated that it was not difficult to implement such policies in time of war, and that the long-term repercussions were manageable. According to the Archives of the Nuremberg Proceedings, Hitler, at a meeting of SS units at Obersalzberg, on August 22, 1939, at which he instructed them “to kill, without pity, men, women and children” in their march against Poland, commented that such activities would have no long term repercussions. Who, he said, “remembers now the massacres of the Armenians?” (Staub, p.187, and 309)

I have examined in some detail at the circumstances associated with the Armenian massacre, and have endeavoured to do so through the analytic lenses provided by a number of authorities. In passing I noted certain similarities to the Holocaust, and, following the excellent analysis provided by Wyszomirski, I commented on certain factors that contribute significantly to the gestation and activation of communal conflicts.

From the analysis provided a number of conclusions can be drawn. First, genocidal policies appear in many cases (but not necessarily in all,) to be a by-product of a long process of gestation. This is easily borne out by reference to the genocidal policies implemented respecting Armenians, Roma and European Jews. All three peoples had been the victims of persecution, exclusion, hatred, and massacre over centuries.

Secondly, the absence of unifying bonds of common identity or interest between groups, whether focused on nationality, culture, religion, race, economic pursuits, or language, and the continued importance of distinctive communal identities, constitute potential social fault lines across which violent conflicts may erupt. The disintegration of the former Yugoslavia into separate political entities based on mystical notions of 'Croatism,' or 'Serbism,' as well as the re-emergence of communal identities in the former USSR, illustrate the rapidity and ease with which conflicts can be instigated across such potential social fault lines. These case studies illustrate the ease with which what appeared to be a relatively stable modus vivendi is easily shattered.

Thirdly, the Armenian case illustrates that it is the relations between persons as representatives of groups that are important in the context of the eruption of group conflicts. Armenian and Turkish peasants developed workable and amicable relations over the centuries in the areas where they lived together, in much the same way as many Armenians, Jews and Turks developed social and commercial relations in the cities and towns. These, however, are relatively easily rendered asunder under the pressure of group conflicts manipulated by leadership elites. This was vividly illustrated in the case of the former Yugoslavia, where people have been virtually 'forced' into adopting a communal identity they had not previously considered relevant to their life circumstances or interests. (cf. Slavenka Drakulic/ Balkan Express: Fragments from the Other Side of War. Hutchinson, London, 1992)

In virtually all communal conflicts it is the manipulation of situations by elites that sows the seeds which bear the fruit of violence and massacre. Anti-semitic pogroms in Russia during the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth, Muslim-Hindu conflicts in India throughout this century, the conflict between Sinhalese and Tamil in Sri Lanka, or that between the ANC and Inkatha in South Africa, all attest to the central place of elites in manipulating situations so as to produce communal conflicts. The violence does not suddenly erupt from a groundswell of popular emotions.

Although the term genocide is at times used rather loosely, there is generally broad agreement among scholars that Gypsies and Jews during the period of Third Reich hegemony in Europe during the Second World War, and the Armenians of Turkey during the First, were all targeted for 'destruction, in whole or in part'. In tracing the origins and implementation of these policies it is, as I sought to demonstrate, necessary to inquire into the nature of the structural relations that obtained between the perpetrators and victims of genocide, as it is the matrix of these relations that helps to explain why such policies emerged and particular groups were selected as victims.

*Document compiled by Dr S D Stein*  
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*Faculty of Economics and Social Science*

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