

Theological and Historical Inquiry into the 1915-23 Extermination of Christians under Ottoman Rule: Part I

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Abstract

This study examines the theological, juridical, and historical dimensions of mass violence as they appear in the Bible, the Torah, and the Quran, with particular focus on the extermination of Armenians and other Christian populations under the Ottoman Empire in 1915-23. This paper juxtaposes theological interpretations with the legal frameworks established by the Nuremberg Tribunal and later codified in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court in order to examine whether the mass killings of 1915-23 should be understood as an ethnic genocide or, alternatively, as a form of religiously motivated violence articulated as *jihad* against Christian *dhimmi* populations. The evidence presented supports an interpretation grounded in political theology and historical jurisprudence. The analysis demonstrates how religious doctrines and legal hierarchies were instrumentalized by imperial authorities to justify persecution, thereby blurring the boundary between theological authority and state power. The article calls for a renewed theological and juridical reassessment of mass atrocities directed against religious communities, Ottoman Empire's case within broader discussions of church-state relations, religious minorities, and crimes against humanity. Although a number of states have formally recognized the Armenian genocide, the systematic destruction of multiple Christian communities has seldom been analyzed through the lens of religious classification as a structural principle of mass violence. By addressing this dimension, the article contributes to ongoing scholarly discussions of church-state relations, political theology, and the legal classification of mass violence.

Keywords

Church-State Relations, Religious Violence, Ottoman Empire, Dhimmi, International Law

1. Introduction

This article forms part of a broader interdisciplinary research program developed by Larysa Karaliova over the past decade examining the theological and juridical dimensions of mass violence.

The events of 1915-1923 in the Ottoman Empire resulted in the systematic destruction of large segments of its Christian population, including Armenians, Assyrians, Greeks, and Arab Christian communities. These events have been extensively examined within the historiography of genocide and mass violence and are widely regarded as one of the foundational cases in the modern conceptualization of genocide. Yet beyond questions of casualty numbers and political responsibility, the 1915-23 extermination raises enduring issues at the intersection of history, theology, and international law.

From a historical perspective, the events unfolded during a period of imperial collapse, war mobilization, and radical transformation of political authority. From a theological standpoint, they occurred within a legal and social order in which religious identity functioned as a primary marker of communal belonging. From a legal perspective, the case continues to inform debates concerning the relationship between religious classification, state sovereignty, and the later codification of genocide as an international crime.

The present study does not seek to reopen established historical consensus regarding the occurrence of mass destruction. Rather, it examines whether the structural foundations of the 1915-23 extermination were grounded primarily in religious differentiation embedded within Ottoman juridical practice. By situating these events within both Ottoman legal traditions and the analytical framework of modern genocide law, the article aims to clarify the conceptual categories through which group-based violence is understood.

The continued scholarly debate surrounding the 1915-23 events reflects broader contemporary concerns regarding the role of religion in state violence, the protection of minority communities, and the interpretation of group-based persecution under international law (Akçam, 2018; Kévorkian, 2011). Clarifying the historical foundations of such cases contributes not only to historiography but also to ongoing discussions of international justice and minority protection.

1.1. A Chapter from an Unpublished Manuscript

The article examines the intersections of theology, history, and international law in relation to the concept of genocide. It argues that the category of genocide warrants reconsideration from theological and moral perspectives, particularly in cases where mass violence is directed against communities defined primarily by religious affiliation rather than ethnicity. By analyzing the 1915-23 extermination of Christian populations under Ottoman rule, the study approaches genocide as both a historical and a theological phenomenon situated within the broader context of Muslim-Christian relations (Dadrian, 1986; Gaunt, 2015; Hlamides, 2008; Suny, 2009).

Rather than revisiting established historical consensus regarding the occur-

rence of mass destruction, the article seeks to clarify the classificatory principles underlying the violence and to examine whether religious differentiation functioned as a primary structural basis. In doing so, it contributes to contemporary debates concerning religious persecution, minority protection, and the interpretation of group-based violence under international law.

Although a number of states have formally recognized the Armenian genocide, the broader destruction of multiple Christian communities has received comparatively limited juridical or political acknowledgment as a religiously structured crime. This discrepancy highlights the importance of continued scholarly engagement with the conceptual framing of mass violence and its legal and theological interpretation.

1.2. An Analytical Distinction between Nazi-Conceptualized Genocide and Religiously Structured Mass Extermination

The central contribution of this article lies in its analytical distinction between genocide as conceptualized within the Nazi racial-genetic paradigm and forms of mass extermination structured primarily by religious classification and juridical subordination. By applying a political-theological framework to the 1915-23 extermination of Christian populations under Ottoman rule, the study challenges the uncritical retroactive application of a Nazi-derived model of genocide to historical contexts governed by fundamentally different normative logics (Nilsson, 2024).

In doing so, the article advances a juridical-theological vocabulary capable of accounting for religiously sanctioned mass violence without diminishing its criminal gravity. This approach situates the Ottoman case within broader debates on church-state relations, crimes against humanity, and the ethical limits of sovereign authority. By clarifying the distinction between biologically determinist models of extermination and those rooted in religious hierarchy and legal subordination, the study offers a conceptual contribution that remains insufficiently developed within existing genocide scholarship.

1.3. Methodological Approach, Sources and Analytical Framework

No formal decree explicitly ordering the total destruction of Christian populations has survived in the archival record. However, the absence of a single comprehensive written order does not preclude genocidal intent. Modern genocide scholarship recognizes that intent may be inferred from patterns of coordinated action, administrative correspondence, and systematic implementation of deportation and killing policies (Akçam, 2018; Kévorkian, 2011). Contemporary telegrams, directives, and provincial reports provide substantial evidence of organized and centrally directed violence.

This study adopts an interdisciplinary approach combining historical analysis, theological inquiry, and international legal interpretation. The primary evidentiary basis consists of published archival materials, including Ottoman adminis-

trative correspondence, telegrams attributed to leading political authorities, missionary and diplomatic reports, and contemporary testimonies. Particular attention is given to documented directives and patterns of coordinated deportation and mass killing (Akçam, 2018; Kévorkian, 2011).

Secondary sources include established scholarship in genocide studies, Ottoman history, and studies of Muslim-Christian relations (Dadrian, 1986; Gaunt, 2009, 2015; Suny, 2009). Scriptural and classical juridical texts (Qur'an, Al-Tabari, and later jurisprudential traditions) are examined not as direct operational documents but as part of the broader theological and legal environment within which communal differentiation was historically articulated.

The analytical framework of the study draws upon the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. The events of 1915-23 are examined through three principal elements: 1) Identification of the protected group; 2) Evidence of intent to destroy the group as such; 3) Implementation of enumerated acts including killing, deportation, forced displacement, and mass death through organized policies. The absence of a single comprehensive written extermination order does not preclude genocidal intent, which may be inferred from systematic patterns of coordinated state action (Akçam, 2018; Kévorkian, 2011).

2. Defining Genocide and Holocaust in Theology and Law

The term *genocide* derives from the Greek *genos* ("race" or "people") and the Latin *caedere* ("to kill"). It denotes the deliberate annihilation of a group based on its collective identity. In theological discourse, however, such acts often embody deeper metaphysical and moral conflicts.

The word *holocaust*, from the Greek *holokaustos* ("wholly burnt"), originally referred to a complete sacrificial offering. Applied to history, it suggests a perverse sacralization of mass killing-human lives consumed as ideological offerings. The juridical foundation for defining genocide was codified during the Nuremberg Trials (1945-1946), where extermination and mass deportation were legally recognized as *crimes against humanity* (Morris & Ze'evi, 2019). These legal categories provide a framework for assessing religiously motivated violence under historical empires. For the present discussion, the important part of the definition is that it is a crime against humanity (i.e., exterminations, deportations, and genocide). Jurists undertook intensive work to define genocide and holocaust and sought to include as many criminal acts as possible within the definition. Within Nazi ideology, genocide was understood as the destruction of groups defined by immutable genetic heritage (Morris & Ze'evi, 2019).

In contrast, the National Socialist extermination policy was grounded in a racial-biological doctrine that defined Jews and Roma as existential threats to the German *Volk* (people). Nazi ideology conceptualized history as a struggle between biologically determined races and framed the elimination of "racial enemies" as a necessary act of national preservation. While elements of mythic symbolism and ideological

ritualization existed within the broader culture of the Third Reich (Goodrick-Clarke, 1985, 2002), the central organizing principle of Nazi exterminatory policy was racial doctrine rather than classical theological jurisprudence. Antisemitism, racial pseudoscience, political radicalization, and material expropriation all contributed to the implementation of genocide (Nilsson, 2024; Ihrig, 2016; Stein, 1966).

While the concept of genocide emerged from attempts to juridically comprehend the crimes of Nazi Germany, its subsequent expansion after 1945 has introduced significant analytical complexity. In its original juridical and conceptual formulation, genocide was closely associated with the deliberate destruction of groups defined by perceived racial or genetic criteria, as exemplified by Nazi policies toward Jews and Roma populations (Kurlander, 2017). Later applications of the term, while morally and politically motivated, have extended its usage to contexts in which violence was structured primarily along religious, political, or cultural lines.

This expansion has enabled broader recognition of mass atrocities but has also raised questions concerning conceptual precision—particularly in cases where exterminatory policies were justified through religious doctrine and legal hierarchies rather than racial ideology alone. These tensions are central to the present analysis.

Illustrative Distinction between Genocide and Religiously Motivated Extermination

A fundamental distinction between the Nazi-derived model of genocide and religiously motivated extermination becomes evident when examined through concrete historical illustrations. Under Nazi racial doctrine, religious belief or conversion had no bearing on survival. Individuals classified as Jewish by ancestry were targeted irrespective of faith or practice.

This logic is exemplified by the case of the Karaims, a community practicing Judaism in religious terms but regarded by Nazi authorities as non-Jewish due to their perceived Khazar origin; despite their religious identity, they were not subjected to extermination. Conversely, Edith Stein (*Teresa Benedicta of the Cross*), a Catholic nun baptized decades before the rise of National Socialism, was deported and murdered in Auschwitz solely on the basis of her Jewish ancestry.

The moral and theological significance of this distinction was explicitly acknowledged by Pope John Paul II (John Paul II, 1998), who canonized Edith Stein as a martyr and designated her feast day as a commemoration of the Holocaust. His recognition underscores that the Holocaust constituted a crime rooted in racial ideology rather than religious affiliation, a categorization fundamentally distinct from religiously sanctioned mass violence.

3. Theological Conceptions of Divine Authority

In Judaism, divine authority is absolute: “*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one*” (Deut 6: 4). In Christianity, this same divine authority is embodied in Christ, the Messiah and Lord. In Islam, the proclamation “*There is no god but Allah*” affirms the unity and sovereignty of the Creator. Across all Abrahamic tra-

ditions, divine authority underpins moral order and delineates the boundary between justice and sin.

Scriptural narratives, the Flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, or the Ten Plagues—depict divine punishment for human disobedience. Although these events describe destruction, they are not regarded as genocide. Within theological frameworks, divine judgment is understood as transcending human juridical standards. Thus, theology distinguishes between divine justice and human violence, the latter being subject to ethical and legal accountability (Hodgson, 2009). The Ten Commandments establish universal prohibitions central to both Jewish and Christian ethics. Foremost among them, “*You shall not murder*” affirms the sanctity of life as a divine principle, principles that resonate with later formulations in modern international criminal law (Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 1998: Art. 7).

4. The Ten Commandments and the Ethics of Violence

Within the covenantal framework of the Decalogue, deliberate killing is presented as a violation of divine command.

The Ten Commandments, given to Moses on Mount Sinai (or Horeb), establish binding moral obligations within the Abrahamic traditions and articulate foundational prohibitions governing human conduct. Central among these is the commandment “*You shall not murder*” (לֹא תִרְצֹחַ), which affirms the sanctity of life as a core principle of divine law. Throughout history, political and religious authorities have frequently invoked divine sanctions to justify warfare, persecution, and coercion. Such appropriation of sacred authority obscures the boundary between divine justice and human ambition, generating moral paradoxes at the intersection of theology and law (Hodgson, 2009). Although variations in formulation and numbering of the commandments exist across Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the ethical substance of the prohibitions remains consistent and universal. The acceptance of the Ten Commandments constituted a covenantal relationship between the Lord and the people of Israel following the exodus from Egypt (*Mitzraim*), affirming divine authority as absolute and morally binding (The Torah (trans.) (Mariner, 2010)). Any form of mass killing thus represents a fundamental violation of this covenant. Nevertheless, historical experience demonstrates that rulers have repeatedly manipulated theological language to legitimize violence, thereby collapsing the distinction between divine judgment and human political ambition. The enduring ethical force of the Ten Commandments lies precisely in their rejection of such instrumentalization of the sacred. The ethical prohibitions of the Decalogue have profoundly influenced Jewish and Christian moral thought and have also shaped broader Abrahamic ethical discourse (Palmer (trans.), 2017).

Hebrew text ((The Torah (trans.) (Mariner, 2010) (London: Kuperard)).

- 1) אַנְכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים.
- 2) לֹא-יְהִי־לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עַל-פָּנָי.

- 3) לא תשא את-שם-יהנה אלהיך לשווא.
- 4) נכור את-יום השבת לקדשו.
- 5) כבד את-אביך ואת-אמך.
- 6) לא תרצח.
- 7) לא תנאף.
- 8) לא תגנב.
- 9) לא-מענה ברצח עד שקר.
- 10) לא תחמד בית רעה; לא-תחמד אשת רעה ועבדו ונאמתו ושוורו ונמריו; וכל אשר לרעה.

English text ((The Holy Bible, 2010) King James Version).

- 1) I am the Lord thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.
- 2) Thou shalt have no other gods before Me.
- 3) Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.
- 4) Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.
- 5) Honor thy father and thy mother.
- 6) Thou shalt not kill.
- 7) Thou shalt not commit adultery.
- 8) Thou shalt not steal.
- 9) Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbors.
- 10) Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, nor his wife, nor his servant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is thy neighbour's.

5. Biblical Descriptions of Mass Killings and Deportations

In the Bible, the Torah, and the Quran, numerous narratives describe episodes of mass destruction and deportation. These include the Flood ((Mariner, 2010) The Torah, Genesis 6-9), which purged a corrupted world, and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah ((Mariner, 2010) The Torah, Genesis 19), cities portrayed as consumed by vice. As Scripture records, “*The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and their sin is very grave*”, after which “((Mariner, 2010) The Torah, Genesis 18: 20) the Lord rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah sulphur and fire from the Lord out of heaven”.

Another illustrative narrative is the story of Samson, which begins in disobedience and concludes with submission to divine will: “Samson called out to the Lord: ‘O Lord God, please remember me.’” This account emphasizes obedience to divine authority rather than human agency. Similarly, the destruction and deportation of the Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians is presented as divine punishment for idolatry.

All such events are framed within Scripture as acts of divine judgment, grounded in the absolute authority and morality of the Lord. Consequently, none of these acts are described as genocide in theological or historical tradition. Within theological interpretation, such acts are framed as divine judgment rather than human crime. These narratives differ fundamentally from modern juridical categories. Within theological frameworks, such events are understood as expressions of di-

vine sovereignty rather than as acts subject to human legal evaluation. The concept of genocide, as defined in twentieth-century international law, presupposes human agency, intent, and accountability. Scriptural depictions of divine judgment operate within a different conceptual register. The distinction between divine judgment and human violence becomes analytically significant when evaluating historical cases such as the 1915-23 extermination of Christian populations under Ottoman rule. Whereas scriptural narratives attribute destruction to divine action beyond human jurisdiction, modern mass atrocities involve identifiable political authorities, administrative coordination, and legally assessable intent. Maintaining this distinction is essential in order to prevent theological narratives from being misapplied to the justification of state violence.

6. Historical Application: The 1915 Extermination of Christians

The events of 1915 in the Ottoman Empire, commonly termed the Armenian Genocide encompassed the systematic killing of Christian populations, including Armenians, Assyrians, Greeks, and Christian Arabs. Archival documents and testimonies indicate that Muslim Armenians were protected from extermination and, in many cases, served within Ottoman military, administrative, and police structures (Akçam, 2018; Kieser, 2018; Üngör & Polatel, 2011; Kévorkian, 2011). This suggests that religious classification played a structurally significant role alongside political and national considerations (Akçam, 2018).

Accordingly, the 1915 massacres may be examined through the lens of political theology as a religiously sanctioned campaign directed against *dhimmi* populations, non-Muslims living under Islamic rule. The theological vocabulary of *jihad*, when considered alongside the juridical status of *dhimmi*s, reveals a religious logic that structured loyalty, exclusion, and punishment within the Ottoman imperial system. This framework helps to explain why religious affiliation, rather than ethnicity, functioned as the decisive criterion in the selection of victims.

7. The Concept of *Dhimmi* under Shariah Law

In classical Islamic jurisprudence, the term *dhimmi* (Arabic: ذمّي 'ḍimmi, ḍimmī) refers to Jews and Christians, the “People of the Book”, who were permitted to live under Muslim rule in exchange for paying the *jizya* tax. The so-called *Pact of Umar* codified their subordinate position, prohibiting the building of new churches, public prayer, or the riding of horses, and prescribing distinctive clothing to mark their status (Al-Qattan, 1999; Afsaruddin, 2025).

Such regulations institutionalized religious inequality and reinforced perceptions of permanent subordination. Over centuries, the *dhimmi* system normalized differential treatment and created conditions under which religious minorities could be subjected to persecution whenever political circumstances shifted.

By the early twentieth century, this historical framework still shaped Ottoman perceptions of non-Muslims. Consequently, when imperial policies turned vio-

lent, theological precedents were readily available to justify the targeting of Christian subjects.

7.1. Islamic Law and the Juridical Status of *Dhimmis*

Because the juridical status of *dhimmis* is often unfamiliar to readers outside Islamic legal studies, the following subsection outlines the core legal principles governing their position under classical Shariah law. The so-called Pact of Umar codified the subordinate status of *dhimmis* and regulated their public religious expression (Sharkey, 2012; Hodgson, 2009). It should be noted, however, that the historical authenticity, textual stability, and uniform enforcement of the Pact of Umar remain subjects of scholarly debate. Modern historiography emphasizes that the application of *dhimmi* regulations varied significantly across time and regions within the Islamic world, and that Ottoman administrative practice evolved in response to political, economic, and diplomatic pressures. The reference to the Pact in this study therefore serves not as evidence of a static or universally applied legal regime, but as an illustration of a broader juridical tradition in which religious differentiation was institutionally recognized.

7.1.1. Foundational Legal Framework

In classical Islamic jurisprudence, the status of *dhimmis* was formalized through what later became known as the Pact of Umar, attributed to (Umar, 1998), the second caliph. This covenant acquired canonical authority in Islamic legal tradition and established a juridical framework governing the lives of Jews and Christians, the “People of the Book”, under Muslim rule. According to this framework, *dhimmis* were granted conditional protection in exchange for political submission and the payment of the *jizya* tax. Islamic legal doctrine emphasized that *dhimmis* should “feel inferior and know their place”, reflecting a codified hierarchy embedded in Shariah law (Hodgson, 2009).

7.1.2. Institutionalized Restrictions and Social Subordination

The juridical status of *dhimmis* entailed extensive legal and social restrictions designed to reinforce permanent subordination. These included prohibitions on public religious expression, such as loud prayer, the ringing of church bells, or the sounding of the Jewish shofar, as well as severe limitations on the construction or repair of churches and synagogues without Muslim authorization (Sharkey, 2012). *Dhimmis* were forbidden from seeking converts among Muslims (Sidney, 2010), excluded from certain civil and political rights, and subjected to visible markers of inferiority, including distinctive clothing or signs affixed to their houses (Al-Tabari, n.d.).

Mobility restrictions further underscored their second-class status. In several Islamic polities, including Mamluk Egypt, *dhimmis* were prohibited from riding horses or camels and, in some cases, even donkeys within urban areas, while such privileges were reserved for Muslims (Norman, 1979). Collectively, these regulations institutionalize inequality and normalize discrimination as a legal norm ra-

ther than an exceptional practice.

7.1.3. Political Theology, Jizya, and the Logic of Exclusion

The obligation to pay the *jizya* tax functioned not merely as a fiscal requirement but as a symbolic affirmation of submission to Muslim political and religious authority (Abdel-Haleem, 2012; Afsaruddin, 2025; *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2025). Failure to comply could result in coercion, expulsion, or death, depending on prevailing interpretations among the four Sunni legal schools (*madhhabs*). Historical sources describe periods, such as the reign of the Abbasid Caliph al-Mutawakkil—during which enforcement of *dhimmi* restrictions intensified, forcing religious minorities into segregated quarters and reinforcing their vulnerability (Al-Qattan, 1999).

This juridical-theological framework persisted into the late Ottoman period and shaped imperial perceptions of non-Muslim subjects. When political circumstances radicalized state policy, the existing legal status of *dhimmi*s provided readily available theological and juridical justifications for exclusion, punishment, and ultimately extermination. Understanding this legal structure is therefore essential for explaining why religious affiliation, rather than ethnicity alone, became the decisive criterion in the targeting of Christian populations in 1915.

8. The International Military Tribunal (IMT)

The International Military Tribunal was established by the London Agreement of 8 August 1945, signed by representatives of the United States, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and the Provisional Government of France. The Agreement provided the legal foundation for prosecuting major war criminals of the European Axis powers and constituted the Charter of the Tribunal (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United States of America, & France and Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, 1945).

A series of trials were conducted in Nuremberg during 1945-1946, in which leading figures of the Third Reich were indicted for crimes against peace, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. Article 6(c) of the Charter defined crimes against humanity. Although the term *genocide* was not explicitly included in the Charter, the concept had been articulated shortly before the trials by Raphael Lemkin, whose work provided the intellectual and legal foundation for subsequent developments in international criminal law.

Article 6 of the IMT Charter defined *crimes against humanity* as:

“Murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation, and other inhumane acts committed against any civilian population, before or during the war, or persecutions on political, racial or religious grounds, whether or not in violation of the domestic law of the country where perpetrated.”

This definition established the principle that systematic or widespread violence against civilian populations constitutes an international crime independent of domestic legal frameworks: “*Crimes against humanity: namely, murder, extermina-*

tion, enslavement, deportation, and other inhumane acts committed against any civilian population, before or during the war, or persecutions on political, racial or religious grounds in execution of or in connection with any crime within the jurisdiction of the Tribunal, whether or not in violation of the domestic law of the country where perpetrated (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United States of America, & France and Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, 1945; Taube, 1945-1946).

The indictments also encompassed a wide range of atrocities committed under the Nazi regime, including state-sponsored medical experiments. These experiments involved low-pressure and hypothermia testing, seawater ingestion trials, typhus vaccine experiments, hepatitis virus research, sulphonamides testing, bone and muscle transplantation, phlegmon experiments, exposure to chemical warfare agents such as mustard gas and phosgene, the collection of skeletal remains of Jewish victims, and the so-called “*euthanasia*” program. These acts were prosecuted as violations of fundamental humanitarian principles and emerging norms of medical ethics.

On 18 October 1945, the chief prosecutors of the Tribunal indicted 24 leading Nazi officials and several organizations. The accused organizations included the Reich Cabinet; the Leadership Corps of the Nazi Party; the Schutzstaffel (SS); the Sicherheitsdienst (SD); the Geheime Staatspolizei (Gestapo); the Sturmabteilung (SA); and the General Staff and High Command of the German Armed Forces (Hoffmann, 2000). The history of the SS: A sociological perspective. University of Wisconsin Press. The charges comprised conspiracy to commit crimes against peace, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.

The legal framework developed at Nuremberg laid the groundwork for later international instruments, including the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, which in Article 7 further elaborated the definition of crimes against humanity as widespread or systematic attacks directed against civilian populations (Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 1998: Art. 7; Morris, & Ze’evi, 2019).

Although the IMT established enduring moral and juridical norms that have since been applied in international criminal law, the Tribunal did not explicitly declare these norms to possess retroactive legal force (or to be retroactive legal power) applicable to crimes committed prior to its establishment. Nevertheless, the moral norms articulated at Nuremberg retain normative relevance and provide an essential framework for the historical and ethical evaluation of earlier mass atrocities.

The term *genocide* was not explicitly included in the Charter of the International Military Tribunal, the underlying acts later defined as *genocide* were prosecuted under the category of crimes against humanity. The concept of *genocide*, articulated by Raphael Lemkin (in book *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* 1944) prior to the trials, provided an important intellectual foundation for the subsequent development of international criminal law.

The legal codification took place only after IMT, at 1948 by Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (UN) and was accepted as a separate crime in 1998-2002 by Rome Statute of the ICC.

9. The 1915 Jihad and Its Modern Echoes

The Ottoman proclamation of jihad in 1915 may be understood as the culmination of long-standing institutional arrangements through which religious authority and state power were mutually reinforcing (Akçam, 2018; Kieser, 2018; Üngör & Polatel, 2011; Kévorkian, 2011). Within this framework, Christian communities were not merely religious minorities but legally differentiated subjects whose status was contingent upon political obedience and theological subordination. When imperial authority came to perceive these communities as disloyal, the preexisting fusion of religious doctrine and state sovereignty provided a ready mechanism for legitimizing coercion (Al-Qattan, 1999).

In this context, non-Muslims who resisted conversion to Islam or rejected unconditional political loyalty were constructed simultaneously as theological outsiders and internal threats to the state. Violence against them was therefore not framed solely as a security response or an expression of nationalist sentiment, but as an act endowed with religious justification. The declaration of jihad functioned as a juridico-theological instrument through which state violence acquired sacral legitimacy as argued by Dadrian.

Accordingly, the policies that culminated in mass extermination cannot be adequately explained through ethnic nationalism alone. Rather, they reflect a structural interaction between religious law, political authority, and imperial governance. This interaction enabled the transformation of political objectives into moral imperatives, insulating state actions from ethical restraint by embedding them within a religiously sanctioned legal order (Dadrian, 1986; Gaunt, 2015; Hlamides, 2008; Suny, 2009).

References to contemporary political ideologies that invoke imperial or religious legacies are introduced here not as political judgments, but as analytical illustrations of continuity in the relationship between theology and state power. Movements that merge nationalist ambition with sacralized historical narratives demonstrate how religious concepts can continue to function as legitimizing resources for political authority, particularly when state identity is framed in civilizational or confessional terms. As an illustrative example, modern ideological currents such as Pan-Turkism—particularly its “*Great Turan*” narratives, demonstrate how sacralized historical imaginaries may continue to be mobilized within state-oriented political projects (Gökalp, 1968; Landau, 1974; Landau, 1995; Ciddi, 2008).

From the perspective of church-state scholarship, the events of 1915 thus represent a critical case study in the dangers inherent in the institutional fusion of religious legitimacy and sovereign power. When theological doctrines are incorporated into state mechanisms of coercion, the boundary between moral authority and political domination collapses, rendering entire populations vulnerable to ex-

clusion and destruction.

Recognizing the religious dimension of the 1915 exterminations is therefore essential—not as an exercise in retrospective moralization, but as a necessary inquiry into the ethical limits of state authority and the responsibilities of religious institutions. Such re-examination contributes directly to contemporary debates on church-state relations by demonstrating how the misuse of theology within governance structures can facilitate mass violence under the guise of legal and moral order.

10. Analytical Synthesis: Genocide and Jihad as Distinct Modes of Mass Destruction

The evidence examined in this article demonstrates that the mass extermination carried out by Ottoman authorities in 1915 was selective, structured, and religiously defined, rather than biologically or genetically determined. Archival records and eyewitness testimonies consistently indicate that only Christian populations, Armenians, Assyrians, Greeks, and other Christian communities, were systematically targeted for destruction, while Muslim Armenians were protected, exempted from deportation, and in many cases incorporated into Ottoman military, police, and administrative institutions (Dadrian, 1986; Akçam, 2018; Morris, & Ze'evi, 2019). This pattern of survival and extermination cannot be explained by ethnicity alone and points decisively to religious affiliation as the operative criterion (Bloxxham, 2005; Ihrig, 2016; Watenpaugh, 2013).

This distinction is critical for differentiating the Ottoman extermination of Christians from the Nazi model of genocide (Kurlander, 2017). In Nazi doctrine, extermination was grounded in genetic determinism: Jews and Roma were targeted regardless of belief, conversion, loyalty, or cultural practice. This distinction concerns mechanisms of classification and execution rather than degrees of criminality or moral gravity. Biological origin alone constituted guilt, rendering survival impossible through any change of identity. By contrast, the Ottoman system operated through religious categorization and juridical subordination. Christians were defined as dhimmis, a legally inferior but conditionally tolerated group whose status could be revoked. In this framework, conversion to Islam functioned as a potential mechanism of survival, underscoring the fundamentally religious, rather than genetic, logic of extermination. The magnitude of the crime nevertheless remains undeniable. Historical estimates indicate that more than three million Christians were killed between 1915 and the early 1920s, including over 1.5 million Armenians, approximately 750,000 Assyrians, more than 400,000 Greeks, and substantial numbers of other Christian communities (Dadrian, 1986; Akçam, 2018; Morris & Ze'evi, 2019; Hlamides, 2008; Suny, 2009). Entire regions were stripped of their Christian presence through mass killings, deportations, starvation, and death marches, resulting in the near eradication of ancient Christian civilizations from large parts of Anatolia.

The Ottoman case thus represents not a variant of Nazi genocide, but a distinct mode of mass destruction in which theology, law, and state power converged. The

extermination was legitimized through religious doctrine (*jihad*), implemented through legal hierarchy (*dhimmi* status), and executed by imperial authority. Recognizing this distinction does not mitigate the crime; rather, it is essential for accurate juridical classification, historical understanding, and for preventing future forms of religiously sanctioned mass violence.

Legal Mapping under the Genocide Convention

The foregoing historical and analytical discussion may now be evaluated explicitly within the juridical structure of the Genocide Convention.

Under Article II of the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, genocide consists of three principal elements: (1) The existence of a protected group (Akçam, 2018); (2) Specific intent to destroy the group, in whole or in part (Kaligian, 2017), as such; (3) The commission of one or more enumerated acts (Watenpaugh, 2013).

In the present case, the protected group consisted of converted to Islam Christians individuals within the Ottoman Empire, including Armenians, Assyrians, Greeks, and other Christian populations. Their identification was grounded primarily in religious affiliation, which functioned as a legally recognized category within the Ottoman system of communal organization.

With respect to intent, although no single comprehensive written decree explicitly ordering total extermination has survived, genocidal intent may be inferred from coordinated deportation policies, systematic targeting of Christian populations, administrative correspondence, and documented patterns of mass killing and destruction (Akçam, 2018).

As to enumerated acts, the historical record demonstrates large-scale killing, deportation under conditions leading to death, forced displacement, destruction of communal structures, and other measures resulting in the physical destruction of substantial segments of the targeted population (Lütem & Yiğit, 2018). These elements correspond to the acts described in Article II (a), (b), and (c) of the Convention.

Accordingly, the 1915-23 events may be analyzed within the structural framework of genocide law, while recognizing the distinct historical and juridical context in which they occurred.

11. Statement of Significance

This article offers an interdisciplinary reassessment of the 1915 extermination of Christian minorities under the Ottoman Empire by integrating theological, historical, and juridical analysis. It advances scholarly understanding of how religious doctrines and legal structures intersected to legitimize violence against non-Muslim populations. By introducing a theological vocabulary for interpreting genocide within the Abrahamic traditions, the study contributes to contemporary debates on church-state relations, interfaith dialogue, and human rights.

Larysa Karaliova developed the original theological framework and conducted the comparative scriptural analysis. Materials from her unpublished book manu-

script and the photograph presented in **Figure 1** were provided by her family from her personal archive.



Figure 1. Dr. Larysa Karaliova.

Larysa Karaliova (2 November 1961-7 January 2025) (Brondz, 2025) (**Figure 1**), from 2012 onward, she published scholarly and analytical works and was actively involved in academic editorial practice, serving as Associate Editor in Chief of *Voice of the Publisher* from 2013 and as Deputy Director of the Norwegian Drug Control and Drug Discovery Institute from 2015. In 1985 she graduated Minsk State Linguistic University (Belarus), Philology in linguistics: French, Russian, German and Pedagogy, 2008 Østfold University College (Norway), in German Philology, in 2012 University of Oslo (Norway), European and American Area Studies and in 2020 Oslo City University (Norway) Nursery and Health Care.

Her theses were *La politique de Valéry d'Estaing en matière de condition féminine* 1974-1981 (in French) (**Figure 2**), Valérie d'Estaing's Policy on the Status of Women in 1974-1981.

Her knowledge in French and in European French politics were highly praised by the former President Valéry d'Estaing. During her visit in 2011 to his family residence the former President Valéry d'Estaing in recognition of her essay quality *La politique de Valéry d'Estaing en matière de condition féminine* 1974-1981 gave Larysa two volumes of his book *Le Pouvoir et La Vie* (**Figure 3**), signed by him as the recognition of Larysa's skills. Larysa Karaliova published the papers (Karaliova, 2015; Brondz, Karaliova, & Ekeberg, 2006; Karaliova & Brondz, 2025, 2026).

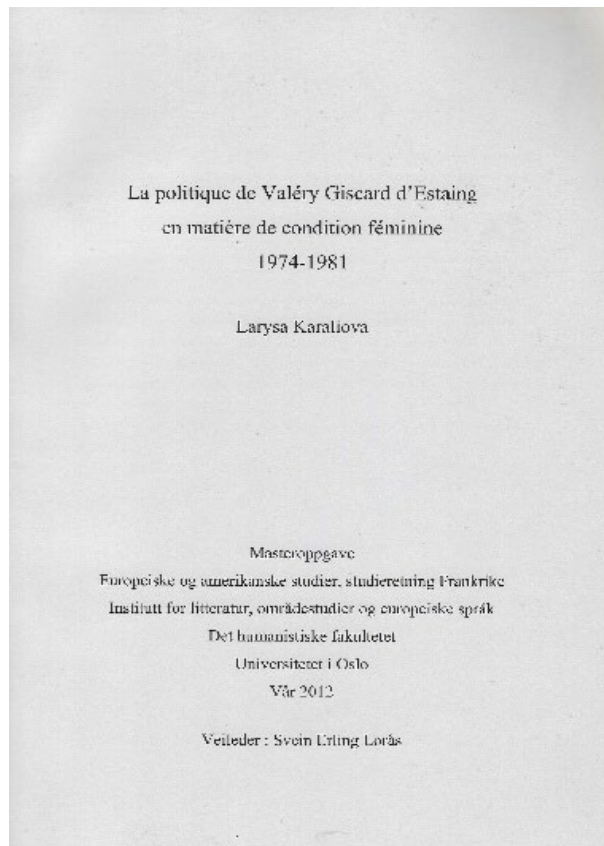


Figure 2. Larysa's thesis: *La politique de Valéry d'Estaing en matière de condition féminine 1974-1981* (in French).

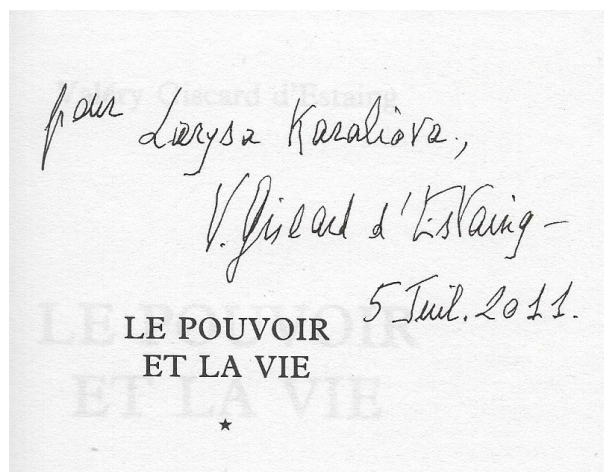


Figure 3. The book *Le Pouvoir et La Vie* signed by Valéry d'Estaing as the recognition of Larysa's skills.

12. Discussion

This conceptual distinction has direct implications for contemporary political and juridical discourse. When modern political actors characterize the 1915-23 events as genocide, they often rely on a moral rather than a strictly juridical application

of the term. Such application is widely accepted within genocide scholarship; however, debates persist regarding the precise conceptual framework through which the events should be analyzed. While such declarations may serve important commemorative or ethical purposes, they risk conflating distinct legal categories by retroactively applying a Nazi-derived genetic model of genocide to a case structured primarily by religious classification.

Questions concerning state succession and legal responsibility remain complex in international law. The relationship between the Ottoman Empire and the modern Republic of Türkiye has been the subject of scholarly and diplomatic debate. While juridical responsibility may be contested, the ethical dimension of historical acknowledgment remains significant in international relations and transitional justice discourse.

This juridical position, however, does not absolve the state from moral responsibility or from the ethical imperative to acknowledge historical suffering.

13. Conclusion

This study has argued that the 1915 extermination of Christian populations under the Ottoman Empire cannot be adequately understood through a strictly Nazi-derived, genetic model of genocide alone. While these events unquestionably constitute crimes against humanity, their underlying logic was shaped primarily by religious classification, juridical subordination, and the instrumentalization of theology by state authority (Dadrian, 1986; Morris & Ze'evi, 2019). The political Islam is taking a new and more radical shape (Eligür, 2010). Recognizing this distinction does not diminish the gravity of the atrocities committed; rather, it clarifies the conceptual and legal frameworks through which such violence should be analyzed. A juridical-theological approach is therefore essential for understanding mass violence directed against religious minorities and for preventing the future misuse of sacred authority in legitimizing state-sponsored persecution.

The events of 1915-23 in the Ottoman Empire represent one of the most consequential episodes of mass violence in the modern era. While the historical reality of large-scale destruction has been extensively documented, the conceptual framing of these events continues to require careful analytical refinement. This study has argued that the extermination of Christian populations under Ottoman rule cannot be fully understood through a purely ethnic or nationalist paradigm. Rather, it must be examined within the broader intersection of religious classification, juridical hierarchy, and wartime state radicalization.

The comparison with the National Socialist model of genocide highlights a critical analytical distinction. Whereas Nazi ideology grounded extermination in biological determinism and racial ancestry, the Ottoman imperial system historically structured communal identity through religious status. Although the violence of 1915-23 occurred within the context of modern state centralization and geopolitical crisis, inherited frameworks of religious differentiation shaped patterns of vulnerability and exclusion. Recognizing this distinction does not relativ-

ize or diminish the gravity of the crime; instead, it clarifies the mechanisms by which mass destruction was conceptualized, justified, and implemented.

The theological dimension of the case requires particular care. Scriptural traditions distinguish divine judgment from human violence, and the incorporation of religious vocabulary into state policy does not equate religious doctrine with political crime. However, when religious legitimacy becomes intertwined with sovereign authority, theological language may be mobilized in ways that reshape political conflict into moralized struggle. The Ottoman declaration of jihad during World War I illustrates how sacral discourse can interact with state power under conditions of crisis, contributing to an environment in which collective violence is framed as morally necessary.

The development of international criminal law following the Nuremberg trials established enduring principles for evaluating such acts. Although the formal codification of genocide occurred only in 1948, the analytical tools developed in the aftermath of World War II provide a framework for assessing earlier atrocities. Applying these categories retrospectively is not an act of anachronism, but a means of clarifying structural features of mass violence that transcend specific historical contexts.

Ultimately, the 1915-23 extermination of Christian populations demonstrates the dangers inherent in the fusion of religious authority and state sovereignty when institutional safeguards collapse. The case underscores the importance of maintaining clear boundaries between theological conviction and coercive governance. It also contributes to contemporary debates in church-state scholarship by illustrating how systems of religious classification, when combined with modern administrative power, can produce catastrophic outcomes. A precise understanding of the religious, juridical, and political dimensions of this historical case is therefore not merely an exercise in retrospective interpretation. It remains essential for contemporary reflection on minority protection, the ethical limits of sovereign authority, and the prevention of future forms of collective violence.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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