



Episode 899: The Armenian Genocide

Guest: Rouben Adalian

WOODS: There's a lot to talk about here. And in fact, in preparing for this episode, I learned a lot more about the Armenian genocide than I had known before. My grandmother, by the way, who died probably 15 or so years ago, she was a lifelong Democrat except when it came to Bob Dole, because she was a single-issue voter, and her one issue was the Armenians. And Bob Dole was sound on the Armenians, so she was happy to vote for Bob Dole. So I come from a family that is very, very, keenly interested in this subject.

I'd like to begin with explaining to us the position of the Armenians within the Ottoman Empire. Presumably there must have been a time when they lived more or less peacefully. And then in the late 18th century, massacres break out. Describe that scene for us.

ADALIAN: You're quite right. The Ottoman Empire existed for about 600 years. The Armenians were one of the conquered peoples ruled by the Ottoman Turks, so obviously once the [00:02:59] conquests had ended and peace had been established, you could argue that you have a few centuries of peace, except the difference being, unlike many other empires, this was an Islamic empire and the Armenians were Christians, so there was an automatic structural issue where Islamic law prevailed, Islamic customs prevailed, and the Christians were a second class minority. And the Armenians were not the only Christians minorities in the Ottoman Empire: Greeks, Bulgarians, Romanians, many others. But by the end of the 19th century, as you know, the Ottoman Empire had shrunk down. The Balkan areas had broken away. Effectively, virtually all of the Christian peoples had gained their independence, with the exception of the Armenians, who were living in our historic Armenia, which is today Anatolia or easternmost Anatolia.

WOODS: And how many of them were there?

ADALIAN: There were 2 million of 2.1 million, somewhere in that range. Possibly about 10% of the population of the Ottoman Empire, which still stretched from Constantinople on down to Arabia.

WOODS: Okay, so what changes in that, from 1894 to 1896, you get open massacres occurring right in front of the general public?

ADALIAN: It has much to do with the man running the empire at the time. The sultan who became known as the Red Sultan decided to repress the Armenian population. They were a group that was advancing economically. This was the year of modernization. The Armenians were reaching out to Europe. Americans were reaching out to the Armenians. Tremendous development in education. American missionaries had arrived some 50, 60 years earlier, and Armenians had taken very quickly to adapting to modern ways. And so they were progressing economically very rapidly. At the same time, obviously, they were becoming more articulate about the oppression that great masses of them were enduring. The sultan ruling autocratically, effectively the only man with power in the state, decided that he's going to contain this issue once and for all, or so he thought, by authorizing a whole series of massacres that spread out across virtually all of Anatolia and resulted in the death of 100,000 to possibly 300,000 Armenians.

WOODS: And that's not all – so there were the massacres and there was what's known as the genocide. So we had the 1895 – then wasn't there another massacre like in 1909? Am I misremembering that?

ADALIAN: No, you're absolutely correct. The Young Turks were a radical group that actually overthrew the sultan because they thought that he was not modernizing Turkey fast enough, believed in a more radical ideology, and they wanted to Turkify Anatolia, which was a multicultural, multiethnic area at the time. And they did this in 1908 and 1909. These massacres broke out in another area known as [00:06:29], heavily populated by Armenians, and another 20,000 to 30,000 Armenians fell victim at the time. And so you're absolutely correct; there's a pattern – there's a set of massacres in 1895 and it repeats in 1909. By the time you get to 1915, the Armenian people have been living in a country that's periodically slaughtering vast numbers of them, and so they have obviously by this time developed a very reserved attitude towards their own government.

WOODS: Well, I should think so. Now, from 1915 to 1918, this is the period where there's a systematic policy carried out to more or less do away with these people, and I'm interested in how that differs from just these massacres that we saw carried out. There is something qualitatively different about what's going on during these years.

ADALIAN: Absolutely right, because the massacres were local events, whereas genocide is something that's centrally organized. It's systematic. It's thorough, requires the machinery of the government, all of the tools of the state administration that are available. We're talking the railroad systems, the telegraph system at the time, rudimentary telephone system, the army, all of the mechanisms that a state has at its disposal in order to dislodge a population from its homes, all of them en masse, put them out on the road in a certain direction, send them out, in this case 1915 towards the Syrian Desert, which made it all the obvious by those who finally arrived there if they hadn't perished along the road that this was indeed not just the end of the road, this was the end of their existence. And so a massacre may kill large numbers of people, but it does spare the majority, whereas a genocide effectively is striving to destroy a very large number of people if not all of them.

WOODS: Now, of course there is some kind of controversy about this, as we well know. The Turkish government does not speak of a genocide, and we know that American

politicians have danced around the subject, and they very much regret the terrible tragedy that befell the Armenian people, but they won't use the word genocide. So this is a very politically loaded question. So it really becomes important to figure out: can we ascertain without a doubt that there was a deliberate policy? Do we have documentation? What kind of evidence do we have that this wasn't just, you know, wartime stifling of dissent or whatever? I mean, that there was a real, deliberate attempt to destroy people?

ADALIAN: Right, that's the central question, and the fact of the matter is that there's just absolutely no shortage of documentation. And interestingly enough, the greatest amount of evidence on the Armenian genocide actually lies in the United States National Archives, for the simple reason that the United States was a neutral party during the greater length of the First World War, the Great War, which occurred from 1914 to 1918.

And so there's an American ambassador, there are American consuls who are stationed in various cities across the Ottoman Empire, as well as a significant number of civilians, including educators, missionaries, physicians. They're all witnesses to what transpires with the Armenian population, and they send reports, regular reports, eyewitness reports to the American ambassador, and all of that gets sent to the United States to Washington. And hence, the American government is fully aware of the entire course of the unfolding the Armenian genocide blow by blow. So it can be entirely reconstructed. And since there's an ambassador, he can communicate, he talks to Ottoman officials, including the central figure, the interior minister by the name of Talaat Pasha, to whom he had access, who is entirely open about what his intentions are and what his objectives are.

And that's just one piece of the puzzle, because there's evidence all across the world in countries friendly and unfriendly to Ottoman Turkey. The Germans were allies, military allies of the Ottoman Turks, they had a large military presence in the country, and their commanders, who did not in any way, shape, or form intervene to stop the atrocities, nevertheless witnessed, reported, and sent information to their own government. And lately, scholars have been mining the Vatican Archives, and the papacy, it turns out, holds a massive amount of documentation sent in by Catholic missionaries, representatives of the Church, priests, and others, who also reported everything. So there's confirmatory evidence from any standpoint one looks at it, so the denialist position of the current Turkish government is simply untenable.

WOODS: I'm noting in an article of yours here that one of the differences between the massacres and then what happened from 1915 onward is that in the massacres there was a lot of looting and burning of Armenian neighborhoods and businesses, but you don't see that in 1915. Instead, you see the transfer of these things from the Armenians to the Turks, which seems to represent rather an ominous change. We're not trying to intimidate you anymore. The time for that is over.

ADALIAN: You're quite right, and I think as you look at these government-orchestrated genocidal episodes – and the easiest comparison is with the Holocaust – not only is there a separation of a targeted minority from the general population and then deported to certain locations in order to be exterminated, but also there's this massive misappropriation of their wealth, their property, their businesses. And

typically it's the government and not the general population that is expropriating it, and so this is another dimension of a genocide, which is the economic destruction and certainly the economic uprooting of this population so effectively it has no chance of returning and recovering, even if it happens to survive the atrocities. It's a plan; it's designed to be finite. That's why it's called a final solution.

WOODS: To what extent did people other than government officials, the diplomatic corps know about what was going on? Like journalists at the time, for example.

ADALIAN: No, journalists were confined to Constantinople, the capital city, so there was little that they could have gone and witnessed. But *The New York Times* had people writing in, again, because the United States was a neutral party, so there were journalists who could send report. And the State Department itself did provide some of this information that was coming in from the embassy to the media, and it's on account of that that there was actually a sizable effort undertaken in the United States, which ended up being called the Near East Relief organization and ultimately chartered by Congress in order to raise funds specifically to save the remaining survivors, to get them food, resources, whatever the U.S. was able to channel through the embassy and its consulates. These men were truly heroic. They're little known. Their names have been forgotten. Perhaps only Ambassador Morgenthau, Henry Morgenthau is remembered best, but every one of them just went out of their way to do their utmost to save as many Armenians as possible. Now, of course after the war, a large number of American volunteers joined this organization called Near East Relief and went overseas, went to Turkey and the Syrian Desert and literally retrieved the remaining survivors and brought them into towns and cities and began to rehabilitate them.

WOODS: What are the estimates of the number of people who were killed in this way?

ADALIAN: 2 million or so population, 1.5 million are estimated to have perished in the course of the years from 1915 to say about 1923. Effectively, there's only half a million survivors and they are dispersed. They're no longer in their home cities. They're now spread across the world, primarily across the Middle East at the time, so they're scattered across Syria, Iran, Russia, what's today Lebanon, Israel, Egypt, Greece, Bulgaria, you name it. All those surrounding countries became refugee sites in those initial decades. And of course anybody who could find their way to the United States did so, and that explains why there are so many Armenians in the country. The United States welcomed a large number of refugees, and that inflow has now stopped since then.

WOODS: Tell me exactly – I realize this is a morbid question, but how the killings were carried out. It's a very large number of people they're killing here, and I'm curious about how women, children, and older men were treated as compared to able-bodied, younger men. Was there any distinction?

ADALIAN: There was a clear distinction made between the able-bodied and the rest of the population, because the able-bodied men initially were drafted into the armed forces; however, they were never really trained or equipped to serve on the front. They were assigned to work in labor battalions, and ultimately they were simply worked to death or else at some point executed. So way before the deportations even

start, the able-bodied men, that portion of the population that might have been able to provide some effective defense or resistance to the deportations, had already been eliminated.

And so the deportations themselves then become a method for reducing the population. People out on the road in the open, where do you get food? Where do you get medication? Clearly the very old and the young would start dropping very quickly. Even so, certain numbers did reach the Syrian Desert. By then, of course there's no access to food; there's no access to water. It's quite obvious that they're simply going to be starving to death, and that's effectively what happened to very, very large numbers. Throughout the deportations, there were locations out of sight where nobody could see or hear what was going on, and therein the massacres occurred. It just continued to reduce down the numbers of the people on the deportation lines. So it's an organized, systematic, methodic way of simply reducing the numbers of a certain population, and 1.5 million is a very large number of people to kill.

WOODS: There is an Armenia on the globe today. Can you discuss the origins of that?

ADALIAN: Yes, historic Armenia in the early 20th century was divided between the Russian Empire and the Ottoman Empire, the Turkish Empire. A small portion had come under Russian rule in the Caucasus. And so what you see on the map today as the Republic of Armenia is what remained of historic Armenia under Russian rule. So that's the part of the population that was spared the direct effects of the genocide, even though they were not obviously spared the effects of the war itself. And this became another location where refugees and exiles concentrated and built a new home and a new country for themselves. Republic of Armenia geographically represents about 10% of what was the historic Armenians' state, the Armenian Kingdom, which dated back some 2 or 3,000 years.

WOODS: Now, how is it possible that the 20th century goes on with almost no discussion of this? I mean, today we hear people talking about the Armenian genocide; I think people assume everybody must have been talking about it for a hundred years. But they really weren't. Now, why is that?

ADALIAN: Well, two reasons: one, very small number of survivors, and you have to understand that the survivors themselves are at this point stateless people, penniless. Their primary objective in life is to simply stay alive, try to reconstitute a family if they can find whomever survived. The idea that the rest of the world would be listening to what they had to say seemed a remote possibility at the time, even though the world was well aware of what had happened to the Armenians. But they went completely quiet on it as it went on.

At the same time, the Turkish government, now reconstituted as the modern Republic of Turkey, saw to it and went about, again, very methodically and with great determination to suppress any public discussion of what had happened to the Armenians, certainly in official circles and in public circles. And the classic example is the ability to prevent the making of the Hollywood movie, *40 Days of Musa Dagh*. A very popular book had been written by that title by a European author, and Hollywood had bought the film rights. They announced that they were going to make the film, but Turkey intervened, and through State Department pressure, the film

wasn't made. And this is just, as I say, the best known example of actually containing and preventing the discussion of the Armenian genocide. And they succeeded in doing so for about 50 years or so.

It's only been since the 1960s and the '70s that the subject of the Armenians has come to public attention again, and that's because it's not the survivors anymore; it's the descendants, the children and the grandchildren of the survivors who have settled in countries all over the world who began to raise the issue. What is the world's response? Where is the point of justice to committing so many crimes that have gone unpunished, unaddressed?

WOODS: Okay, so that leads me to the next question. Describe for me what's been going on in the U.S. government in terms of statements by U.S. presidents about this. What are the factors at work here? It can't just be — I've always been told by my family, well, they don't want to offend the Turks because Turkey's an important ally. And I just can't believe that. Germany's an important ally and nobody worries about offending them. So what really is going on here? Is that really it?

ADALIAN: It's because unlike Germany, which faced the reality of what happened during a war and where these international tribunals as known as the Nuremberg Trials effectively persuaded and imposed upon the German population the realization of the crimes in which they had participated, that did not occur in the case of Turkey. And so effectively they got away with it. There were some trials in the immediate postwar years in 1919, 1920 or so, but those closed down pretty quickly. And so the onus of responsibility was never imposed on the Turkish government.

As far as the United States is concerned, Turkey and the United States have a significant alliance, and Turkey uses that leverage against the United States with all sorts of threats in closing down some of the bases, and some of those bases are critical for U.S. security and for U.S. policy in the Middle East. So instead of defending the truth, instead of acknowledging what the evidence is in our own National Archives, our government stops short of labeling the events a genocide. Otherwise, the president of the United States every April 24th for some 20 years or more does issue a statement on what the White House calls an Armenian Remembrance Day. It's a significant statement, because it does indeed recall what happened in 1915. The statements tend to be very accurate in their description of what happened, in as you noticed, massacres, deportations, expropriations, whatever else, but just stops short of labeling a genocide, which is the word on which the Turkish government is really hung up.

WOODS: Now, why is it — is it hung up on that simply because it's offended by the term, or does it think there will be any present day consequences, negative consequences for Turkey? Are the Armenians seeking any kind of reparations and that's what the Turks are afraid of, or is it just they don't want to be accused of this terrible crime?

ADALIAN: One, they don't want to be accused of the crime, and second, they do understand that if there is confirmation by the United States that indeed what happened in 1915 is a genocide, then there would be repercussions or considerations to be taken into account, at which point, what do you do? What kind of responsibility

does a government take for events that have now been labeled a genocide? Now, mind you, some 25 or more countries have done so already, most of them in Europe and South America, including Canada. It's only a question of where the United States stands, and the U.S. government's position, as I've tried to explain, is that it acknowledges the facts, but it won't label it a genocide.

WOODS: Interesting. Now, can you just take one minute to say something about Bob Dole, who's not somebody I have a lot of necessarily super kind words for on the show, but as I said, my grandmother loved him because of this? Why is it that Bob Dole became interested in the situation involving the Armenians?

ADALIAN: That's actually a very interesting question, and it has everything to do with his service during the Second World War. He was severely wounded, and when he was brought over for recovery to the States, he was sent to a surgeon of Armenian background by the name of Hampar Kelikian, who did his absolute best to help this young soldier who was bedridden to recover physically and to recover emotionally and morally. And that young soldier became Senator Bob Dole of Kansas, and Senator Dole was always personally grateful and thankful and held the memory of Dr. Kelikian dear. And Dr. Kelikian himself and his family of course had been victims of the Armenian genocide, and it's through him that Senator had first learned of the Armenians and of their fate, and thus he became, as you know, the greatest champion in the United States government for officially recognizing the Armenian genocide. In 1990, he spoke on the floor of the Senate eloquently to try to persuade the rest of his colleagues to adopt a resolution to that effect. He did not succeed, but he certainly made it clear where he stood.

WOODS: I'd like to ask you one other thing. I'm interested in the Church among the Armenians. Now, most of them I assume were Armenian Orthodox?

ADALIAN: Right, Armenians are virtually all Christian, but primarily Armenian Orthodox with many Protestant and many Catholic.

WOODS: Okay, so I'm just interested in, during those initial massacres, the extent to which the Church in particular was targeted, and if so, in what form did that take.

ADALIAN: Yes, that's actually a terrific question. To the effect that typically a genocide starts by targeting the able-bodied and the leadership, and this is why Armenians commemorate the Armenian genocide on April 24th, because that's the day the leadership of the Armenian community in Constantinople, a few hundred men, all of them were summarily arrested and deported and many never returned. And that pattern continued across all the Armenian communities, all the towns and cities of the Ottoman Empire. Any educator, any clergyman, any successful businessman, they were the ones that were politically active, naturally, were the ones that were picked up first. And the persecution of the priesthood was particularly gruesome because there was a religious dimension to the Armenian genocide, and the priests and the clergy were targeted for particular abuse. And no need to go into the details, but there are even reports of crucifixions.

WOODS: Wow, that is horrifying. Well, is there a good book people can read on this? If they're only going to read one, do you have one you can recommend?

ADALIAN: Well, that's actually a challenging question. What I could do, though, is recommend that people visit the website of the Armenian National Institute, Armenian-Genocide.org. It contains a massive amount of information on the subject and sample documents, sample reports from that time, the America record on the subject matter, what presidents have said and what many others have said. It will give them a comprehensive look into the subject of the Armenian genocide.

WOODS: All right, that is excellent. So Armenian-Genocide.org is that website. I will link to that website on our show notes page for today. TomWoods.com/899 will have that link on it. So anyway, this is about as thorough a background as you're going to get in 30 minutes about the Armenian genocide. Now people know where they can find more information, and we are grateful to Rouben Adalian for your time and your expertise. Thanks so much.

ADALIAN: You're most welcome.