

HIS101 (Histories of Violence)

The Armenian Genocide and The Holocaust: Final Essay

By Filip Zaleski; 1008241500

2022.04.12

Word Count: 1027

Ins.: A. Guerson de Oliveira, M. Meyerson

T.A.: N. Mara-McKay

While delivering HIS101, Professor Meyerson has alluded to the United Nations' definition of genocide as "acts committed with the intent to destroy in whole or in part, a national, racial, ethnic, or religious group, as such."¹ The significance of genocide in the study of our history and, particularly, in the study of human violence cannot be understated. The Armenian Genocide of 1915 and the Holocaust of 1942-1945 are two cases of genocide selected for the purpose of this essay – these will be overviewed and analysed. Genocide at the hands of both the Ottomans and the Nazis was the result of: national insecurity manifesting itself as hatred of a persecuted minority, a vision for an 'ideal' governance of land by one ethnicity, and intense allegiance to the state. The essay will scrutinize each event before coming to a discerning conclusion.

The Armenian genocide was the result of geopolitical pressures on the Ottoman empire and a wave of intense nationalist belief. In the dawn of World War I, the Ottoman empire quickly began losing territory to newly-formed liberated nations and to Russia, pushing the state into an "existential crisis"². The government was also substantially pressured by Western powers to modernize and reform, accelerating identity-related stresses. Alongside the increased popularity of national agendas that such geopolitical pressure caused, the early twentieth century was a period of intensifying ethnic nationalism, particularly in the Balkans³. There, nationalism was very much rooted in the idea that each ethnic group was to have their own territory, their own state; expulsion of 'other' minorities was already ongoing⁴. The 'Young Turk' movement is one sign of the extremization of Muslim-Turkish identity. Cycles of violent conflict began when the Ottoman government found itself having to settle in Anatolia, the homeland of the Armenians. Already,

¹ Mark Meyerson, "HIS101Y – Colonialism and Settler Genocide," *MyMedia* (University of Toronto, 2022), <https://play.library.utoronto.ca/watch/4728ea93be95114db1d0c8b6e93e7a87>.

² Mark Meyerson, "HIS101Y – The Armenian Genocide," *MyMedia* (University of Toronto, 2022), <https://play.library.utoronto.ca/watch/da9f47a439f642af610e980270b75e3f>.

³ Meyerson, "HIS101Y – The Armenian Genocide."

⁴ Meyerson, "HIS101Y – The Armenian Genocide."

Armenians were resented within Muslim circles and seen as merchants and middlemen for Western powers⁵. Such allegations gained traction within the Ottoman population, and Armenians quickly became labelled revolutionists – persecutors ‘exercised the most diabolical ingenuity’⁶ in vilifying them. The Ottomans realized that recognizing the independence of ethnic minorities would weaken the state as it did before⁷; this is an important motive behind the persecution. A violent, “fanatical wrath”⁸ ensued in April 1915 that, in contrast to most previous historical cases of genocide, was not motivated by religion (in fact primary Sunni Muslim moral codes were broken), but by rugged obedience to state policy⁹. Around half of the pre-WWI Armenian population was destroyed and public forces greatly aided the state aggressors. Victims were removed from ancestral homelands, stripped of possessions, their bodies mutilated and dehumanized.

The Holocaust was the result of fundamental antisemitism in Nazi ideology and the lack of reaction from world observers. As were Armenians in Asia Minor, Jews were resented in Nazi Germany; both groups were not random victims but actively discriminated peoples. There was a distribution of hatred toward the Jews motivated by the illusion of Jewish control of resources and Hitler’s desire to create a narrative that would resonate within the disaffected and angry German population of post-depression¹⁰. Similarly to the rising beliefs of ethnic exclusion in Anatolia, the Nazis believed that Germany would attain a great and powerful status if it achieved racial purity¹¹, the principal motive behind the killing. Himmler claimed that the country would not have survived

⁵ Meyerson, “HIS101Y – The Armenian Genocide.”

⁶ Henry Morgenthau, *Ambassador Morgenthau’s Story* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), 80-85.

⁷ Meyerson, “HIS101Y – The Armenian Genocide.”

⁸ Morgenthau, *Ambassador Morgenthau’s Story*, 80.

⁹ Morgenthau, *Ambassador Morgenthau’s Story*, 85

¹⁰ William W. Hallo, David B. Ruderman, and Michael Stanislawski, in *Heritage: Civilization and the Jews. Source Reader* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1984), 265.

¹¹ Alexandra G. De Oliveira, “HIS101Y – The Holocaust,” *MyMedia* (University of Toronto, 2022), <https://play.library.utoronto.ca/watch/fce4f9d6f6afd30f142f6d9691614293>.

allied bombardment and the war altogether if the Jews remained undealt with¹². The Ottomans, however, believed that the Armenians would conspire with the Russians and overthrow the empire. The dehumanization of Jews in Nazi Germany was total: they were seen as peoples “without any culture”¹³. Similarly, Ottoman persecutors seemed to almost resent the fact that Armenians continued to live¹⁴. Once in effect, extermination in the Holocaust (e.g. via gas chambers) extended the dehumanization of victims by industrializing their death.

Dehumanizing the victims of genocide was a process that helped justify the extermination of the victims, and it helped the persecutors to carry out the numerous atrocities by painting a sub-human image of their targets. In addition to intense ethnic beliefs for the future of Germany, the Holocaust was orchestrated by the force of absolute obedience toward the Fuhrer. This is evidenced partly by comments of various Nazi subordinates, e.g. ‘what the Fuhrer ordered was always right’¹⁵. Clearly, the motives of the individual Ottoman and Nazi perpetrators of genocide were tied to grand allegiances to their state: without such allegiance persecutors would not comply with their hideous orders. Allegiance to Hitler’s policy also helps to explain the widespread aid from the German public – this was an important condition that enabled the Holocaust. Professor Meyerson explained that without public support in identifying Jews, their persecution would be rather impossible¹⁶. This condition also largely facilitated the Armenian genocide where civil militias and prisoners hunted down Armenians and extended the state-induced killings.

Hitler’s calculation that the Western world would not commit to preventing and addressing his extermination machine established in 1942 was another crucial condition that consolidated the

¹² Henrich Himmler, “A Secret Speech on the Jewish Question,” in *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 777

¹³ Hallo, Ruderman, and Stanislawski, *Heritage: Civilization and the Jews. Source Reader*, 265.

¹⁴ Morgenthau, *Ambassador Morgenthau’s Story*, 83.

¹⁵ Rudolf Hoess, “Commandant of Auschwitz (c. 1945),” in *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 779.

¹⁶ De Oliveira, “HIS101Y – The Holocaust.”

Holocaust. The tyrant observed the lack of discourse about and response to the Armenian genocide as well as the general unwelcoming attitudes toward Jews fleeing Germany at the start of his reign¹⁷. It was also due to the “passivity”¹⁸ of the allied forces in addressing the atrocities on the Jewish population that can be blamed for the prolonging of the extermination.

The astonishingly frequent repetition of genocide throughout human history and present is a sign that it is never an accident. The Armenian genocide and the Holocaust show that movements pushing for genocide and factors inclining the public to support it or ignore it have been long ongoing. The study of these horrid events helps to identify the factors that incite division and prejudicial brutality. In both the cases of Armenia and the Jewish population, it was the hatred of a minority rooted in national distress, a vision for an ‘ideal’ governance of land by an ethnicity, and strong allegiance to the commands of the state by perpetrators that stood behind the episodes of genocide. The cases display the dangers of indifference and silence, as well as the true power of the contemporary nation-state; both in orchestrating atrocities and influencing public opinion.

¹⁷ De Oliveira, “HIS101Y – The Holocaust.”

¹⁸ Hallo, Ruderman, and Stanislawski, *Heritage: Civilization and the Jews. Source Reader*, 275.

Bibliography

- De Oliveira, Alexandra Guerson. *HIS101Y - The Holocaust. MyMedia*. University of Toronto, 2022. <https://play.library.utoronto.ca/watch/fce4f9d6f6afd30f142f6d9691614293>.
- Hallo, William W., Ruderman, David B., and Stanislawski, Michael. *Heritage: Civilization and the Jews. Source Reader*, 265–76. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1984.
- Himmler, Henrich. “A Secret Speech on the Jewish Question (October 8, 1943),” in *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*, 777-87. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Hoess, Rudolf. “Commandant of Auschwitz (c. 1945),” in *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*, 777-87. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Meyerson, Mark. *HIS101Y - Colonialism and Settler Genocide. MyMedia*. University of Toronto, 2022. <https://play.library.utoronto.ca/watch/4728ea93be95114db1d0c8b6e93e7a87>.
- Meyerson, Mark. *HIS101Y - The Armenian Genocide. MyMedia*. University of Toronto, 2022. <https://play.library.utoronto.ca/watch/da9f47a439f642af610e980270b75e3f>.
- Morgenthau, Henry. Essay. In *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story*, 80–85. Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2003.