

THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

The forced deportations and brutal executions of Armenians at Ottoman hands is known as one of the earliest examples of genocide - but controversy still rages on

One of the most hotly debated topics arising from the collapse of the Ottoman Empire is the question of what terminology should be used to describe the massacres of the Armenians. Some countries have formally classified this as genocide, whereas others have avoided such recognition.

What is undisputed is that the Christian Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire during WWI were singled out, rounded up and either executed or forced to leave the Empire in what is an undeniable example of ethnic cleansing. Of the hundreds of thousands of civilians who were expelled, tens of thousands died of starvation and the hardships they were forced to endure. Of the 1.5 million Armenians living in the Empire before WWI, there were only 400,000 by 1922.

As punishment for resisting their Ottoman overlords, the Armenians were targeted (along with Greek and Syrian minority populations) by the authorities. On April 24, 1915, about 250 Armenian intellectuals and influential figures were rounded up and arrested. Over the following months, many of them died in custody. As Ottoman defeats in World War I mounted, the authorities grew more concerned that the Armenians could be convinced to work with the enemy. If they could not be converted to Islam and forced to give up their national identity, they posed a serious threat to Turkish homogeneity. So, it was decided that Armenian men, women and children (regardless of age or ability) would be deported from their homeland in the Caucasus to the deserts of Syria. The march was thousands of miles long, and nobody was really expected to survive.



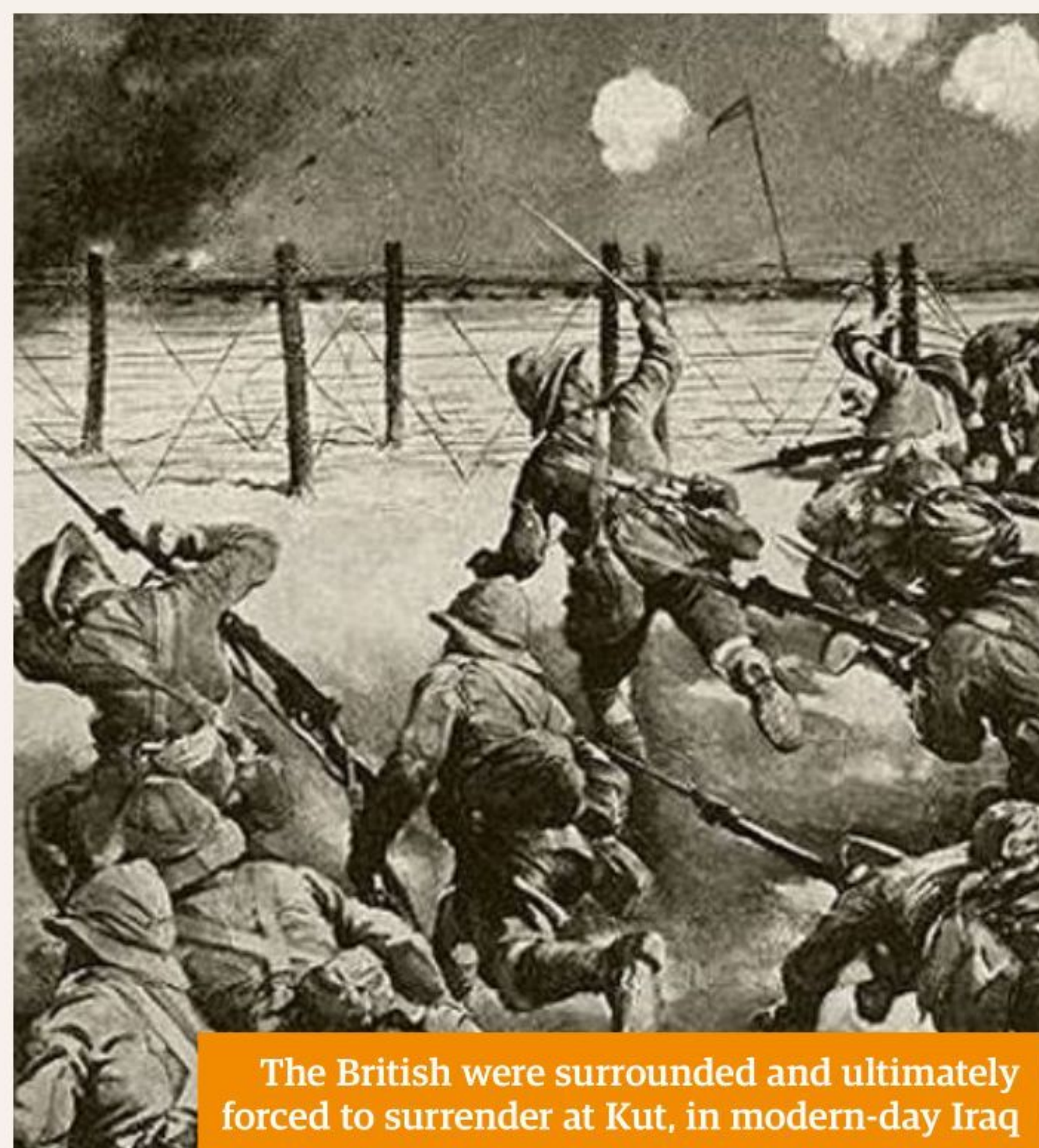
Desperate Armenian women and children pick at a horse carcass to feed themselves, Syria

The deportations resulted in the deaths of up to a million people - of exhaustion, thirst or being attacked on the journey by hostile mobs and corrupt soldiers. If anyone made it to the Syrian desert, they were placed in concentration camps and worked to death by Ottoman guards. In an era of increasingly global media, many foreign journalists, politicians and missionaries saw the horrors of the genocide and reported it back home. Henry Morgenthau, the US ambassador in Constantinople, co-ordinated a fundraising effort that raised \$100million (the equivalent of \$1billion today) for the refugees.

Yet despite being witnessed by the whole world, 100 years later it's still being debated whether the ethnic cleansing of Armenians fits the definition of 'genocide'. Although the word 'genocide' itself was coined by a man who was studying the Armenian case (Raphael Lemkin), it's argued that the persecution of Armenian people was not systematic or overly specific - it all happened in the context of war. Turkey and its neighbour Azerbaijan argue that it was certainly an atrocity, but not deliberate genocide.

The rest of the world is divided over the issue. While many countries (including Russia, Syria, Canada and most of Western Europe) have formally recognised the events of 1915-1916 as genocide proper, others are concerned about harming their relationship with Turkey. Britain and the US, despite having significant Armenian communities, have long refused to officially term it a 'genocide'.

The debate rages on, but Armenians around the world continue to campaign for recognition of their ancestors' persecution, even more than a century later.



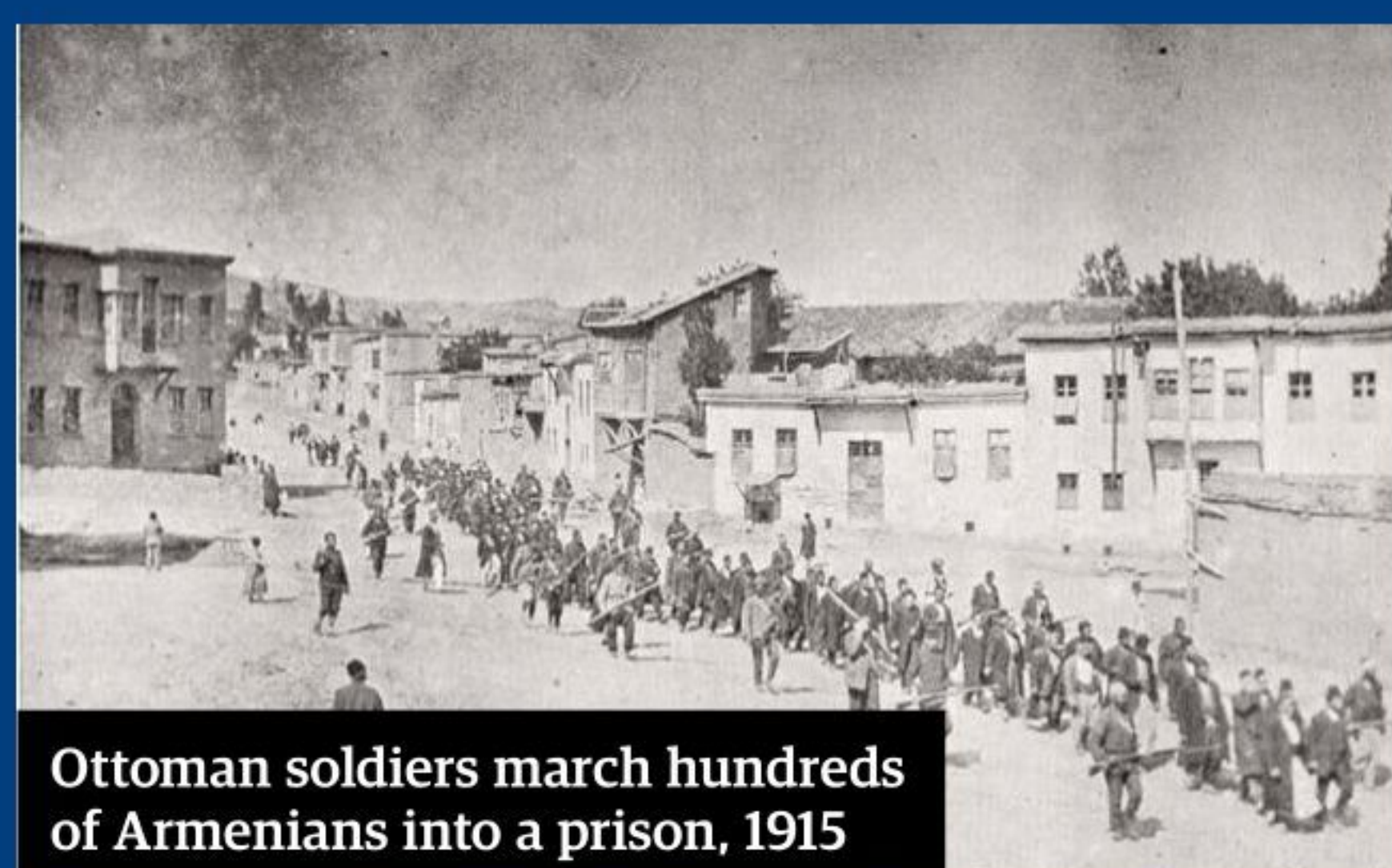
The British were surrounded and ultimately forced to surrender at Kut, in modern-day Iraq

thousands of British soldiers were now prisoners of war. It was a humiliation for the Brits and another sign that the Ottomans were far from finished. The news of the capitulation at Kut was almost simultaneous with the retreat from the Gallipoli peninsula. The fight with the Ottoman Empire was not the easy victory Britain had expected.

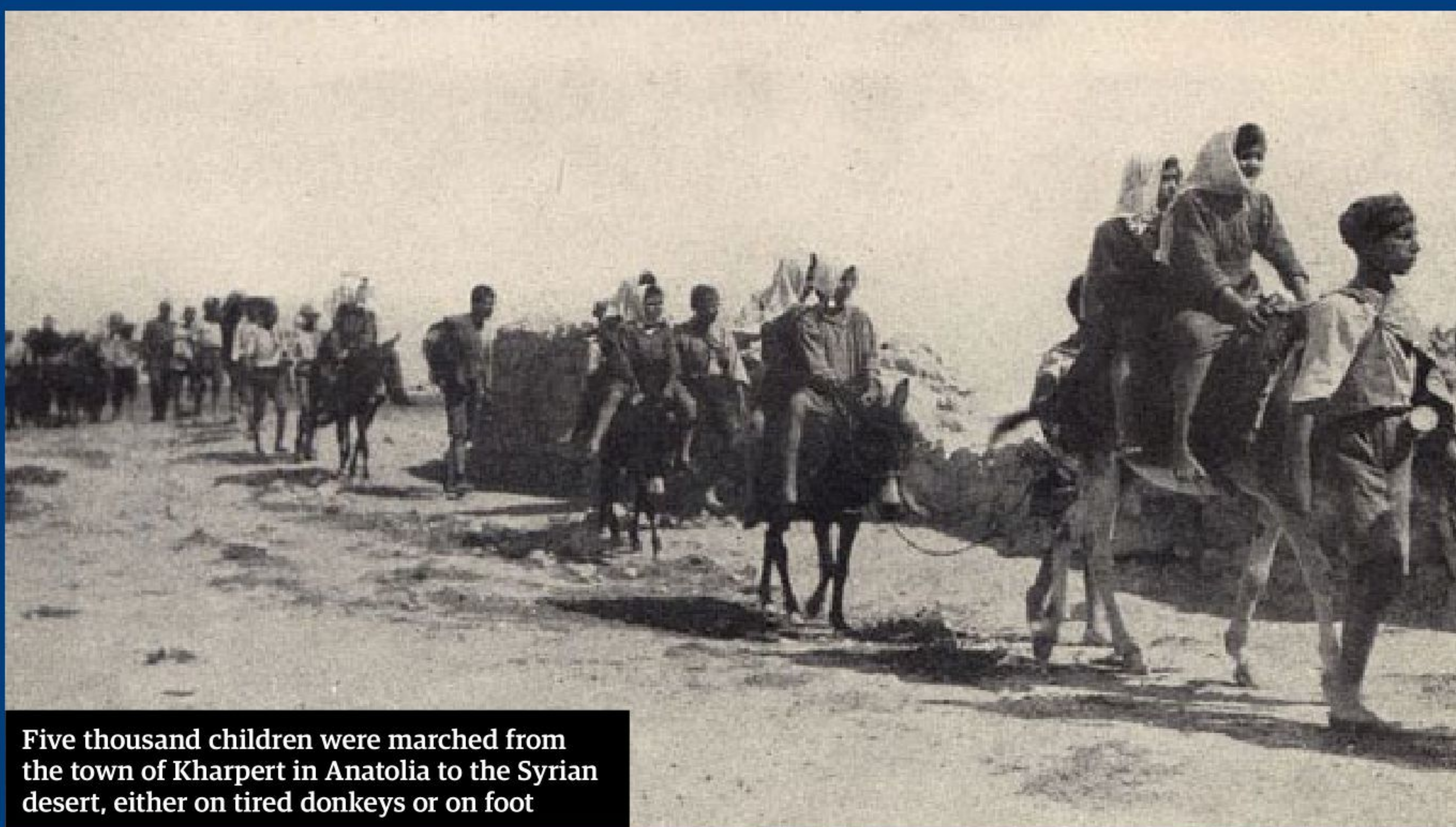
In March of 1917, General Sir Archibald Murray amassed thousands of British imperial troops to break out into the Middle East proper through the town of Gaza, then held by von Kressenstein. Murray led what was known as the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF) and surrounded the key city, where he launched an all-out assault. It failed and there would end up being three Battles of Gaza before victory went to the EEF in November 1917.

Nearly a year later, the EEF pushed further north until they met one of the last remaining Ottoman field armies at Megiddo in September 1918. The industrial scale of death throughout the war made many British soldiers conclude that the blood-drenched imagery in the Bible's book of Revelations might be coming true. Part of the prophecy described a mighty battle at Armageddon; Megiddo translates to Armageddon in English, so they were uneasy about fighting there, fearing they might be witnessing the 'end of days'.

While the prophecy wasn't true, it certainly was Armageddon for the Ottomans, including Mustafa Kemal, who'd secured the Ottoman-Turkish victory at Gallipoli. For the 35,000 men on the Ottoman side, supported by over 400 artillery pieces, the battle was a disaster. General Edmund Allenby (who had replaced Murray) used a creeping barrage to cover the advance of his troops, including an impressive cavalry charge. The Desert Mounted Corps managed to get behind Ottoman lines and attack from the rear as the main force charged in from the front. Of the 35,000 Ottoman soldiers at the battle, only 6,000 avoided being killed, wounded or captured. It was the biggest defeat the Ottomans suffered in WWI and, on 30 October, the Armistice of Mudros ended hostilities in the Middle East, a few weeks before the war ended in Europe.



Ottoman soldiers march hundreds of Armenians into a prison, 1915



Five thousand children were marched from the town of Kharpert in Anatolia to the Syrian desert, either on tired donkeys or on foot