

# The Forgotten Empire

In 1453, the Ottoman Empire conquered Constantinople, signifying the fall of the Eastern Roman Empire. As the Ottoman Turks took control of the city, they renamed it Istanbul. They also took control of all of the trade routes between Europe and the East. The collapse of these land-based trade routes led to the Age of Exploration as Europeans began to seek new trade routes by water. The Ottoman Empire, a predominantly Muslim nation, was always looming in European politics, occasionally allying with one nation or another in the various European conflicts. As big as these impacts were, the end of the empire would have even bigger consequences for Europe and the world.

## Remembering Sykes-Picot

When the Ottoman Empire sided with Germany against the Allied Powers in World War 1, Britain and France saw a rare opportunity to expand into the Middle East. The World War was at the height of European Imperialism, and the Sykes-Picot Agreement represented the ways that Imperial nations thought. Wars were opportunities to gain new colonies that should not be wasted. It was a secret agreement in which Britain and France agreed to divide up control of the Middle Eastern region amongst themselves. Had the agreement remained a secret, it may have been effective. Even though Britain and France were the main parties of the Agreement, since Russia was a member of the Triple Entente, they included the Russians on the discussions. When the Bolsheviks took over Russia, they gained access to the secret, and wanting to embarrass the European capitalist nations, they released the information to the world.



Map of the Middle East showing the British and French areas. Sykes was the British diplomat, and Picot was the Frenchman.

The problem was that while the British and French planned to control the Middle East themselves, they had also made alliances with the Arab Muslims who wanted to replace the Ottoman Empire with their own caliphate. British generals and diplomats like Lawrence of Arabia had promised them that they would be allowed to control the land and set up their own governments. The broken promise outraged the Arabs, who had fought and died for the Allies against the Turks. In the end, the Arabs simply exchanged being a part of the Ottoman Empire for being ruled by the British or French Empires.

Today, the terrorist organization known as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) claims the land that was divided up by the Sykes-Picot Agreement. They fly flags in propaganda videos saying that they remember the Sykes-Picot Agreement, and specifically target committing terrorist actions in Britain and France. The West may have forgotten its broken promise, but the Arabs did not.

## Genocide Gets its Name

In 1943, Rafael Lemkin created the term “genocide” to refer to the specific, state-planned, mass murder of an ethnic, religious, or political group. While he was in the midst of the most infamous genocide in human history, it was not the Holocaust that Lemkin was thinking about when he created the term. Instead, he was thinking about a genocide against Armenian Christians that was executed by the Ottoman Empire during World War 1.



The Armenians were a Christian group who had been conquered and absorbed into the Ottoman Empire around the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century. Christians living in the Ottoman Empire were regularly abused, spat on, assaulted, and stolen from. The Ottoman Empire was governed by Sharia Law, an Islamic religious and political legal code. While Christianity is not illegal under Sharia Law, only Muslims have citizenship rights like owning property. The government regularly permitted its citizens to abuse the Christian “infidels” living in the Ottoman Empire but there was no organized effort on the part of the government to injure them directly.



An Armenian death march photographed by a German traveler

Early in 1915, the Ottoman government ordered that all Armenians be removed from the fighting units in the army, and reassigned to work groups. They wanted to ensure that the Armenians could not fight back. Then the community leaders were arrested. Tactics to remove men from their communities were employed across Turkey, where local conscription laws would draft all of the men to work detail. Communities that followed the laws were left defenseless. Communities that did not were violently attacked. Jedvat Bay, an Ottoman general, once exclaimed that if anyone resisted his orders he would “kill every Christian man, woman, and child up to here (pointing at his knee)”.

The massacres of entire Armenian communities were widely reported in newspapers around the world. The Ottoman Empire’s allies in Germany and Austria didn’t put any pressure on them to stop, although from the number of reports that were written, it clearly bothered them. The New York Times and other American newspapers reported the massacres regularly.

The Ottoman government then ordered the military to deport anyone who was a threat to the Empire. The result was forced marches into the Syrian desert with no particular destination. Hundreds of thousands of Armenian men, women, and children were sent into the desert with absolutely no supplies. Any who tried to come back were shot. One German banker was so disturbed that he took pictures of what was happening and complained that they were being forced remain silent in the middle of what he called “bestial cruelty.” Official records weren’t kept, but its estimated that at least 1 million people died, over 70% of the Armenian population.

Reaction to the Armenian genocide has been varied. The American ambassador to Turkey at the time, Henry Morgenthau began a charity for the victims that raised millions of dollars. The current government of Turkey denies that a genocide ever took place. Due to its importance as an ally, and despite Presidents Clinton, Bush, Trump, and Obama promising to officially recognize the Armenian Genocide as a genocide, none of them have as President of the United States.

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. How is Imperialism connected to ISIS?
2. What is the difference between genocide and mass-murder?
3. Why haven’t the US Presidents officially recognized the Armenian genocide?

Write About It.

*“The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.” - Edmund Burke*

Reading the article and the quote from Hitler, what do you think Burke meant?

Our strength consists in our speed and in our brutality. Genghis Khan led millions of women and children to slaughter – with premeditation and a happy heart. History sees in him solely the founder of a state. It’s a matter of indifference to me what a weak western European civilization will say about me. I have issued the command – and I’ll have anybody who utters but one word of criticism executed by a firing squad – that our war aim does not consist in reaching certain lines, but in the physical destruction of the enemy. Accordingly, I have placed my death-head formation in readiness – for the present only in the East – with orders to them to send to death mercilessly and without compassion, men, women, and children of Polish derivation and language. Only thus shall we gain the living space (Lebensraum) which we need. **Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?**

Adolf Hitler, August 22, 1939

