

The Armenian Genocide: Applying Psychological Theories

Rachna Minhas¹

Abstract

Genocides have cumulated through the years, but the psychological understandings behind large-scale massacres are not well known. This analytical paper looks at the Armenian Genocide and attempts to apply psychological theories to better understand how Genocides occur. This paper examines cultural and religious divisions to dissect a large historical time period.

Keywords: psychology of genocide, social psychology, analytical paper

¹rachna.minhas1@email.kpu.ca; Written for Psychology of Genocide (PSYC 4650). Thank you, Dr. Kyle Matsuba, for a wonderful and eye-opening class, and for assisting in the completion of this analytical paper.

The Armenian Genocide: Applying Psychological Theories

Turkey holds a rich history and consists of a range of cultures and religions. The country was once known as the Ottoman Empire, a nation united under the Osman dynasty (Suny, 2015). The nation brought together many ways of life, but was predominantly under Muslim rule (Dixon, 2015; Suny, 2015). As different in-groups were able to live contently with out-groups, this slowly began to change. A war that created a drift between the Muslims and Christians of the Ottoman Empire was the Balkan Wars, when Russia supported countries within the Balkan Peninsula to come together and fight against the Ottomans (Llewellyn & Thompson, 2017). This led to tension amongst Armenians who supported the Russians and the Muslim Ottomans (Suny, 2015).

Today, the Turkish Government continues to take the stance that there was never a genocide, rather a civil war between the Ottoman Empire and the Armenians (Dixon, 2015). This narrative has been repeated by the Turkish Government in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. Despite international pressures to recognize the actions of this nation's past as a genocide, the government continues to deny any involvement on the part of Ottoman officials in the so-called Armenian Genocide (Dixon, 2015). The specific period within which the Armenian Genocide occurred was between 1915-1916 when Armenians were deported from Anatolia, leading to the death of over 500,000 Armenians by the extremist Young Turks of the Committee of Union and Progress (Betts, 2008; Stone, 2016). This paper attempts to understand these genocidal events by applying psychological theories to explain perpetrator behavior. Specifically, this essay applies Social Identity and Self-Categorization Theory, Shared Cognitions and Social Representations Theory, and the Cognitive Control Model to help explain how the events led up to the genocide, and how the genocide was founded on collective ideals, values, and beliefs about out-groups that are heightened with external stressors like international threat.

The Armenian Genocide did not happen overnight but was cultivated by years of prejudiced attitudes already in place. Armenians were not the only minority group subject to discrimination, their Greek and Syrian counterparts were also condemned to ethnic cleansing and genocides while under the last two decades of Ottoman rule (Matossian, 2019). Research on both the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust shows similarities between the Nazi party and the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) government under the Young Turks. Both governments were built on an ideology of a superior race to justify the brutal killings and ethnic cleansings of a non-dominant group (Dixon, 2015). Christian Armenians were treated as equal as their Muslim

counterparts during the Hamidian regime and were given the flexibility they needed within government policies for the Ottoman Empire to be in the Union. During the Hamidian period, the policies created were elastic. The government during this period was open-minded to the activities of both non-Muslims and Muslims (Özbek, 2005). The Hamidian period also saw an increase of tension between Kurds and Armenians for land after the Russo-Ottoman war in 1877-1878 (Klein, 2007). The dispute between Kurds and Armenians was not, however, based on religion but on the fiscal and social changes between the end of the Russo-Ottoman war and the beginning of the removal of Armenians from the empire (Klein, 2007). Klein (2007) explains that although the tension between Kurds and Armenians was present before the Russo-Ottoman war, both tribes were able to become dependent on one another, so much so that both tribes took initiatives together to write requests to Ottoman officials for more food and resources. This trust between Kurds and Armenians changed as Kurds began to view Armenians as salient enemies to the empire (Klein, 2007).

In addition, Armenians were treated poorly. Armenians were forced out of the Ottoman Empire and anyone who could not make the long and tiring trip was left behind to die (Suny, 2015). Many women and young teenage girls were “given” to Kurds and other Ottoman authorities where they later died (Deligiannis, 2018; Schaller & Zimmerer, 2008; Suny, 2015). Children were placed into orphanages where they became malnourished, feeding on the grinded bones of other dead orphans (Panian et al., 2015); and if they were not adopted, they were thrown into the Euphrates River (Suny, 2015). These events have all contributed to the Armenian Genocide. As stated earlier, the purpose of this paper is to apply the following psychological theories: (a) the Social Identity and Self Categorization Theory, (b) the Shared Cognitions and Representations Theory and, (c) the Cognitive Control Model, to explain the possible factors leading to the Armenian Genocide.

Explaining the Armenian Genocide

Social Identity and Self Categorization Theories propose that as individuals move throughout their daily lives, they present themselves in multiple identities under the domain of their group membership (Tindale et al., 2002). Turner (1985) asserts that having multiple identities is what gives people a sense of individuality and these multiple identities work to separate people from their group (Tindale et al., 2002). Both Greeks and Armenians lived together under “Cappadocia” (Deligiannis, 2009), which was heavily influenced by Iranian

culture (Suny, 2015). However, during the Hellenistic period, some Armenians did not grasp much of the Hellenistic influence and formed their own non-Orthodox Christian Armenian culture (Deligiannis, 2009). Moreover, Armenians and Greeks were different from the rest of the Ottoman empire based on their religious foundations: Armenians were Christian, and a large part of the Ottoman empire was Muslim (Suny, 2015). Here, the collective ideals are based on the religion of the individual. As collectivism stands, people are more likely to associate with those like them, and their own culture reflects shared core values that distinguishes them from other religions and cultures (Oyserman & Lauffer, 2002). Fiske (1994) and Triandis (1995) explain that what is appropriate to one's own culture is what is comfortable and does not need further clarification on part of the in-group member, but to the outgroup member, aspects of their culture are considered a threat, leading to the further separation of the two groups (Oyserman & Lauffer, 2002).

Although there was some group identity in being part of the Ottoman Empire, it was not enough for Armenians to be considered an in-group member. Furthermore, as individuals can separate themselves from their collective group, they begin to assign people who do not share their similar characteristics into out-groups (Tindale et al., 2002). Tajfel and Turner (1979) support that classifying people as "other" help intensifies one's self-esteem, and Hogg and Mullin (1999) substantiate that reducing uncertainty can push individuals to further detach from people different than them (Tindale et al., 2002). What further separated Armenians from Ottomans, moreover, was the role Armenians played in wars between Russia and the Ottoman empire; Armenians had helped Russians on a few occasions, portraying Armenians as different to the dominant Muslim population (Seker, 2008; Suny, 2015). Officials in the Balkan war, specifically higher-ranking Muslim and German officers, perceived non-Muslim lower ranking soldiers as deceitful and the non-Muslim soldiers they favoured as troublemakers within camps (Öztañ, 2018).

This separation between both religions was enough to classify Armenians and other non-Muslims as an out-group; Muslims in the Ottoman Empire further pushed themselves away to decrease any risk that the non-Muslims would harm them. Being perceived as traitors to the nation segregated the two religions. What is a part of the group norm for Armenian Christians was not the same for Muslim Ottomans. This was already a signal of the culmination of a genocide, like Jews in the Holocaust, Armenians were subject to a hovering racist ideology of

the Ottoman empire (Dixon, 2015), in addition to the belief that Armenians would change their loyalty against the empire. The Armenians being the outgroup allowed for in-group Muslim members to contrast themselves to Armenians leading to the further division between the religious groups that is, the differences in their culture, values, and collective ideals further separated both groups, creating intergroup conflict because the norms of both groups were not similar (Tindale et al., 2002). Groups begin to compare themselves to others (Tindale et al., 2002), and the processes underlying the group comparisons between Armenians and the rest of the Ottoman Empire can be explained further in the next theories.

According to Shared Cognitions and Representations Theories (Festinger, 1954) people use their own “social reality” to compare themselves to out-groups or other people (Tindale et al., 2002). This idea can be extended to explain attitudes towards non-Muslim Ottomans. Individuals evaluate the beliefs and behaviours of out-group members to establish whether their values and actions fit with their own idea of what is suitable in their “social reality” (Tindale et al., 2002). What did not fit with the social reality of the Ottoman Empire were the Christian minority groups such as the Greek, Syriacs, and Armenians (Matossian, 2019). There was a further separation between Muslim Kurds and Armenians that followed after the Russo-Ottoman war in 1877-1878 (Klein, 2007); Armenians were perceived as disloyal to the Ottoman Empire amongst Kurds and Ottoman officials (Klein, 2007; Öztan, 2018). The Hamidian massacres followed soon after (Klein, 2007) with little done by leaders to prevent the killings of Armenians on part of the Kurds (Suny, 2015). This belief about Armenians was shared amongst officials, writers, and scholars soon after and was used to retain power after the Russo-Ottoman and the Balkan wars. It also helped the Ottoman Empire to unify its people under one doctrine (Özbek, 2005; Öztan, 2018). The Young Turks built their ideological doctrine around the dominant Muslim group to help them gain support (Modscovici, 1984).

The shared beliefs, on which the Young Turks built their platform, did not allow Armenians into the social reality of other Ottomans. Armenians were often at a crossroads in whether to side with Russians or the Ottoman Empire in past wars; in 1877-1878 Eastern Armenians were in favour of Russian dominance over the Ottoman Empire (Suny, 2015). Great Britain continued to put pressure on Ottomans to end anti-Christian policies, but this did not stop Kurdish Ottomans from massacring Armenian villages in July 1877 (Suny, 2015). Armenians siding with Russians

again during the Balkan wars was a threat to the CUP, who saw these actions as disloyal to the Ottoman Empire (Stone, 2015).

The collective ideals, values and beliefs towards out-groups increased after the Balkan war, and with Talat Pasha and the Young Turks in control, there was a strong push for a unified state free of diversity. Moreover, the role of external stressors like international threat cultivating the Armenian Genocide can further be interpreted using the Cognitive Control Model which outlines the positives of having control, the results of losing that control, and the length individuals will go to regain the power once held (Frey & Rez, 2002). This model extends from Skinner's (1985) Control Theory and holds that certain conditionals must be met in order to have control and the extent to which groups or individuals will go to gain control back if lost (Frey & Rez, 2002). The events happening during this time seriously impacted how the CUP acted before the Armenian genocide. The loss of the Balkan war led to multiple areas being taken over and out of Ottoman control, some of these areas had more diversity compared to others (Öztañ, 2018; Seker, 2007). The loss of the Balkan war and territory acted as a negative event that had unfavourable consequences (Frey & Rez, 2020). The CUP saw both Greeks and Armenians as threats to the Ottoman Empire, as Christians, they stood as barriers to an ultimate one-nation state for the Ottoman Empire (Seker, 2007). The basis of the creation of the CUP was to protect the Ottoman Empire from becoming a state with different ethnicities and religions like Christianity, and the organization's founders were Muslim (Seker, 2007). Authorities and scholars blamed the loss of the Balkan war on not having a sovereign state, the Ottoman Empire was diverse and filled with different religions and ethnicities, and authorities pinned the areas lost on leaders of those battlefronts because of their anti-Unionist ideals (Öztañ, 2018). It had become a collective belief among a group of nationalist scholars and their readers that the loss of the Balkan war was because the empire was too diverse (Frey & Rez, 2002; Öztañ, 2018).

In addition, according to Cognitive Control Theory, there is often a communicator who dispatches their messages to a larger audience to gain support for their ideologies (Frey & Rez, 2002). In this case it was the Unionist scholars and authorities who utilized their logical stances on the importance of a unified state to ensure the Ottoman empire would not be taken over by external powers (Frey & Rez, 2002; Öztañ, 2018; Seker, 2007). The CUP was unable to create an empire free of multiple faiths, ethnicity, and race; the organization was unable to stop separatism amongst the people in the empire and could not end intervention from external powers

(Seker, 2007). Having solid control involves the ability to explain the reason behind an issue and being able to hypothesize what that issue could possibly do. Control also involves being able to stop that issue from creating a negative outcome. However, the CUP was unable to follow through with its wishes of an empire free of differences due in part to the external pressures (Frey & Rez, 2002; Seker, 2007).

The focus of the Young Turks, then, evolved into nationalism, adding the nation needs to regain control (Öztañ, 2018; Frey & Rez, 2002). External stressors began to weigh in on the ultimate ethnic cleansing and removal of the Armenians: The Russians saw a weak point in the infrastructure of the Ottoman Empire and planned their own attack (Stone, 2016). Similar to Hitler and the Nazi Party, who slowly broke the rules of the Treaty of Versailles to test the boundaries of control, policies were slowly introduced to bring non-Muslims into Islam (Frey & Rez, 2002; Seker, 2008). Armenians, who had sided with Russians in previous wars, began to plan to separate themselves from the Ottoman Empire following the introduction of unionist policies (Seker, 2007; Suny, 2015); and Great Britain continued to pressure the CUP to leave non-Muslims alone (Suny, 2015). Ottoman authorities began to understand that the multiple losses faced by the empire were rooted in the unfaithfulness of Armenians in its wars with Russia, leading Armenians to face multiple attacks at the hands of Kurdish Ottomans (Frey & Rez, 2002; Suny, 2015). To gain influenceability over other political platforms, the Young Turks took on nationalistic beliefs and values to influence the polls and took over the CUP (Frey & Rez, 2002; Öztañ, 2018; Suny, 2016).

In the end, the Young Turks were able to take over the Ottoman Government and regain control over society as the dominant group in the Ottoman Empire. Bandura (1983) notes that control does not stop at an individual level. Collective groups' perceptions, values, and beliefs can also be changed through a strong sentiment during times of uncertainty (Bandura (1983), as cited in Frey & Rez, 2002). Collective groups, under these circumstances, must share multiple facets like similar environments, shared understanding of events, and common perceptions as to why these events occurred (Frey & Rez, 2002). Collective and dominant groups were already formed under the requirements Bandura (1983) lists. After the Balkan war, a large majority of government officials were in favour of a united empire, articles and publications written by unionist officials argued the reason for the loss should be placed on anti-unionist high officials (Frey & Rez, 2002; Öztañ, 2018; Seker, 2007). Nationalist views took over the Ottoman

government, Talat replaced older Ottoman officials with those who believed strongly in the ideals of the Young Turks, the CUP stayed silent as Kurds attacked Armenians (Suny, 2015). The Kurds were forcing land away from Armenians and poor Muslims and Talat handed the case over to courts already in favour of Kurds (Suny, 2015).

Ottoman authorities did nothing to intervene in the massacres and killing of Armenians at the hands of Kurdish perpetrators due to the regulations that were being placed on Christian Ottomans (Seker, 2008). To regain control of what was lost, leaders in the Ottoman Empire illogically blamed the non-Unionist ideals instead of looking at internal factors that could have contributed to their loss (Frey & Rez, 2002; Öztan, 2018). As Staub (1989) mentions, collective groups and individuals will go to any extreme when the perceived loss is high and will engage in multiple different methods to regain control (Frey & Rez, 2002), perpetrators engaged in moral disengagement-type actions. For example, authorities would act unethically by creating stories of Armenians in negative portrayals to set Armenians apart from the norms and rules held by the collective Muslim group, sharpening the distinction of Armenians and the rest of the Ottoman Empire (Suny, 2015; Frey & Rez, as cited in Lewis, 2002). Tolerance for the out-group dropped, and Armenians were perceived as a dangerous outgroup (Staub, 1989), a stronger divide of group differences was then placed between Muslims and non-Muslims (Suny, 2015; Frey & Rez, 2002). Non-Muslims are perceived to be the reason behind the loss of the war for the Ottoman Empire and there was a greater emphasis of non-Muslims being the enemy of the empire, reinforcing the in-group and out-groups psychological and social differences (Frey & Rez, 2002). Some Kurdish tribes, who were also victims of the Young Turks and had previously massacred Armenians in the Hamidian Massacres (1894-96), remained silent until the Unionist ideology became widely accepted and later took part in massacres of Armenians and sexual misuse of Armenian women (Schaller & Zimmerer, 2008). It was the separation of Armenians as a threat to the Ottoman Empire that led to dishonourable actions from Kurds and Ottoman authorities to help the dominant group regain control of the power the empire lost (Frey & Rez, 2002; Schaller & Zimmerer, 2008).

Delegating control to the Young Turks and Talat Pasha gave society direction in times of external pressures from Russian invasion and gave Unionist leaders a platform to share their beliefs and values (Frey & Rez, 2002; Özbeck, 2015). Talat played a key role in the final decision to exile Armenians as his strong leadership and perceptions of Armenians in the role of the loss

of the Balkan war led to the ultimate decision of the CUP to rid the Ottoman empire of what Suny (2015) notes as the “Armenian Problem”. As Suny (2015) notes, the Young Turks were convinced that for the Ottoman empire to continue to live, they needed to be free of its internal threat—non-Muslims. Armenians were simply the first ethnic minority targeted in the extermination of non-Muslim people, Greek and Syriac people also suffered during the policies created by the Young Turks and Talat Pasha (Matossian, 2019). Perpetrators included organized officials and Kurd residents who worked together to deport Armenians; killing Armenians had become common and actions to harm or murder Armenians became a norm for the perpetrators (Klein, 2007; Schaller & Zimmerer, 2008; Suny, 2015). Women were given to Ottoman soldiers and often died of disease or were killed at the hands of authorities, children were drowned, young boys hung, and their corpses fed to animals (Suny, 2015).

In conclusion, the events leading up to the Armenian genocide were examined through a psychological lens using the Social Identity and Self-Categorization Theory, Shared Cognitions and Social Representations Theory, and the Cognitive Control Model. Through these theories and models, this essay argued that collective ideals, beliefs, and values of the out-group heighten fear in in-groups towards outgroups leading the genocide. The Social Identity and Self-Categorization Theory explained how Armenians had differed from others within the Ottoman Empire. Armenians were derived from a group of Cappadocians not influenced by the Hellenistic culture, creating its own non-Orthodox Christian culture (Deligiannis, 2019). The Armenians Christian and humanistic way of life differed from other ethnicities in the Ottoman Empire (Suny, 2015); Kurds were different from Armenians in terms of religion and these differences between their faith further separated the two (Oyserman & Lauffer, 2002). Events like the Russo-Ottoman and Balkan wars added to the stereotype of the Armenian out-group, shaping the perceptions and attitudes towards the out-group in a negative light. Further division of the two groups was also explained by the contrasting religions of Armenians and Kurds (Klein, 2007). As Oyserman and Lauffer (2002) explain, in-group differences between individuals are considered acceptable, however differences between said in-group and out-group are perceived as more threatening and are seen in the difference between Muslims and non-Muslims in the Ottoman Empire. The “social reality” under the Shared Cognitions and Shared Representations Theory shaped the dominant group into a nationalist society as opposed to the unionist society that held multiple religions together in the Ottoman Empire and was the building block the Young Turks political platform

(Ôztan, 2018). Greeks, Syriacs, and Armenians did not fit into the dominant group's ideals (Matossian, 2019) and were seen as disloyal after the Russo-Ottoman war (Klein, 2007; Ôztan, 2018). Lastly, the Cognitive Control Model was used to explain how the loss of control after the Balkan war pitted the Ottoman Empire's diverse society and anti-Unionist ideals as the reason for the loss of multiple wars. After the Balkan wars, scholars and Unionist Ottoman Authorities used articles to express their reasoning being the loss of the war, leading to a shared belief that having a unified nation under one religion was a better plan strategically (Ôztan, 2018). When Talat and the Young Turks began to enforce policies against non-Muslim Ottomans, Ottoman officials and Kurds went to extreme measures to try to regain control, creating false stories about Armenians based on Muslim-Ottoman collective norms and rules, and had a lower tolerance for the out-group Armenians (Frey & Rez, 2002; Suny, 2015). As the divide between Kurds and Armenians increased, so did killings on part of Ottoman officials and Kurdish Ottomans (Klein, 2007; Suny, 2015).

References

- Deligiannis, P. (n.d.). Cappadocians, Armenians and Greeks in Byzantine Eastern Asia Minor: An Ethnolinguistic approach. 18.
- Dixon, J. M. (2015). Norms, narratives, and scholarship on the Armenian Genocide. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 47(4), 796–800. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743805050051>
- Frey, D., & Rez., H. (2002). Population and perpetrators, preconditions for the Holocaust from a control-theoretical perspective. *Understanding Genocide: The Social Psychology of the Holocaust*, 188-216.
- Klein, J. (2007). Conflict and collaboration: Rethinking Kurdish Armenian relations in the Hamidian Period, 1876-1909. 15.
- Llewellyn, S., & Thompson, S. (2017, August 18). *The Balkans*. Alpha History. https://alphahistory.com/worldwar1/balkans/#The_two_Balkan_Wars
- Özbek, N. (2005). Philanthropic activity, Ottoman patriotism, and the Hamidian Regime, 1876-1909. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 37(1), 59–81. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743805050051>
- Öztan, R. H. (2018). Point of no return? Prospects of Empire after the Ottoman defeat in the Balkan Wars (1912-13). *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 50(1), 65–84. [doi:10.1017/S0020743817000940](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743817000940)
- Panian, K., Banean, G., & Karnig, P. (2015). *Goodbye, Antoura: A Memoir of the Armenian Genocide*. Stanford University Press. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kwantlen-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1990258>
- Schaller, D. J., & Zimmerer, J. (2008). Late Ottoman genocides: The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and Young Turkish population and extermination policies—introduction. *Journal of Genocide Research*, 10(1), 7–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520801950820>
- Şeker, N. (2007). Demographic engineering in the late Ottoman empire and the Armenians. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 43(3), 461–474. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263200701246157>
- Stone, D. (2016). Reviews of Books: “They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else”: A History of the Armenian Genocide. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 26(3), 517–518. <http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.kpu.ca:2080/10.1017/S1356186315000413>

- Suny, R. G. (2015). *They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else: A History of the Armenian Genocide*. Princeton University Press. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kwantlen-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1935076>
- Tindale, R. S., Munier, C., Wasserman, M., & Smith, C. M. (2002). Group processes and the Holocaust. *Understanding Genocide: The Social-Psychological Explanation of the Holocaust*, 143-160.