

Brief Histories

The Nanjing Massacre

Setting the Stage

On September 18, 1931, Japan invaded and occupied Manchuria, China. Manchuria, a colony in Northeastern China, was an industrial area known for its rich mineral and coal reserves. The so-called Mukden Incident was the first of many skirmishes between the Republic of China and the Empire of Japan. Full scale war did not break out between the two countries until the Marco Polo Bridge Incident – July 7, 1937 – when the Japanese army attacked a major entrance point to Beijing, China. The Marco Polo Bridge Incident marked the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese War; the war was fought before and during World War II and ended with Japan's unconditional surrender to the Allies on September 9, 1945. In December of 1937, during this war, the Japanese military invaded Nanjing, China and engaged in a campaign of mass killing. The Japanese army marched from Shanghai, a port city 190 miles down the Yangtze River, to Nanjing. Weakened by losses in Shanghai, China's army withdrew its troops from Nanjing. This left the city, and its citizens, unprotected from the invading Japanese army. As the Japanese approached, Western businessmen and missionaries established the Nanjing Safety Zone, a safe haven in the city for women, children and other noncombatants.

Massacre

On December 13, 1937, The Japanese army captured what was then China's capital city, Nanjing, and killed as many as 300,000 civilians and numerous unarmed Chinese soldiers over the course of two months. After the Japanese overran the city, they hunted down and killed suspected Chinese soldiers, massacred families living outside the Safety Zone, and raped tens of thousands of women. The Japanese army also looted the city and burned down many buildings. In January, the invaders declared the city subdued and ordered the Safety Zone disbanded; when people returned home, atrocities resumed. The violence subsided in February 1938, after the establishment of a Chinese led, Japanese influenced government. The chaos, fires, and mass graves make a precise count of casualties impossible.

Aftermath

The Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal opened in May 1946 and concluded in November 1948. The defendants, which including Prime Minister Gen. Tōjō Hideki and other wartime leaders of Japan, were accused of crimes against peace, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. In total, twenty-five defendants were convicted. Sixteen were sentenced to life imprisonment (four died in prison); two received lesser sentences; seven, including Prime Minister Gen. Tōjō Hideki, were hanged. The Japanese government paroled the imprisoned in 1956 and released them unconditionally in 1958.

Nanjing Massacre Testimony

USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive contains 30 testimonies from Nanjing Massacre survivors. The Foundation partnered with the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall in 2012 to preserve the testimonies of the last survivors of these atrocities; interviews continued until 2017. All of the testimonies are in Mandarin and contain English subtitles. Testimonies in the Nanjing collection seek to establish full-life histories of the individuals, including their social and cultural life before and after the Nanjing Massacre.



John Magee, an American Missionary stationed in China during the Nanjing Massacre, took 16mm home movies of the devastation he observed. The above image is of Shuqin Xia, her younger sister Shuyun Xia, and an elderly woman. The woman lived in a local nursing home, and she found Shuqin and Shuyan ten days after their family had been killed.

Setting the Stage

Prior to German and Belgian colonialization in the late 1800s, Rwandans shared a culture, language and monarch. Inter-marriage between three groups – Tutsi, Hutu and Twa – was common. Members of one group could gain or lose wealth and power and change from one group to another. Colonizers did not understand or respect this dynamic. They favored Tutsis over Hutu and Twa, and created rigid ethnic categories. From that time on, ethnicity was passed from father to child. Decolonization in the 1950s led to violence against the Tutsi. When Rwanda became an independent republic in 1962, the Hutu established a dictatorship. Ethnic division and violence forced some Tutsi into exile. In October 1990, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a militant group founded by Tutsi refugees, invaded Rwanda. The RPF demanded a safe return to Rwanda and expected a role in the country's government. Rwandan president Juvénal Habyarimana was forced to negotiate a peace agreement with the RPF. Hutu extremists feared they would lose power, and formed militias, called Interahamwe. These militias believed in Hutu supremacy and promoted violence against Tutsis. On the evening of April 6, 1994, a private jet carrying President Habyarimana was shot out of the sky, killing everyone on board. Immediately, extremists within the government and the media blamed the RPF for the attack. Militias set up roadblocks around the capital city of Kigali. Their perceived enemies – Tutsi leaders and Hutu who did not believe in ethnic-based nationalism – were targeted for killing. By the morning of April 7, the genocide had begun. Violence quickly spread throughout the country. The RPF believed the violence violated the ceasefire, and they renewed their campaign against Rwandan government forces.



Above: Photograph of Tutsi survivor, Gerard Bandora, July 1994. This photograph was taken shortly after the end of the Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda.

Genocide

The Interahamwe – promising land and wealth – recruited able-bodied Hutu (both male and female) to participate in the genocide. Radio and newspapers used propaganda to incite attacks on Tutsi. Tutsi were hunted, tortured, raped, and murdered. Neighbors, friends, and family members turned on one another. Much of the killing was perpetrated with machetes and other farm tools. Tutsi sought refuge in churches, schools and stadiums. During prior instances of mass violence, churches offered sanctuary, yet, during the genocide, militias attacked them. Schools, stadiums, and churches are now the site of mass graves. Over the course of approximately 100 days, Hutu extremists murdered at least 900,000 Tutsi and Hutu moderates. The genocide in Rwanda is the fastest genocide in modern history.

End of Genocide

Despite the presence of United Nations peacekeeping forces in Kigali before and during the genocide, there was no international intervention. The genocide ended in July 1994, when the RPF took control of the country. By that time, over 900,000 people had been murdered. Several million Rwandans, mostly Hutu, fled to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). In refugee camps along the border, Hutu extremists continued to attack Tutsi. Perpetrators who remained in Rwanda were arrested and jailed in makeshift prisons. In 1994, the United Nations established the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. High-level perpetrators were put on trial. Later, a hybrid judicial system, the Gacaca Courts, were established. Over one million suspected perpetrators were tried by the Gacaca. Despite these efforts, many perpetrators have never been put on trial.

Testimony

USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive (VHA) contains testimonies from genocide survivors, rescuers, and elders from the community. This testimony was collected by USC Shoah Foundation, the Kigali Genocide Memorial, and the Holocaust Museum in Houston.

Setting the Stage

On October 29, 1914, the Ottoman Empire, led by the Young Turk government, entered the First World War on the side of the Central Powers—the German and Austro-Hungarian empires. Under the cover of war, the Armenian Christians, who were viewed as ethnic and religious others by the state, were targeted by the government for total destruction. This was part of a plan to form a Turkish state and expand Ottoman territories east, beyond the Armenian Highlands. These crimes against the Armenian people are known as the Armenian Genocide.

Genocide

In 1915, leaders of the Young Turk government began to eliminate its Armenian population through political orders of forced deportations and mass murder. To avoid any possible resistance, more than 200 Armenian community leaders were arrested on April 24th in Constantinople (Istanbul). Most were executed soon after.

In large groups, Armenians were forced out of their homes and pushed south toward the Syrian desert. Along the way, men were separated and killed, while women and children were forced to march under extreme harsh conditions. They were forcefully starved, without shelter and protection from harassment and violence. As Armenians were removed from their towns, new laws allowed for their homes, businesses and churches to be looted, confiscated and/or destroyed. Most Armenians survived death as a result of forced conversion to Islam, abduction, forced adoption, or by being sold or married into Turkish, Kurdish or Arab households. Others were saved due to aid from American and European missionary and relief organizations, while others were saved by neighbors who resisted political orders to harm Armenians.



Family of deportees on the road.
Armin T. Wegner Collection. Armenian National Institute.
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End of the Ottoman Empire

By November 1918, Ottoman involvement in the First World War resulted in their defeat and the victorious Allied powers partitioned and occupied the empire. Between 1919 and 1920, the Ottomans held special military tribunals, which tried Young Turk leaders for crimes such as intentional massacre, deportation, plunder of properties, torture and torment. The key leaders, Mehmed Talât, Ismail Enver, Ahmed Cemal, Dr. Mehmed Nazim and Dr. Behaddin Şakir were found guilty of first degree mass murder and were given the death penalty in absentia. However, this punishment was never followed through. Soon after, a Turkish nationalist movement led by General Mustafa Kemal formed to force Allied troops out. During this period, Armenians continued to be targets of genocidal policies. By 1923, General Mustafa Kemal and his forces went on to form the modern-day Republic of Turkey.

An estimated 1.5 million Armenians, approximately two-thirds of the pre-war Armenian population living in the Ottoman Empire, were murdered between 1915 and 1923. As of 2020, despite overwhelming evidence, scholarly research, and testimony of survivors and foreign witnesses that confirm the destruction of the Armenians as a genocide, the Turkish government continues to refuse to acknowledge its past crimes, denying the genocide at home and abroad.

Armenian Genocide Testimony

Firsthand experiences and memory of the Armenian Genocide are preserved in USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive through two collections — the Armenian Film Foundation collection and the Richard G. Hovannisian Armenian Genocide Oral History collection. Both collections give access to survivor testimonies and other eyewitness accounts, in addition to survivor descendant and scholar testimonies recorded between the 1970s to the early 2000s. The audiovisual testimonies from the Armenian Film Foundation were filmed for use in documentary films that would bring international awareness and education about the Armenian Genocide. The average length of these testimonies are about 20 minutes. The Richard G. Hovannisian Armenian Genocide Oral History collection consists of audio testimony recorded by university students, which offer a complete history of the life of Armenians, before, during and after the Armenian Genocide. The average length of these testimonies are about 90 minutes.

Setting the Stage

After World War I, Germany was in shambles and its people, led to believe they were winning the war right up until defeat, were in shock. Their leader, the Kaiser, was forced to step down and the Treaty of Versailles led to significant loss of land and citizens. In February 1919, a new German government was created: the Weimar Republic. The constitution of the Weimar Republic was very progressive and allowed women the right to vote, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion. However, as an emergency measure in the name of national security, Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution allowed for the suspension of these civil liberties.

In 1932, Adolf Hitler, leader of the nationalistic, antisemitic and racist National Socialist German Workers' Party (Nazi Party), was elected to the German Reichstag (Parliament). In January 1933, he was appointed Chancellor by President von Hindenburg. After the Reichstag fire, Hitler manipulated Article 48 and passed the Enabling Act, which allowed him to pass laws without the approval of the Reichstag or the President. This was the beginning of the end of the Weimar Republic. The Nazis established a single party dictatorship referred to as the Third Reich.

From 1933 until 1939, the Nazi government enacted hundreds of increasingly restrictive and discriminatory laws and decrees that banned Jews from all aspects of German public life.



Above: Photograph of Jewish Survivor, Renée Firestone, with her parents, Julia and Mauritius Weinfeld. Julia was killed at Auschwitz; Mauritius died shortly after liberation.

Genocide

“The Holocaust was the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. Holocaust is a word of Greek origin meaning ‘sacrifice by fire’” (U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum).

During World War II, the Nazis systematically targeted Jews in Nazi occupied territories. Jews were forced to wear identifying symbols, relocate to heavily crowded ghettos, and participate in forced labor. Millions of Jews were murdered during the Holocaust. The Nazis also targeted racial, political, or ideological groups deemed “inferior” or “undesirable” – “Roma (Gypsies), homosexuals, Slavic peoples, the mentally and physically disabled, Socialists, Communists, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Within several years, mass murder became the official Nazi policy (officially organized at the 1942 Wannsee Conference). By then, the Nazis had already deployed Einsatzgruppen (mobile killing units) to massacre Jewish communities in Poland and the Soviet Union. The Nazis also used poisonous gas, in vans and later in gas chambers at six death camps (Chelmno, Auschwitz, Majdanek, Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka). Even when their defeat was imminent, the Nazi leadership committed resources to the destruction of Europe’s Jewish population. Prisoners were forced to evacuate in what are now known as Death Marches.

Fall of the Third Reich

When the Allied troops (led by the United States, United Kingdom, and Soviet Union) defeated the Nazis, they encountered evidence of genocide: documentation, witnesses, mass graves, and concentration and death camps. Europe was in disarray; millions were displaced, and entire cities were destroyed. Displaced persons camps were established to house Jewish survivors. Many Jews continued to face antisemitism and violence and most Jews decided to emigrate. The Nuremberg Tribunal was established and tried 22 members of the Nazi leadership for war crimes but the majority eluded justice.

Holocaust Testimony

USC Shoah Foundation’s Visual History Archive preserves firsthand experiences and memories of the Holocaust from 14 collections. The VHA contains over 53,000 testimonies of Holocaust survivors and witnesses, including, Jewish Survivors, Rescuer and Aid Providers, Liberators, Sinti and Roma Survivors, Political Prisoners, Jehovah’s Witness Survivors, War Crimes Trial Participants, Non-Jewish Forced Laborers, Eugenic Policies Survivors, and Homosexual Survivors. The vast majority of the testimony was collected between 1994 and 1999, and the interviewees detail their lives before, during, and after the Holocaust. The testimonies average about two hours in length.

Setting the Stage

Cambodia won its independence from France in 1953. The war in neighboring Vietnam (1955 – 1975) contributed to the destabilization of Cambodia; the United States bombed Vietnamese sanctuaries in rural Cambodia. Between 1970 and 1975, there was a civil war in Cambodia, which further added to a growing economic and cultural gulf between people in the cities and the countryside. This provided a perfect background for the Khmer Rouge to take over. The Khmer Rouge, a group started by the armed wing of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (Cambodia), was led by Pol Pot. The Khmer Rouge occupied Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975. Their goal was to establish a classless, agricultural state based on communal living. To achieve this, the Khmer Rouge sought to eliminate anyone they deemed “New People”—urban populations, intellectuals, and minorities—who were thought to have been corrupted by outside influence. The Khmer Rouge favored peasants, who they called “Old People.”

Genocide

The Khmer Rouge established a totalitarian state, and Pol Pot was a dictator. The Khmer Rouge believed that citizens of Cambodia had become corrupted by outside influences, especially Vietnam and the capitalist West. Within days of taking power, the regime killed thousands of military personnel and forcibly moved millions of people out of cities, killing anyone who refused or was too slow. They forced citizens into what they called reeducation schools, which were essentially places of state propaganda. The regime forced families to live communally with other people, in order to destroy the family structure. The Khmer Rouge targeted ethnic minorities, especially Chinese, Vietnamese, and Muslim Cham, of whom an estimated 80% were killed. In addition, anyone who was believed to be an intellectual was killed: doctors, lawyers, teachers, people who spoke more than one language, and even people who wore glasses became targets. Citizens could be detained for the slightest offenses, and the government set up vast prisons where people were held, tortured, and executed. The most infamous of these prisons was known as “S-21,” located in the capital city of Phnom Penh, where accused “traitors” and their families were brought, photographed, tortured, and killed. Of the roughly 17,000 men, women, and children who were brought to S-21 there were only about a dozen survivors. There were mass graves throughout the country, areas that became known as “killing fields.”

End of the Khmer Rouge

On December 25, 1978, Vietnam invaded Cambodia; the Khmer Rouge government was overthrown by the Vietnamese army. Vietnamese troops stayed in the country until 1989, with armed clashes between Vietnamese troops and Cambodian citizens going on throughout the 1980s. Yet the Khmer Rouge did not disappear until much later, and continued to hold Cambodia's seat at the United Nations for twelve more years. On October 23, 1991, the Comprehensive Cambodian Peace Agreement (commonly referred to as the “Paris Peace Accords”) was brokered by the United Nations, ending the twelve year civil war in Cambodia. In May 1993, the first free elections in more than twenty years were held. In January 2001, the Cambodian government established the Khmer Rouge Tribunal to try leadership of the Khmer Rouge for crimes against humanity. Trials began in 2009, but have led to only three convictions. The vast majority of the perpetrators suffered no consequences for their actions.

Cambodian Genocide Testimony

USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History archive includes testimony from five (5) Cambodian Genocide survivors. Two of the interviews are in Khmer, with English subtitles, and three are in English. Testimonies in the Cambodian Genocide collection seek to establish full-life histories of the individuals, including their social and cultural life before and after the Cambodian Genocide.



Children at work during Democratic Kampuchea.
Documentation Center of Cambodia
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