

# Mass Atrocities

*Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?*

—German Führer Adolf Hitler (August 22, 1939)

**Essential Question:** What were the causes and consequences of mass atrocities from 1900 to the present?

The deaths of fighting forces in the two world wars were only part of the total casualties. Genocide, ethnic violence, and other atrocities took place as extremist groups rose to power. During and after World War I, the Ottoman Empire, ruled by a clique of “Young Turks” who were disturbed by the continuing decline of Ottoman power, perpetrated the Armenian genocide in which some 1.5 million Armenians died. As Adolf Hitler implemented the Holocaust, he referred to the Armenian annihilation as a reminder of how little the Nazis need fear for the systematic murder of six million Jews.

Ethnic atrocities did not end after World War II. Dictator Pol Pot wanted to “purify” Cambodian society along racial, social, and political lines, resulting in the deaths of 1.6 to 1.8 million Cambodians. (See Topic 8.6.) And in Rwanda, the majority Hutu government directed mass slaughter of the Tutsi minority.

## Atrocities in Europe and the Middle East

After three years of a bloody stalemate, the United States entered World War I in 1917, despite considerable popular protests in the United States against American involvement. By the summer of 1918, when U.S. forces were in place in Europe, U.S. actions helped push the war in the Allies’ favor. Allied advances against the Central Powers forced Germany to surrender on November 11, 1918, which became known as **Armistice Day**.

Between 8 million and 9 million soldiers died in the war, with more than 21 million wounded. In France, Germany, Russia, and Austria-Hungary, fewer than half of all young men who fought for their countries returned physically unharmed. Soldiers who did return often bore emotional scars.

Civilian casualties were harder to record, but estimates range anywhere from 6 million to 13 million. This was one of the first modern wars where civilians were considered legitimate targets. Although the Allies’ propaganda often exaggerated accounts of atrocities, reports of German soldiers raping women and killing families during their march through Belgium were common.



World War I Casualties				
Country	Alliance	Dead (in millions)	Wounded (in millions)	Imprisoned (in millions)
Germany	Central Powers	1.8	4.2	0.6
Russia	Allies	1.7	5.0	0.5
France	Allies	1.4	3.0	0.5
Austria-Hungary	Central Powers	1.2	3.6	0.2
Great Britain	Allies	0.9	2.1	0.2
Italy	Allies	0.5	1.0	0.5
Turkey	Central Powers	0.3	0.4	Not known
United States	Allies	0.1	0.2	Fewer than 0.05

**Armenian Genocide** The most shocking example of such atrocities were the deaths of between 600,000 and 1.5 million **Armenians** in Turkey. This action has been called the 20th century’s first **genocide**, the attempted killing of a group of people based on their race, religion, or ethnicity. The Ottoman government alleged that the Christian Armenians, a minority within the Ottoman Empire, were cooperating with the Russian army, an Ottoman enemy during World War I. As punishment for this cooperation, the Ottoman government deported Armenians from their homes between 1915 and 1917 and into camps in Syria and what is today Iraq. Many Armenians died from starvation, disease, or exposure to the elements. Turkish troops executed others. Armenians have argued that the deaths were genocide. The Turkish government has said the deaths were the result of actions of war, ethnic conflicts, and disease, not genocide. (Connect: Create a graphic organizer comparing the Armenian genocide with the Nazis’ extermination of millions of Jews. See Topic 7.6.)

## Pandemic Disease

War-related deaths continued past Armistice Day in the form of an **influenza epidemic**. Under peacetime circumstances, a virulent disease might devastate a concentrated group of people in a particular region. However, in 1918, millions of soldiers were returning home as the war ended. As they did, they had contact with loved ones and friends, thereby spreading the flu. In 1919, the epidemic became a **pandemic**, a disease prevalent over a large area or the entire world, killing 20 million people in Europe, the United States, and elsewhere. India alone may have lost 7 million people to the disease.

The worldwide spread of the disease was another sign that while nationalism remained a powerful political force, improvements in transportation were creating a global culture that would create global challenges. Whether people could create effective international responses was unclear.

## Suffering and Famine

A more intangible casualty of the war was the loss of a sense of security and hopefulness. The term **Lost Generation**, first used to describe American expatriate writers living in Paris after the war, came to be used more broadly to describe those suffering from the shock of the war. World War I was the bloodiest war thus far in history. It resulted in tremendous suffering and death for both military personnel and civilians.

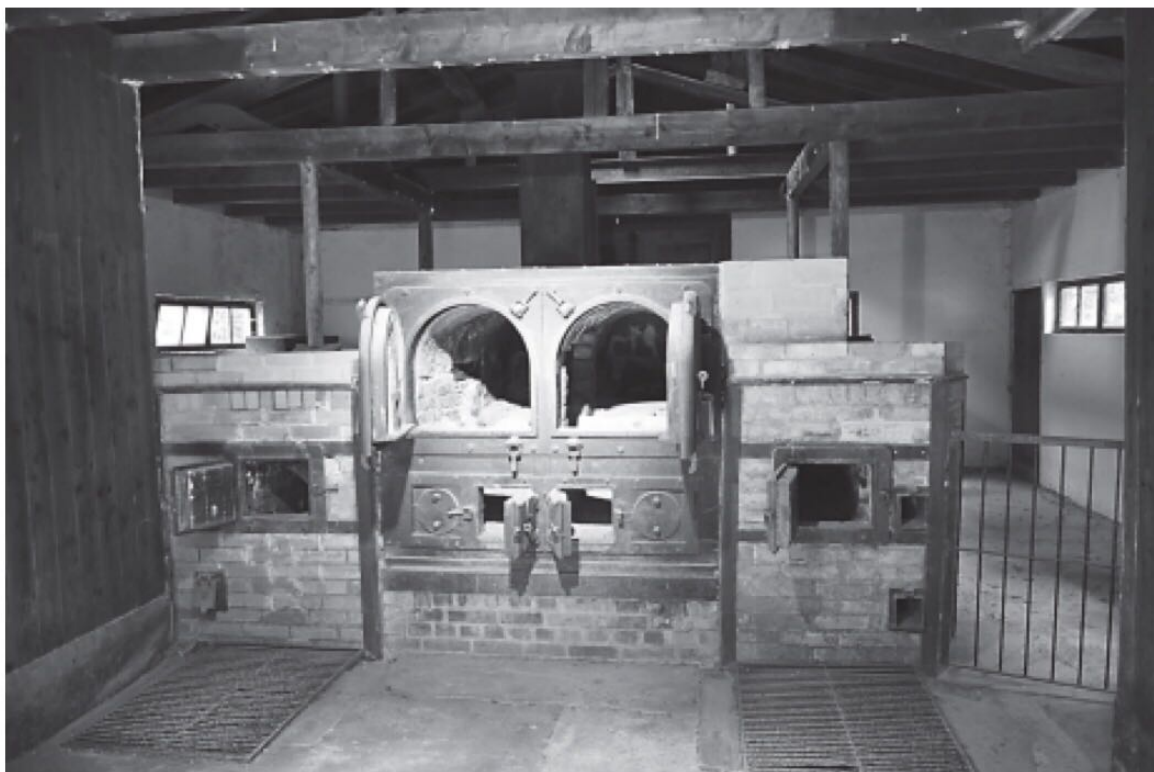
**Famine in the Ukraine** In the Soviet Union, peasants strongly resisted Stalin's collectivization of agriculture. They hid or destroyed their crops and killed their livestock rather than turning them over to state control. This led to famines from human action rather than by weather or crop failures. The famines in 1932 and 1933 were especially devastating in the Ukraine, one of the Soviet Union's most fertile farming regions. An estimated 7 million to 10 million peasants died as a result of these famines. The government took much of the crops that were grown to feed industrial workers or to use for industry. Although peasants starved, industry grew.

## Casualties of World War II

Because of the widespread fighting, advances in the technology of destruction, and its impact on the economies and civilian life of so many nations, the effects of World War II were unprecedented. Although exact casualty figures have been impossible to determine, total deaths probably numbered 40 million to 50 million. Maybe half of those were citizens of the Soviet Union, and millions of others were from Germany, Poland, China, and Japan. Losses among U.S. troops were fewer, but still considerable: about 290,000 soldiers killed and more than 600,000 wounded. Civilian casualties from attacks on land, air, and sea; from government executions based on political rationales, including genocide; and from disease and starvation caused by the war likely exceeded military casualties.

**The Nazis** During the war, the world gradually learned about Nazi brutality. In its pursuit of territory, Germany forcefully removed many Slavic peoples, including one million Poles, and Roma, also known as Gypsies, from their homes. **Heinrich Himmler**, the leader of the Nazi special police, the SS, oversaw these policies. In addition, more than 7 million residents of conquered territories were forced to work in labor camps or in jobs that supported the German war effort. The Nazis sent political opponents, people with disabilities, and gay people to the camps. But the largest single group the Nazis targeted were the Jews. When Hitler became chancellor, he instituted many policies that reflected these extreme anti-Semitic views, such as the **Nuremberg Laws** of 1935 that banned Jews from certain professions and certain schools. Jews were forced to live in sections of cities called **ghettos**.

In 1942, the Nazi persecution of Jews turned into mass murder. They began a campaign led by the SS to kill all Jews in Europe, a plan they called the “**Final Solution**.” Initially, Nazi killing units moved from place to place, shooting Jews and burying them in mass graves. Later the SS began rounding up Jews and shipping them to death camps, where Nazis gassed them. Auschwitz and Treblinka in Poland and Dachau in Germany were some of the largest camps. By the end of the war, the Nazis had killed about six million Jews, an act of genocide known as the **Holocaust**. The Nazis killed another five million people who belonged to other persecuted groups or were Soviet prisoners of war. The Nazis worked many to death in labor camps and massacred others.



One shocking aspect of the Holocaust was how the Nazis used technology—trains, poisonous gas, and ovens for cremation (shown here)—to make their attempt at genocide more efficient and more deadly.

**The Japanese** During the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, Japanese soldiers killed at least 100,000 Chinese soldiers and civilians in what was called the Rape of Nanking. During World War II, although the Japanese did not carry out a dedicated policy of genocide that paralleled the Holocaust, millions of people died as a result of their policies. Under the program “**Asia for Asiatics**,” Japan forced people they had conquered into labor programs. These included service in the military, on public works projects, and on farms to reduce the food shortage in Japan. The Japanese army forced women in Korea, China, and other occupied countries to become “comfort women,” prostitutes for Japanese soldiers. Because of these harsh programs, more than a million civilians died in Vietnam alone. Perhaps an equal number of Allied prisoners of war and local workers perished while doing forced labor for Japan.

**The Allies** Air warfare carried out by the United States and the other Allies brought a new type of deadly combat to civilians. The Allies' **firebombing** of German cities, particularly **Hamburg** in 1943 and **Dresden** in 1945, caused large casualties. The number of deaths in Hamburg was about 50,000. Dresden had fewer casualties, maybe 25,000 deaths, as 15 square miles of its historic city center were destroyed. The United States also used firebombing in **Tokyo**.

The final two air attacks in the war, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, produced not only high casualties, but tremendous fear about the destructiveness of a future war fought with nuclear weapons. These weapons had been developed by an international group of scientists working in the United States. The scientific achievement was impressive, but it also required developments in other areas to have military use. For example, to deliver the nuclear weapons required improvements in airplane design to allow long flights carrying heavy loads. There is a great difference between the planes used in World War II and those used in World War I. In addition, the widespread use of the aircraft carrier by several powers extended the airplanes' reach. Using these developments in planes and ships, countries could carry out air attacks anywhere in the world.

## Genocide and Human Rights

The global community said "never again" to genocide after the horrors of the Holocaust. However, genocides continued to occur.

**Bosnia** Ethnic conflict drove the genocide in **Bosnia**. The end of World War I brought with it the creation of several new nations in Eastern Europe, including Yugoslavia. That country was home to Serbians, who were Eastern Orthodox Christians; Croats and Slovenes, who were Catholic; and Muslims in the regions of Bosnia and Kosovo. Marshal Josip Broz Tito led communist Yugoslavia from the end of World War II until his death in 1980. As dictator, Tito tried to suppress separatist tendencies among the peoples of Yugoslavia by keeping Serbia and Croatia, the two largest republics, from dominating the smaller ones.

After the Soviet Union collapsed, so did Yugoslavia. When Slovenia, Croatia, and Montenegro declared independence, they each defined citizenship in terms of ethnic background and religion. Serbian nationalists led by the demagogue **Slobodan Milošević** were particularly emphatic about ethnic purity. Serb forces, in attempts to dominate states such as Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, committed horrific acts of **ethnic cleansing** against Muslims from Bosnia and Kosovo, killing or driving people who were not part of the main ethnic group from their homes. Bosniaks, Kosovars, and Croats fought back, causing more casualties. Serb soldiers raped untold numbers of Muslim women. In total, more than 300,000 people in the region perished over the course of Yugoslavia's **balkanization**, or disintegration into separate states.

**Rwanda** One of the smallest countries in Africa, **Rwanda** was the site of one of the worst genocides in modern history. Ethnic and tribal hatred going

back to the colonial era was behind the slaughter. Belgian colonizers had treated the minority **Tutsis** better than the majority **Hutus**. The latter group resented all the power that the Tutsis enjoyed. When Rwanda won independence from Belgium in 1962, the Hutu majority easily won control of the government and took revenge on the Tutsis by discriminating against them. In response, tens of thousands of Tutsis fled the country and formed a rebel army.

In 1993, Tutsi and Hutu forces in Rwanda began negotiations for a coalition government in which both ethnic groups would share power. The negotiations were cut short in 1994 when Rwanda's president, a Hutu, was killed in an airplane crash, supposedly shot down by rebel forces. This incident lit the flames of genocide. Over the next three months or so, between 500,000 and 1 million civilians—mostly Tutsis and some moderate Hutus—were killed. Some sources estimate that casualties were even higher.

International responses ranged from insufficient to callous. United Nations peacekeepers were instructed *not* to use force to restore order. There were also too few peacekeepers to protect all Rwandans. Individual countries, including the United States, evacuated their personnel from the country after Belgian peacekeepers were killed. UN peacekeepers and individual nations failed to evacuate any Rwandans. The Rwandan genocide focused attention on the lack of leadership in the international community. It became clear that the United Nations needed to think seriously about its role in violent conflicts if it wanted to effectively protect human lives and human rights.



Source: Wikimedia Commons

A school building in Rwanda has space set aside for a display of skulls, bones, and mummified bodies to remind people of the genocide of hundreds of thousands of people in 1994.



**Sudan** Another genocide erupted in 2003 in **Darfur**, a region located in western Sudan. Most of the people involved were Muslim, but some were nomadic pastoralists of Arab descent, while others were non-Arab farmers. The government of Sudan was controlled by Arab Muslims. Two Darfur rebel groups composed of non-Arabs took up arms against the Sudanese government in response to attacks from nomads. In response, the government unleashed Arab militants known as the **Janjaweed** (translation: “evil men on horseback”) on the region. Together with Sudanese forces, the Janjaweed attacked and destroyed hundreds of villages throughout Darfur, slaughtering more than 200,000 people, mostly non-Arab Muslim Africans. More than one million people were displaced, creating a refugee crisis that spilled into neighboring Chad. Despite negotiations, appeals, and the **International Criminal Court** charging Sudan’s President **Omar al-Bashir** with war crimes, the genocide continued.

The genocides in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Sudan became stains on the conscience of the world. International organizations and the broad global community were supposed to defend human rights after the Jewish Holocaust. Considering the millions of lives lost and human dignity shattered, the failure of the international community appeared obvious. (Connect: Write a paragraph comparing genocides in Africa during the last three decades with the Holocaust.)

<b>KEY TERMS BY THEME</b>		
<p><b>GOVERNMENT: War</b> Armistice Day Hamburg Dresden Tokyo</p> <p><b>GOVERNMENT: Policies</b> genocide Final Solution Holocaust Asia for Asiatics ethnic cleansing balkanization</p> <p><b>GOVERNMENT: Organizations</b> International Criminal Court</p>	<p><b>GOVERNMENT: Countries</b> Bosnia Rwanda Darfur</p> <p><b>GOVERNMENT: Leaders</b> Heinrich Himmler Slobodan Milošević Omar al-Bashir</p> <p><b>CULTURE: Movements</b> Lost Generation</p> <p><b>CULTURE: Ethnic Groups</b> Armenians Tutsis Hutus</p>	<p><b>TECHNOLOGY: Warfare</b> firebombing</p> <p><b>ENVIRONMENT: Disease</b> influenza epidemic pandemic</p> <p><b>SOCIETY: Discrimination</b> Nuremberg Laws ghetto Janjaweed</p>