

Commemoration of an Assassin: Representing the Armenian Genocide

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Communication.

Chapel Hill
2007

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Abstract

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The role of interpretation becomes fundamental in respect to unpacking memory, and by extension, elucidating how it is that we engage, consciously or unconsciously, in the construction of representational identities through commemoration. In the case of the Armenian Genocide, interpretations are further complicated by the presence of unresolved trauma, or more concretely, the denial of the memory of genocide. This trauma results in the inability to access the events of 1915 as political/memorial/historical/material “sites” of discourse.

In order to negotiate this trauma, commemorative works such as the Soghomon Tehlirian monument in Fresno, Ca, have been constructed. This rhetorical space of “genocide” offers strategic access to memories and meaning and allows for a perpetuation of historical narrative in its most palatable and controlled forms. Through this enjoinder of identities, Armenians are offered a sense of identity and agency in direct opposition to a historical experience/representation that granted them neither.

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“You cannot render a decision which is intellectually honest but contrary to your conscience, because it is not possible for us that injustice be justice.”--Soghomon Tehlirian’s Defense Attorney Adolf von Gordon¹



Figure 1. Soghomon Tehlirian monument in Ararat Cemetery, Fresno, CA

On March 15, 1921, Soghomon Tehlirian assassinated the former Turkish Minister of the Interior Talaat Pashaa in Charlottenburg, Germany. The transcripts of Tehlirian’s subsequent trial in Berlin, Germany, recount the events leading to that fateful day.

¹ Soghomon Tehlirian Trial Transcripts. 3rd State Court, Criminal Department, Berlin. April 16, 1921, <http://www.cilicia.com/armo_tehlirian.html> (accessed on April 10, 2007).

According to Tehlirian's testimony, his entire family had been taken from their home in Erzincan, Armenia, five years earlier, and told that they would be deported to the south. That same day, as his family was being led out of town, the soldiers leading their caravan began to fire on the unarmed deportees. Before his eyes, Tehlirian's sister was raped, his mother and father shot, and the rest of his family bludgeoned to death. Tehlirian was the only family member to escape, but was haunted by the memory for the rest of his life.

For the next five years, Tehlirian closely followed the whereabouts of Talaat Pashaa, the man considered by Armenians to be one of the main orchestrators of the Armenian Genocide. Many believe this obsession is what ultimately brought Tehlirian to Germany. But in his trial, Tehlirian countered that his move was prompted by his desire to continue his studies and that it was simply a coincidence that Talaat had previously taken up residence in the apartment building adjacent to his.

Tehlirian recounted that, in late February of 1921, his mother appeared in a dream. He recalled that scenes from the massacre kept recurring in his head and then the, "Corpse [of his mother] just stood up before me and told me, 'You know Talaat is here and yet you do not seem to be concerned. You are no longer my son.'"² Two weeks later, Tehlirian chased Pashaa down in the street next to his apartment and shot him in the neck. He quickly tried to reassure onlookers that they should not be concerned by asserting, "I am an Armenian. He is a Turk. It is no loss to Germany."

² ibid

He was placed on trial in Berlin on April 16, 1921 for the crime of premeditated homicide. During this sensationalized trial, Tehlirian was asked by the presiding judge if, “As Talaat left the house, did you again have the vision of your mother?”³

To which Tehlirian replied, “I cannot say for sure. When I saw him, I saw my mother and dashed out to the street.”⁴

When asked by this same judge if he recognized that he was guilty for this particular crime, Tehlirian responded, “I do not consider myself guilty because my conscience is clear...I have killed a man. But I am not a murderer.”⁵

The jury took slightly over an hour to acquit Tehlirian on all counts.

Tehlirian’s paradoxical description of recognizing his action but rejecting his guilt and the jury’s concurrence with his interpretation are indicative of the complicated read, then and now, of an Armenian history and representation which revolves substantially around unresolved trauma. This lack of resolution stems from the continual denial that the acts of 1915 constituted genocide--and due to this contestation--the inability to assign guilt and inversely acknowledge victimization. Furthermore, the unresolved trauma is seen as the Armenian people struggle to access and give voice to an experience that remains ambiguous in terms of its rhetoric and, by extension, its memory. Armenian collective memory and identity are formed around these episodic narratives of unresolved trauma and loss that are perpetuated and dislocated further as they pass from generation to generation. But in the face of

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ ibid

the historical and psychological ambiguity of the Armenian Genocide, the most significant act of resolution is arguably the acquittal of Soghomon Tehlirian.

In Memoriam: The Complexity of Commemoration

As the story of Soghomon Tehlirian suggests, there is no interpretation of memory that is not subject to the problematics of revision and substitution on a conscious or unconscious level. This engagement of memory is necessary in order to make sense of the world as we understand it or to rectify losses that we cannot or do not want to fully comprehend. For many, understanding the inhumanity which must be present to carry out such genocidal acts and trying to reconcile the loss of human life stretches beyond the moral and ethical limits of their comprehension. Due to this sanity preserving deficiency of the mind, we may find external outlets that will shoulder some of the burden. Commemoration serves as this negotiated outlet or space. It becomes the material embodiment of the engaged memory. It is a place of on-going interpretation that exists so that we may simultaneously force ourselves to comprehend and breathe a sigh of relief that, as we stand in the commemorative space, someone or something else is absorbing some of the memory work for us.

In this perpetually-engaged space of memory, the role of interpretation becomes fundamental in respect to unpacking memory, and by extension, elucidating how it is that we engage, consciously or unconsciously, in the construction of representational identities through commemoration. Of course, the role of interpretation in the case of the Armenian Genocide is further complicated by the presence of unresolved trauma. The trauma in the case of the Armenian Genocide

comes, in great part, from the inability to access the events of 1915 in terms of their representation as political/memorial/historical/material “sites” of discourse because it still remains an unacknowledged genocide.

Commemoration, and more broadly, memory work present the conditions of possibility of experiencing (accessing) this trauma resulting from this denial. If indeed we recognize the Soghomon Tehlirian monument as a microcosm of the broader collective (un)conscious, a turn must be made to three guiding questions of memory and representation: (1) What roles do memory and commemoration play in organizing representational identities, and does this particular commemorative work function so that we may not have to comprehend the inhumanity, injustice, and meaning of genocide on a certain level? More specifically, (2) What disconnects of memory and representation are the Armenian people experiencing as they attempt to commemorate the identity of the unacknowledged victims of genocide? and (3) Through what framework can these particular acts of memory work and material representation be made accessible and coherent?

In order to negotiate these questions as they apply to the Soghomon Tehlirian monument, an overview of the monument itself and a brief historical interpretation of the Armenian Genocide followed by its rhetorical framing in the aftermath will be outlined to contextualize the issues. Next, the broader questions of an Armenian experience and identity, which claim a place rhetorically within--and in expanding political, cultural, and historical spaces beyond this monument-- will be posited in order to situate the place of commemoration as it serves as a response to the broader political turmoil.

At this point, a move will be made to evaluate the notion of a representative commemorative work as it is subject to inevitable dislocations of memory. Extending from this work, an alternative reading strategy derived from the Freudian notion of the rebus will be offered in order to navigate some of the aforementioned complexities and complications that arise from the deconstruction of the monument's materiality and symbolism. Finally, the culmination of this analysis will seek an alternate reading of the Soghomon Tehlirian monument as it reconstitutes an Armenian identity that is more nuanced when viewed as relational, rather than representational.



Figure 2. Soghomon Tehlirian monument in Ararat Cemetery, Fresno, CA

The History and Symbolicity of the Soghomon Tehlirian Monument

April 24, 2007, dozens of Armenian-Americans gathered around the Soghomon Tehlirian monument at Masis Ararat Cemetery in Fresno, Ca, to mark the

92nd anniversary of the Armenian Genocide. It was on this day in 1915 that Armenians living within the Ottoman Empire were forced from their homes, deported, and murdered. This day is known as Martyr's Day and is recognized as the official commencement of one of the largest ethnic cleansings in history.⁶

In honor of the 1.5 million lives lost during this time, 135 memorials in 25 different countries have been erected. The Soghomon Tehlirian monument is one such complex example as it commemorates the victims of the genocide through its tribute to Soghomon Tehlirian. Tehlirian became a national hero after murdering Talaat Pashaa, the man recognized as the mastermind behind the Armenian Genocide of 1915.

The Soghomon Tehlirian monument has an important cultural presence within the Armenian community in Fresno. Reflexively, the commemorative space is made more noteworthy due to it being situated within this particular city. Fresno projects its own significance as it maintains one of the larger Armenian communities in the United States. In fact, until 1930 Fresno and its outlying areas sustained the largest Armenian population in all of California, only to more recently be overtaken by Glendale, Ca.⁷ The centrality of Fresno was demonstrated upon Soghomon Tehlirian's death--after multiple services were held throughout California--his body was ultimately brought back to Ararat Cemetery where he and his wife requested to be buried.⁸ Other local families have chosen to have smaller monuments and

⁶ Multiple genocides actually took place in the late 1890's and again in 1915-1923. The Armenian Genocide of 1915 was the largest, and therefore, tends to receive the most historical recognition.

⁷ Bulbulian, Berge. *The Fresno Armenians: History of a Diaspora Community*. (Word Dancer Press: Sanger, CA), 2001, x.

⁸ Miller, Howard. "The Armenian Massacre: 55 Years Later, Silence." *Fresno Bee*. April 24, 1970.

headstones centered on the walkway in close proximity to this structure as it appears to extend an element of status. What is also interesting about this monument is that as it becomes interpellated into this space of status, it has been materially revised in order to appear as more worthy of reverence.

According to Mayher Chekerdemian, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation within Fresno (ARF) created a committee to oversee the original monument's construction. He was appointed chair of this committee as he was an active member within the local ARF organization and the larger community. The ARF is an international organization dating back to 1890 with the goal of promoting social justice, democracy and self-determination for the Armenian people.⁹ The organization began sponsoring monuments dedicated to the Armenian Genocide all over the world during the 1960's.¹⁰ In fact, during this time the construction of genocide monuments became so frequent and well-received that the Turkish government launched an aggressive public relations campaign to combat the pro-Armenian sentiment that the commemorative works were fueling.¹¹

Chekerdemian explained that the ARF issued requests worldwide for artists to create a memorial for Ararat Cemetery. The man eventually chosen to design the

⁹ Armenian Revolutionary Federation Website <<http://www.arf.am/English/>> (accessed on August 1, 2007). The ARF is the Armenian Socialist Party which led the construction of the first Armenian Republic in 1918. They later fought Soviet rule only to lose and be disbanded in 1920. They reemerged in 1990. Today they are recognized as a significant international political force for Armenia and Armenian communities worldwide.

¹⁰ Chekerdemian, Mayher. Member of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation. Phone interview conducted on July 1, 2007.

¹¹ Hartunian, M. William. "The Washington Report of Middle East Affairs." *Washington*: Vol. IX, Issue 1; May (1990): 12.

monument was Harmik Hacobian, a sculptor from Tehran, Iran.¹² After Hacobian's design was finalized, the ARF privately began collecting the \$20,000 they needed to construct the monument. Chekerdemian said that the ARF was pleased to discover that the local community wanted to be involved in the memorial as well and requested to make donations to aid in its construction. The ARF decided to allow outside donations, but refused to take any donations of more than one hundred dollars. This ultimately meant that the monument was constructed mostly from donations of twenty-five to fifty dollars per family.¹³

By Aug 31, 1969 the monument's construction was completed. At this time it was approximately 12 feet tall and constructed of marble around the pedestal. In 1995, local Armenian community members commissioned a restoration of the memorial.¹⁴ For this refurbishment they hired an Armenian born sculptor named Ashot Simonyan.¹⁵ Simonyan was a well established sculptor within Armenia and Russia, but chose to immigrate to the United States around 1990 as his family was no longer able to find work.¹⁶ Simonyan is a local celebrity around Fresno and has been asked to design multiple headstones and memorials within the Armenian community.

¹² Harmik Hacobian is still alive today and residing in the Los Angeles area.

¹³ Chekerdemian, Mayher. Phone interview with Author. July 1, 2007.

¹⁴ Chekerdemian expressed his frustration that the refurbishment was undertaken without any permission from the original committee that commissioned and designed the Soghomon Tehlirian monument during the 1960's. Specifically, he stated that he did not find the refurbishment to be "kosher."

¹⁵ I had a personal interview with Ashot Simonyan on December 24, 2006. All information regarding his construction of the monument comes from that meeting.

¹⁶ Armenia has suffered tremendous damage to its infrastructure in the past century with multiple wars, political upheavals, and extreme ecological devastation. Armenians are still trying to rebound from the earthquake in 1988 that killed over 45,000 Armenians and left over 500,000 homeless.

When asked to restore the Soghomon Tehlirian monument, Simonyan agreed to remodel the structure, but refused to take any compensation for the work. He chose to extend the obelisk several additional feet and reconstructed it out of a more expensive granite. He also recovered the eagle and snake on top of the structure with gold plating. When Simonyan was asked in an interview to elaborate on his personal knowledge of the Armenian Genocide and how it manifested itself materially in the remodeling of the monument, he responded without hesitation only that, “I know this because it is in my soul.”¹⁷

Structurally, the monument contains multiple reads as it chooses to memorialize the event with a gold-plated eagle swooping down with wings extended and beak open as it clutches a snake in its clenched talons. According to Chekerdemian, the original artist Harmik Hacobian explained to the ARF committee members that the eagle represented, “...the arm of justice of the Armenian people extending their wrath onto Talaat Pashaa,” who was symbolized by the snake.¹⁸ The obelisk on which the eagle sits is fifteen feet high and constructed of solid granite. Attached to this is a placard with an inscription in Armenian and English which reads: “...In memory of Soghomon Tehlirian, the national hero who on March 15, 1921, brought justice upon Talaat Pashaa, a principal Turkish perpetrator of the Armenian Genocide of 1915, which claimed the lives of 1.5 million Armenian martyrs.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Personal Interview with Ashot Simonyan on December, 24, 2006. Conducted, audio recorded, and transcribed on 12-24-06.

¹⁸ Chekerdemian, Mayher. Phone Interview with the Author. July 1, 2007.

¹⁹ Inscribed on the Soghomon Tehlirian monument in Masis Ararat Cemetery in Fresno, CA.

The monument sits squarely in the center of the main cemetery and is framed by two long walkways extending out from it. The walkways are constructed of a red brick and shaded by lines of tall cypress trees on both sides. The trees serve, in part, to cut off the clear display of the headstones, leaving the monument to stand as a striking presence against a relatively nondescript scene. There is a noticeable juxtaposition of the humble, mostly horizontal gravestones scattered throughout the cemetery and the striking grandeur of the monument.

The monument insists upon making a solemn tribute to those who have fallen while simultaneously celebrating an act of political defiance. There is absolutely no mention of Tehlirian as murderer or assassin. There are only allusions to justice, vindication, and heroism.

As it is explicitly marked by heroic symbolism and implicitly marked by the complex political and cultural identity of genocide victim, the Tehlirian monument is subject to contradictions of representation and history. The Armenian people have constructed a public identity that revolves around the remembering of the forgetting of the Armenian Genocide. It is a strategic move on the part of the Armenian people to construct an oppositional front to the current global politic which largely chooses to ignore the call for recognition.

At first glance this push to commemorate carries its own set of obstacles as it appears to call for a singular understanding of the Armenian experience and in this way creates its own kind of oppression of representation. It almost seems like a compulsion to impart and project a historical and cultural identity within these kinds of commemorative works *and* in the broader political sphere. One might easily

conclude that the Soghomon Tehlirian monument works to project a largely static understanding of the Armenian experience and identity. These issues ultimately raise questions about commemoration's ability to reflexively guide collective memory, and in turn, how it can alter modes of representation.

A Representation of History

During the decline of the Ottoman Empire in the early part of the twentieth century, political organizations such as the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) were created by an organization known as the Young Turks. They sought to transform the fledgling empire into a nation-state based on liberal and democratic principles as had been outlined in the Ottoman constitution of 1876. During this political transformation, the Young Turks anticipated that the great powers would accommodate them in their development of a democratic state, but found, to the contrary, that many of these established powers chose to exploit the Ottoman Empire's weakness by applying political power for resources. Between the years of 1908 and 1912, Ottoman territory was reduced by forty percent as the international community and minority factions began to take advantage of the weakened ruling authority.²⁰

In the face of a failed democratic experiment, the CUP leaders believed the only way to realize their vision was to shift to pan-Turkism, a xenophobic nationalism

²⁰ Melson, Robert. "Responses to the Armenian Genocide: America, the Yishuv, Israel" *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*. 20(1). (2006): 106.

designed to reconstitute an identity derived from Islam and Turkish ethnicity. Within this new empire, minorities could only acquire basic rights by becoming Turkish Muslims.²¹

With the world's attention focused on World War I, the stage was set for Turkey to slip under the radar as it sought to expand its empire by quieting dissenting voices. The effects of this shift to Turkish Nationalism were felt most readily by the Armenian communities situated in Eastern Anatolia next to the Russian border. This space had been historically contested and still remains a place of religious and political significance.²² It did not take long before other nations began to recognize that the tensions within the region were beginning to produce casualties of startling proportions.

The American ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, Henry Morgenthau noted that it was the undeniable "pattern of destruction" that finally caught broader attention. He elaborated further that the killings were, ...repeated over and over in different parts of Turkey, many of them far from any war zone; such repetition could only have come from a central design. Armenian men were drafted into the army, set to work as pack animals, and subsequently killed. Leaders were arrested and executed. Then the deportations of women, children, and the elderly into the deserts of Syria and Iraq began.²³

²¹ Ibid 107.

²²According to biblical texts, Noah's Arc landed on Mt. Ararat-formerly situated within the Christian nation of Armenia but now residing within modern-day Turkey.

²³ Henry Morgenthau, *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page 1918), 309.

In an ironic historical moment, a German Consul appraised the nature of the conflict during his visit to the area. He had been sent to evaluate Germany's decision to serve as a Turkish ally in this conflict. Presently sitting within the German State Archives is a document, which Chancellor Bethman Hollweg wrote on July 27, 1915: ...The Turkish government has gone much further than the scope of justified defense measures in an effort to counteract actual and possible subversive Armenian activities, but instead...are consciously aiming to achieve the downfall of the largest possible proportions of the Armenian people by using methods which are borrowed from antiquity, but which are unworthy of a government that wishes to remain in alliance with Germany...it has tried—and of this there can be no doubt—to take advantage of the opportunity to rid itself of the Armenian question... The letter concludes that the Turkish government will “never be able to deny responsibility for all that has happened.”²⁴

As quickly as 1915, the international community declared these killings a “crime against humanity.”²⁵ The genocide continued from 1915-1918 and was reinstated following the end of World War I from 1920-1923. Though the rhetoric of the international community was strong--demanding accountability and organizing attempts to aid displaced Armenians—no definitive political action was taken against the Ottoman Empire in regards to these events.²⁶

²⁴ “From Consulate Aleppo (Roessler) to the Reichskanzler (Bethamn Hollweg).” German State Archives, Document 1915-07-27-DE-001. <<http://armenocide.de/armenocide/armgende.sf>> (accessed on November 21, 2006).

²⁵ This was thirty three years before the official adoption of the UN Genocide Convention <http://www.armenian-genocide.org/genocidfaq.html>.

²⁶ Dadrian, Vahakn N. “Patterns of Twentieth Century Genocides: The Armenian, Jewish, and Rwandan Cases.” *Journal of Genocide Research*. 6(4), December (2004): 493.

The Rhetoric of Denial

Since 1923 the rhetoric surrounding the nature of the deaths of over 1.5 million Armenians has been subject to varying degrees of acknowledgement and denial on the world stage. However, one rhetorical move has remained consistent with the Turkish government: “genocide” does not apply here. Immediately following World War I, the Turkish government claimed that the events were ultimately security measures that had gone wrong due to overzealous officials and poorly trained soldiers. This rhetoric was then harnessed to bolster the Turkish government’s position that what had happened between the years 1915-1923 was actually the product of a civil war. Within this claim it became more difficult to assign Turkey responsibility as it appeared the country had been overwhelmed with the burdens of internal unrest.²⁷

In subsequent years, the debate fell silent as the Turkish government pressured the United States and Europe to avoid the issue of genocide. The Armenian Genocide was successfully kept out of the school curriculum locally and abroad. Certain movies depicting the events were shelved by the U.S. State Department.²⁸ Within the political realm, proponents of commemorative legislation were met with considerable

²⁷ Leo Kuper, "Problems in Education on Genocide," *Internet on the Holocaust and Genocide*, (Feb 1988): 1.

²⁸ Turkey pressured the U.S. State Department into preventing MGM Studios from producing a film based on Franz Werfel's *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, a book depicting aspects of the genocide (Kuper 1).

resistance.²⁹ As recently as 2000, Congressman Dennis Hastert was asked to pull a piece of legislation that would have commemorated April 24 as a day of remembrance for the Armenian Genocide. At the request of President Bill Clinton, Hastert removed the proposal from the docket before it was ever extended to the House floor for consideration.³⁰ Another example of the United States accommodating the Turkish government on this matter was the removal of all references to the Armenian Genocide in the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. The Turkish government asserted that it was an unfair conflation to include the “alleged” or “so-called” Armenian genocide alongside the Holocaust memorials.³¹

Global Others and Genocide: What Influences an Armenian Identity?

By recognizing all of these competing discourses and attempts at collective meaning-making, the secondary questions of this research ultimately become: How does the denial of genocide by the Turkish government and the lack of acknowledgement by other global powers influence a sense of Armenian memory? How large of a role are the Armenian people granted in shaping representations of themselves when they are still relying on global Others to recognize that the events of

²⁹ Turkey tried to prohibit any mention of the genocide in a United Nations report and was successful in its pressure on the Reagan and Bush administrations in defeating Congressional resolutions that would have designated April 24 as a national day of remembrance of the Armenian genocide. (Kuper 1)

³⁰ Mueller, Alfred. “Affirming Denial Through Preemptive Apologia: The Case of the Armenian Genocide Resolution.” *Western Journal of Communication*.. 68(1), Winter (2004): 24.

³¹ Israel W. Chamy, ed., *Toward the Understanding and Prevention of Genocide*. (Boulder, Colorado and London: Westview Press, 1984). 364-372.

1915 were actually genocide? What is ultimately being oppressed or privileged through this acknowledgement or negation? Finally, will acknowledgement of genocide provide the closure which is sought by the Armenian people?

Ultimately, lack of acknowledgement of genocide must be understood as it has operated on an Armenian collective identity and memory due to its rhetorical absence within the larger global community. Concerns about this rhetorically ambiguous space surface as to how the denial of genocide organizes, and therefore, implicitly prevents other discourses (identities and/or experiences) from being able to fully (re)present themselves within the construction of an Armenian identity.

Within the last year, calls for the admission of a calculated, government-ordered genocide of the Armenian people have crept into the public and political spheres as France has pushed for a piece of legislation making any denial a legal offense. It was viewed by the Turkish government as a political maneuver to keep Turkey out of the European Union and was also widely criticized as a blow to free speech.³² To date, over a dozen countries have approved resolutions that acknowledge “genocide” occurred and, in some cases, even demand recognition on behalf of Turkey.³³

In a slightly different vein, many American politicians have stood to gain financially from playing into the “genocide” politic. As alluded to previously, Representative Dennis Hastert garnered a significant Armenian vote by promising to

³² BBC NEWS. “Turkey Condemns ‘Genocide’ Vote.” October 12, 2006. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/europe/6043730.stm>> (November, 22, 2006).

³³ Cooper, Belinda and Taner Akcam. “Turks, Armenians and the ‘G-Word’” *World Policy Journal*. Fall (2005): 81-93.

support House Resolution 596 in 2000,³⁴ but he chose to pull it from the floor before it came up for debate due to pressure from the White House.³⁵ President Bush also made passing claims during the 2000 election that he intended to push for recognition of an Armenian Genocide, but has since become distracted with other commitments. Of course the most recent incident of the Armenian question bleeding into American politics came on March 14, 2007, when Senators Hillary Clinton and William Reid announced their support for Senate Resolution 106, which was stated as follows: [Senate Resolution 106 is] Calling on the President to ensure that the foreign policy of the United States reflects appropriate understanding and sensitivity concerning issues related to human rights, ethnic cleansing, and genocide documented in the United States record relating to the Armenian Genocide.³⁶

Though some countries have taken definitive steps to recognize this aspect of Armenian identity/history, the United States and Israel have repeatedly chosen to side-step any substantial political action. This most recent bill, mentioned above, would be a strong rhetorical turn for the United States as the government has chosen to remain politically neutral in the last half of the twentieth century. Because of the nature of genocide, this form of neutrality has functioned as an implicit denial and allowed for a further perpetuation of what has now become by lack of acknowledgement an enduring genocide.

³⁴ Oct 19, 2000. House Resolution 596 demanded Turkish recognition of the Armenian Genocide.

³⁵ Mueller, Alfred. "Affirming Denial Through Preemptive Apologia: The Case of the Armenian Genocide Resolution." *Western Journal of Communication*.. 68(1), Winter (2004): 24-26.

³⁶ "Senate Resolution 106." <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/billtext.xpd?bill=sr110-106> (accessed on May 1, 2007).

As these few political maneuvers suggest, “genocide” does not solely define an Armenian experience, it is also responsible for continually reconstituting and reorganizing identity among alleged perpetrators and global Others: It is an [Turkish] identity, therefore, founded on a policy of deportation and massacre, inasmuch as it was necessary to provide a territorial homogeneity, upon which the myth of ‘one’s own’ fatherland was based—and the more it is transmitted and recounted over time, the more it forgets or leans toward justifying that policy as an act of self-defense. To counterbalance this there is the Armenians’ account, for whom the genocide is a tragic and inextricably crucial date, ever-recurring and present due to the prohibition of its commemoration.³⁷

While the monument materially addresses commemoration, the ambiguity parallels the larger issue of the unresolved memory work of the Armenian people. It appears that genocide recognizes its own ability to create boundaries that demand accountability and, ultimately, inform international politics.

The global politics at stake here extend beyond a coherent cultural identity. The European Union is now determining whether allowing Turkey into its political body connotes an anti-humanist stance on behalf of all of its members. In a radical turn from his former rhetoric, the Pope announced that he and the Vatican backed Turkey’s EU admission and hoped that productive talks would commence soon. In the case of the EU, allowing Turkey into its body [without explicit recognition of genocide] suggests a complicity with a certain kind of remembering and

³⁷ Flores, Marcello. “Turkey’s Entry into the EU: National Identity, Collective Memory and the Haunting Ghosts of the Armenian Genocide.” *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*. Vol. 7, No. 1, April (2005): 112-113.

absorbing/obscuring of the past that allows memory to manifest itself in such a way that international politics and markets, not historical accountability, serve as the deciding factor for a nation's standing. Of course as of late, Turkey's struggle to obtain entrance into the EU has led to heightened scrutiny of the Armenian Genocide and other historical episodes, but these new surges of discourse and calls for government-sanctioned restitutions have proven somewhat ineffectual as Turkey's admittance appears unlikely and its own political and cultural instability seem to be overshadowing its attempts to modernize in the global market. Furthermore, the recent elections have shown that the political struggle to maintain authority and a cohesive, progressive national identity have left Turkey in a cultural state of limbo and largely unwilling to make a bold political move in favor of recognizing the Armenian Genocide.

Of course, all of this political maneuvering is substantially undercut by Armenia's subordinate position within global politics and, more significantly, the Armenian Diaspora which left most of the surviving population dispersed throughout the world, and in turn, left the possibility of the former "homeland" a distant memory. Yet another obstacle is the implicit acknowledgement that the world has become so fractured around cultural and religious beliefs that another country can not intervene on the behalf of the Armenian people without facing a complex set of political ramifications.³⁸

³⁸ Armenia is recognized as the first Christian nation in 301 A.D. This has been problematic for centuries as they have been surrounded and/or occupied by many diverse religious groups.

Implications for Commemoration

As the previous sections suggest, the politics of memory become central to the question of an Armenian experience as collective publics try to create a matrix of intelligibility. As it was suggested by Freud, the problem that arises from trauma, or in this case, the articulation of the traumatic, is the incapacity to develop a code that can be jointly recognizable and understood.

Commemoration or memory work presents the possibility of accessing the trauma resulting from the denial of genocide, but the public memory work can also be confused or resituated due to the relationship between the event being commemorated and the time and space of the people doing the commemorating. This may stem from the fact that certain rhetorics are deployed in order to reflect *contemporary* desires to explain the injustices (traumas) of the past.³⁹

The politics of the civil rights movement could explain the decision to construct the monument in the sixties, and even more substantially, what symbolism to include within it. The sixties would have provided a strong framework from which to extend the message of justice and demand recognition of a fundamental humanity. Furthermore, the struggle domestically to assert civil rights was countered in an international competition to stave off communist ideology. As many Americans were being interpellated into new discourses of freedom and equality, they were simultaneously encouraged to reassert their loyalty to the American tradition of patriotism and conservatism.

³⁹ Vivian, Bradford. "Jefferson's Other." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. Vol. 88, No. 3, (August 2002): 284.

In this way, the Soghomon Tehlirian monument embodies a historical representation which is very much shaped by the political climate of its time. The eagle striking out at the serpent could embody patriotic ideals of national strength, but it also serves a broader function of identification as Armenian Americans seek to ground themselves within a discourse that allows them to assert their own American authenticity. In a broader context, the monument also embodies the need to step outside the law or traditional code in order to achieve justice. Soghomon Tehlirian understood that he had killed a man, but he did not consider it an act of murder because his actions were to rectify past wrongs and thus create a space for closure. This serves as another interesting tension as Armenians seek to assimilate into an American way of life—an America which prides itself on being a nation of laws-- while simultaneously choosing to step outside the construct of law and order so that they may honor Tehlirian and achieve justice.

In other words, as the Soghomon Tehlirian monument illustrates specifically, or as the discourse surrounding the Armenian Genocide demonstrates more broadly, the repetition of public memory (this being the public memory of trauma in the case of the denial of a genocide) across changing contexts is a response to new exigencies (patriotism, justice, etc), but the repetition does not provide authentic memories as much as it transforms characters and resituates subjects within a present locatedness. This serves to intensify the memory and extend its domain. The more we seek to recover the authentic the more alienated it becomes,⁴⁰ or put more simply, we believe that we are relying on reproductions of an authentic experience to reappropriate

⁴⁰ Ibid 299.

memory, but rather, we have constructed our understanding of the past from memories *derived* from other memories. It is because of this, that a turn must be made to the theoretical possibilities of psychoanalysis as it resituates the framing through which the Soghomon Tehlirian monument can be accessed.

As was stated previously, the problematic nature of commemoration lies in the memory work which must be performed in order to unpack certain representations of identity and meaning. This is particularly complicated when the duty of memory is one of obligation. The performance of commemoration demands a certain kind of obligated memory, which returns to and repeats the meaning which is being projected onto it. In “Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through,” Freud gives clarity to this notion by offering that:

...the patient repeats instead of remembering. “Instead of”: repetition amounts to forgetting. And forgetting is itself termed a work to the extent that it is the work of the compulsion to repeat, which prevents the traumatic event from becoming conscious...In its place arise a phenomena of substitutions, symptoms, which mask the return of the repressed under various guises...⁴¹

In the case of a traumatic event such as the denial of the Armenian Genocide, the memory is no longer simply obligated, but also manipulated to return and make an, “...appeal to conscience that proclaims itself to be speaking for the victims’ demand for justice.”⁴² In this instance justice would be achieved, not only through the

⁴¹ Ricoeur, Paul. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. (University of Chicago Press, Chicago), 2004: 445.

⁴² Ibid 90.

commemoration of Tehlirian's actions, but also through the recognition of genocide as it continues to reassert itself into the former.

Paul Ricoeur explicates further on this process when he suggests that, stemming from this repetition, substitutions begin to find their way into memory work and alter the perception of the historical. This allows the historical moment to be overtaken, or more precisely condensed, by the commemorative one and by extension, allows a commemorative model to *substitute* for a historical model.⁴³ The reliance on the commemorative model is how personal memory becomes appropriated and obscured by collective memory. As the substitutions of commemoration and history are simultaneously negotiated, so are the substitutions of meaning for the figures symbolically and materially constructed within the monument. Tehlirian is at once hero and martyr, predator and prey.

The problem with this obligation to remember, or as Freud alluded to above-- what is ultimately in turn the obligation to forget--comes an inability to consciously retrieve the moment or memory. This subsequently creates the inability to access the trauma or more specifically to come to terms with the traumatic history of the Armenian Genocide, and in turn, how it has defined an Armenian representation. Due to this blocked memory, more substitutions, dislocations, and condensations must occur so that the commemorative/historical moment existing within the monument can be made accessible, can be negotiated without truly having to come to terms with the event, and most substantially, can simply be made intelligible.

It becomes a performative negotiation as the reader returns--time and again-- to repeat the memory, to obscure the trauma, and to come to terms with what is

⁴³ Ibid 91.

remembered. This performance is seen on the placard fixed to the monument. The script acknowledges that the monument was constructed in honor of heroism and martyrs. Both identities suggest existing for a cause. They lived and died for something of greater importance than themselves. In an implicit way, it suggests agency rather than powerlessness. These two identities were chosen because they recognized how imperative it was that they perform their roles and how important it is that these identities are reasserted over and over again in order to situate an Armenian representation. It may stand to some degree as a revisionist history but it also productively calls attention to a rhetorical self-awareness. These competing identities must negotiate and simultaneously fulfill certain expectations of this space of public memory in order to claim the commemorative moment that they seek to project.

Psychoanalytic Construct of the Rebus

What makes the monument such an interesting and complex read is the dynamic relationship of the aforementioned competing identities. Representations of heroism and victimage are offered in this monument, but it is the relationship and engagement of the two that offer the most productive possibilities for understanding the broader issues of identity at play. In attempting to negotiate the struggle of representation in commemoration as it is read through the lens of psychoanalysis, it becomes apparent that reading the Soghomon Tehlirian monument in terms of its manifest content falls prey to too many condensations and dislocations of obligated memory. A more concrete way to illuminate how these condensations and

dislocations manifest themselves in the unconscious psyche is through the monument's use of the eagle. Within Armenian culture the eagle is seen as a symbol of power that remains prominently displayed on the national coat of arms. The eagle dates back to the ancient Armenian Kingdom of Artaxiads, which in the 1st Century BC stood as the most powerful dynasty in the Roman east.⁴⁴ When the sculptor Harmik Harcobian was asked whether this ancient symbolism influenced his decision to include the eagle in his monument he claimed that that had never been his intention.⁴⁵ This

notion of intent and representation stands as an interesting example of how the processes of transformation can begin to occur between the unconscious relationship of manifest and latent content. The use of the eagle ultimately provides connections to ancient allusions of power and agency, which allow for one mode of identification with the Armenian culture but obscures many other representations of victim, survivor, or even--in the case of Soghomon Tehlirian-- vigilante. The transformative nature of the eagle symbol functions to interpellate the monument into an ancient historical referent that conjures up images of a former dynasty rather than the actual historical moment which was grounded in the despair of the Armenian Diaspora. Furthermore, a rather ethnocentric read would conclude that the incorporation of the eagle was an attempt to present the Armenian culture as fully grounded in American ideology. All of these condensations point to the need for an alternative reading strategy. In hopes of avoiding an over-simplified understanding of the monument as

⁴⁴ "Armenia: The Artaxiads." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-44267/Armenia> (Accessed on August 3, 2007).

⁴⁵ Chekerdemain, Mayher. Phone Interview with Author. July 1, 2007.

representational in its manifest content, the method of reading the monument as a rebus⁴⁶ will be pursued. Issues of representation follow a similar trajectory in terms of unpacking the memory work of dreams and that of commemoration. They both rely on an attempt to articulate the symbolic as it is embodied in various representational forms.

Recognizing the similarities within this process allows for a more fluid borrowing of methodological practices as they were originally derived from Freud's Interpretation of Dreams. Freud recognized that "reading" a dream solely in terms of the manifest content, as it was presented through our memories, relied too heavily on the illusion of an authentic representation. To counter this tendency, he proposed that a matrix of meaning should be derived from a dream's latent content. This would mean that dreams would need to be evaluated as a relational whole. The content of dreams would have to be interpreted in the context of the relationship between manifest and latent content *and* through the processes by which one was transformed into the other.⁴⁷ Freud illuminates this further by suggesting that, ...dream-content seems like a transcript of the dream-thoughts into another mode of expression, whose characters and syntactic laws it is our business to discover by comparing the original and the translation. Dream thoughts are immediately comprehensible ...dream-content, on the other hand, is expressed as it were a

⁴⁶ Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. (Avon Books, New York), 1965. 312.

⁴⁷ Ibid 311.

pictographic script [or rebus], the characters of which have to be transposed individually into the language of the dream thoughts.⁴⁸

It is at this point that Freud turns to the problematic nature of reading dream's manifest content when he warns, "If we attempted to read these characters according to their pictorial value instead of according to their symbolic relation, we should clearly be led into error."⁴⁹

As it was suggested earlier, the eagle cannot be understood in its complexity simply by its pictorial representation. It would not be a complete read to suggest that the eagle represented an ancient Armenian dynasty or assimilation into American culture. This is the complication that arises when trying to comprehend the Soghomon Tehlirian monument as a pictorial composition embodying distinct forms of representation. If one were to analyze the monument strictly in terms of its visual and material composition, they would be misled into believing that the eagle clutching the snake in its talons was symbolic of Armenians reasserting an identity of power. At the very least, though it would be less explicit, the image would suggest a certain satisfaction achieved through vengeance.

This is why the Soghomon Tehlirian monument can be more fully understood as it is read through the lens of the rebus. It is made coherent only through the transformation of its manifest and latent content as they are constructed into a web of relationships: heroism and victimage, villainy and justice, remembrance and denial and so on. The monument must be read as an act of heroism being undercut by the cowardice of global Others who remained neutral. It also alludes to the

⁴⁸ Ibid 311-312.

⁴⁹ Ibid 312.

transformative nature of justice and injustice as Tehlirian had to murder a man (injustice) to rectify the wrongs committed against the Armenian people (justice). This interplay is what offers Armenians a kind of representation that they can access. Armenian identity is constantly negotiated and defined by its articulation of the relationship “between”—as they are continually calling for other’s recognition of genocide *and* organizing a strong identity in opposition to those who have refused to acknowledge it, therefore, allowing the denial of genocide to triumph. If absolute closure were granted to these identities, a new rupture of representation would occur for Armenians as their complimentary and competing identities have served to create an ever-present memory of trauma and victimage.

The monument must also be evaluated as it functions within its space. In terms of sheer hierarchy, the eagle/snake construction maintains the most prominent place and space of the monument. This is represented through the contrast produced by its gold plating, the choice to capture the scene as a live action shot, and the placement of the structure almost twenty feet in the air. All of these choices would suggest that the structure carries the most significant and most representative symbolism within the monument. In a substantially less showy fashion, the plaque, which has been fixed near the ground to one side of the monument, announces again that this monument stands for heroism and that such heroic acts were needed to seek justice for the lives’ lost. This plaque is simultaneously the most nondescript and most defining puzzle piece of the monument as it establishes all of the motivations for the structure’s existence.

As it can be seen in the historical narrative of the Armenian Genocide, the Soghomon Tehlirian monument distorts and dislocates too much of its own representation of history to attempt to decode each piece in its singularity. Acknowledging this possibility in the monument and in the broader politics surrounding the Armenian experience allows for a more productive understanding of the web of relations that shape an intelligible meaning for the Armenian people.



Figure 3. Soghomon Tehlirian monument in Ararat Cemetery, Fresno, CA

Conclusions

The Armenian people have held onto the belief for nearly a century now, that the global Other's codification of their tragic past as "genocide" is the only pathway

to resolving the memory work of a people. In terms of memory and representation, it makes sense both that Tehlirian and the monument become a touchstone since his acquittal provides one of the most tangible acknowledgements by the global Other that justice has been served and that the perpetrator(s) was “rightfully” punished. It substituted for a modern-day crime of passion for all Armenians in a world that refused to name the atrocity as genocide, and consequently, further diminished the martyrs’ and victims’ deaths.

But the larger dilemma at play here is: How does one talk of “genocide” and its denial? It is a kind of articulation that exceeds the bound of human intelligibility. To speak of an “authentic” representation of the experience of genocide is to suggest that one has the capacity to unveil “the truth.” But the problem remains the same. There are no words that can define what is beyond expression; there are only representations of memory and meaning, which can be utilized to access the experience. This recognition is especially significant in the case of the Armenian Genocide as the Armenian community is now inextricably situated within the trauma but removed from the historical experience. They are forced to rely on reappropriated memories that once served as representational experiences for the last generation of genocide survivors. It is rather easy to discuss how genocide organizes and why it is politically significant, but to comprehend what it is and what it means demands a language that exceeds our humanity.

In a way this unresolved victimage has become a critical piece of the construction of current Armenian identity. It not only provides Armenians with a strong and ever-present mode of identification, but it also serves to suppress the

possibilities of other identities, for example, the rhetorically more empowering identity of genocide survivor.

Armenians' sense of identity is dependent on this continual reproduction of the former (unresolved victimage) representation. This is exemplified in the on-going struggle to maintain an Armenian identity that is tied in with the notion of a homeland and a history of persecution and alienation, while simultaneously seeking to identify with American ideology. The problem is that the former Armenian homeland does not appear to be a cultural or political possibility. However, that is in all likelihood no longer the most significant point. Armenians seem to achieve a certain level of catharsis by demanding the recognition of the memory of a homeland, and the loss of that space through ethnic cleansing.⁵⁰

The trauma of the denial of the event--followed by the denial of the memory--allows Armenians to construct a more intelligible narrative than they would be able to if they were to attempt to speak of genocide as experienced. Unacknowledged genocide provides Armenians communal meaning, but as stated previously, to actually conceive of it as lived experience stretches beyond the boundaries of ethical and psychological intelligibility. So the problem becomes: a community cannot insist upon suppressing the (unintelligible) experience of genocide because they need it as a mode of identification. So in terms of political mobility, the rhetorical space (or the representation through commemoration) of "genocide" offers strategic access to memories and meaning, which may explain why the Soghomon Tehlirian monument must have a tribute to a hero and a plaque to the fallen in the same commemorative

⁵⁰ Burke, Kenneth. *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature and Method*. (University of California Press: Berkeley). 1966.

space. This monument offers reading strategies which allow for a perpetuation of memory and historical narrative in its most palatable and, quite possibly, controlled forms. Through this enjoinder of identities, Armenians are offered, at least in appearance, a sense of identity and agency in direct opposition to a historical experience/representation that insisted that they be granted neither. Therefore, it is the projection of Armenian history being interpellated into this reproduction of memory and discourse that allows them *access* to representational forms that they will continually renegotiate in order to reconstitute what their understanding of the Armenian experience is. Simply put in the words of William Saroyan:

I should like to see any power of the world destroy this race, this small tribe of unimportant people, whose wars have all been fought and lost, whose structures have crumbled, literature is unread, music is unheard, and prayers are no more answered. Go ahead, destroy Armenia. See if you can do it. Send them into the desert without bread and water. Burn their homes and churches. Then see if they will not laugh, sing and pray again. For when two of them meet anywhere in the world, see if they will not create a new Armenia.⁵¹

⁵¹ Saroyan, William. Armenian Missionary Association of America. Newsletter. March/April 2001. Vol. XXXV No. 2. <http://www.amaa.org> (accessed on August 1, 2007).

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