

ning with the fifteenth-century occupation of Armenia by the Ottoman Turks. Indeed, Ottoman rule over Armenia was one of oppression and discrimination. Armenians were treated as second-class citizens and were subjected to illicit taxation, discriminatory laws, and constant harassment and persecution. Armenian culture and civilization suffered significant setbacks, and Armenians were turned into subservient slaves who showed absolute compliance even when their belongings were looted, their villages ransacked, and their women kidnapped. This situation changed in the early nineteenth century, as the liberal ideas of Europe began to reach the Armenians. National awareness was on the rise, and the will to stand up for their basic rights escalated.

The first act of resistance against oppression occurred in 1862 in the mountainous region of Zeitun, where Zeituntsies refused to pay the discriminatory and illegal taxes levied upon them and took up arms against a 12,000-strong Turkish army, bolstering the 6,000 irregulars who had arrived to punish the defiance. The unprecedented resistance, which ended successfully with the interference of the French government, became an inspiration to all Armenians. Political parties were formed; bands of revolutionary militants called *fedayees* went from village to village to protect defenseless Armenians against the Turkish and Kurdish assaults; pleas and supplications were sent to Sultan Abdul-Hamid II, and the intervention of European governments was sought. The Ottoman government responded with increased persecutions. Crushing any form of resistance and brutal reprisals against the innocent population became a governmental policy, culminating in the widespread massacres of 1895–1896. With a few exceptions, most notably Zeitun and Van where resistance warded off disaster, these massacres resulted in an enormous destruction of life and property.

Significantly, the incident that triggered this bloodshed was the resistance in Sasun in the summer of 1894, spurred once again by refusal to pay the impoverishing high taxes the Kurdish chieftains and government tax collectors demanded. With the Hnchakists (Social Democrat Hnchakian Party) encouraging, arming, and leading them, the Sasuntsis organized fighting bands and repelled the Kurdish irregulars and the Turkish army. The resistance lasted about a

## Armenian resistance, 1915

*Rubina Peroomian*

The Armenian Genocide is commonly thought to have started in April 1915. However, the roots of this event and the Armenian resistance to annihilation stretch back for centuries, begin-

month and was eventually crushed; the entire region was ransacked, and the population was massacred.

Protests, petitions, and memoranda by the European Powers to stop the carnage bore no results. The Ottoman government labeled the incident an uprising with an intention of sedition, therewith justifying the ensuing massacres. Genocide scholars believe that these massacres mark the beginning of the Armenian Genocide.

Acts of protest, peaceful or otherwise, against these extreme measures were turned into bloodbaths. Examples include the September 1895 peaceful rally organized by the Hnchakists in Constantinople, the attack to avenge the destruction caused by the Mazrik Kurdish tribe (the Khanasor Expedition, July 1897), the vengeful plot against the sultan's life on July 21, 1905, and the capture and threatened destruction of the Ottoman Bank, housing European capital, in August 1896, organized by the ARF (Armenian Revolutionary Federation; Dashnakists). As a manifestation of resistance, the ARF joined the Turkish opposition aimed at toppling the government and breaking the sultan's absolute power, and supported the July 1908 constitutional revolution led by the union of opposition factions, the Ittihad ve Terrangi Party (Young Turks). A few months later, however, in April of 1909, incited by the Muslim religious leaders and under the indifferent eyes of the police and the army, the Turkish mob began to attack the Armenians in Adana. The carnage of looting, rape and murder soon spread into the towns and villages of Cilicia.

The Armenians, having gained the right to bear arms after the Young Turk revolution, engaged in armed resistance in a few places including Adana, Hajin, Sis, Zeitun, and Dort Yol. The bloodshed stopped only after the Turkish army chose to intervene. Although total extermination ("genocidal intent") was not yet a part of the government policy, the path chosen was certainly one that was leading to the annihilation of a people. The ground was being prepared for the Young Turk ultranationalists – the triumvirate of Enver, Talat, and Jemal – who took over the government in a coup in January 1913, and who would finish the job in 1915.

The task was not an easy one: the Armenians were more or less organized, and even had representatives in parliament to protest against the mistreatment and injustices that were going

on in the empire. The plans for Armenian annihilation could not be executed without first neutralizing all likely resistance. World War I gave the opportunity to isolate the empire and cut off intervention by Great Britain, France, and Russia – the enemies of the Ottoman Empire (now the ally of Germany).

To preempt possible armed resistance, the government promulgated the law of general conscription, and almost all Armenian men aged 18–45 were drafted into the army. Next the populace was disarmed; those who did not have weapons to turn in were often tortured and killed; houses were looted and churches were desecrated on the pretext of searching for hidden weapons. The arrest, exile, and execution of Armenian civic, political, and religious leadership was the last blow aimed at beheading the Armenian people.

From April to August of 1915, Armenians from across the empire, and not only the battle zones as the denialists claim, were ordered to leave their homes, leaving their belongings behind. In the process, the male deportees were the first to be liquidated, executed or shot on the deportation route. Very soon, the caravans consisted only of women, children and elderly men – prey to the frequent attacks of the bandits, Muslim villagers, and even the gendarmes accompanying them.

While collective resistance was almost impossible, individual acts of resistance were numerous. Eyewitness accounts, memoirs, and reports speak of those who refused to obey orders, stayed behind and defended their homes and belongings to the last breath against the Muslim refugees from Thrace or Bulgaria, sent by the government to settle in Armenian houses. These accounts also describe young women who plunged to their death from the cliffs or drowned themselves in the Euphrates River, resisting the evil intentions of the perpetrators. Young survivors of the Armenian Genocide remember their mothers teaching them the Armenian alphabet, tracing it on the desert sand, reading them the Bible, and encouraging them to keep their spirits up, despite hunger and thirst, and despite the misery and death around them. These children were taught not to forget their Armenian ancestry, to remember the great Tragedy, and uphold their national identity. The transmission of this memory by the survivors is the one form of resistance that has outlasted the Genocide.

The possibility of organized armed resistance was crushed at the outset. In this uncompromising process, the very few exceptions include the resistance in Zeitun, Van, Shabin Garahissar (June 1915), Mush (July), Sasun (August), Urfa (late August), and Musa Dagh. With the exception of Van and Musa Dagh, resistance only gained these cities several weeks of respite, at the end of which the population was brutally massacred or deported. With regard to the unyielding resistance of the 35,000 Armenians in Urfa against an 11,000-strong army, Fahri Pasha, the army commander, is quoted as saying “What we would have done if in these difficult times we had a few Urfas to deal with.”

The unrestrained assaults against the Armenians of Zeitun began in late March 1915. Twenty-five youth protested against the treatment and took to the hills. The local army, with the help of a battalion of 5,000 soldiers from Aleppo, attacked, captured and killed the fighters and drove the Armenian population of Zeitun out on a death march. The date was April 8, marking the first act in the process of deportation of the entire Armenian population of the empire and the first futile attempt to resist the government’s plans of extermination.

News of massacres in the surrounding villages and deportations from Zeitun and other Cilician towns and villages was reaching Van, and Armenians were preparing to defend the city. They had been able to muster some makeshift arms and ammunition and organize strongholds. The battle, headed by Dashnak Aram Manukian (1879–1919), began on April 20 and lasted about four weeks until the Russian army entered the city and the Turks fled. As a result of this brave act, the lives of 30,000 were saved. The city enjoyed a few weeks of semi-independence until the sudden withdrawal of the Russian army, which was followed by the perilous exodus of the Armenian population toward eastern Armenia. The Van self-defense was labeled an uprising and the reason for the government’s decision to drive out the entire Armenian population.

The self-defense of the Armenian population of Musa Dagh on the shores of the Mediterranean was another successful operation which saved 4,000 Armenian lives. Musa Dagh Armenians decided not to obey the government decree of deportation. On July 31, they climbed up the mountain carrying food, arms and ammunition and fought for seven weeks

before they were rescued by a French warship which saw their signals calling for help.

The Musa Dagh resistance is typical of all instances of Armenian resistance to the Genocide of 1915, in that it involved the participation of not only the fighting men, but also the women, carrying food and ammunition to the fighters, caring for the wounded, and even making bullets, as well as the children, who risked their lives to run from one bunker to another to dispatch orders and bring news to the headquarters. The Musa Dagh resistance inspired the Austrian-Jewish journalist Franz Werfel to write the world-renowned novel, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* (1934). Some Holocaust scholars believe that the Jewish resistance in the Warsaw ghetto was inspired by that novel.

SEE ALSO: Armenia, Mass Protest and Popular Mobilization, 1980s to Present; Turkey, Protest and Revolution, 1800s–1923; Young Turks

#### References and Suggested Readings

Auron, Y. (2000) *The Banality of Indifference*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

Dadrian, V. N. (1995) *The History of the Armenian Genocide*. New York: Berghahn Books.

Hovannisian, R. G. (Ed.) *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times, Vol. 2: Foreign Dominion to Statehood: The Fifteenth Century to the Twentieth Century*. New York: St. Martin’s Press.

Nalbandian, L. (1963) *The Armenian Revolutionary Movement: The Development of Armenian Political Parties Through the Nineteenth Century*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Walker, C. J. (1980) *Armenia: The Survival of a Nation*. New York: St. Martin’s Press.