

# Immediate Legacies of WWI: America's Failed Response to the Armenian Genocide

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## CONTEXT

On April 24, 1915, the Ottoman Empire began an aggressive genocide campaign against its Armenian citizens. The Ottoman Empire's instability, coupled with World War I military losses, brought long-standing tensions between the Turks and Armenians to a head. An estimated 1.5 million Armenians died as a result of the events between 1915 and 1923. Much of Turkey's actions went unacknowledged, taking a backseat to the war.

At the conclusion of the war, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points promoted a foreign policy that promoted universal democracy around the world and the establishment of a permanent council to mediate disputes between nations and protect those who could not defend themselves. Using the Armenian Genocide as the example, students will think deeply about how America should act when the defenseless are threatened. Does the U.S. have the moral and/or legal authority to intervene in the affairs of other nations when no U.S. citizen or entity is harmed?

## PRIMARY SOURCES

"Answer Morgenthau by Hanging Armenians," September 16, 1915

*The New York Times*

<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1915/09/16/issue.html>

Confidential Telegram, Henry Morgenthau, U.S. Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, to U.S. Secretary of State Robert Lansing, July 16, 1915

U.S. Documents about Armenian Genocide,

University of South Florida Library

<http://exhibits.lib.usf.edu/exhibits/show/armenianstudies/armenia-genocide/docs>

Confidential Telegram, U.S. Secretary of State Robert Lansing to Henry Morgenthau, U.S. Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, July 16, 1915

U.S. Department of State

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1915Supp/d1402>

Diary Entry, Henry Morgenthau, U.S. Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, August 8, 1915

U.S. Documents about Armenian Genocide,

University of South Florida Library

<http://exhibits.lib.usf.edu/exhibits/show/armenianstudies/armenia-genocide/docs>

## SECONDARY SOURCES

John Kifner, "Armenian Genocide of 1915: An Overview"

*The New York Times*

[https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/ref/timestopics/topics\\_armeniangenocide.html?mcubz=0](https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/ref/timestopics/topics_armeniangenocide.html?mcubz=0)

## OBJECTIVES

At the end of this activity, students will be able to:

- Understand that the Armenian Genocide occurred during World War I;
- Discuss the U.S. response to the Armenian Genocide and decide if the U.S. was justified to not intervene; and
- Debate the role the U.S. should play on the world stage today in human rights crises.

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## Teacher Instructions

- Read the article, "Armenian Genocide of 1915: An Overview" to provide context to the teacher.
- Make one copy of the Armenian Genocide Document Packet for each student.
- Divide the class into groups of four to five students each.
- Distribute one copy of the Armenian Genocide Document Packet to each student.
- Remind students that President Woodrow Wilson requested a declaration of war from Congress in order to make the world "safe for democracy." Review Wilson's Fourteen Points and the merits of a democratic world. Ask students:
  - Are basic human rights the foundation of a democracy?
  - If Wilson is promoting a democratic world, is he advocating for the establishment of basic human rights? Why or why not?
- In groups, ask students to define the world sovereignty and as it applies to nation states. Discuss whether there are any conditions that give one state the authority to invade another state when there is no dispute between them.
- Introduce the Armenian Genocide to the students:
  - The Turkish Government conducted a state-sanctioned genocide against the Armenian people residing in Turkey beginning in April 1915 and lasting through 1922. Approximately 1.5 million Armenians (of the original two million Armenians living in Turkey prior to 1915) died as a result of direct shooting, drowning, smoke inhalation (placed in caves, fires started, entrance sealed), starvation, and death marches.
- Explain that the genocide was well recorded in major American newspapers. In the *New York Times* alone, reports of the massacres were printed in 158 editions of the paper from April to December 1915.
- Direct students to review documents one and two.
  - Ask groups to share what they think of the situation.
  - Highlight question two in document two. Ask students what they think of Lansing's question to Morgenthau and if that should be the standard of U.S. intervention.
  - Ask students, by a show of hands, think the U.S. had a moral obligation to protect the Armenian people. Discuss reasons for and against intervention.
- Instruct students to examine and complete documents three and four
  - After students what they think Morgenthau and the U.S. should have done in light of Turkey's response to U.S. requests to stop the genocide.
- Explain to students that the U.S. government did nothing to stop the genocide. In fact, following World War I, the U.S. government lobbied that no Turkish leader should be tried as a war criminal because of their actions during the genocide. The U.S. government cited the preeminence of state sovereignty as their reason. Secretary of State Lansing believed that no state had the right to intervene or pass judgment on the internal affairs of another state.
- Tell the class, U.S. Secretary of State Robert Lansing was quoted as saying, "The essence of sovereignty is the absence of responsibility." Ask students,
  - In your own words, what is Lansing saying?
  - Do you think states should be accountable to other nations for domestic policies? Should they have to justify their domestic policies or cultural norms to another nation?
  - The U.S. has the death penalty and no European nation does. Should a European nation have the right to invade the U.S. because they think we are violating human rights?
  - Does the U.S. have a moral obligation to protect citizens of another country if that country is not protecting them from harm?

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## Armenian Genocide Document Packet

### DOCUMENT ONE

**CONFIDENTIAL TELEGRAM, HENRY MORGENTHAU, U.S. AMBASSADOR TO THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE,  
TO U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE ROBERT LANSING, JULY 16, 1916**

U.S. Documents about Armenian Genocide, University of South Florida Library  
<http://exhibits.lib.usf.edu/exhibits/show/armenianstudies/armenia-genocide/docs>

Constantinople, 16 July 1915

Deportation of and excesses against peaceful Armenians is increasing and from harrowing reports of eye witnesses it appears that a campaign of race extermination is in progress under a pretext of reprisal against rebellion. Protests as well as threats are unavailing and probably incite the Ottoman government to more drastic measures as they are determined to disclaim responsibility for their absolute disregard of Capitulations and I believe nothing short of actual force which obviously United States are not in the position to exert would adequately meet the situation. Suggest you inform belligerent nations and mission boards of this.

### QUESTIONS:

In his words, a campaign of what is happening to the Armenian people?

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What is Morgenthau's assessment of the action required to stop the genocide from continuing?

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# Immediate Legacies of WWI: America's Failed Response to the Armenian Genocide

## Armenian Genocide Document Packet

### DOCUMENT TWO

**CONFIDENTIAL TELEGRAM, U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE ROBERT LANSING TO HENRY MORGENTHAU,  
U.S. AMBASSADOR TO THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE, JULY 16, 1915**

U.S. Department of State

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1915Supp/d1402>

The Secretary of State to the Ambassador in Turkey (Morgenthau)

Washington, July 16, 1915, 4 p. m.

865. Your 841, July 10. Department approves your procedure in pleading with Turkish Minister of Interior and Minister of War to stop Armenian persecution and in attempting to enlist sympathies of German and Austrian Ambassadors in this cause. The Department can offer no additional suggestions relative to this most difficult situation other than that you continue to act as in the past. Have any native-born American citizens or any naturalized American citizens entitled to protection under American statutes received injuries during this trouble?

Lansing

### QUESTIONS:

What permission does Lansing provide Morgenthau?

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What seems to be the important issue to Lansing?

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### DOCUMENT THREE

**DIARY ENTRY, HENRY MORGENTHAU, U.S. AMBASSADOR TO THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE, AUGUST 8, 1915**

U.S. Documents about Armenian Genocide, University of South Florida Library  
<http://exhibits.lib.usf.edu/exhibits/show/armenianstudies/armenia-genocide/docs>

*Note:* Talaat Pasha was one of the three men who ruled the Ottoman Empire during World War I and a key leader in the genocide. In November 1918 he fled, and was assassinated in Berlin, Germany, in 1921.

**8 August 1915**

I argued in all sorts of ways with him but he said that there was no use, that they had already disposed of three quarters of them, that there were none left in Bitlis, Van, Erzurum, and that the hatred was so intense now that they have to finish it. I spoke to him about the commercial losses and he said they did not care, that they had figured it out and knew it would not exceed for the banks etc. five million pounds. He said they want to treat the Armenians like we treat the negroes. I think he meant like the Indians.

### QUESTIONS:

What is Morgenthau referring to in the first sentence when Talaat says "they have to finish it"?

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Talaat compares what Turkey is doing to the Armenians to what the U.S. did to the Indians.

Do you think this is a fair comparison? Why or why not?

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Do you think America's domestic past should influence how we respond to current atrocities?

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# Immediate Legacies of WWI: America's Failed Response to the Armenian Genocide

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### DOCUMENT FOUR

**"ANSWER MORGANTHAU BY HANGING ARMENIANS," SEPTEMBER 16, 1915**

*The New York Times*

<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1915/09/16/issue.html>

### **ANSWER MORGENTHAU BY HANGING ARMENIANS**

***He Protests Against the War  
of Extermination Now  
in Progress.***

Special Cable to THE NEW YORK TIMES

LONDON, Thursday, Sept. 16.—A Times correspondent, lately in Salonika, says that all the reports from Turkey are agreed as to the terrible character of the Turkish atrocities against Armenians. It is believed that it is the official intention that this shall be a campaign of extermination, involving the murdering of 800,000 to 1,000,000 persons. Christians can escape murder by embracing Mahomedanism, in which case all the female members of the convert's family of marriageable age—wife, sisters, or children—are distributed around to other Turks, making the reversion to Christianity in future practically impossible.

The American Minister at Constantinople is said to have protested recently against the massacre, in view of the danger to which they exposed the American missionaries. The only response to his protest was the hanging of twenty leading Armenians the next day in the streets of Constantinople.

### **QUESTIONS:**

What does the article cite as the "official intention" of the Turkish government?

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What are the results of Ambassador Morgenthau's protests of the atrocities?

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**The New York Times**

Published: September 16, 1915

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