

**Crimes against Humanity in the German Imperial Realm
1878-1945**
Eric D. Weitz

Nothing was more radical than Nazi efforts to establish an uncontested German imperium in Europe based on race. In its aggressive military policies and its exercise of the most extreme form of population politics, Nazi Germany overthrew any constraints of the preexisting international and domestic orders. Nevertheless, its policies were not all *sui generis*. Until the onset of the Holocaust in 1941, the regime shunted around entire population groups in a way that fell firmly within the common European understanding of politics since at least the Balkan Wars of 1912-13. Genocide lay beyond the pale of the international system; forced deportations and the creation of massive refugee streams did not.

Those most German of events -- the establishment of the Nazi regime and the emergence of the Holocaust -- were also profoundly shaped by a) the shift in international politics from the classic diplomacy of the nineteenth century to the population politics of the twentieth, from the Vienna to the Paris systems; and b) transnationalism in the sense that models of "handling" defined population groups through the exercise of massive violence flowed from the German imperial realm -- especially the formal colony of Southwest Africa as well as areas intended spheres of influence like the Ottoman Empire -- into Germany and German-dominated Europe.

Forced deportations of defined populations had long been practiced by empires, but reached a new scale from around the mid-nineteenth century onward as Muslims were either forced out or fled the Caucasus and Balkan regions as Ottoman power receded. A very new and dangerous precedent was set following the Balkan Wars, when a whole range of bilateral agreements and informal actions, generally accepted by the Great Powers, displaced populations from Greece, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire. German military and civilian officials then witnessed the Young Turks' deportations and massacres of the Armenians. Some Germans were appalled by what they saw, but others accepted and even abetted the extremes of Ottoman policies.

The Paris Peace conference following World War I then established the principle of state sovereignty based on supposed ethnic or national homogeneity. The Lausanne Treaty of 1923 took the meaning of the five Paris treaties -- Versailles, St.-Germain, Trianon, Neuilly, and Sèvres -- to their logical conclusion because the Great Powers legitimized the "population unmixing" (Lord Curzon's phrase) of Muslims and Christians in Turkey and Greece. For the first time, forced population movements were not the result of the exclusive actions of a victorious state or, as in the wake of the Balkan Wars, bilateral agreements, but of an international treaty specifically sanctioned by the Great Powers. By shunting over one million Christians from Anatolia to Greece and around 350,000 Muslims from Greece to Turkey, Lausanne established the ethnically homogeneous states -- at least in theory -- that the Paris peace treaties presumed.

These developments from the Balkan Wars through the Armenian Genocide to the Paris Peace Conference and the Lausanne Conference and Treaty marked a major transformation in the international system, the *shift from traditional diplomacy to population politics*, from mere territorial adjustments to the handling of entire population groups categorized by ethnicity, nationality, religion, or race, or some combination thereof. This shift from the *Vienna system* to the *Paris system* signified the establishment of the principle of sovereign, ethnically homogeneous states as the basis of the international order. As a result, the Paris system arguably has had as great an impact on the history of the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries as the Vienna system had on the nineteenth.

In the transition from the Vienna to the Paris system, the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first years of the twentieth marked a critical transition period, both on the level of the international system and Germany's place within it. Germany, joined the drive for colonies and also began to see the Ottoman Empire as a site of German imperial influence. The personnel of key state institutions, notably the officer corps and the foreign and colonial services, developed their political concepts in the context of their experiences in the German imperial realm, in particular Southwest Africa and the Ottoman Empire. In both places German officials developed political models that placed primacy on ethnicity, nationality, or race (or some combination thereof) as the source of political legitimacy. Their understanding of state interests shifted far beyond the rather simple concepts of the Vienna system and its limited toolkit for maintaining stability; they had moved into the realm of population politics, and in a hierarchical way that always entailed the domination of one particular group in the state -- with dire consequences for others.