

Current Events from the Past

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The New York Times began publishing in 1851 and has covered major historical developments for the last century and a half. Many articles have been organized into thematic topics as part of a Great Events series and are available on microfiche from UMI (1-800/521-0600 <http://www.umi.com>). Using excerpts of newspaper articles from the past for class and homework assignments provides students with contemporary perspectives on events in world and United States history and also prepares students to answer document-based questions. This issue of *Social Science Record* examines nineteenth and early twentieth century events in Southwest Asia focusing on the emergence of modern Turkey from the Ottoman Empire. Combining topics makes it possible for students to discuss whether European powers share responsibility for the massacre of Armenians because of their imperialist ambitions in the region. The Crimean War should be examined within the context of competing 19th century alliances and imperialist ventures. These contribute to the breakdown of the European system established after the Napoleonic era and lead to World War I. The massacre of the Armenians can be compared with the Great Irish Famine, African enslavement by Europeans, the European Holocaust and other similar events in human history. How do we explain these atrocities? How do we prevent them in the future?

Aim 1: What were the underlying causes of the Crimean War?

Teacher Background: Many historians consider the Crimean War the world's first modern war. It was the first war to produce a female nursing corps, led by Florence Nightingale, the first to use the telegraph, the first to have a war correspondent and a battlefield photographer, and the first to make use of the Gatling gun. The war was precipitated by Russian attempts to expand its influence in the Black Sea region at the expense of the Ottoman Empire. Great Britain and France intervened in defense of Ottoman interests and to block Russian expansion.

Aim 2: Should world powers have intervened to protect Armenians?

Teacher Background: Armenians are a Christian people who trace their ancestry to the Biblical Noah. Armenia's location on the East-West trade route between Europe and Asia helped ensure that the people and the land were a center of contention throughout history. Parts of Armenia were conquered by the Byzantine Empire, the Persians, the Seljuk and Ottoman Turks, and the Soviet Union. At the end of the 19th century, the great majority of Armenian lands fell within the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire.

Although the Ottoman Empire was once great and powerful, by the close of the 19th century it was known as "the sick man of Europe". European powers, interested in expanding their influence in the region, attempted to weaken the Ottoman Empire's Islamic rulers by encouraging and financing independence movements within the multinational, multiethnic empire. This support and contemporary ideas of national self-determination that were taking hold in the region, pitted Armenians against Turkish national aspirations at the eve of World War I. The result proved disastrous for the Armenians. The Ottoman leadership ordered and executed a large scale campaign of brutality and massacres on the Armenian population. Thousands were murdered and millions were forced to flee their homes and become refugees.

ACTIVITY SHEET: The Crimean War (1853-1854) - From the pages of *The New York Times*

1. (July 1, 1853) THE DESIGNS OF RUSSIA UPON TURKEY- There is a Russian proclamation from 1837 that reads in part, “. . . are you not aware that if the heavens should fall, Russia could prop them with her bayonets? The English may be good mechanics and artisans, but power dwells only with Russia. No country ever waged successful war against her. Russia is the most powerful of all the nations. If you desire peace, you must be convinced that there are but two powers in existence- God in heaven, and the Emperor upon earth.”

Czar Nicholas remembers Russia’s first war in which he was left in possession of the Ukraine, obtaining a port on the Black Sea. This was before Czar Peter came up with the idea that the nations of Western Europe were more advanced than his own, and that there was no reason why he should not bring his own people to the level of European civilization. By his will he enjoined his successors to obtain Turkey. This was the beginning of the conflict, the conflict of which the fate of Europe hangs.

2. (February 20, 1854) - THE EASTERN QUESTION IN THE HOUSE OF LORDS. My Lords, I am reluctant to engage in war against any state and certainly against Russia. I consider it my duty to use every possible effort and every endeavor to check a feeling which I admit is natural. No war can be justifiable unless it partakes of the nature of a war in self-defense. No man can now pretend that there is any real danger from the war now existing, yet as interfering with a proper preservation of the balance of power established in Europe, it might be considered in some sense self-defense.

3. (February 20, 1854) A LETTER FROM THE FOREIGN SECRETARY TO THE BRITISH AMBASSADOR AT ST. PETERSBURG - Authentic information from Constantinople, has reached her Majesty’s Government, that a Turkish squadron was completely destroyed by an overwhelming Russian force; that 4,000 Turks perished; and that survivors, no more than 400, were all more or less wounded.

4. (February 20, 1854) INTERVIEW OF BRITISH MINISTER WITH COUNT NESSELRODE - Dismiss from your mind the unfounded notion that it is the desire of Her Majesty’s Government to humiliate Russia; no feeling of the sort exists. Do not imagine either that it can be for our interests that Russia be injured- quite the contrary. The case is plainly this- *Her Majesty’s Government has a British interest and a European interest in maintaining the independence and the integrity of the Ottoman Empire.* The duties that the British government has to perform have been imposed upon us by Russia. Turkey must be defended from aggression. Her Majesty’s Government has pledged to defend her.

5. (February 20, 1854) PRUSSIA AND AUSTRIA - The destinies of Europe hang upon the decision of the two great German powers. Will the cabinets of Vienna and Berlin unite themselves heartily and sincerely with the French and British government for the maintenance of the existing territorial arrangements of Europe? One of the principal objects which the Russian Emperor now seeks to realize is the conquest of the mouth of the Danube- in other words, he desires to seal up the principal outlet for the commerce of the Austrian dominions.

6. (February 21, 1854) COUNT ORLOFF’S MISSION - Czar Nicholas has asked that his former friends and allies, the Emperor of Austria and the King of Prussia, adhere to unconditioned armed neutrality in the Eastern quarrel. In return, Russia would protect them and that in the approaching dissolution of the Ottoman Empire their interests would not be forgotten.

7. (April 15, 1854)- THE DECLARATION OF WAR - It is with deep regret that her Majesty announces the failure of her anxious and protracted endeavors to preserve for her people and for Europe the blessings of peace. The unprovoked aggression of the Emperor of Russia has compelled us to come forward in defense of an ally whose territory is invaded and whose dignity and independence are assailed.

Questions

1. According to the speaker in article 2, when is war justified? Do you agree or disagree? Explain.
2. What does the speaker mean when he refers to a “balance of power” in Europe?
3. In your opinion, why does the Emperor of Russia appeal to the Emperor of Austria and the King of Prussia?
4. Based on the articles, what is the Russian view of events taking place in the Black Sea region?
5. Based on the articles, what is the British view of events taking place in the Black Sea region?
6. In your opinion, is *The New York Times* coverage of these events biased? Explain.
7. In your opinion, what were the underlying causes of the Crimean War?

ACTIVITY SHEET - Massacre of the Armenians (1895-1916) - From *The New York Times*

1. (October 20, 1895) **TURKEY COAXED TO KILL** - A private letter received from Constantinople puts on the Armenians themselves the blame for the harsh treatment they have received from Turkey. The letter reads, "The Armenian Hunchagist party seems to think that its job is to enlighten the world on the rude character of Turkey. They force the Turks to show themselves as they are. They hold that Turkey is a wolf in sheep's clothing. If they twist the tail of the beast, he will forget and stain the snowy fleece with blood every time; although the fact that he needs a disguise is perfectly well known to the reputed wolf".
2. (November 17, 1895) **KILLING THE ARMENIANS** - In the disturbances that had taken place at Sivas 800 Armenians and 10 Turks had been killed. The discrepancy in the figures show that the Turkish allegations that the Armenians were the aggressors are absolutely untrue and that the Armenians were deliberately massacred.
3. (November 29, 1895) **THE ANARCHY IN TURKEY** - Discussions of the reasons for the present frenzy of slaughter in Turkey seems a waste of time. There are the natural Turkish ferocity, the oppression of the Armenians, the assumed massacres, and the revolutionary movement inextricably mingled with it all, and the vague specter of purely religious fanaticism urging the Turk to proclaim war on all Christians. The reason for all the horrible events that have shocked the world is the Turk and his four centuries of denial of civil rights to his Christian subject.
4. (January 1, 1896) **ARMENIANS ARE ANXIOUS** - It has been reported by the Turkish government that Ottoman troops are protecting Americans missionaries against Armenian rioters. Not the slightest foundation exists to support this allegation.
5. (February 4, 1896) **GURUN AND CHERMERIS VILLAGES DESTROYED** - The following is a letter received at Constantinople by the press- ". . . Armenian villages are pillaged and burned. Raiders carry the plunder . . . no clothes, no bedding, no kitchen utensils, and nothing to eat are left to the surviving villagers."
6. (October 1, 1915) **ASKS BERNSTORFF'S AID TO PREVENT MASSACRES, STATE DEPARTMENT MAKES INFORMAL REQUEST TO (GERMAN) AMBASSADOR ON BEHALF OF ARMENIANS.**
7. (October 4, 1915) **TELL OF HORRORS DONE IN ARMENIA** - The Committee on Armenian Atrocities, a body of eminent Americans who have been investigating the situation in Turkish Armenia, issued a detailed report asserting that in cruelty and in horror nothing in the past thousand years has equaled the present persecutions of the Armenian people by the Turks.
8. (October 5, 1915) **GOVERNMENT SENDS PLEA FOR ARMENIA** - It is probably well within the truth to say that of the 2,000,000 Armenians in Turkey a year ago, at least 1,000,000 have been killed or forced to flee the country, or have died upon the way to exile, or are now upon the road to the desert of Northern Arabia, or are already there.
9. (November 27, 1915) **ARMENIAN'S HEROIC STAND IN MOUNTAINS**- Viscount Bryce made public the details of further Armenian massacres which he says "surpass in horror, if that were possible, what had already been published".
10. (December 15, 1915) **MILLION ARMENIANS KILLED OR IN EXILE, AMERICAN COMMITTEE ON RELIEF SAYS VICTIMS OF TURKS ARE STEADILY INCREASING**

Questions

1. Who does the writer in article 1 blame for the harsh treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire? What is your view of this statement?
2. According to the other articles, is the writer justified in making this accusation? Explain.
3. In 1915, the United States and Great Britain condemned Turkish treatment of Armenians. What other events are going on at this time? In your opinion, are these other events related to these statements and Turkish treatment of Armenians? Explain.

4. In your opinion, what were the underlying causes of the massacre of Armenians in Turkey?
5. In your opinion, do world powers share responsibility for these events? Explain.

Lesson Ideas and Activities

Examine a map of the region. Why was the Ottoman Turkish Empire of strategic importance to other nations?

Discuss whether European powers who undermined the Ottoman Empire because of their own imperial ambitions in the region share responsibility for later events.

Is nationalism a positive or negative force? Discuss whether nationalism is to blame for attacks on Armenians, Assyrians, Greeks and Kurds living in Turkey.

Research the continuing debate over Turkish actions against ethnic minorities in the past and present.

Write a letter to *The New York Times* responding to Ottoman denials of atrocities against the Armenians.

Compare the Armenian experience during World War I with the Jewish experience during World War II.

Discuss recent assaults on ethnic minorities. Should other nations intervene to prevent future atrocities?

Perform an Armenian Resistance dance. Both Greek and Armenian Americans claim the dance Miserlou as part of their ethnic heritage.

Check out these websites:

Armenian National Committee of America (www.ebusolutions.com/anca) and Armenian Genocide (www.hyeetch.nareg.com.au/genocide).

- Steven Bolagna, Thomas McCann and Laura Peterson

