



CANADA & THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

The Armenian Genocide

Genocide is the attempted eradication of a people. In one sense, it is an ancient phenomenon that has been a feature of human history for millennia. But in the modern period, it has also taken on new characteristics reflecting the context within which it has been pursued: the desire to create homogeneous nation-states, the importance of war-making for sustaining their existence, and the legacy of Western imperialism around the world.

The WWI targeting of the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire—the predecessor of today's Republic of Turkey—took place in what are now Turkey, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. What this people experienced was a crime that had touched the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples of Canada previously and the Ottoman Assyrians and Greeks concurrently. Today, it is being carried out against the Rohingyas of Myanmar and the Darfuris of Sudan. The Armenian case is just one among the dozens being studied by academics around the world.

While it took place in its most concentrated form during WWI, which the Ottoman Empire had joined on the side of the German and Austro-Hungarian empires, we need to look further back to understand its history and legacy.

The homeland of the Armenians is the expansive plateau between Mesopotamia, the Black and Caspian Seas, and the north-east-

ernmost tip of the Mediterranean. By the sixteenth century, it had been split in two: the western half had come under Ottoman (or Turkish) rule and the eastern half under Safavid (or Persian) rule (and, later, Russian as well). It was those of the western half that were targeted for annihilation. Because borders and conditions of life changed over the ensuing 400 years, it is impossible to present their



Genocide survivor Asdghig "Starrie" Aleman
(born 1 March 1910). Courtesy of Anthony Tieuli /
www.anthonytieuli.com.



Genocide survivor Peter Bilezikian (born 7 August
1912 in Koum Bat, Marash; died 24 March 2010
in Newton, Massachusetts). Courtesy of Anthony
Tieuli / www.anthonytieuli.com.

experiences in just a few sentences; but, as a general overview, we can say that as a conquered people subscribing to an Abrahamic religion, their existence was tolerated—as opposed to accepted or encouraged—by the Ottoman state. It also gave them a degree of communal autonomy while relegating them to a subservient social and legal status.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, influenced by the ideals of the American and French revolutions, many of the empire's subjects began agitating for greater individual and collective rights. While the government promised great reforms over the course of the century, many of these promises remained empty. Of those that were carried through, some succeeded, others fell short, and others made the situation worse. As the

sultanate used coercion and military force to tighten its control over its population and to combat European intrusion into its internal affairs, the eastern third of its territory suffered greatly. This was part of the Armenian heartland, where, at that time, roughly two-thirds of the population was Armenian. Overall, tensions between various groups rose over the course of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. In the succession of events, Armenians were targeted en masse during two major waves of massacres: the Hamidian Massacres of the 1890s and the Adana Massacres of 1909. These claimed some 300,000 lives. By the eve of WWI, Armenians in Ottoman territory numbered 2 million.

The main thrust of the genocide took place during 1915–1916 and was coordinated by a faction of the Committee of Union and Progress, a group that had come to power through coup d'état. An important early phase saw the arrest of Armenian intellectuals in the capital, Constantinople (now Istanbul), during 24–25 April 1915. (This is why the genocide is commemorated on April 24 of every year.)

Wholesale deportations toward killing centres and concentration camps—25 were established in Syria and northern Mesopotamia—were organized. Locally and en route to these places, most deaths were brought about through slaughter, famine, and mass drowning. Once at the camps, most died through massacre, starvation, and disease. The perpetrators of these acts shared a common religion but had diverse motives, priorities, and experiences. Among the elites, personal enrichment; the realization that Armenians would serve as easy scapegoats for wider problems; a conviction that their targets' very existence posed a mortal threat to the Turkish nation; and Pan-Turkism, a desire to extend their empire



Genocide survivor Veronica Sarmanian (née Engeian) (born 15/16 March 1906 in Marash; died 11 May 2009 in Boston, Massachusetts). Courtesy of Anthony Tieuli / www.anthonytieuli.com.

into central Asia, were particularly powerful. At lower echelons, vengeance, hatred, greed, sadism, social pressure, and promises of entry into heaven and material rewards were key motivators. By the end of the war, the death toll had reached roughly 1.5 million; 1.3 million Ottoman Armenians lay dead, along with some 200,000 Armenians from the Persian and Russian empires. Another 700,000 were displaced or absorbed into Turkish, Kurdish, Arab, and Bedouin households.

The Ottoman defeat in the war did not bring peace. During the Allies' postwar occupation of the empire, many survivors returned to their homes, thereby becoming targets for renewed violence. And they were soon faced with a new threat: that of renegade military

officer Mustafa Kemal and his growing military force. During and after the Franco-Turkish, Greco-Turkish, and Armeno-Turkish wars of 1919–1922, his Turkish Nationalist Movement continued to kill and expel non-Muslims with a view to creating a new nation-state by the sword. He succeeded in his venture and was bestowed with the honorific surname Atatürk (father of the Turks) in celebration of it. In the years that followed, a policy of enforced social amnesia established a conspiracy of silence in the new Republic of Turkey. Armenian contributions to Ottoman life were no longer spoken of, history books were rewritten, place-names were changed, cultural heritage was appropriated or destroyed, and anti-Armenianism became institutionalized.

The outcome of this genocide was the expulsion of a people from its homeland of millennia and the usurpation of land, wealth, history, and opportunity on a colossal scale. The violence did not only satiate a desire for destruction; it also made available the materials with which a new nation-state could be constructed: heritage, buildings, liquid assets, economic opportunities, and so on.

The Armenian Genocide has multiple legacies. For the survivors, it was one of betrayal, degradation, and lifelong trauma often endured in silence. For their descendants, it became a cornerstone of their identity, a historic event that casts them paradoxically in the mould of both victim and survivor. For social scientists, it is an event through which passes the heritage of international law, NGOs, postwar tribunals, diaspora studies, and missionary work. In Turkey, its history has been so distorted that a full confrontation with it necessitates a reformation of national identity.



Genocide survivor Miriam Nerkizian (née Dishjian)
(born 2 March 1915 in Konya; died 8 November
2012 in Boston, Massachusetts). Courtesy of
Anthony Tieuli / www.anthonytieuli.com.

Canadians Help



A photograph from the 1920s showing some of the 2,000 orphans at a Near East Relief orphanage in Corinth, Greece. The text they have spelled with their bodies refers to sentences from the Bible that read

"We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many."

Courtesy of Yarmouth County Museum and Archives, Nova Scotia.

Canadians began learning about the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire in a meaningful way only in 1878, in the aftermath of the Russo-Ottoman War. Thanks to the presence of Protestant missionaries—mostly Congregationalists from Ontario—this interest grew with time. As the situation in the Ottoman lands became increasingly dire, these fieldworkers sent reports of famine, death, and destruction to newspapers and church bulletins back home. Some, notably the Chambers family of North Norwich and the MacCallums of Kingston, became engaged over several decades, often risking their lives in the process. Influential figures such as the principals of Queen's College (now University) and Knox

College (now part of the University of Toronto) organized fundraising and lobbying efforts, and support was received from the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), and other national organizations.



Members of the ARAC in the early 1920s. Levon Babayan is standing at the far right on the back row. MSR 1370, acc. 21210, F 1405-02-12, Archives of Ontario.

Media coverage peaked during the world war; Canadians read details of the horrific killings in hundreds of ar-

THE CALL FROM ARMENIA

Children Send Their Gifts to Help the Sufferers
 ---One Man of 81 Years Collects \$88---Fund is
 Steadily Growing---Many Papers Help

Total previously acknowledged \$61,383.71
 Amount acknowledged to-day 8,728.98

Total acknowledged to date \$70,112.69

The appearance in the columns of *The Globe* of names of subscribers is regarded as a receipt for contributions to the Armenian Relief Fund, but the other day Mr. D. A. Cameron received a letter to which he made a special reply. Here is the letter, exactly as it was written, and it is easily seen why it received special consideration:

Toronto Jan 16th 1920
Mr. D. A. Cameron
Toronto
Dear Sir, I am just seven years old
 and my two sisters six and five
 years old. We are so sorry for
 the poor Armenian children and are
 sending sixty cents that we had
 saved up. I gave all I had in my
 purse today. Please call it
 from the Campbell Kiddies =
 46 Drayton Ave, Yours truly
 Toronto

Franklin R. Campbell

Part of a front-page article in the 21 January 1920 issue of the *Globe*. It provides an update on the Call from Armenia fundraising drive and reproduces a letter received by the

ARAC, which said,

"Toronto Jan. 16th 1920

"Mr. D. A. Cameron

"Toronto

"Dear Sir,—

"I am just seven years old and my two sisters six and five years old. We are so sorry for the poor Armenian children and are sending sixty cents that we had saved up. I gave all I had in my purse today. Please call it from the Campbell Kiddies.

"Your truly,

"Franklin R. Campbell

"46 Drayton Ave,

"Toronto"

ticles published across the country. In 1916, the Armenian Relief Fund of Canada—later renamed the Armenian Relief Association of Canada (ARAC)—was established to coordinate fundraising and news-sharing efforts. Over 15 years, it collected an impressive \$1,000,000 in donations and had among its patrons Toronto's Roman Catholic archbishop and Anglican archdeacon, an Ontario Supreme Court justice, and two governors general. Its officers were mostly businessmen and clergymen. It had more than 25 chapters and worked in conjunction with the British Lord Mayor's Fund and the American Near East Relief. It was part of an international pool of agencies that also included the League of Nations, the League of Red Cross Societies, the International Labour Organization, and l'Union internationale de secours aux enfants. All were involved in refugee relief, including Armenian relief.

In 1920, the ARAC and the *Globe*, a predecessor of today's *Globe and Mail* newspaper, launched a campaign called the "Call from Armenia." In addition to raising funds, its participants petitioned the government to apply diplomatic pressure on Britain for the establishment of an Armenian state through the Paris Peace Conference. Canadian authorities asked to be properly informed by the British concerning the postwar talks and supported the public's calls for the establishment of an independent Armenia. In February, as the Allied powers were contemplating leaving the Armenian heartland under Turkish rule, Canada sent the British a scathing, five-page dispatch detailing its position on the issue:

"Although the Canadian Government has already drawn the attention of His Majesty's Government to the public opinion ... on this question, ... the Canadian Government should place itself on record as absolutely opposed to the return of any of the Armenian provinces of Turkey to Turkish rule."

Throughout that year, the notion that "the blood of Canadians shed in the war

was part of the price paid for the freedom of the Armenian people” was repeated in communication after communication. Soon after, the Treaty of Sèvres and a US-guaranteed arbitration process formalized that the northeastern fifth of the Ot-



About 100 of the Georgetown Boys at the Canadian National Exhibition (CNE), 10 September 1925. It was common for the Georgetown project to be supported by donations in cash and in kind and for opportunities to be found for the boys to befriend adults and children outside their farm home. This trip was likely an example of that. Also photographed are members of a Guelph pipe band, some Boy Scouts, Scout Commissioner O'Callaghan, and ARAC members Rev. Ira William Pierce, Levon Babayan, Rev. Andrew Lane, and Aris L. (Gh.) Alexanian (Aliksonian). Courtesy of Raffi Sarkissian.

toman Empire would form part of such a state. But as the 1919–1922 wars unfolded, the territory was occupied by the Turkish Nationalist Movement and remains a de facto part of Turkey today. While there was much public outcry, the Allies acquiesced in a bid to appease the country's new rulers, who promised to block Soviet expansion into the Middle East. (Turkey later joined NATO for the same reason.)



Sara Corning (1872–1969). Born in Chegoggin, Nova Scotia, she joined the American Red Cross as a registered nurse in 1914 and became a volunteer for the American Near East Relief organization in 1919. She was responsible for rescuing 5,000 orphans from the razing of Smyrna (now Izmir, Turkey) by the Turkish National Movement in 1922 and helped relocate them to a new orphanage in Greece. For her bravery, King George II of Greece awarded her the Knight's Silver Cross of the Order of the Redeemer, one of the country's highest honours. Courtesy of the Yarmouth County Museum and Archives, Nova Scotia.

A project that did find success was the bringing of orphaned survivor children to Canada. By the summer of 1922, there were 50,000 such children being taken care of in institutions across the Balkans, the Middle East, and the South Caucasus. In October, the ARAC began working to bring some across the Atlantic. Over the next five years, through much hard work and convincing, it was able to secure the entry of 109 boys and 22 girls and women. The United Church of Canada brought in another boy and 18 girls and women after taking over the project in 1928.

All were brought in with promises that they would be trained in professions much in demand: agricultural and domestic work. While the girls and women spent only a short time under the ARAC's direct care, boys aged 8–12 were set up at a specially built institution: the Armenian Boys' Home, a farm and

orphanage established in Georgetown (now Halton Hills), Ontario.

These boys had lost their parents, their homes, and their country. While they may have been glad to be in the safety of Canada, they often found it difficult to adjust to a new environment with a different language, culture, and traditions. The project became the ARAC's flagship undertaking and was featured often in the press. Donors and politicians were invited to visit the institution to get a first-hand look at how their support was helping these few survivors of a campaign of annihilation. It was remarkable as an example of Canadians not only considering but also acting upon notions of humanitarian resettlement just 25 years after Confederation. (The coincidence that the first group of children arrived at Georgetown on July 1, Dominion Day [now called Canada Day], was probably not lost at the time.) Its importance becomes clear when we consider that while these children were allowed in by special permission, Canadian immigration policy remained restrictive against Asians at that time and most adult survivors were prohibited from entering.

Collective Commemoration

Collectively commemorating the past not only shows solidarity toward victim groups but also creates opportunities for raising awareness through public education. The consequences of the Armenian Genocide continue to reverberate across borders and time especially due to its continued denial by the government of Turkey.

Genocide scholar Roger W. Smith sees denial as an integral part of the genocidal process—its final stage. It is a process that relies on the selective destruction of memory. After the genocide, Turkish and Kurdish individuals and families who had saved Armenian lives hid the stories of their heroism for fear of being persecuted. Today, instead of celebrating these upstanders as heroes, it is those who executed the policy of annihilation who are revered. One example is Mehmed Talat Pasha, the program's chief architect. Writes one activist,

"At last count, there were officially 8 'Talat Pasha' neighborhoods or districts, 38 'Talat Pasha' streets or boulevards, 7 'Talat Pasha' public schools, 6 'Talat Pasha' buildings, and 2 'Talat Pasha' mosques scattered around Istanbul, Ankara [the capital], and other cities. After his assassination in 1922, Talat was originally interred in Berlin, Germany, but his remains were transferred to Istanbul in 1943 by the Nazis in an attempt to appease the Turks. He was re-buried with full military honors at the Infinite Freedom Hill Cemetery in Istanbul. The remains of the other notorious ... leader, Enver Pasha, were also transferred in 1996 from Tajikistan

and re-buried beside Talat, with full military honors; the ceremony was attended by Turkish President Suleyman Demirel and other dignitaries."



Armenia orphans under the care of Near East Relief photographed just before their transfer from Aidipso to Kavala, both in Greece, c. 23 April 1923. Courtesy of the Yarmouth County Museum and Archives, Nova Scotia.

Observers have used the phrase “We didn’t do it but they deserved it” to summarize how the state teaches its history: it denies the targeting of civilians while arguing that such actions were necessary for creating the republic.

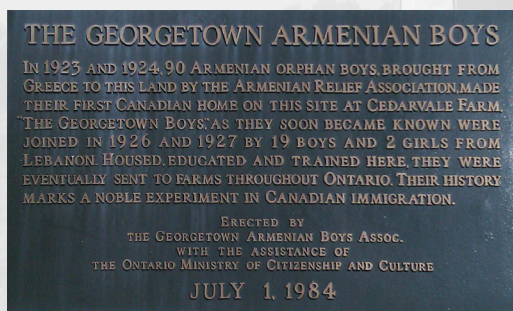
The government of Turkey’s denial of the Armenian Genocide has hindered civil society initiatives aimed at combating racism and establishing a fuller understanding of the past. In light of the consequences of denial, recognition and commemoration of the genocide by other governments the world over becomes ever more important.

Following years of petitions and protests, the Canadian Senate officially did this for the first time in 2002. Similar steps were taken by the House of Commons in 2004 and by the federal government in 2006. The Upper House’s resolution stated,

“That this House calls upon the Government of Canada:

“To recognize the genocide of the Armenians and to condemn any attempt to deny or distort a historical truth as being anything less than genocide, a crime against humanity, and

“To designate April 24 of every year hereafter throughout Canada as remembrance of the 1.5 million Armenians who fell victim to the first genocide of the twentieth century.”



An early plaque placed by the Georgetown Armenian Boys Association and the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Culture on 1 July 1984. Courtesy of Daniel Ohanian.

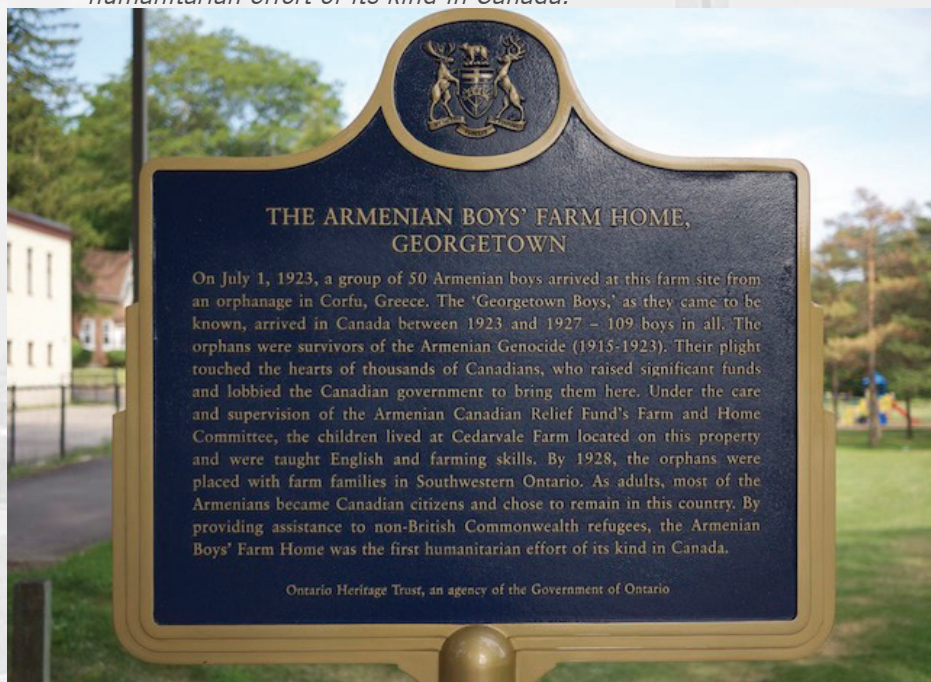
In 2010, Heritage Halton Hills, an agency of the town of Halton Hills, designated the Armenian Boys’ Home a protected historic site. (The building is still standing and serves now as Cedarvale Community Centre.) The commemorative plaque

placed there reads,

"In 1923, Cedar Vale Farm was the site of Canada's first international humanitarian resettlement effort, rescuing orphans of the Armenian Genocide. It later became a United Church girls' school."

One year later, the Ontario Heritage Trust, an agency of the government of Ontario, also commemorated the history of the Georgetown Boys. The plaque erected on that occasion says,

"On July 1, 1923, a group of 50 Armenian boys arrived at this farm site from an orphanage in Corfu, Greece. The 'Georgetown Boys,' as they came to be known, arrived in Canada between 1923 and 1927—109 boys in all. The orphans were survivors of the Armenian Genocide (1915–1923). Their plight touched the hearts of thousands of Canadians, who raised significant funds and lobbied the Canadian government to bring them here. Under the care and supervision of the Armenian Canadian Relief Fund's Farm and Home Committee, the children lived at Cedarvale Farm located on this property and were taught English and farming skills. By 1928, the orphans were placed with farm families in Southwestern Ontario. As adults, most of the Armenians became Canadian citizens and chose to remain in this country. By providing assistance to non-British Commonwealth refugees, the Armenian Boys' Farm Home was the first humanitarian effort of its kind in Canada."



The plaque placed by the Ontario Heritage Trust in 2011. Courtesy of Ontario's Historical Plaques / www.ontarioplaques.com.

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Prepared by Daniel Ohanian, Raffi Sarkissian, Aram Adjemian,
and Isabel Kaprielian-Churchill.
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