

## **The Armenian Genocide. *Forgotten Fire***

Topic: 20th century world history, modern Middle East, human rights, World War I, book-based lesson, genocide.

By: Phillip Ninomiya, Anya Free. UCI History Project. Updated in 2022.

### **Guiding Question:**

*What was the Armenian Genocide?*

Advocacy to recognize the atrocities committed by the Turkish government has never been more important. As the Ottoman Empire waged a losing battle in World War I, on the home front it began an assault on the Armenian peoples, eliminating up to 75% of their population and confiscating their historical lands. This lesson fits well within the framework question: *What were the consequences of World War I for nations, ethnic groups, and people?*

### **History Standards**

10.5 Students analyze the causes and course of the First World War.

5. Discuss human rights violations and genocide, including the Ottoman government's actions against Armenian citizens.

**Framework excerpt (343-344):** In 1915, as the Ottoman Empire declined, the Turkish government carried out a systematic genocide against the Armenian population that had been living on its historic homeland in what is now eastern Turkey. Turkish authorities first arrested hundreds of Armenian political and intellectual leaders, sending them to their deaths; Armenian men were conscripted into work camps where they were killed outright or died of exhaustion. The remaining Armenians were ordered onto death marches into the Syrian desert, where they were subjected to rape, torture, mutilation, starvation, holocausts in desert caves, kidnapping, and forced Turkification and Islamization.

More than 1.5 million Armenians, more than half of the population, were eliminated in this way; virtually all their personal and community properties were seized by the government, and more than 500,000 innocent people were forced into exile during the period from 1915 to 1923. When the war ended in 1918, the Armenian population was reduced by 75 percent and their historical lands were confiscated by the Turkish government. Students may examine the reactions of other governments, including that of the United States, and world opinion during and after the Armenian Genocide.

### **Common Core State Standards/ Literacy skill addressed:**

#### **Reading, Grade 9-10**

1. Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.
2. Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.
3. Analyze in detail a series of events described in a text; determine whether earlier events caused later ones or simply preceded them.
7. Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.
9. Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

## Writing, Grade 9-10

2. Write informative/explanatory texts, including the narration of historical events, scientific procedures/experiments, or technical processes.
  - a. Introduce a topic and organize ideas, concepts, and information to make important connections and distinctions; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., figures, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.
  - b. Develop the topic with well-chosen, relevant, and sufficient facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples appropriate to the audience's knowledge of the topic.
  - c. Use varied transitions and sentence structures to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships among ideas and concepts.
  - d. Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to manage the complexity of the topic and convey a style appropriate to the discipline and context as well as to the expertise of likely readers.
  - e. Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing
5. Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.
7. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

## Overview of Lesson:

This lesson analyzes the causes, atrocities and subsequent history of the Armenian Genocide, including its international recognition and continuous denial by Turkey. Citing a variety of primary sources, students will gain knowledge through these voices. The lesson makes use of the novel *Forgotten Fire* by Adam Bagdasarian and firsthand recordings of survivors offering students an opportunity to reflect on how various sources can teach us about the historical event.

## Additional Resources:

Facing History and Ourselves, "[Raphael Lemkin and the Genocide Convention.](#)" last updated May 12, 2020.

[This PDF](#) from the USC Shoah Foundation gives a brief background to the Armenian Genocide.

[This biography](#) of Adam Bagdasarian gives information about the author of *Forgotten Fire*.

[The worksheet](#) analyzes a map of the Ottoman Empire in 1914 to learn about the linguistic and religious diversity of the empire.

[Teaching About the Armenian Genocide](#) with The New York Times.

[Learn about the history of the Armenian genocide during World War I.](#) Overview of the history and controversy surrounding the Armenian Genocide. Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

[5 Reasons Why Biden's Recognition of the Armenian Genocide Is Significant.](#) American University.

## **Assessment and Civic Engagement:**

Students will demonstrate their understanding of the historical events of the Armenian Genocide through several analyses of first- and second-hand resources, including a fictionalized account, *Forgotten Fire*.

As a final project, students can design and create a monument or memorial devoted to the Armenian Genocide. The activity can be performed as a group project. Students may be instructed to use [symbolism](#) to design their memorial. The memorial should represent an idea, event, or person they believe is important to remember from the history of the Armenian Genocide.

After completing the project, ask students to reflect on how the memorials may affect both local communities and the global perception of the events.

## **Sources:**

*Please note that some of the content and source materials we will cover uses violent and sexist language. This lesson includes descriptions of violence and sexual violence. We welcome all discussions about what is, is not, or could be appropriate for classroom instruction. Images are high resolution and may be resized for classroom use.*

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## Introduction

This lesson focuses on a tragedy of world history: the genocide of the Ottoman Armenians. Armenian genocide began from 1915 onward and took the lives of around 1.5 million men, women and children. We will examine this historical event through three key topics:

1. What was the role of the Ottoman Empire in the Armenian Genocide? We will consider who made up the population and leadership of the Empire and consider the events that led to genocide.
2. Documenting the killings and atrocities that that made up the genocide.
3. The legacy of this tragedy today, or specifically, why the Turkey refuses to recognize it.

Each topic allows us to comprehend how and why things occurred with the idea that exposure and open discussion is important for everyone.

The genocide is was a well-documented event. At the time of the first killings in 1915, evidence came out about these atrocities, such as newspaper headlines and diplomatic reports. There is an abundance of evidence from a variety of sources that makes it impossible to deny. Nonetheless, this discussion is especially important today considering that Turkey (the modern country that was the Ottoman Empire) denies that any crimes occurred. The Turkish government has attempted to block the international community from recognizing the genocide and protested votes to commemorate it. Their official policy has been to deny and block such discussions on the international stage. Despite every evidence to contradict the Turkish government stance, yet they do so anyway.

Our guide to understand the human experience through these crimes against humanity is the novel *Forgotten Fire*. Through the narrator Vahan Kenderian, we can consider how he reacted and responded to murder, loss of family, violence and abuse as the genocide came to the town in which he lived. Despite all the tragedies that Vahan suffered, he was a survivor who lived to tell his tale to the world. Along the way he documented the atrocities committed against him, his family and his people.

Before we begin, it is important to understand the word *genocide* in order to discuss this subject in detail.

1. The word *genocide* has the prefix “geno-.” What do you think is its meaning? (Hint: think of words like gene, genetics, and genome).
2. The suffix “-cide” is from Latin. Can you guess what its meaning is?

**Source 1. Raphael Lemkin on the episode of "U. N. Casebook," a CBS television program. February 1949. Video.**

**Citation:** [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F57pgpr\\_jdw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F57pgpr_jdw)

**About:** Genocide is one of the worst events imaginable in human history. Unfortunately, the world has witnessed it several times in the last 100 years. Genocide is fueled by fear, hatred, racism and violence. It is often organized by political leaders and carried out against ethnic or religious minority groups. Genocide is, specifically, the systematic and planned extermination of an entire national, racial, political or ethnic group. Genocide can even include the plans and intent to do so. The term was coined by lawyer Raphael Lemkin. He migrated to the United States in 1940 as a refugee from the Nazis. Lemkin worked tirelessly for worldwide recognition of the dangers of genocide. Watch the video linked above and consider following questions:

1. Is what happened to the Armenians somehow less of a genocide because the term was not yet invented?
2. Why was it so important for the international community to recognize genocide as a specific crime against humanity?
3. In your own words, what does the word "genocide" mean? How is its meaning different from other terms like massacre or mass murder?

**Source 2. “When Turkey Destroyed Its Christians,” by Benny Morris and Dror Ze’evi. Secondary source.**

Citation: Benny Morris and Dror Ze’evi, “When Turkey Destroyed Its Christians.” The Wall Street Journal, May 17, 2019.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/when-turkey-destroyed-its-christians-11558109896>

**About:** Benny Morris and Dror Ze’evi are both professors of Middle Eastern studies at Ben Gurion University of the Negev in Israel. In this essay, they detail the harsh and brutal attacks against Christian communities in the Ottoman Empire starting from 1894 onward. These crimes include, of course, the genocidal horrors against the Armenians. As you read, consider how this information fits in with the previous sources about diversity within the empire. Certainly by the twentieth century, the ideals of tolerance and acceptance that made the Ottoman Empire strong in its early years no longer existed.

<p>Between 1894 and 1924, the number of Christians in Asia Minor fell from some 3-4 million to just tens of thousands—from 20% of the area’s population to under 2%. Turkey has long attributed this decline to wars and the general chaos of the period, which claimed many Muslim lives as well. But the descendants of Turkey’s Christians, many of them dispersed around the world since the 1920s, maintain that the Turks murdered about half of their forebears and expelled the rest.</p> <p>The Christians are correct. Our research verifies their claims: Turkey’s Armenian, Greek and Assyrian (or Syriac) communities disappeared as a result of a staggered campaign of genocide beginning in 1894, perpetrated against them by their Muslim neighbors. By 1924, the Christian communities of Turkey and its adjacent territories had been destroyed.</p> <p>The tragedy began during 1894-96, when Sultan Abdulhamid II unleashed a series of massacres against the Ottoman Empire’s Armenian minority, fearing that they threatened the integrity of his realm. Some 200,000 people, almost all Armenians, were killed; many thousands of Turkish villagers, townspeople, officials, policemen and soldiers took part, as well as Kurdish tribesmen. At each site, alongside the pillage and murder, many thousands of Armenian women were raped or abducted. Some would eventually be killed; many more were forced into Muslim households and converted, serving for the rest of their lives as wives, concubines or servants.</p>	<p><b>Asia Minor</b>—the peninsula of land that today constitutes the Asian portion of Turkey</p> <p><b>dispersed</b>—spread out</p> <p><b>forebears</b>—ancestors</p> <p><b>adjacent</b>—neighboring</p> <p><b>Kurdish</b>—an ethnic group in the Ottoman Empire</p> <p><b>concubine</b>—a woman who lives with a married man and has a lower status than his wife</p>
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In January 1896, in the southern Turkish town of Palu, an American missionary reported that the Turks “continue to carry off girls and women, keeping them a few days and then returning them with their lives blasted.” His meaning was made clear in an August 1896 report by another missionary in Mardin: “We saw girls not a few who returned from the hands of their captors weeping bitterly, shrieking and crying: ‘We are defiled! No one will take us in marriage.’”

Turkey and Germany were allies in World War I, but on July 7, 1915, the German ambassador in Constantinople, Baron Hans von Wangenheim, reported that deportation columns of Armenians from the eastern city of Erzurum were being ambushed by Kurdish bands, with “the men and children... butchered and the women carried away.” On July 27, a German engineer on the Baghdad railway reported that a Turkish sergeant “abducted 18 women and girls and sold them to Arabs and Kurds for 2-3 Mejdieh,” a coin that was a fifth of a Turkish pound.

During the war, slave markets emerged in Aleppo, Damascus and several Anatolian towns in which Armenian girls who had been corralled by Turkish troops were sold for a pittance. Officials of the Ottoman Interior Ministry seem to have encouraged abduction and conversion. In December 1915, a telegram from the ministry decreed it “necessary for young Armenian girls to be married with Muslims.”

Many thousands (and possibly tens of thousands) of the Greek and Armenian inhabitants of Smyrna (now known as Izmir) were murdered. The American consul general in the town, George Horton, reported that one of the “outstanding features of the Smyrna horror” was the “wholesale violation of women and girls.” In 1924, the British Foreign Office assessed that “not less than 80,000 Christians, half of them Armenians, and probably more” were still being detained in Turkish houses, “many of them in slavery.”

In all, we found that tens of thousands of Christian women suffered rape, abduction and forced conversion during this period, along with the mass murder and expulsion of their husbands, sons and fathers.

**pittance**—a very small amount of money

The German people and government have long acknowledged the genocidal horrors of the Third Reich, made financial reparations, expressed profound remorse and worked to abjure racism. But every Turkish government since 1924—together with most of the Turkish people—has continued to deny the painful history we have uncovered.

1. The Turks of the Ottoman Empire attacked and killed different Christian groups within the empire. Who were these Christians?
2. What crimes were committed against Ottoman Christians? Who were the people responsible?
3. Why did the Ottoman government want Armenian girls to be married to the Muslims?
4. When these crimes were happening, were they a secret? What did other countries know?
5. What is the response of the Turkish government today?

## Source 3. Nvart Assaturian's Testimony

Citation: USC Shoah Foundation, "Nvart Assaturian – Armenian Survivor," February 21, 1988 (1:00 to 4:05). [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1c0-0HAwFZkW-BHDMkRac0OZwcqbEj\\_Ae/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1c0-0HAwFZkW-BHDMkRac0OZwcqbEj_Ae/view)



**About:** Nvart Assaturian was a young Armenian girl when the atrocities began. She was from the city of Bitlis. Nvart speaks in this clip about how the first atrocities began. As we watch this and other testimonies of the survivors remember that because of the tragedies occurred over one hundred years ago, each witness was elderly by the time they could record their experiences. Today, they have all passed away. As you listen and watch, consider the courage of the survivors to make sure that the actions against them were not forgotten.

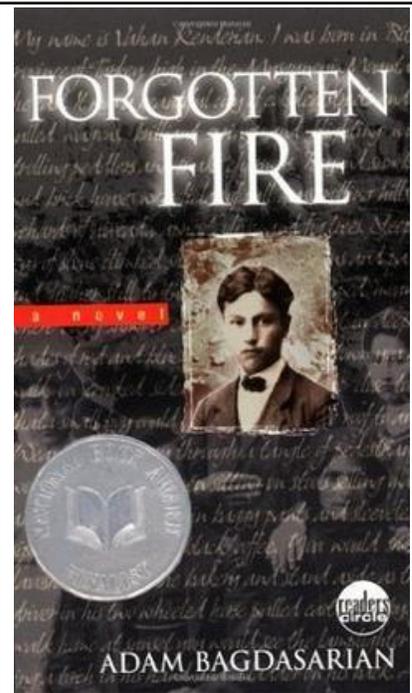
Watch her testimony and answer the following questions:

1. Assaturian tells us that when her father did not come home, the men of the families were also disappeared. What was the reason to take the fathers, uncles and older brothers away from their families?
2. What rights did her family have when the government authorities come to search her house?
3. What was the role of women when the men were taken away? What did they do?

**Source 4. *Forgotten Fire* by Adam Bagdasarian. The Beginning of the Atrocities.**

Citation: Adam Bagdasarian, *Forgotten Fire* (Laurel-Leaf Books, New York, New York, 2002), 11, 14-15.

**About:** *Forgotten Fire* is a novel based on a true story of one young man, Vahan Kenderian, and his experience surviving the Armenian genocide. Just like the survivor Nvart Assaturian, Vahan lived in the city of Bitlis. In the excerpts below, Vahan witnesses his stable world turn into chaos. He watches his family members taken away, and he sees firsthand the downward destruction of his hometown. As you read, consider the many crimes being committed by agents of the state against the Armenian people. Reflect how Vahan’s experience shares some similarities to Nvart Assaturian above.



Early in the spring of 1915, two gendarmes came to see my father. They told him that he was wanted at the government building. “Official business,” they said.

I did not understand. Government officials often came to the house, but always in suits and usually to ask my father’s advice. But these were policemen. Had my father broken the law, or did the government simply want to consult with him? I looked at my mother to see if she understood. She was staring at my father as though he were ill and could not be nursed back to health.

Things began to happen quickly after that. The next day I saw six men being led away by three gendarmes. The shirts of two of the men were ripped and bloody, and their faces were cut and bruised.

A short time later, the stores closed. First the bakery, then the cobbler’s, then the butcher shops. Oskina and Armenouhi [his sisters] heard screams coming from the prison. Diran [his brother] had heard gunshots coming from the center of town. Tavel [his brother] had heard that the homes of two

**gendarmes**—police officer

Armenian families had been set on fire and burned to the ground. And then my mother took me out of school, and I was told not to leave the house. We made a point of never mentioning my father, fearing, I suppose, that his life hung by a thread and that any expression of uncertainty on our part would condemn him to death. I awoke every morning certain that the worst was over, but by the end of the day there was always more. Now they were searching the homes of Armenians for guns. Now they were ransacking our churches and accusing our priests of preaching sedition. Some Armenians were fighting back, futilely, in homes that were set on fire, some died barricaded behind mud walls. Two or three times a day I would open our front door and listen to for the sound of gunfire and, hearing nothing, try to believe that the fighting was over. I sniffed the air for the smoke of burning houses and, smelling nothing, tried to believe that the world was safe again. Two days after I was taken out of school, Uncle Mumpreh was gone. “To prison,” Sisak told me. “They came for him early this morning.”  
 “Why?”  
 “They claim he’s a revolutionary,” my brother said.

**cobbler**—shoe-maker

**ransacking**—to damage and steal from a place

**sedition**—to rebel against the government

**futilely**—pointless, without producing any useful result

1. The adult men were the first ones targeted by the government. Why do you think they were the first to be taken?
2. Consider the breakdown of the community. Armenians lose access to their churches, schools, shops and sources of food. How could people survive without these necessities?
3. For Vahan, the sounds of bullet shots and the smell of burning homes became a daily experience. What were the family’s options for living now that their community was systematically destroyed?

Reflection: Why is it important for Nvart Assaturian and other survivors to tell their stories? Although it is difficult to hear of other’s suffering, why is it important for us to listen to their stories?

## Source 5. Levonti Azadian's Testimony

Citation: USC Shoah Foundation, "Levonti Azadian - Armenian Survivor," July 17, 1985 (12:25 to 13:50) [https://drive.google.com/file/d/18-USqAYC1njFAI3yQ-TOMrUe40hxJX\\_6/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/18-USqAYC1njFAI3yQ-TOMrUe40hxJX_6/view)



**About:** Levonti Azadian was a young girl who lost her family home in Adana. She was living in tents with other Armenian refugees forced to leave everything behind. In this section, she talks about how she avoided being taken away from her relatives. Watch her testimony and consider the following questions:

1. What did some Turks do to separate Armenian families?
2. How was Azadian able to prevent being taken away? How difficult was this escape for her?
3. In your opinion, how hard was the decision for her to make in this type of situation? What choice would you have made? She had the choice of living with a rich family that would steal her from her relatives, or run away with her family and live poorly.

## Source 6. Forgotten Fire by Adam Bagdasarian. Sexual Violence

Citation: Adam Bagdasarian, *Forgotten Fire* (Laurel-Leaf Books, New York, New York, 2002), 131-137

**About:** In this passage, Vahan speaks about sexual violence committed against a young Armenian girl, Seranoush. She was brought to live with him, and Vahan feels happy with her presence around him. She reminds him of his sisters, Oskina and Armenouhi. In the scene below, Vahan has found a measure of peace and stability in his job working for a powerful Turk who protects him. In contrast, Seranoush has no escape and continues to suffer because of the soldiers. The events described below are painful to read, but they show how women and girls were abused and raped by Ottoman officials.

The stable door opened late one afternoon, and a soldier I had never seen before entered with a young girl. “She’s going to stay with you,” he said, and closed the door.

It seemed too good to be true, and I was as dumfounded by this great luck as I had once been by misfortune.

The girl had black hair and wore a sweater over her dress. Her feet were swathed in strips of cloth, and her ankles were streaked with dirt and dried blood. I could not see her face because her head was bowed, but she did not look much older than nine or ten.

“My name is Vahan,” I said, the first Armenian words I had spoken to anyone but myself in over a year.

The girl raised her head a little, and I saw the large black eyes, the small red mouth, and the green and black bruise that covered the entire left side of her face.

“My name is Seranoush.”

As an offer of friendship, I took a piece of bread from my tray and gave it to her. I watched her eat, her head bowed a little to hide her face.

“When was the last time you ate?”

“Three days ago,” she said.

Three days! She was nearly starving. “They’ll feed you here,” I said. “You’ll eat so much your stomach will get big like mine.” I patted my stomach and she smiled.

After dinner I turned off one of the lamps, and soon after that Seranoush drew one of my blankets over her and fell asleep almost immediately. I wanted to kiss her cheek as I would have kissed Oskina’s or Armenouhi’s. I wanted to take her hand in mine and heal her bruised cheek and give her beautiful clothes. I wanted her to know she was safe, that she was no longer alone, that this was not just the best day of my life but the best day of hers, as well. She had a family now. She had a brother, father, and a best friend. Now she and I were not alone; we would never be alone again.

I was still awake when the door opened and the soldier came in. I was awake when the soldier held the lamp over my face, then Seranoush’s. And I was awake when the soldier pulled the blanket off Seranoush’s body and she screamed and he hit her across the face and pulled down his trousers. It was as if a kind of storm had suddenly ripped away the walls and roof of the stable and set upon Seranoush with a violence that cannot be imagined. And it must have been that same storm that swept me up and

threw me at the soldier, my fists pulling at the back of his uniform with more strength than I possessed, my hands tearing at his face that turned to me an instant before I was struck again, the side of my face stinging and blood in my mouth. I sprang again at the soldier, my arms around him, and this time the man exploded in my arms, and I was on my back several feet away and unable to swallow or to breathe.

Three soldiers came to the stable that night, and the third soldier did not have to slap Seranoush or cover her face because she did not make a sound. She did not speak the next day, and she ate only a bite or two of the food I gave her. When I spoke to her, she gave no sign that she heard me. She pulled the blanket around her shoulders and turned away from me, from the world. And every night for seven nights, the soldiers took her outside and raped her.

On the morning of the eighth day, I called softly to her, but she did not answer. I leaned close to her and touched her face. Two soldiers carried her body out of the stable.

1. Why do you suppose that Vahan was so happy to Seranoush when she first arrived?
2. When Seranoush first arrived, she had been previously abused. What signs indicate that she suffered from violence before meeting Vahan?
3. Why did Vahan immediately relate to Seranoush?
4. The United Nations defines the crime of genocide through many acts, one being “Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.” Considering this definition and the passage you just read, explain how sexual violence was a part of the Armenian Genocide.

Reflection: Take time to think about or write down your thoughts and feelings after reading these passages.

## Source 7. Lemyel Amirian's Testimony

Citation: USC Shoah Foundation, "Lemyel Amirian - Armenian Survivor," January 19, 1987 (24:32 to 28:15). [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1t\\_JM-XkMnZ2Zlq1QCnWYqDn\\_wdixH7Xg/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1t_JM-XkMnZ2Zlq1QCnWYqDn_wdixH7Xg/view)



**About:** Lemyel Amirian was a schoolboy in Van whose family and friends fought against Ottoman attacks during which he himself was shot. (Van was the location where the “Butcher of Armenians,” Selim Bey was governor, see more about him below). In this clip, Amirian explains his experiences during the resistance. He also gives his reasons on why he thinks that the Armenian Genocide occurred. Watch his testimony and consider the following questions:

1. Why do you think he was shot at? What could have been one reason?
2. In what ways did Armenians resist the Ottomans? What were their techniques?
3. What reasons does Amirian give for the start of the Armenian Genocide?
4. Consider the testimonies you watch as well as what you have read in *Forgotten Fire*. How did the survivors you listened to and the characters in the book perform acts of resistance against their oppression?

**Source 8. *Forgotten Fire* by Adam Bagdasarian. Selim Bey**

Citation: Adam Bagdasarian, *Forgotten Fire* (Laurel-Leaf Books, New York, New York, 2002), 108-109, 117-125.

**About:** In this passage, Vahan finds an escape from killings and constant danger of being captured. Mrs. Altoonian, the mother of his best friend, places him in the care of Turkish military and political leader Selim Bey. Bey has taken over the house of Vahan’s family and gives him a job taking care of the horses. From living in his family home to sleeping on hay in the barn, Vahan feels the humiliation of working for this criminal. Bey may have been directly responsible for the deaths of his relatives or his friends and neighbors. As you read, consider how Vahan is drawn into Bey’s power. Vahan wants to remember and recognize this man for his crimes. However, Bey uses his influence over Vahan, along with his charm, to manipulate him.

Mrs. Altoonian told me that she had gone to see Selim Bey, the ex-governor of Van. She told me that he was living in my family’s house. She told me that he and my father had worked together in Van, where my father had practiced law in an Armenian court. She told me that the governor had great respect for my father and that he was a fair and honorable man.

Two months before, the name Selim Bey had been on the lips of every Armenian who had escaped from Van. “The butcher of Armenians” they called him. How many hundreds, how many thousands of Armenian men had he marched out of the city and murdered? How many homes had he burned to the ground? Bu his orders, mothers and infants were killed and the heads of his more influential victims were sometimes mounted on poles outside the government building.

I would not grovel for a butcher. Nor would I smile or shake his hand or ingratiate myself in any way.

I felt safer in the dark. Sometimes, I tried to imagine what the governor looked like. I saw him as a fat man with a blubbery gray face, oily skin, and dead black eyes. Sometimes I saw him as a huge, muscular man of limitless power and cruelty.

As the weeks passed, he loomed larger and larger in my imagination until finally he became the most vivid and pervasive presence in my life. I could almost see him lying on my father’s bed, reading by the light of my father’s lamp. In my mind he had become as broad as a shadow on the wall, with eyes as hypnotic as a candle flame. I had to remind myself that he was only a man, only flesh and blood, only a thug who did not have the good manners to present himself to his prisoner, and I renewed my vow to stand up to him when we finally met.

**grovel**—beg  
**ingratiate**—to try to please someone

“I am Selim Bey,” the man said. “I knew your father. I’m sorry it’s taken us so long to meet,” he said. “I’ve been very busy. You are comfortable here? You have enough to eat?”

“Yes,” I said. Then, despite myself, “Thank you.”

Selim Bey looked at me with eyes that seemed to see through me. “Why are you afraid?” he said.

I did not answer.

“You are here because you are Sarkis Kendrian’s son. You were not brought here to be harmed.”

I nodded meekly, and tried to meet his eyes.

“I was sorry to hear he was called. If there was any way I could have stopped it, I would have. But these things...” He shook his head. “Enver Pasha himself couldn’t have stopped it.” He glanced at my blanket and mattress of straw. “Is it cold enough for you at night?”

I nodded, surprised by his concern.

“But you have enough to eat?”

“Yes.”

“Good. It is very hard for Armenians to find food these days. But I’ll make you a promise: As long as I eat well, you will eat well.”

An empty space was offered for me to thank him, and I did. And now I knew why Mrs. Altoonian had trusted him, and why she had said he was a fair and honorable man. If I hadn’t known who he was I would have trusted him, too. Watching him make it easy to forget that he was a butcher of Armenians and not simply a debonair and prosperous businessman.

“I’m glad we met,” he said, extending his hand.

Without thinking, without hesitating, I shook that soft dry hand, and did not realize what I had done until after he left the stable.

That evening I was given twice my usual ration of food... I thought about the unusual man I’d met that morning: his courtesy, his praise, his hand shaking mine. He had treated me not like an Armenian orphan, but like the son of a man whose wealth and influence he admired. I tried to remember that he was a murderer, that he was responsible for making widows of women like my mother and orphans of boys like myself. But as hard as I tried, I could not imagine him ordering anyone’s death or burning anyone’s house to the ground.

But as weeks turned into months, it became harder and harder to ignore his friendship, harder and harder to imagine a monster in this well-dressed, well-spoken, distinguished-looking man. He had never raised his voice to me, never threatened me or struck me. How could I hate such a man? And how could I be sure he was a monster? I hadn’t seen him kill anyone or burn down anyone’s house. I did not doubt that those events had taken place, but

**meekly**—gently or submissive

**debonair**—stylish

how could anyone be sure that Selim Bey was to blame? He had offered me his protection.

I was wearing the clothes that *he* had given me. I was warm at night because he had given me a second blanket. My belly was full because he gave me all the food I could eat. I was not lonely because he visited me in the stable two or three times a week. I *wanted* to see his point of view, I wanted to see the world through the eyes of my protector. Only later did I learn that while he was allowing me to ride his horse and giving me extra blankets and new clothes, he was also (with the help of two or three hundred Turkish troops) killing off the last of the Armenians in Bitlis and confiscating their valuables. Only later did I realize how inhuman a well-dressed, well-spoken, charming man could be.

**ration**—portion

1. Who is Selim Bey? What kind of a person is he?
2. Vahan’s feelings change over the course of working for Bey. What are they at the start and what do they become later? How do you explain this change?
3. Does Vahan ever truly learn to trust Bey? How would you describe their relationship?



1. What are some of the consequences of the denial of the Armenian Genocide? How does it affect Armenians? How might it affect people who are not Armenians?
2. What is the role of nationalism in Turkey's denial of the genocide? How is a nation's identity connected to its history?
3. Think about the significance of the "state-sponsored denial." How does it affect international relationships?

**Reflection:** Think about the problem of Turkish denial of the Armenian Genocide. Are there any parallels here with Selim Bey who uses his power and money to manipulate Vahan?

## Source 10. President Joe Biden’s Statement Acknowledging Armenian Genocide, 2021

Citation: Statement by President Joe Biden on Armenian Remembrance Day, The White House, April 24, 2021,

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/24/statement-by-president-joe-biden-on-armenian-remembrance-day/>. Accessed December 12, 2022.

**About:** For many decades, Turkish officials worked hard to prevent the official international recognition of the Armenian genocide. While some countries, including Germany, France, Russia, and Canada have officially recognized it, many others have not, fearing a bad relationship with Turkey. Most U.S. presidents have refrained from calling the genocide for what it was, because Turkey is an important American partner in the Middle East and a NATO ally. On April 24, 2021, on the 106<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of the genocide, Joe Biden issued the following statement, which officially named the mass atrocities against Armenians a genocide. Before Biden, the only U.S. President to acknowledge the genocide while in office was Ronald Reagan. Read the excerpts from the statement and answer the questions.

Each year on this day, we remember the lives of all those who died in the Ottoman-era Armenian genocide and recommit ourselves to preventing such an atrocity from ever again occurring. Beginning on April 24, 1915, with the arrest of Armenian intellectuals and community leaders in Constantinople by Ottoman authorities, one and a half million Armenians were deported, massacred, or marched to their deaths in a campaign of extermination.

...

Of those who survived, most were forced to find new homes and new lives around the world, including in the United States. With strength and resilience, the Armenian people survived and rebuilt their community. ... We honor their story. We see that pain. We affirm the history. We do this not to cast blame but to ensure that what happened is never repeated.

...

The American people honor all those Armenians who perished in the genocide that began 106 years ago today.

1. What is the significance of this statement?
2. What is the responsibility of Americans and our government today to care about the Armenian Genocide from 100 years ago?
3. Do you think Mr. Biden made the right decision? Do you think the symbolism of the announcement is important? Why, or why not?

## Source 11. Turkish Reactions to President Joe Biden’s Statement

Citation: “Reactions after Biden announcement on Armenian genocide,” Reuters, April 24, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/reactions-after-biden-announcement-armenian-genocide-2021-04-24/>; “In historic move, Biden says 1915 massacres of Armenians constitute genocide,” April 24, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/biden-says-1915-massacres-armenians-constitute-genocide-2021-04-24/>. Accessed December 12, 2022.

**About:** Below is a number of statements made by Turkish officials reacting to President Biden’s recognition of the genocide. Joe Biden’s statement came at a time when the relationship between Turkey and the United States was already strained due to a number of disagreements, including Turkey’s human rights record. Read the quotes and answer the questions.

Turkish Foreign Ministry statement:

“We reject and denounce in the strongest terms the statement of the President of the US regarding the events of 1915 ... It is clear that the said statement does not have a scholarly and legal basis, nor is it supported by any evidence.”

“This statement ...will open a deep wound that undermines our mutual trust and friendship. We call on the US President to correct this grave mistake.”

Mevlut Cavusoglu, Turkish Foreign Minister, on Twitter:

“Words cannot change or rewrite history. We have nothing to learn from anybody on our own past. Political opportunism is the greatest betrayal to peace and justice. We entirely reject this statement based solely on populism.”

Faik Oztrak, spokesman for the main opposition Republican People’s Party:

“It will open wounds that will be difficult to repair not only on U.S.-Turkey ties but also on a potential compromise between the people of Armenia and Turkey.”

1. Turkey loudly protests any votes to recognize their responsibility with the Armenian Genocide. What power do they have to silence such conversations in the international arena?
2. What arguments do Turkish officials use to protest President Biden’s statement?

## Source 12. Sona Visits the Armenian Genocide Memorial

Citation: Team Coco, “Sona Visits the Armenian Genocide Memorial,” November 18, 2015  
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1TI67TbM4NpF0jVUqFl3mLq1vZ1Vu85Jl/view>

**About:** Sona Movsesian is Conan O’Brien’s personal assistant. She is of Armenian descent. In this video from 2015, she travels with her boss Conan to Armenia and they visit the Armenian Genocide Memorial to pay their respects to those who lost their lives in this catastrophe. Despite the unwillingness of Turkey and some other nations to recognize the Armenian Genocide, memorial sites like this one serve to preserve the history of this tragedy for the future. There are several monuments locally, such as in Montebello, Pasadena and Downtown Los Angeles. Watch the video and consider what it means for Armenians worldwide to have these public spaces of remembrance and respect.



### Final Project:

As a final project, consider what happens when history is erased or denied? Why is it important for schools in California and around the world to teach about the atrocities against Ottoman Armenians and other genocides? What is the role of the memorials and monuments in remembrance? Consider these questions with your classmates and then design your own monument or memorial to remember the Armenian genocide.