

1st Place – Middle School Category

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Life. Must defend. Human rights. Must defend. We must defend life and fight for the respect of human rights. It sounds like such an obvious concept and like such a easy thing to do, but people do not always think of the fragility of these concepts.

This is especially true for us, teenagers, who may not be aware of how hard the past has been for many people.. Therefore, we are moved when we learn about the atrocities of the past, but we cannot fully appreciate them since they seem so distant.

The truth is that many horrible examples of violations against life and human rights have occurred, even until recently. I want to call to attention two genocides that took place during the first half of the 20th century; the Armenian Genocide and Stalin's Forced Famine of 1932-33.

To begin, the organized killing of people for the sole purpose of putting at end to their collective existence left 1.5 million Armenians dead between 1915 and 1918. And between 1932 and 1933, 7,000,000 Ukrainians perished in what is known as Stalin's Forced Famine. These killings took place in an organized manner for the sake of more political power through ethnic cleansing.

In addition, these horrendous massacres brought, in both cases, not only death but other extreme situations such as the rape of young women and the forced labor of men.

In the case of the Armenians, men were submitted to brutal work conditions while the Turks occupied their villages. Women were killed or moved to other regions, and the Turks sometimes kept young boys who were forcibly converted to the Muslim religion.

In Stalin's Forced Famine, rich Ukrainian farmers, known as Kulaks, were declared

“enemies of the people” and they were left homeless and without a single possession, not even pots and pans. This happened because Stalin imposed the Soviet System of land management known as collectivization.

Thirdly, torture by starvation was present in both genocides. The Armenians were moved by force into Syria to die of thirst and hunger in the desert. They were forced to walk from one region to the next without food or water. One million people were forced into these death marches that lasted for months. Similarly, the Ukrainians were deprived of eating the food they had grown with their own hands, and starvation spread so fast throughout the Ukraine that people were dropping dead in the streets and the bodies were dumped in mass graves. Those who survived did so by eating dogs, cats, mice, birds, and leaves from bushes. Others resorted to cannibalism. It is estimated that 25,000 Ukrainians died every day between 1932 and 1933.

Finally, in both instances, the international community was aware of the situations but chose not to become greatly involved. Governments of the West knew of the atrocities being committed but for various reasons chose not to act on their knowledge. The Allied Powers issued a warning to Turkey, but it had no effect. Most witnesses of the Armenian Genocide were U.S. diplomatic representatives and American missionaries who reported the genocide to the Western media. This brought moral outrage but no strong actions took place to sanction the Ottoman Empire in Turkey. In the case of the Ukraine, the Soviets staged photo opportunities for the foreign press so that the governments of the West adopted a passive attitude toward the famine. In November of 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt recognized Stalin's communist government and negotiated a new trade agreement.

In conclusion, I pledge to study the past and to honor the lessons I learned from it so that I can contribute to a better, kinder, and brighter future. I promise to respect the lives of all individuals and respect them rather than punish them for their cultural differences.

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