

Talk Given April 24th, 2018 for ACOM at St Anthony Park Library – St
Paul Minnesota

Thank you for joining me today. My name is Tom Keljik – I am a member of the Armenian Cultural Organization of Minnesota. I was asked to a talk on the anniversary of the Armenian Genocide. Today marks the date in which Armenian intellectuals were rounded up in Constantinople. April 24, 1915 began the process that ultimately claimed 1-to 1.5 million Armenian lives as well as Greeks and Assyrians.

My purpose in this next hour is not to talk about the Genocide per se', but to explore its root causes. I am neither a scholar nor an expert; I have read and thought about this for many years and I share my findings with you. It is a complex story, but my hope is that in painting this landscape you will have a better understanding of the event.

It will require that we delve into history, geography, religion, culture, societal structure, economics, social status, and human emotions surrounding notions of superiority, humiliation, envy, and entitlement.

Armenia

For 3,000 years Armenia existed boarded by the Black, Mediterranean, and Caspian Seas. Great Powers rose and fell over the centuries, and the Armenian homeland – when not independent, was – at various times ruled by **Persians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Mongols and Turks**. Armenia – is fixed on the earth at approximately in the low 40 degrees North Latitude and somewhere between 38 to 45 Degrees East Latitude. It is an arid land situated on a highland plain dominated by a rugged-rocky terrain, spotted with mountains, ravines, lakes, and rivers. Its climate is severe – experiencing cold and snowy winters and often hot – drought prone summers. History, archeology, and anthropology tell us that the proto-Armenians – the Hittites developed dry farming techniques 6,000 years ago. The Iron Age is launched from this general locality as well as and domestication of wheat, barely, sheep, cattle, pigs, and goats.

The eleventh century, the first Turkish tribes invaded the Armenian homeland. Thus began hundreds of years of rule by Muslim Turks. Seljuk Turkish tribes from central Asia poured into **Persia 1037** and captured **Baghdad 1055** and defeated the Byzantine armies at **Manzikert 1071** opening Armenia - once again to Muslim occupation.

The Seljuk Empire was at its height by the mid twelfth century when it was invaded by the Mongols which overran west Asia and ravaged Anatolia.

By mid-thirteenth century the Turks re-energized by tribal leader – Osman controlled much of southeastern Europe, western Asia and Northern Africa between the fourteenth and early twentieth centuries.

After 1354, the Ottomans crossed into Europe with the conquest of the Balkans – it became a trans-continental – multilingual Empire – some thirty nationalities or identifiable ethnic/language groups.

Population

1914 Ottoman Empire - 35 million. Great Britain - 46 million, France - 41 million, Germany - 68 million, Russia - 166 million (143M today)

1600 – Ottoman 26 Million, 14 Russia, France 20, Great Britain 5.5

Why was the Ottoman Empire so Successful?

- **State-run education system**
- **Religion was incorporated in the state structure, and the Sultan was regarded as "the protector of Islam".**

- **State-run judicial system**
- **Ruthless in dealing with local leaders**
- **Promotion to positions of power largely depended on merit**
- **Created alliances across political and racial groups**
- **United by Islamic ideology**
- **United by Islamic warrior code with ideal of increasing Muslim territory through [Jihad](#)**
- **United by Islamic organisational and administrative structures**
- **Highly pragmatic, taking the best ideas from other cultures and making them their own**
- **Encouraged loyalty from other faith groups**
- **Private power and wealth were controlled**
- **Very strong military**
 - **Strong slave-based army**
 - **Expert in developing gunpowder as a military tool**
 - **Military ethos pervaded whole administration**

It is not hard to conclude that the Ottoman elite had a strong sense of superiority. It dominated a significant portion of the ancient world. Their armies had racked up one successful conquest after another. They controlled Mecca and Medina, Jerusalem, and Constantinople – Holy sites to three major world religions. Their fierce and warrior nature was a major fear of Christian Europe and was echoed by Popes, Shakespeare and Martin Luther.

(Luther – don't resist the Turks – it is a scourge intentionally sent by God to sinning Christians - but he quickly changed his tune) He prayed for deliverance from "the world, the flesh, the Turk, and the Devil"

The feeling of pride and dominance permeated the general Turkic-Muslim people and even it tinged the minorities.

The sense of superiority was reinforced by their chosen faith in Islam that defined non-believers as second class peoples.

While believers in Judaism and Christianity were seen as "people of the Book" they were subservient to the final word of God through Mohammed – his last and greatest prophet.

The Empire codified and enforced that the Ottoman Islamic state was in command and demanded obedience. Non-Turkish Muslims had less

status than Ottoman Turks – but stood above Christians and Jews. Arabs, Kurds, Balkan Muslims, Circassians, Laz, Chechens were often rebellious, but were respected for their faith. The scriptures from the Quran formed how to treat nonbelievers. The code applied to non-Muslims was called **Dhimmi** – it afforded protection and rights with certain detailed restrictions and a less than favorable tax system.

Under a system called **Millet**, non-Muslim peoples were given limited power to regulate their own affairs. The system was applied to Greeks, Armenians, Assyrians and Jews.

Can you provide evidence of how non-Muslims were regulated by the Ottoman Empire?

- Men were barred from marrying Muslim women
- Testimony by non-Muslims against Muslims was not accepted in court
- In penal law, a Muslim who killed a non-Muslim was generally sentenced to death
- Non-Muslims were prohibited from conducting their religious observance in a way that would disturb Muslims
- Ringing of church bells – forbidden
- Construction of synagogues and churches were forbidden
- Non-Muslims were prohibited from riding horses and bearing arms
- Non-Muslims were obliged to step aside for approaching Muslims
- Non-Muslims could not build homes higher than Muslim homes

Whatever ones religion or ethnic status, life for the majority of the Ottoman subjects was rough and traumatic. Most were engaged in subsistence farming. Most were tenant farmers, similar to the serfdom relationship in Europe during the Middle Ages. Landlords rented plots

to the farmers and shared in the risk/benefits of harvest. It was a closed agrarian economy in which what you grew and made – you utilized to stay alive.

What was excess was bartered or sold in small village markets. Craftsmen and traders were present in larger villages performing their business and passing it on from generation to generation. Not much changed over the centuries. Of course, a set percentage was sucked up by the central government. Banditry and violence were constant threats in these small communities.

National Geographic, October 1915 – Hester Donaldson Jenkins

(1869 -1941. Oshkosh Wis. Normal School, University Chicago, Columbia –PHD, Prof of history and English – Constantinople College. She translated Turkish poems. Congregationalist, many academic societies, Recreation: Riding, boating, tennis etc.)

What is Armenia? Page 329

First paragraph – Armenia is a word that has widely different connotation for different peoples. To us Americans it means a vague territory somewhere in Asia Minor; to the makers of modern maps it means nothing – there is no such place; to the Turks of a few years ago it was a forbidden name, smacking of treason and likely to bring up that bugaboo “nationalism,” than which Abdul Hamid II feared nothing more, unless it were “liberty”; but to nearly two millions of Russian, Persian, and Turkish subjects it is a word filled with emotion, one that sends the hand to the heart and calls up pride and sorrow.

Typical Towns 341

A typical Armenian town of the better class is Bardezag, near the Gulf of Ncomedea. This is a town of narrow streets, paved with great stones and bordered by dark narrow houses made of unslaked brick of the Scriptures, but the straw much in evidence. The edges of the streets serve as cutters, and the doorsteps over them are littered with children. There is one school house which is a sort social center, serving as a lecture-room or concert hall at need. There is, of course the square Gregorian Church. There is also a silk mill, and the fields are filled with mulberry trees wherewith to feed the hungry silk-worms. On the edge of the town are an English orphanage, founded after the massacre of 1896, and an American college for boys, the latter being the great center for the enlightenment for the neighborhood. The fields are fertile and well, but beyond the hills, whence descend the marauding Kurds to reap where they have not sown.

The people are largely agricultural, although there are many of them engaged in the intellectual and business interests of the town.

While the Ottoman Empire calcified and struggled to evolve, Europe emerged from its sleepiness of the middle ages. Formulating and strengthening national and racial and ethnic identities; grasping new ideas in philosophy, arts and science - Europe began to roar. Historians suggest that the Battle of Vienna in 1683 marked the turning point in which the Ottomans ceased to be a significant menace to Christian Europe.

How many here like croissants? - Viennese baker's celebration
pastry – defeat of the Ottomans

Within the declining power of the Ottoman Empire the Armenians (and others) were able to carve out advantages – even under long occupation they were able to maintain their traditions while embracing new concepts and ideas to better their lives and those around them. **European “ways”** were more easily accepted by the “others”, many having been involved in trade and banking where they developed ties in Europe and elsewhere that exposed them to exciting new ideas. Known by the Ottoman elite as **Millet-i-sadika (loyal Millet)** – the Armenians became a small engine in moving the Empire slowly forward. The system allowed them to exist; and for some Armenians even thrive.

Additionally, Armenians especially embraced the opportunities that the mostly American Protestant Missionaries offered in educating boys, girls men and women in new and thrilling ideas that directly impacted Armenian communities.

National Geographic, page 357 - Americans Makers of Armenia

If the Powers have done little for Armenian but raise false hopes, that is not true of the people of Europe and America. French missions are dotted all over Asia Minor, and German societies have cared for children orphaned by the massacres, while English missions, schools, and orphanages attest a deep interest in the Armenians. But the greatest work done among them has been done by the Americans, whose schools and hospitals. Say an Englishman “might almost be called the makers of modern Armenia.

What Evidence do we have on hand that Armenians met with a high degree of Success in the Empire?

- Balian family built the Sultan's palaces – etc. Dolmabache
- Dadian family sole providers of gunpowder and manufacturers of guns to the military
- Duzian family ran the Ottoman Treasury, official keepers of the jewels of the Sultan
- Bezdjian close councilor to Sultan Mahmud II.
- Calouste Gulbenkian – Advisor on Mesopotamian oil prospects to the Ottomans. Established oil company – Known as Mr. 5%.
- The 16 largest banks of the Ottoman Empire were run by Armenians in the late 19th century.

After centuries of running up one victory after another the Ottoman Empire was exhausted. Its economy began to falter-even shrink and its perceived enemy – Christian Europe grew even stronger. The once proud Ottomans endured one humiliation after another as Europe began drooling over the prospects of the **“Sick man of Europe”** offering up new lands for incorporation into Europe's thirst for colonies. Russia, Britain, France, Austro-Hungarian, Germany and others saw opportunities in the remnants of a decaying Ottoman Empire.

Adding to its misery was the emergence of national movements in its own territory. The Serbians, Greeks, Albanians, Arabs as well as some Armenians became enamored with running their own show. Each defeat to a European power in battle resulted in treaties favorable to the winner and usually forcing concessions on making the Ottoman Christian communities equal citizenship and guarantying their safety; in some cases attempting autonomy. This was added salt to the wounds of the humiliation of military defeat. Humiliation turns to anger and

that anger was sharpened on the Empire's Christian minorities who were seen in league with these external powers.

Nationalist thought also grew among the Ottoman educated elite. They became enchanted with the emergence of the idea of Turkification. Realizing the old Ottoman concept of empire was over and that a more concise national identity would need to be shaped out of the old empire. At first, the Young Turks were intellectuals intrigued with western ideas, (most coming from the Balkans) constitutional government, rights of man, and even human rights. As time wore on, they saw the cause too immense and the ideas too hard to translate to a faltering Empire. The Young Turks began to evolve to more Nationalist theme - **Turkey for Turks** as they entered the twentieth century.

And then Arch Duke Ferdinand was shot and killed in Sarajevo in August of 1914, thus providing the "powder keg" that catapulted the world into the Great War. Entering on the side of the Central Powers it was a chaotic and bungled effort from the start. Christian communities were immediately suspected of siding with the enemies of the Central Powers. The **Committee of Union and Progress** had decided that it was time to act to eliminate this internal war threat and solve the long term problem had the potential of blocking the creation of a Turkish centered nation state.

It was determined that the Armenians would never be successfully assimilated into this new national concept. They would resist as proven

in the extreme eastern provinces near Russia. The other non-Turks have demonstrated this time and time again – starting with Serbia. The Arabs were the most current peoples in the Empire hankering for separation.

The solution was to depopulate the regions with high concentrations of Armenians – constituting more than 10%. And so the order went out. The government had been successful in emotionally engaging its Ottoman citizens (especially Kurds and Chechens) in debasing the Armenians – casting them as enemies within and linked to foreign warring enemies. They were known to be shrewd and crafty people and gavurs as well. Their wealth was not deserved and would be reallocated to deserving believers. Morph the emotional frenzy into a Holy Cause - a just killing.

Mohammed's followers after having been told to destroy a caravan outside Mecca said "It was not you who slew them, but Allah, who slew them" – Prophet – year - 620.