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# “FORGET-ME-NOT”

The Politics of Memory, Identity, and Community in Armenian America

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Spring 2018

## Acknowledgement

When I first began writing this thesis I had no idea how monumental undertaking it would become. I would first and foremost like to extend my heartfelt appreciation to my advisor, Professor Zeinab Abul-Magd, who has been a tireless mentor and inspiration throughout the writing process and during my undergraduate career. Her guidance and support has been immeasurably important to me. Professor Leonard Smith, as the guiding faculty for all the history honors candidates, has also been endlessly helpful from the beginning stages of this project. In my deep gratitude for his hard work and patience, I am not a moderate.

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I think it is appropriate that this thesis is due in April, a mere four days before the 103<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the Armenian genocide. When I began this thesis, my interests were more geopolitical than personal, but this has fully changed through my experience reading through memoirs recounting the events of the Armenian genocide. To all those who were brave enough to put their stories to paper, thank you. To those historians who have fought tirelessly to make the history of the Armenian genocide known, thank you. I dedicate this work to you. I am in awe of vibrancy and energy of the Armenian community, best described by the great Armenian-American author 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 or water. Burn their homes and churches. Then see if they will not laugh, sign and pray again. For when two of them meet anywhere in the world, see if they will not create a New Armenia.”

## Glossary

Armenian Assembly of America (AAA) – Elite Armenian lobbying group focused on lobbying members of Congress

Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA) – Armenian lobbying group dedicated to grassroots organization and mobilization

Armenian National Institute (ANI) – Research and education branch organization of the AAA

Armenian Youth Federation (AYF) – Youth corps of the ARF

Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) – Umbrella political party of the Young Turks that gained power during the 1908 revolution. Ottoman government in power from 1908-1918 considered responsible for the Armenian genocide

Dashnak or Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) – Politically influential Armenian political party with roots in the late-19<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman and Russian Armenian communities

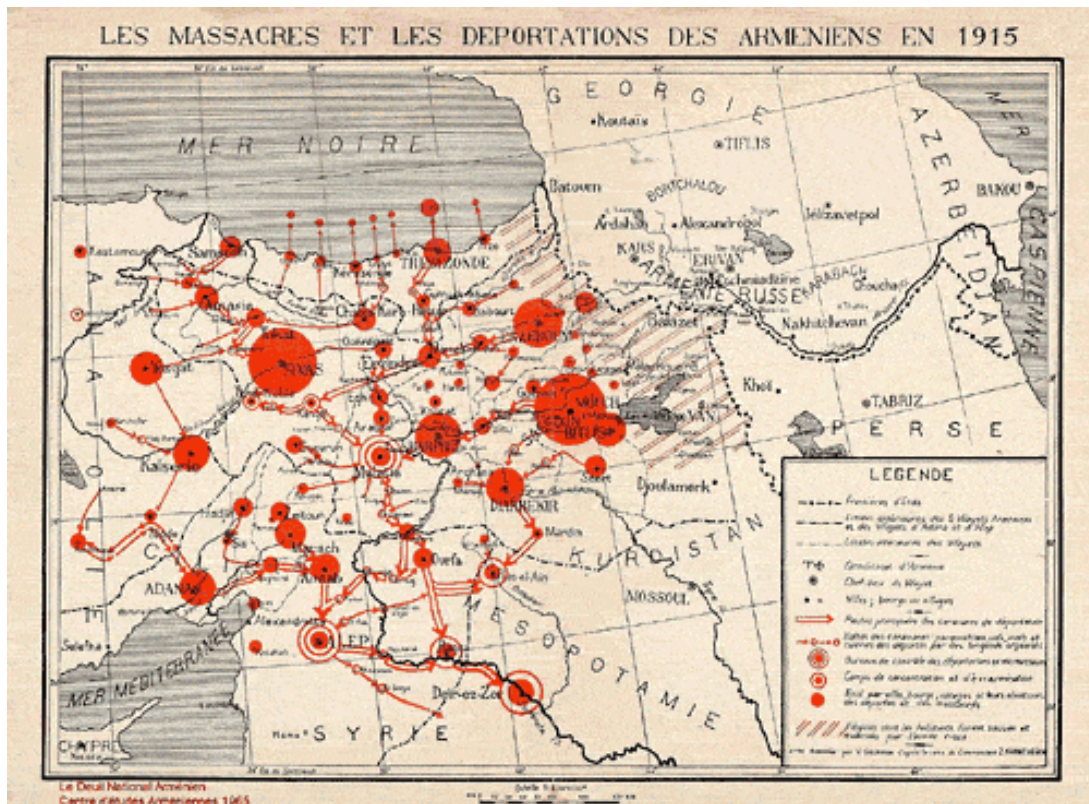
Near East Relief (NER) – The oldest American charity organization created in response to the Armenian genocide, considered one of the largest and most successful humanitarian projects undertaken by the U.S. Now known as the Near East Foundation (NEF)

Non-Dashnak – Refers to any members of the Armenian diaspora who are not affiliated with or do not agree with the Dashnak ideology or mission

Young Turks – Turkish nationalist party in early 20<sup>th</sup> century that led the 1908 revolution against the Sultan, ending the monarchy

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“The Massacres and Deportations of the Armenians in 1915.” Courtesy of Centre d’études Arméniennes 1965; Collection IUT Blois, France. Found at <http://genocide.leadr.msu.edu/stories/mapping-and-geospatial/the-armenian-genocide/map-of-the-armenian-genocide/>. (Accessed April 17, 2018).



Robert Hewsen. “Historical Armenia,” in *Armenia: A Historical Atlas*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001. Near East Section, African and Middle Eastern Division, Library of Congress. <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/armenian-literary-tradition/exhibition-items.html#obj69>. (Accessed April 17, 2018).



## Introduction



“March for Justice in Hollywood, CA.” United Armenian Council for the Commemoration of the Armenian Genocide – Los Angeles website, April 24, 2015, <http://www.uacla.com/march-4-justice-4-24-2015.html>. Accessed March 21, 2018.

On the morning of April 24, 2015, Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles began filling with people solemnly carrying the red, blue and orange flag of Armenia. The crowd would eventually grow to over 100,000 people,<sup>1</sup> all gathered in memory of the massacre of over 1.5 million Armenians in Ottoman Turkey a century before: an event formally known as the Armenian

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<sup>1</sup> Mejia, Brittany, Taylor Goldenstein and Howard Blume, “Armenian genocide: Massive March Ends at Turkish Consulate in L.A.,” *Los Angeles Times*, Apr. 24, 2015.

genocide.<sup>2</sup> This massive demonstration was for many a first glimpse into the fraught history of Turks and Armenians, rooted today in the dispute over what happened a hundred years ago during WWI (1915-1918). The massacre, deportation, and exile of the Armenian people from Anatolia have been the subject of significant debate. In the Turkish official narrative, it was the unfortunate but justifiable use of force against a rebellious population during the war; for Armenians, an insidious attempt to eliminate the Armenian people from the Ottoman landscape: a genocide.

Genocide, in the UN Genocide Convention of 1948, is defined as acts such as “killing,” “causing serious bodily harm,” and “deliberately inflicting...conditions of life calculated to bring about...physical destruction” done “with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.”<sup>3</sup> This international legal definition has been at the core of debates surrounding the Armenian genocide, with the concept of “intent” at the center of Turkish denialist claims. The continuing dispute over whether or not a genocide occurred has led to an emphasis on genocide recognition by the Armenian community for the past hundred years. Although twenty-eight countries have recognized the Armenian genocide as a “genocide”, the U.S. is not one of them.<sup>4</sup> The controversial nature of Armenian genocide recognition has made its memorialization one of the core tenets of communal Armenian identity.

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<sup>2</sup> I choose to use “Armenian genocide” in this paper. However, Marc Nichanian discusses in *Loss* that the use of the term “genocide” makes it “knowable” and in doing so can function as a further denial; framing the violence of 1915 in a historical and judicial framework that only positions communicable witnessing as legitimate and acceptable proof. He suggests using the term “Catastrophe” or “*Aghed*”, which I have chosen not to do because the historical and legal implications of using the word “genocide” are an important factor to consider in how the Armenian community remembers and uses the events of 1915.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations, *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, Dec. 9, 1948.

<sup>4</sup> “Countries that Recognize the Armenian Genocide,” *Armenian National Institute*. [http://www.armenian-genocide.org/recognition\\_countries.html](http://www.armenian-genocide.org/recognition_countries.html). (accessed Feb. 19, 2018).



In this thesis, I am not focused on rehashing the historical arguments made around whether or not the events of 1915 constitute a genocide. Instead, I hope to explore how memories of the genocide were constructed and politicized to form a framework of Armenian identity that dictated Armenian-American action and reaction over the past century. The articulated memory of the genocide, not its facts or reality, which is understood through survivor testimony, American response, and the broader Armenian political experience, forms the basis of a deployable Armenian communal identity. In this sense, the “truth” of the genocide matters less than how it has been perceived, understood, and deployed for political activism or cultural unity by the Armenian-American community. I argue that the Armenian-American community has politicized narratives and memories of the genocide going back to the 20<sup>th</sup> century to forge an identity and organized community.

Much of the work of historians on the Armenian genocide has been to document, record, and compile testimonies and primary sources to create a historical record that fits the legal definition of genocide. The impact of this work cannot be understated: the massacres and atrocities that were once contested in the international sphere have been publically recognized as a “genocide” by dozens of countries. This work, championed in texts like *The Young Turks Crime Against Humanity* by Taner Akçam and *They Can Live in the Desert but nowhere else...* by Ronald Suny, has largely succeeded in making the Armenian genocide “no longer academically contested.”<sup>5</sup> Despite an apparent *academic* consensus regarding the events themselves, the interpretation of these events remains politically contentious. The murkiness of

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<sup>5</sup> Dr. Rouben Adalian, comment to author during interview, Nov. 18, 2017.

interpretation is intimately connected with history and identity, and the ability to determine “truth” in this context has been inexorably conditioned by politics.

The “Turkish” state argument looks at the events of 1915 in the total war context of WWI and contends that the genocide was a reasonable government response to a legitimately perceived threat to the Ottoman state.<sup>6</sup> Along this line of thinking, in *Armenian History and the Question of Genocide* Michael M. Gunter suggests that the fairest interpretation of 1915 is that Armenians were not “victims of a *premeditated and unprovoked genocide*,” but rather of an “honest, but inaccurate belief among the Turkish leaders that they were faced with a widespread and coordinated Armenian uprising from within at the very time their state was in mortal danger from without.”<sup>7</sup> The “Armenian” argument paints a different picture: drawing from U.S., Ottoman,<sup>8</sup> and German Archives,<sup>9</sup> scholars argue that an “intent to destroy” can be inferred despite the lack of “clear, unambiguously incriminating documents.”<sup>10</sup>

In this thesis, I investigate how the memory of the Armenian genocide, informed by political conditions and events that occurred before and after the genocide itself, has been created

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<sup>6</sup> Other elements of the denialist arguments include pointing to Armenians who were left untouched and investigations made by the CUP government into reported abuse of Armenian deportees. These and other common denialist theses are systematically analyzed and dismantled in Akçam (2012), p. 373-447.

<sup>7</sup> Michael M. Gunter, *Armenian History and the Question of Genocide* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 20. Italicization in original.

<sup>8</sup> A discussion the challenges and limitations of using the Ottoman Archives, particularly regarding the destruction of documents, can be found in Taner Akçam’s book *The Young Turks’ Crime Against Humanity*, p. 1-27.

<sup>9</sup> Evidence compiled from the German Archives can be found in *The Armenian Genocide: Evidence from the German Foreign Office Archives, 1915-1916*, edited by Wolfgang Gust. The topic of German involvement and complicity in the Armenian Genocide, especially as a precursor to the Holocaust, has been the subject of several books. These include *Justifying Genocide* by Stefan Ihrig, *Rewriting German History: New Perspectives on Modern Germany* edited by Jan Rieger, and *Revolution and Genocide* by Robert Melson.

<sup>10</sup> Taner Akçam, *The Young Turks’ Crime Against Humanity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 27.

and utilized. For the Armenian-American community, this memory has been instrumental in the construction of an ethnic identity, towards political goals, and as a means of community organizing. An exploration of the ways that this memory was experienced, established, interpreted, and re-interpreted by Armenian-Americans functions as a history of Armenian genocide memory in Armenian America. In this way, the Armenian genocide has been essential in developing and strengthening Armenian-American identity and community by providing a point of commonality despite prior political, geographic, and even religious backgrounds. Armenian-Americans were able to grow and establish themselves through the traumatic memory of the genocide, utilizing trauma and victimhood towards political empowerment.

To guide my understanding of how the traumatic memory of genocide could be used towards community and identity formation, I turn to the fields of trauma and memory studies. Looking specifically at the ways genocidal trauma has affected communal memory and identity gives insight on the ways that trauma and memory work to affect present understandings of self and community. This approach sees the past as dynamic and understands that “memory and perception are always intertwined, oriented to produce action.”<sup>11</sup>

The field of trauma studies is still relatively new, but as discussed in *Critical Trauma Studies*, edited by Monica J. Casper and Eric Wertheimer, the field is concerned with understanding trauma as “a product of history and politics, subject to reinterpretation, contestation, and intervention.”<sup>12</sup> This repositioning of trauma away from the clinical examines

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<sup>11</sup> Melissa King, “Survivors: An Ethnographic Study of Armenian American Activism and Expression” (dissertation, University of California Riverside, 2013), 122.

<sup>12</sup> Monica J. Casper and Eric Wertheimer, eds., *Critical Trauma Studies: Understanding Violence, Conflict, and Memory in Everyday Life* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2016), 3.

tensions between “individual identity and collective experience, between history and the present, [and] between facts and memory.”<sup>13</sup> This provides an opportunity to examine the Armenian genocide’s traumatic effect as a still-continuing process.

In the field of memory studies, collective memory<sup>14</sup> is defined by Iwona Irwin-Zarecka in *Frames of Remembrance* as “a set of ideas, images, feelings about the past...located not in the minds of individuals, but in the resources they share”<sup>15</sup> which creates a “socially articulated and socially maintained ‘reality of the past’.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, collective memory creates a past which functions as the foundations of a community identity. In the context of the Armenian genocide, this framework is useful for understanding how genocide memories themselves have been politicized and interpreted in order to support a post-genocidal community identity. Zarecka’s work highlights the impact that framing the past has in creating present realities of understanding, feeling, and remembrance of a communal identity.

*Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, edited by David Eng and David Kazanjian, dabbles in both memory and trauma studies. It introduces the concept of a “hopeful politics of mourning” that understands the past as part of a “creative process, animating history for future significations as well as alternate empathies.”<sup>17</sup> A “hopeful politics of mourning” opens the possibility for a relationship between loss, mourning, and the past to take on a productive or hopeful character by

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<sup>13</sup> Casper and Wertheimer, 4.

<sup>14</sup> The concept of collective memory was pioneered in Maurice Halbwachs’ *On Collective Memory* (1952).

<sup>15</sup> Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames of Remembrance* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1994), 4.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 54

<sup>17</sup> David Eng and David Kazanjian, *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 1.

rethinking loss as “creative... full of volatile potentiality and future militancies rather than as pathologically bereft and politically reactive.”<sup>18</sup> This concept opens up the possibility for Armenian genocide memory to be continuously reinterpreted; to take on new meanings as the Armenian-American community encounters shifting political, social, and generational contexts.

Although the communities that Armenian-Americans built are powerful, I understand their political empowerment most explicitly as the success of Armenian-American lobbying groups. *The U.S. and Ethnic Lobbies* by David M. and Rachel Anderson Paul attempts to quantitatively determine which ethnic lobbying groups are the most successful and how that success is defined. As such, it has provided me with a guiding framework for understanding how ethnic lobbies are organized and function in the American context. The Armenian-American lobby is understood as “one of the most influential ethnic communities in the foreign policy process” resulting in “one of the most active ethnic lobbies.”<sup>19</sup> Whereas most ethnic lobbying literature ignores memory and focuses on organization, I consider memory an integral part of Armenian-American political organization.

Using these frameworks, I seek to understand how the memory of the Armenian genocide has been forged and affected by changing geopolitics, the growth of Armenian America, and internal dynamics over the past century. I investigate how this memory has been utilized in community building and political organization. The details of the historical record are now well-documented and critiques of the Turkish state’s unwillingness to recognize these events as such are equally as well-represented. The traumatic memory of the Armenian genocide, passed down

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 5

<sup>19</sup> David M. Paul and Rachel Anderson Paul, *Ethnic Lobbies and US Foreign Policy* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2009), 52.

across several generations<sup>20</sup>, remains raw in the minds of many Armenians. In this thesis, I seek to understand how Armenian-Americans developed community and identity *through* the memory of the Armenian genocide rather than despite it. I will explore the ways that the record has been reacted to and interpreted by the Armenian-American community to guide identity formation and political mobilization.

Guiding this research are several questions: How has the memory of the Armenian genocide been constructed and disseminated to Armenian-Americans? In what ways do accepted narratives of genocide remembrance create a communal identity? What are the main organizations dictating the tone and goals of the community and how do they utilize memories of the genocide? And finally, how are the political and non-political uses of Armenian genocide memory changing?

To aid in this endeavor, I am drawing from a wide variety of archival and primary sources, such as memoirs of survival translated into English; newspapers archives from WWI and the Cold War; U.S. governmental records;<sup>21</sup> and publications of Armenian-American community and lobbying organizations. Moreover, I conducted field research in Los Angeles over Winter Term, where I visited sites of memory through the city, attended community events, and interviewed members of the Armenian-American community. I engage with the living memory of the genocide using documents collected from key Armenian organizations such as the Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA), which is active in organizing and political lobbying, and the Armenian Museum of America in Watertown, MA which is focused

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<sup>20</sup> See articles: *100 Years of Trauma: the Armenian Genocide and Intergenerational Cultural Trauma* by Selina L. Mangassarian and *Generational Impact of Mass Trauma: The Post-Ottoman Turkish Genocide of the Armenians* by Dr. Anie Kalayjian and Ms. Marian Weisberg.

<sup>21</sup> These include congressional records, documents released on Wikileaks and presidential statements.



on preserving and disseminating memory. These primary sources serve to deepen my understanding of the origins and contexts of genocide memories while providing me with insights into current focuses and direction. I also note that many of the secondary sources I draw from are written by Armenians themselves. While this does not necessarily detract from their academic credibility, it is important to consider the history of the Armenian genocide and Armenian-Americans as work largely undertaken by those with a personal connection to the Armenian-American community.

This thesis is organized chronologically and thematically around issues of building memory, politicizing memory, and making memory public. Chapter one begins with how the memory of the Armenian genocide was first articulated and disseminated in the U.S. during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This chapter starts with the immediate post-WWI reaction of the American public to the Armenian plight. It then moves on to discuss how Armenian immigration to the U.S. was informed by Armenian public image and how experiences and organizations of immigrants reinforced narratives about the Armenian genocide. Chapter two moves on to explore the politicization of the Armenian genocide in the U.S. as part of building a unified identity in the diaspora, from the 1920s through the Cold War period. This chapter begins by examining ideological stances and rifts within the Armenian diaspora, focusing on the influential Dashnak Party's ideology. I then explore how violence was adopted as an immediate response to the genocide and was commemorated and incorporated into the memorial narrative. The chapter finishes by looking at how a new generation of Armenian-Americans and a changing international environment, including the emergence of an independent Armenia from the Soviet Union in 1992, facilitated a move towards political lobbying. Lastly, chapter three discusses how memory of the Armenian genocide in the past two decades has been made public through

political and legal initiatives towards redress. This focuses on the opinions and visions of young politically active Armenian-Americans today, as well as community organizing, public events, and monuments to genocide memory.

## Chapter 1

### **Building Memory: Constructing Victimhood through American Media and Immigrant Narratives**

At the end of the Great War, Armenians found themselves thrust from relative obscurity under the Ottoman Empire to an international stage. Forced from their historical homeland in Anatolia, having lost most of their material possessions if not their lives or families, the fate of the Armenian people could very well have been obscurity. However, the public sympathy that Armenians were met with, particularly from a U.S. audience, in combination with the immigrant experience helped shape the narrative contours of the Armenian genocide.

This chapter explores the origins of the genocide's remembrance in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, focusing on specifics of the American context that allowed for a strong community and identity building around the genocide. Before and during the genocide, repeated persecution led to the continuous victimization of displaced Armenians. In turn, this led to a canonical understanding of Armenians as victims in the American context. This publicly perceived image made victimhood a core tenant of the Armenian-American understanding of their identity and community in relation to the genocide.

In this chapter, I argue that there were two developments that took place before and after WWI that set the foundations of the Armenian-American community's central focus on the genocide. I focus most heavily on the time period between 1915-1924, when memory around the genocide was actively being built in the U.S. through American mass media and by new Armenian immigrants. However, I also discuss events preceding and following this time period to examine the ways that this built memory shifts from a focus on victimization towards action.

As various forms of American publications promoted and leveraged the public image of Armenians as victims against the trope of the “Terrible Turk,” Armenians were able to capitalize on Wilsonian moral sentiment to carve out a space for themselves in the American landscape. This helped create an imagined Armenian people and community in the American public sphere by American journalists, missionaries, and diplomats. However, this left them susceptible to the changing tides of public opinion and higher global politics.

Media depictions alone did not shape the burgeoning Armenian-American community. Patterns of immigration, beginning in the late-1800s also played an important role in the ways that Armenian-Americans imagined themselves in the American landscape. Mostly arriving as migrants fleeing political persecution, Armenians in America relied on their strong social ties and the shared experience of oppression to establish united communities. These connections, mostly religious and political, carried the seed for future strife but were instrumental in organizing early Armenian-Americans towards unified goals. My exploration of how the genocide was remembered and evoked during this early period reveals patterns of persecution that led to the repeated victimization of displaced Armenians. This, coupled with the canonical understanding of Armenians as victims in the American context made victimhood a core tenant of the Armenian-American understanding of their identity and community in relation to the genocide.

I. *“Ravished Armenia”: Armenian Victims, American Heroes*



“Gyumri Orphanage.” NER Ad found on the America We Thank You website, April 2015, <http://americawethankyou.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Gumri-orphanage-Armenia.jpg>. Accessed Mar. 29, 2018.

Beginning in the summer of 1915, reports began pouring into the *New York Times* published under alarming headlines: “Armenians Horrors Grow,”<sup>22</sup> “Turks Depopulate Towns of Armenia,”<sup>23</sup> “Tales of Armenian Horrors Confirmed.”<sup>24</sup> Each article detailed for the American public a growing crisis half a world away, contributing to a vivid vision of a Christian population being “exterminated as a result of an absolutely premeditated policy elaborately pursued by the gang now in control of Turkey.”<sup>25</sup> These reports, provided by travelers, missionaries, and

<sup>22</sup> “Armenian Horrors Grow,” *New York Times*, Aug. 6, 1915..

<sup>23</sup> “Turks Depopulate Towns of Armenia,” *New York Times*, Aug. 27, 1915.

<sup>24</sup> “Tales of Armenian Horrors Confirmed,” *New York Times*, Sept. 27, 1915.

<sup>25</sup> “800,000 Armenians Counted Destroyed,” *New York Times*, Oct. 7, 1915.

journalists, hoped for a reaction from a “neutral” American audience that could inspire more of a response from the Germans and Turks than the Allied powers. They were not disappointed.

The plight of the Armenians was widely disseminated across the country through newspapers, books, and even in the cinema. Mabel Elliott, Medical Director of the Near East Relief, even declared in her memoir published in 1924 that “there is probably not an American to whom the idea of Armenia is not familiar.”<sup>26</sup> Primary sources predominately consisted of missionary and consular witnesses, who shared news of massacres and deportations with their networks. Reports of violence and injustice against Armenians received frequent coverage not only in large national newspapers like the *New York Times*; they were also published in smaller state and local newspapers across the country which ensured wide readership and awareness.<sup>27</sup> However, news reporters were scarce – only two U.S. correspondents identifiable on the ground in 1915 – and under constant threat. Even freelancers could be arrested if they showed sign of working to disseminate information about the massacres.<sup>28</sup> Regardless of the dangers the information could not be contained, and newspapers were responsive and sympathetic.

The stories that circulated in the American press focused on descriptions of the shocking violence that was committed against the Armenians, often told by eyewitnesses. One such article, entitled “Saw Armenians Go Starving To Exile,” is conveyed by a missionary whose trustworthiness is “vouched for by the board [of the Commissioners for Foreign Missions].”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Mabel E. Elliott, *Beginning Again at Ararat* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 17.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas C. Leonard, “When News is not enough: American media and Armenian deaths,” in Jay Winter, ed., *America and the Armenian Genocide of 1915* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 298.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

<sup>29</sup> “Saw Armenians Go Starving to Exile,” *New York Times*, Feb. 6, 1916.



The article describes the horrific maltreatment of “old men and old women, young mothers with tiny babies, men, women, and children all huddled together – human beings treated worse than cattle are treated.” The intentional cruelty shown to the Armenians, who were forbidden to buy food to the point that mothers threw “twenty babies ... into a river as a train crossed... [because the mothers] could not bear to hear their little ones crying for food,”<sup>30</sup> shocked American audiences.

Even state officials contributed to popular culture surrounding the Armenian plight. Henry Morgenthau<sup>31</sup>, close friend and colleague of President Wilson as well as the Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, was the most influential voice to urge action from Congress as well as the public in the early 1910s. His account of the genocide, a scathing condemnation of Turkish action as well as German inaction, was published as a hugely popular and influential book entitled *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story* in 1918. Morgenthau's vivid descriptions of Turkish brutality and Armenian massacres and deportations became iconic images of the genocide. The Armenian people, described as “a little island of Christians surrounded by backward peoples of hostile religion and hostile race” whose “long existence has been one of unending martyrdom”<sup>32</sup> reinforced the image of Armenian victims and Turkish brutes. In the chapter entitled “The Murder of a Nation,” he describes vividly what would become the canonized image of the Armenian's deportation – a “procession of normal human beings became a stumbling horde of dust-covered skeletons...[leaving] behind another caravan – that of dead and unburied bodies, of

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<sup>30</sup> *New York Times*, Feb. 6, 1916.

<sup>31</sup> Morgenthau received an honorary degree from Oberlin in 1916, with President King commenting: “Able and distinguished American Ambassador, champion of humanity in a time and place of unexampled difficulty.” (*Oberlin Alumni Magazine*, Vol. 12 Issue 10 (1916), 308.)

<sup>32</sup> Henry Morgenthau, *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story* (New York, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1918), 288.

old men and of women dying in the last stages of typhus dysentery, and cholera, of little children lying on their backs and setting up their last piteous wails for food and water.”<sup>33</sup> These scenes of violence and public disgrace led him describe this period as “one of the most hideous chapters of modern history...I do not believe that the darkest ages ever presented scenes more horrible than those which now took place all over Turkey.”<sup>34</sup>

Morgenthau called for the American government to take action for the Armenians, embodying the dual humanitarian and Christian imperatives for Americans. In a conversation with Talaat Pasha, the Young Turks’ Minister of the Interior who is considered one of architects of the genocide, Morgenthau declared that Americans are “broadly humanitarian, and interested in the spread of justice and civilization throughout the world.”<sup>35</sup> Speaking for all Americans, he gave Armenians the sense that they had a permanent ally when saying “our people will never forget these massacres...you are defying all ideas of justice as we understand the term.”<sup>36</sup> Morgenthau’s statement was characteristic of the hopeful and moralistic Wilsonian outlook on America’s role. Frederick Lynch’s book *President Wilson and the Moral Aims of the War*, published at the height of Wilsonianism in 1918, described this as action taken not for “gain of territory or for revenge” but in pursuit of “moral, ethical, religious aims.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Morgenthau, 317.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 335.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Frederick Lynch, *President Wilson and the Moral Aims of the War* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1918), 10.

On September 16, 1915, only a few short weeks after news of the massacres began hitting U.S. shelves, several prominent men ranging from academics, to businessmen, to high-ranking members of the clergy met in New York City to investigate the claims and discuss possible routes of action. This meeting, first labeled the “Committee on Armenian Atrocities” later became the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief (ACASR), then the American Committee for Relief in the Near East (ACREA), and fully realized as the Near East Relief (NER). The NER eventually raised \$117 million in relief funds between 1915-1930 to aid refugee populations from the Ottoman Empire.<sup>38</sup> The amount and response was staggering – the result of public rallies and church collections, aided by sympathetic press and a compelling narrative: helpless Christian Armenians violently massacred, tortured, and exiled by barbarous Turks.

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<sup>38</sup> "Near East Relief Committee Records, 1904 - 1950," Finding aid at the Burke Library Archives Missionary Research Library Archives at Columbia University. New York, NY. [http://library.columbia.edu/content/dam/libraryweb/locations/burke/fa/mrl/ldpd\\_10126110.pdfIn](http://library.columbia.edu/content/dam/libraryweb/locations/burke/fa/mrl/ldpd_10126110.pdfIn). (accessed Oct. 27, 2017).



“They Shall Not Perish.” NER Ad found on the America We Thank You website, April 2014, [http://americawethankyou.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/World\\_War\\_I\\_They\\_shall\\_not\\_perish.jpg](http://americawethankyou.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/World_War_I_They_shall_not_perish.jpg). Accessed Mar. 29, 2018.

Merrill D. Peterson’s *Starving Armenians* highlights the American humanitarian response to the Armenian genocide, which was remarkable, but does not critically discuss why the Armenians presented as compelling and sympathetic to the American public. The cause of the Armenians became intertwined with an American sense of identity; not only as a Christian

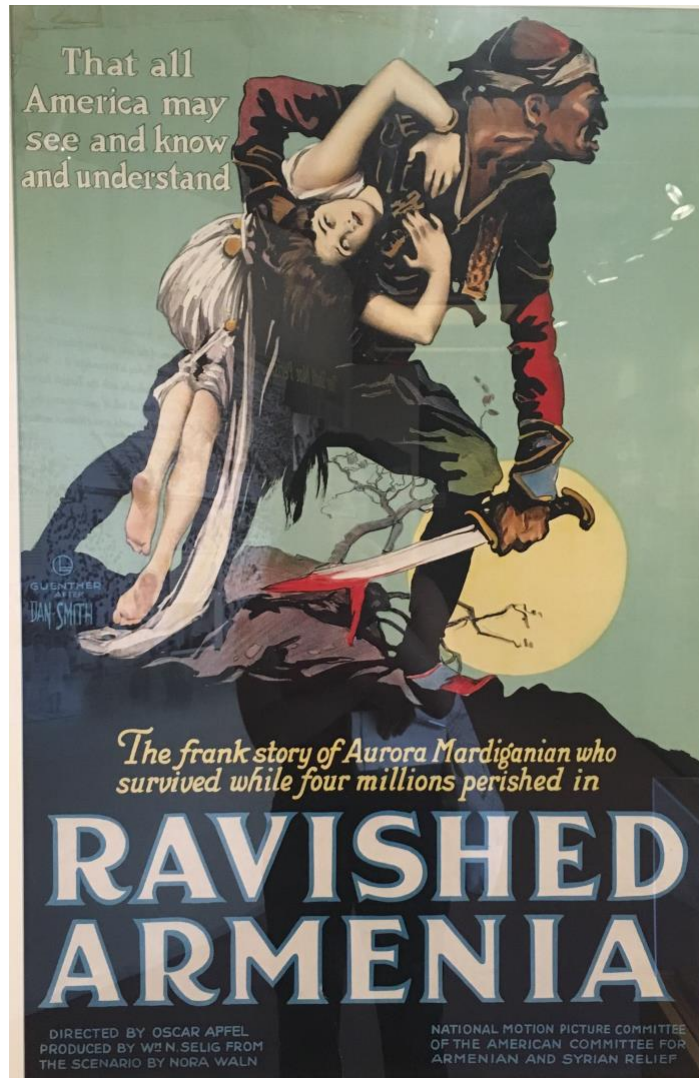
people, but as part of a humanitarian nation responsible for the morality of the world<sup>39</sup> -- exemplified in the NER poster “They Shall Not Perish.” Helping these “starving Armenians” was an imperative of ethical and patriotic proportions. The press also emphasized American generosity and responsibility, claiming that “what is left of the Armenian race is...but a few “fragments,” and the task of putting these fragments together and maintaining them is the task the [Armenian and Syrian] committee adds, of the United States.<sup>40</sup>

The success of the NER and the media was twofold: they managed to raise unprecedented public awareness of an event occurring halfway around the world to raise an incredible sum of money – over \$1 billion in today’s terms – while setting up a narrative of the close ties between the American humanitarianism and the Armenian genocide that is still evoked by the Armenian community today. The PR campaigns that led to this success cemented Armenians in the American imagination explicitly as victims. Posters produced for the NER almost exclusively feature women and children, sometimes under the protective arm of Lady Liberty.

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<sup>39</sup> Julia F. Irwin, “Taming Total War: Great War -Era American Humanitarianism and its Legacies,” *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (2014): 763-775. I do not go into great depth into this curated image of American aid, but it should be noted that it was, in the Great War era, not an entirely altruistic undertaking (as things in politics tend not to be), but alternatively functioned as “a form of propaganda, a means of social control, and a tool of statecraft.” (Irwin, 763).

<sup>40</sup> “Give Millions Today to Save Armenians,” *New York Times*, Oct. 22, 1916.



“Ravished Armenia.” Photograph by author, as seen in the Armenian Museum of America, July 30, 2017.

The film “Ravished Armenia” or “Auction of Souls”, shown in 1919, also reflects this narrative of the American savior and Armenian victim. The silent film was based upon a memoir of the same name and starred its author, Aurora Mardiganian. The film in its entirety has been lost, but an incomplete version was preserved by a French survivor of the Armenian genocide.<sup>41</sup> The surviving footage depicts graphic violence, with one scene famously showing young

<sup>41</sup> Sévane Garibian, “Ravished Armenia (1919): Bearing Witness in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in Joeceline Chabot et. al., eds., *Mass Media and the Genocide of the Armenians* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 46.



Armenian girls being crucified.<sup>42</sup> The promotional poster shows Aurora -- dressed in flowing rags, her body contorted as she looks out at the viewer – being carried off by a dark-skinned Turk carrying a bloody knife. One of the taglines reads, “That all America may see and know and understand.”<sup>43</sup> The film served as living testimony, the witness representing herself and the Armenian genocide in an already recognizable and canonized form, at a moment when there was a real opportunity for the international community to recognize and grant the Armenian people political retribution and rights.

As WWI approached an end, ideas for an American mandate for Armenia were proposed, similar to British and French mandates over other former Ottoman territories across the Middle East and endorsed by the League of Nations. The basis of a mandate echoed familiar themes: the shared Christianity between the two nations, America’s longstanding track record in aiding the Armenians, and a claim that the mandate would be easy due to the fact that “Armenians already understood and subscribed to democratic principles.”<sup>44</sup> Articles and essays, written by Americans and Armenians, discussing Armenia’s potential were circulated.<sup>45</sup> Aram Serkis Yeretzian, an Armenian who had been living in Los Angeles since 1910, wrote in his 1923 sociology thesis on Armenian immigration to the U.S.: “Armenians are waiting anxiously to see America, like a big brother, accept the mandate for Armenia. (...) The case of Armenia is

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<sup>42</sup> “RAVISHED ARMENIA , the original 1919 movie also known as [ Auction of Souls ],” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uTnCaW-Uo\\_s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uTnCaW-Uo_s) (Feb. 24, 2018), 21:49.

<sup>43</sup> Poster seen at the Armenian Museum of America in Watertown, MA, July 30, 2017.

<sup>44</sup> Merrill D. Peterson, “*Starving Armenians*”: *America and the Armenian Genocide, 1915-1930 and After* (Charlottesville VA: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 80-81.

<sup>45</sup> See: *Should America Accept Mandate for Armenia* (New York, NY: The Armenian National Union of America Press Bureau, 1919). And *America as Mandatory for Armenia: Articles and Opinions* (New York, NY: The Armenian National Union of America Press Bureau, 1919).

morally stronger than that of any of the small nations whose destiny is to be decided at the Peace Conference.”<sup>46</sup>

However, despite Wilson arguing for self-determination for “other nations which are now under Turkish rule,”<sup>47</sup> the Senate rejected a mandate. The Treaty of Sèvres, signed by all the Allies except the U.S. on 10 Aug 1920 included a section dedicated to Armenia wherein Turkey would recognize Armenia as a “free and independent State” with significant territorial concessions.<sup>48</sup> The terms of the treaty sparked the Turkish War of Independence, led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. After the Turks won, the new Treaty of Lausanne was drafted and signed in 1923, making no mention of Armenians.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, it ignored Armenian demands for their independent state’s borderlines with Turkey and a new Turkish-Armenian border had already been determined in 1922 with the ratification of Turkey’s Treaty of Kars with Russia.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, in spite of America’s history supporting Armenia, international pressures in the form of a nascent Turkish state and the prioritization of collective security meant American priorities were broader than the Armenian issue.

By this point, the American public had also begun to tire of the Armenian problem – the seemingly unending need for supplies, funds, and volunteers after four years was testing the

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<sup>46</sup> Aram Serkis Yeretizian, “A History of Armenian Immigration to America with Special Reference to Conditions in Los Angeles.” (master’s thesis, USC, 1923), 17.

<sup>47</sup> Woodrow Wilson, “Fourteen Points,” January 8, 1918, available from [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/wilson14.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/wilson14.asp). (accessed Mar. 1, 2018).

<sup>48</sup> *Treaty of Sèvres*, Sèvres, France, August 10, 1920, p. 25-26, available from <http://treaties.fco.gov.uk/docs/pdf/1920/ts0011.pdf>. (accessed Mar. 1, 2018).

<sup>49</sup> *Treaty of Lausanne*, Lausanne, Switzerland, July 24, 1923, available from [https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Treaty\\_of\\_Lausanne](https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Treaty_of_Lausanne). (accessed Mar. 1, 2018).

<sup>50</sup> *Treaty of Kars*, Kars, Turkey, October 13, 1921, available from <http://groong.usc.edu/treaties/kars.html>. (accessed Mar. 1, 2018).

goodwill of Americans. Morgenthau's declaration to "never forget" had run hollow. The NER, which had prided itself on its apolitical nature, was floundering in a new climate that necessitated political convictions to remain relevant. Their basic interest – humanitarianism – stood no chance "unless it was stiffened by the iron rod of national interest."<sup>51</sup> As the world, with the U.S. leading the way, entered a new era of international and national understandings of power, states, and community, the once prominent issue of Armenians quickly faded in the American mind. American public discourse succeeded in coalescing memories of the Armenian genocide into a narrative of Armenian victims and American heroism, but failed to keep this memory more generally relevant. However, this narrative helped facilitate a growing community of Armenians in the U.S., for whom the memory would not fade. The emerging community would understand themselves as the U.S. public did: victims of persecution.

## ***II. Armenian America: "A ray of light and hope for the suffering Armenian"***

Armenian immigrants arriving to America in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century would create the foundations of a new community already well-known in the American public. Most came as the result of political persecution in the Ottoman Empire. Robert Mirak, in *Torn Between Two Lands*, argues that this process of persecution and emigration was the result of an intellectual awakening in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that "ruptured permanently the centuries-old relationship with the Turks that had ensured the survival of the Armenians."<sup>52</sup> The Dashnak Party, or the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF)<sup>53</sup>, a revolutionary and socialist party that emerged in the 1890s

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<sup>51</sup> Peterson, 149.

<sup>52</sup> Robert Mirak, *Torn Between Two Lands: Armenians in America, 1890 to World War I* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 3.

<sup>53</sup> Dashnak and ARF refer to the same organization. Although AYF is more frequently used, I use Dashnak to cut down on acronym use in this thesis.

was the most prominent political group to emerge and will be discussed in depth in the next chapter. Although *Mirak* focuses on the period before the genocide, the coincidence of political awakening and emigration would solidify the self-perception of Armenian victimhood, aided in the American context by their sympathetic public image.

The 1890s marked the first instance of mass Armenian immigration to the U.S. as a result of the Hamidian Massacres in 1894 and 1895.<sup>54</sup> These massacres, carried out under Sultan Abdul-Hamid II, were a response to an emerging Armenian Question in the Ottoman Empire. Following the failure of modernizing *Tanzimat* reforms<sup>55</sup> to alleviate the pressures of a crumbling empire and a nascent Armenian revolutionary movement, the Hamidian Massacres attempted to forcefully teach the Armenians a lesson about where true power in the empire lay. Over the course of eleven months, somewhere between 100,000-300,000 Armenians were killed and hundreds of villages destroyed.<sup>56</sup> Although the massacres caused outrage in European and American audiences, there was no unilateral action by the Great Powers taken against the Sultan.<sup>57</sup> In the last decade of the 1800s, over 12,000 Armenians fled to the U.S.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Arra S. Avakian, *The Armenians in America* (Minneapolis, MN: Lerner Publications Company, 1977), 42.

<sup>55</sup> The *Tanzimat* (in Turkish, “reformation”) period took place between 1839 and 1876 and was an attempt to preserve the Ottoman Empire by introducing “modernizing” policies by transforming from empire to state based on the European model. These involved consolidating administrative power, introducing a new system of taxation, and granting equality for all citizens, including minorities, under the umbrella of a unified “Ottoman” identity.

<sup>56</sup> Richard G. Hovannisian, “The Armenian Question in the Ottoman Empire, 1876-1914,” in Richard G. Hovannisian, ed., *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times: Volume II* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 222.

<sup>57</sup> Manoug Somakian, *Empires in Conflict: Armenia and the Great Powers, 1895-1920* (New York, NY: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 1995), 22.

<sup>58</sup> *Mirak*, 48.

Armenians continued to immigrate to America due to “fear, oppression, and the lasting paralysis of trade and commerce in areas that had not received aid.”<sup>59</sup> As their numbers grew in America, communities of Armenians expanded from the East Coast to Midwestern factory towns and California, drawn by agricultural jobs.<sup>60</sup> However, Turkey’s involvement in the Balkan Wars between 1912-1913 and the beginning of World War I in 1914 significantly restricted the number of Armenians that could immigrate at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>61</sup> At this point, the total population of Armenians in America was roughly 100,000.<sup>62</sup> The next major wave of immigration would come with the end of WWI and Armenian refugees fleeing war and genocide. These early immigrants mostly came from Ottoman Armenia, also known as Western Armenia and shared “common cultural ties, a common worldview, and a consensus regarding Armenian identity.”<sup>63</sup>

At the end of WWI, from 1914 to 1924, roughly 25,000 Armenians entered the U.S.<sup>64</sup> Two important legal decisions aided these new immigrants. The Halladjian decision (1909) assisted immigration by giving Armenians the legal distinction of whiteness<sup>65</sup> and opened up

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>60</sup> Dennis Papazian, “Armenians in America,” *Het Christelijk Oosten* 52, No. 3-4 (2000), pp. 311-347 found at <https://web.archive.org/web/20070311221526/http://www.umd.umich.edu/dept/armenian/papazian/america.html> with original pagination not retained. (accessed Feb. 26, 2018).

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Avakian, 45.

<sup>63</sup> Barlow Der-Mugrdechian, “Armenians and Armenian Americans, 1940-Present” in Elliot Robert Barkan, ed. *Immigrants in American History: Arrival, Adaptation, and Integration, Vol. 1* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2013), 725.

<sup>64</sup> Avakian, 45.

<sup>65</sup> Aram Ghoogasian, “How Armenian-Americans Became White: A Brief History,” *Ajam Media Collective*. August 29, 2017, <https://ajammc.com/2017/08/29/armenian-whiteness-america/>. (accessed Feb. 28, 2018).

opportunities for naturalization. The *U.S. vs. Cartozian* (1925) ruling “confidently affirmed that the Armenians are white persons, and moreover that they readily amalgamate with the European and white races.”<sup>66</sup> These distinctions helped Armenian immigrants to avoid many of the anti-Asian immigration laws and introduced Armenian immigrants as Caucasian. Although Armenian immigrants did face discrimination,<sup>67</sup> these legal decisions were undoubtedly strengthened by the legacy of American media which had informally coded the Armenian people as Christian and Caucasian. However, the Immigration Act of 1924, which set limited quotas for entry into the U.S. based on national origins – only 100 people annually from Turkey –slowed Armenian immigration to a trickle. In total, roughly 190,000 Armenians lived in America by 1931. It would not be until the act was lifted in 1965 that larger-scale immigration could again resume.

Many Armenian refugees relocated to nearby Arab countries including Jordan, Syria, Egypt, and Lebanon as well as Russia.<sup>68</sup> The largest population of Armenian genocide refugees, however, went to U.S., seen as a bastion of hope and opportunity. One story, told by the son of a genocide survivor, describes how despite the “crowded compartments, the nonexistent gender division, the lack of privacy, sanitation and food”, the “feeling of being on the move and the thought of reaching America gave [his father] hope.”<sup>69</sup> This impression of America was certainly conditioned by the amount of aid and attention that the U.S. had given Armenians.

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<sup>66</sup> United States v. Cartozian, 6 F.2d 919 (1925). [<https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/F2/6/919/1551454/>]

<sup>67</sup> Mirak, 123.

<sup>68</sup> Der-Mugrdechian, 726.

<sup>69</sup> Robert Aram Kaloosdian, *Tadem: My Father's Village*, (Portsmouth, NH: Peter E. Randall Publisher, 2015), 239-244.

In *Armenian-Americans: From Being to Feeling Armenian* Anny Bakalian argues that Armenian religious and political organizations formed the building blocks of the Armenian-American community. This “cultural baggage” that Armenians brought functioned as “essential organs for propagating divergent ideologies about Armenians as a people.”<sup>70</sup> These organizations were interconnected, and “communal life in the United States came to be organized around the churches... Where there was a church, there was also politics.”<sup>71</sup> The connection between religion and politics originates from their position as a distinctively Christian *millet* (community)<sup>72</sup> living under the Ottoman Empire. In *Becoming American, Remaining Ethnic*, Matthew A. Jendian investigates the Armenian-American community’s development as distinctly “Armenian” while assimilating into a new American identity, arguing that “assimilation and ethnicity can coexist.”<sup>73</sup> Jendian’s research also reveals that religious institutions was the most strongly correlated with ethnic identification as a “building block for social, professional, and personal relationships with other of Armenian descent.”<sup>74</sup>

Outside of these institutions, however, the legacy of American public sympathy for Armenians helped them enter the U.S. and still-fresh experience with the genocide urged Armenians to hold their ethnic identities closer. Institutions like the church or social clubs organized by the Dashnak worked to create “the home called “Immigrant Armenia”” which

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<sup>70</sup> Anny Bakalian, *Armenian-Americans: From Being to Feeling American* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1993), 90

<sup>71</sup> Bakalian, 89.

<sup>72</sup> *Millet*, in the Ottoman context, was used to designate non-Muslim communities which were treated as autonomous and self-contained religious entities that had limited freedom to worship so long as they accepted an inferior and subservient position under Ottoman law and paid a high yearly tax, known as *jizya*.

<sup>73</sup> Jendian, 4.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

offered “cultural, social service, and political programs as well as community and family activities.”<sup>75</sup> These spaces provided a place for immigrants, largely “survivors of and witnesses to the lost Armenia,”<sup>76</sup> to rebuild their communities in America.

The lack of delineation between religion and politics, especially organizationally, helped establish the Armenian-American community as fundamentally political. The organizations that helped foster community development provided a space for new Armenian-Americans to understand themselves in the American context. This was informed by existing American public discourse as well as the shared experience of escaping persecution. The narrative of the genocide was canonized in this early community: brutal Turks, Christian Armenian victims, and kind Americans. This narrative would continue to be evoked by future generations. Being forced to flee solidified the “memory of victimization”<sup>77</sup> that helped unite the community.

Armenian-American community and identity developed around American media and immigration in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The collection and public dissemination of genocide stories created a sympathetic foreign public and solidified a canonical narrative of Armenian victimhood. Waves of immigration between 1895-1923 were facilitated by this sympathetic narrative and, as a result of political persecution, helped foster communities that rallied around political organizations that understood victimization as a core tenant of the Armenian experience. This early creation and dissemination of genocidal memory as “glue that holds us

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<sup>75</sup> Kaloosdian, 270.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.

<sup>77</sup> Irwin-Zarecka, 60.



together...what nourishes the spirit, the soul of the Armenians”<sup>78</sup> created a “socially articulated and socially maintained “reality of the past.””<sup>79</sup>

However, the stakes were higher than just the creation of a community. For Armenians, the genocide was a horrific attempt to erase the Armenian people and their existence as a community was already radical. Yet history itself, not just America, was already beginning to forget that this injustice occurred – the Turkish Republic’s establishment in 1923 and its acceptance by the international community was proof. To combat oblivion, Armenian-Americans would need to find an outlet to express their “reality of the past” and politics would serve this need nicely. The private victimization of the Armenians was about to take on a far more active and public stage.

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<sup>78</sup> Garo Hovsepian as quoted in Laure Marchand and Guillaume Perrier, *Turkey and the Armenian Ghost: On the Trail of the Genocide* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015), 20.

<sup>79</sup> Irwin-Zarecka, 54.

## Chapter 2

### **Politicizing Memory: From Revenge to Political Representation**

Public discussions of the atrocities against the Armenians during WWI were disappearing as quickly as the new Turkish Republic was being built. To combat this, Armenian-Americans took on the active politicization of memories of the Armenian genocide to try and catapult the Armenian story back into the headlines as it once had been. Tracing the evolution of Armenian-American community from the early 1920s until 1992, this chapter explores evolving strategies of politicizing the memory of the genocide to attract international attention. This period witnesses the full political development of the Armenian-American community through new post-genocide immigration, the Cold War, and Soviet Armenian independence.

As the Armenian-American community expanded and evolved, it used genocide memory for political activism in fundamentally different ways that varied between militancy abroad to peaceful lobbying within the American political system. I begin this chapter with the political development of the Dashnak or Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) party, through ARF documents and party member statements, which became the most influential group to politicize the genocide across the diaspora.

The utilization of memory towards violence as a way of coping with genocide and a lack of international recognition marks a turning point in the politicization of the Armenian-American community. I consider the strategy of violence established during Operation Nemesis, organized as an immediate post-war reaction (1919-1923) through insights by the operation's main protagonist, Soghomon Tehlirian, news reports, and ARF documents, as a reflection of Armenian

anger and Armenian political immaturity. As Tehlirian eventually settled in the U.S., his narrative of violent heroism became incorporated into the collective genocidal memory.

The chapter ends with the Armenian-American move towards peaceful political lobbying from the 1940s onwards as a method of galvanizing the community around the memory of victimization due to the genocide. During the Cold War, the Armenian community grew in the U.S. as a function of new backgrounds and political discourses brought by new waves of Armenian immigration and tensions that evolved around supporting Soviet Armenia—the only nation-state or homeland that the Armenians had between 1920 and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Publications and speeches produced by the Armenian-American community when it was most politically active, between 1965, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the genocide, and 1992, when the Republic of Armenia declared independence, shed light on their internal affairs.

### ***I. The Dashnak: An Ideological Rift***

The Dashnak Party, as mentioned in the previous chapter, emerged in the 1890s as a revolutionary and socialist group. It quickly gained a reputation as the most radical and influential Armenian political group and continues to be heavily influential in the Armenian-American community today. Tracing its ideological roots and struggles illuminates the kind of actions deemed appropriate and the basis for feelings of Armenian victimhood post-WWI. Before arriving in the U.S. with Armenian migrants, the Dashnak existed in both the Ottoman (Western Armenia) and Russian (Eastern Armenia) empires. The geographic separation of the Dashnak was resolved by defining the Armenian liberation struggles as “a people separated by political borders, but united in dedication to a common revolutionary ideal.”<sup>80</sup> This

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<sup>80</sup> Gerard J. Libaridian, *Modern Armenia: People, Nation, State* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2004), 97.

revolutionary ideology initially encouraged the development of a specifically Armenian sense of nationalism and pride and supported violent measures to reach its goals.

However, the Dashnak's support of revolutionary and even violent measures to reach their goals isolated some members of the Armenian community. The founding members of the Dashnak unified Armenian groups and organizations around the "armed struggle for liberation."<sup>81</sup> Hrach Dasnabedian, a prominent Dashnak member, wrote *History of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (1890-1924)* describing early Dashnak goals as achieving "political and economic liberty by means of insurrection... [through] propaganda, revolutionary education of the people, the organization and arming of the people for self-defense, sabotage, the execution of corrupt government officials and all exploiters as well as Armenian informers and traitors."<sup>82</sup> Although the Dashnaks were (and remain) a majority, non-supporters of the Dashnak, from members of the Armenian Democratic Liberal (ADL or Ramgavar) party to those who are nonpartisan but oppose the militant tactics of the Dashnaks, form the smaller non-Dashnak faction.

Dashnak tactics of violence to gain international recognition have their origins in 1896, when they became internationally known for raiding the Imperial Bank Ottoman in an attempt to draw attention to the Hamidian Massacres, then ongoing in the eastern provinces of the empire.<sup>83</sup> Two dozen armed attackers, "hurled bombs, shot and killed a guard, rounded up hostages, and occupied [the bank]."<sup>84</sup> The standoff would only end after a day of bloody riots against the

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<sup>81</sup> Hrach Dasnabedian, *History of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation Dashnaksutium (1890-1924)* (Milan, Italy: OEMME Edizioni, 1989), 31.

<sup>82</sup> Dasnabedian, 33.

<sup>83</sup> Somakian, 19.

<sup>84</sup> Eric Bogosian, *Operation Nemesis* (New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2015), 56.

Armenian community in Constantinople and the British sending in troops. The use of violence was justified as necessary action for “the revolution which has penetrated into the bones of the Armenian nation”<sup>85</sup> This set a precedent for appropriate action in the name of justice and autonomy for the Armenian people. The event proved to leadership that only through “their own armed struggled” that they could “establish the foundation for the liberation,”<sup>86</sup> aided by a secret militia organization called the *fedayi*.<sup>87</sup> The *fedayi* consisted of young men who voluntary became permanent members that would undertake missions – usually assassinations – as ordered by the Central Committee of the Dashnak.<sup>88</sup>

The Ottomans lost WWI in 1918 and their planned partition by the Allied powers raised serious aspirations for an independent Armenia. With the 1917 Russian Revolution happening concurrently, it seemed like an opportunity to unite both Eastern and Western Armenia into a single independent country. The Dashnak seemed poised for leadership, but treaties between Russia and the Ottomans reduced Armenian territory. Further, independence movements by Georgian and Muslim populations forced the Armenians to declare their own independence as a last-ditch effort to save any Armenian lands. On June 6, 1918 the Armenians had little choice but to sign the Treaty of Batum with the encroaching Ottoman Empire and were left with a “mangled bit of land that, for lack of a better term, they called a republic.”<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Collective note by the *Dashnak* committee on Aug. 25, 1896, as quoted in Somakian, 19.

<sup>86</sup> Dasnabedian, 19.

<sup>87</sup> *Fedayi* comes from the Arabic word Fedayeen, which literally means “those who suffer”; but was used in the Armenian context to refer to the militia organization.

<sup>88</sup> Taner Akçam *A Shameful Act* (New York, NY: Metropolitan Books, 2006), 58.

<sup>89</sup> Richard G. Hovannisian, “Armenia’s Road to Independence” in Richard G. Hovannisian, ed., *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times: Volume II* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 301.

As a final blow, on December 2, 1920, the Republic of Armenia became the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR).<sup>90</sup> The new Armenian republic had stood no chance against the rising threat of Turkish nationalism and Soviet expansion. Occupying only a sliver of their ancestral lands, with a small population of war-tired people and refugees and no economic elite, Armenia was absorbed into the Soviet sphere. The new communist government quickly took advantage of Dashnak inexperience with leading a country, arresting and exiling many until the entire party was forced to flee the country.<sup>91</sup> It would not be until Armenia's liberation from Soviet rule in 1992 that they would return.

Armenians seemed to have reached a breaking point: in exile, in the U.S. and elsewhere, and given that an Armenian state did exist (albeit under the Soviets), the Dashnak split ideologically around the issue of Soviet rule. Some thought the Soviet Armenian state should be seen as the legitimate homeland; others only believed in an Armenia that included Anatolian lands. In a 1923 report, re-published in New York by American non-Dashnaks in 1955, the first Prime Minister of Armenia and former Dashnak member, Hovhannes Katchaznoui declared that the Dashnak had lost its *raison d'être* and as such, should "decisively end its existence."<sup>92</sup> Those that agreed with him, effectively non-Dashnak, were reflecting pragmatically on Armenia's situation. They saw the Soviets as a protecting force capable of one day being the Great Power support against Turkey that the Armenians needed. However, as a matter of identity and

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<sup>90</sup> Ronald Suny, "Soviet Armenia" in Richard G. Hovannisian, ed., *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times: Volume II* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 347.

<sup>91</sup> Richard G. Hovannisian, "The Republic of Armenia" in Richard G. Hovannisian, ed., *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times: Volume II* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 344-346.

<sup>92</sup> Hovannes Katchznouni, *The Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnagtzoutiun) Has Nothing To Do Anymore*, trans. Matthew A. Callender, ed. John Roy Carlson (New York: Armenian Information Service, 1955), 11.

memory, the Dashnak saw Soviet rule as “enemy occupation.”<sup>93</sup> Accepting the Soviet Armenian state implicitly meant giving up on the ancestral Armenian homelands now located in Turkish Anatolia. Giving up on a united Armenia, and by extension the Dashnak ideology, was seen by some as giving up on Armenian identity altogether.

In the U.S. the community was officially partitioned in 1933, when the Armenian Apostolic Archbishop was murdered in New York City because of his pro-Soviet beliefs by nine members of the Dashnak Party.<sup>94</sup> Some condemned this act as terrorism against their own, others saw it as the justified end of a traitor.<sup>95</sup> Although the New York murder was contentious, the general use of violence was a greyer subject. The unreconciled experience of the genocide sought actors that could bring justice to the Armenian people in the immediate post-war period. One terrorist operation became celebrated as acceptable and even heroic following the disastrous aftermath of WWI.

## ***II. “It is not I who am the murderer, it is he”: Creating Heroes from Victims***

On the morning of March 15, 1921 Talaat Pasha left his Berlin apartment followed by a young man named Soghoman Tehlirian. Tehlirian approached, looking at Talaat’s face to confirm that this was his target: the former Ottoman Minister of the Interior and one of the Armenian genocide’s architects. A single gunshot later, Talaat was dead. The New York Times would report on the assassination the next day sympathetically, contextualizing Talaat’s murder as the “last act of a tragedy whose earlier scenes were enacted in the blood-stained deserts of

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<sup>93</sup> Bakalian, 95.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>95</sup> Benjamin Alexander, “The American Armenians’ Cold War: The Divided Response to Soviet Armenia” in Ieda Zake, ed., *Anti-Communist Minorities in the U.S.: Political Activism of Ethnic Refugees* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 72.

Asia Minor.”<sup>96</sup> Talaat’s assassination was part of the Dashnak’s much larger and more complicated plan of vengeance, dubbed “Operation Nemesis.” Under its auspices, seven people considered responsible for the Armenian genocide were murdered by the end of the summer of 1922. Talaat was the most famous slayed; Soghomon Tehlirian became the most famous assassin and a symbol of justice for Armenians.

*Operation Nemesis* is one of the few books dedicated to Soghomon Tehlirian and this operation, written by Eric Bogosian, an Armenian-American playwright and actor who first undertook the book project as a way of educating himself. Although Bogosian conducted extensive research in order write the book, I am aware that his background lends the book some amount of dramatization. However, Bogosian’s background also means *Operation Nemesis* gives insights into the ways that the Operation is intentionally being remembered and retold by an author who has “been radicalized”<sup>97</sup> by working on the book.

In 1919, an attempt to prosecute Ottoman war criminals through a court-martial, including the “Big Three” leaders, Talaat, Enver, and Djemal Pasha, led to their death sentences.<sup>98</sup> However, the signing of the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920 sparked the Turkish War of Independence and the trials were stopped. In 1920 the new Kemalist government dissolved the

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<sup>96</sup> “Assassin Boasts of Talaat’s Death,” *New York Times*, Mar. 16, 1921.

<sup>97</sup> Aram Kouyoumdjian quoting Eric Bogosian, “Asbarez Exclusive: Eric Bogosian on Writing ‘Operation Nemesis’,” *Asbarez*, April 23, 2015. (accessed Mar. 8, 2018).

<sup>98</sup> Published in the *Official Gazette (Takvimi Vekayi)* of Turkey, No. 3604, July 22, 1919. The transcript was translated into English by Haigazn K. Kazarian and published in the *Armenian Review*, Vol. 24 (1971, 4), pp. 19-26. Found at [http://www.armenian-genocide.org/Affirmation.237/current\\_category.50/affirmation\\_detail.html](http://www.armenian-genocide.org/Affirmation.237/current_category.50/affirmation_detail.html). (accessed Mar. 7, 2018).



Courts-Martial<sup>99</sup> and all the prisoners, including the Big Three, were allowed to continue on with their lives.

Late in the summer of 1920, Tehlirian was instructed to meet with Dashnak leadership in Boston. The operation was run out of Watertown, MA, mostly funded by “a steady stream of donations from wealthy (mostly American) Armenians who may or may not have suspected where their donations were going.”<sup>100</sup> This was his interview to be part of the *fedayi*. Tehlirian was given his instructions and sent to Berlin. After stalking Talaat for weeks, the opportunity finally appeared. Tehlirian describes pulling out his gun and shooting him in the head, watching “as his powerful body for a second became rigidly tall, unsteady, then like the sawed off trunk of an oak fell with a thud, face forward... I never could have imagined that the monster would be laid low so easily.”<sup>101</sup> In that moment, he was “enveloped by an internal satisfaction of spirit... The constant nightmare that had perpetually settled on me, heavy like head, seemed suddenly to have lifted.”<sup>102</sup>

Tehlirian was immediately arrested and placed on trial, but after only three days he was set free. For the court, and much of the rest of the world, the narrative was clear: Tehlirian had “surmounted his victimhood;”<sup>103</sup> he had murdered an unsympathetic “Terrible Turk” already condemned to death and avenged his people. Coached by the Dashnak, Tehlirian performed on

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<sup>99</sup>Jennifer Balint, “The Ottoman State Special Military Tribunal for the Genocide of the Armenians: ‘Doing Government Business’” in Kevin Jon Heller and Gerry Simpson, eds., *The Hidden Histories of War Crimes Trials* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>100</sup> Bogosian, 137.

<sup>101</sup> *Hairenik* quoting Vahan Minakhorian, *Soghomon Tehlirian: Recollections* (Houssaper: Cairo, 1956). Found at <https://hairenik.com/vfp/soghomon-tehlirian/>. (accessed Mar. 9, 2018).

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> Bogosian, 190.

trial the second part of his secret mission: revealing to the world what had happened to the Armenians while obfuscating Dashnak involvement in the entire operation. Both Tehlirian and the Dashnak understood that this was a critical moment to establish a canonical version of events and to sell the Armenian interpretation of events to the world. Tehlirian, playing an “undersized, swarthily palefaced Armenian”<sup>104</sup> who murdered Talaat in a moment of passion, was a victim compelled to action. Tehlirian’s story was used to solidify a canonical memory of injustice around the events of 1915 while creating a hero to embody that memory. As he told the court, “I do not consider my self guilty because my conscience is clear... I have killed a man. But I am not a murderer.”<sup>105</sup>

Tehlirian left Berlin a free man and a hero. After spending time in Cleveland, France, and Yugoslavia, he eventually ended up with the large Armenian diaspora in California in 1945. In America, Tehlirian received a hero’s welcome by the established Armenian-American community.<sup>106</sup> His son recalls that “In his last years, the Armenians showed my father off in cities around America – in Boston, Cleveland, New York (...) He would give patriotic speeches but he really never liked to talk of what happened.”<sup>107</sup> The community looked to Tehlirian as a

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<sup>104</sup> “Says Mother’s Ghost Ordered Him to Kill,” *New York Times*, June 3, 1921.

<sup>105</sup> Soghomon Tehlirian, “Trial of Soghomon Tehlirian,” [http://www.cilicia.com/armo\\_tehlirian.html](http://www.cilicia.com/armo_tehlirian.html) (accessed March 8, 2018). [Original Source: (Berlin, 1921)]

<sup>106</sup> “Soghomon Tehlirian Monument,” *Ararat Armenian Cemetery Association*, <http://araratarmeniancemetery.com/index.php/about/soghomon-tehlirian-monument> (accessed Mar. 16 2018).

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

hero despite his distaste for his own actions: the symbolic gesture of assassination overrode Tehlirian's discomfort with being a murderer.



“Soghomon Tehlirian Monument.” Ararat Cemetery website, date unknown, <http://araratarmeniancemetery.com/about/soghomon-tehlirian-monument>. Accessed April 15, 2018.

Tehlirian eventually died in 1960 in Fresno and was buried in the historic Ararat Armenian Cemetery and later moved to Masis Ararat Armenian Cemetery, both in Fresno. A year after his death a large monument was erected which became a memorial site for Armenians around the U.S. to pay their respects.<sup>108</sup> As a commemorative space in the city with the most

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

significant Armenian-American population up until this point, the monument was rich with symbolic images and functioned as a site of memory for this diasporic community. Tehlirian was an especially poignant symbol of the genocidal experience leading to concrete action; memory manifesting in a single iconic act. The Dashnak oversaw its construction, and it features a golden eagle clutching a snake in its talons on top of a tall marble column. The original artist, Harnik Hacobian, stated that the eagle and snake represented “...the arm of justice of the Armenian people extending their wrath onto Talaat Pashaa,”<sup>109</sup> A plaque in Armenian and Turkish 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.”<sup>110</sup>

Tehlirian was an important figure of justice representing unsettled “historical moral accounts”<sup>111</sup> heightened by Turkish denial “challenging [Armenian] visions of [the past].”<sup>112</sup> His actions and memory helped forge “a public identity that revolves around the remembering of the forgetting of the Armenian Genocide.”<sup>113</sup> Every year on the commemoration of the Armenian genocide, held on April 24<sup>th</sup>, there is a ceremony held at this monument. This memorialization of Tehlirian as a glorious hero was not necessarily embraced by him or his family. In a 2016 interview, his son criticized the community’s fixation on genocide, stating “The Armenians keep

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<sup>109</sup>Mayher Chekerdeman, as quoted in Sarah Vartabedian, “Commemoration of an Assassin: Representing the Armenian Genocide” (master’s thesis, UNC Chapel Hill, 2007), 10.

<sup>110</sup> Inscription on the Soghomon Tehlirian as quoted in Sarah Vartabedian, “Commemoration of an Assassin: Representing the Armenian Genocide” (master’s thesis, UNC Chapel Hill, 2007), 10.

<sup>111</sup> Irwin-Zarecka, 77.

<sup>112</sup> Irwin-Zarecka, 76.

<sup>113</sup> Sarah Vartabedian, “Commemoration of an Assassin: Representing the Armenian Genocide” (master’s thesis, UNC Chapel Hill, 2007), 11.

trying to tip things out of the grave...It's three generations ago. It's history. (...) I never remember my father saying one bad word about the Turks. He just wanted to live his life in peace.”<sup>114</sup> Like during his trial, Tehlirian as a symbol of justice mattered more to the community than his true feelings.

This intentional reworking of history in the public sphere was a direct response to attempted erasure and became an important cornerstone in issues of justice for the Armenian genocide. David Minier, former District Attorney, remembered Tehlirian when he was assigned to prosecute Gourgen Yanikian, a 78-year-old Armenian genocide survivor and longtime Fresno resident. Yanikian lured two Turkish diplomats to a hotel in Santa Barbara in 1973 and killed them an act of “vengeance, of retribution, and of justice”<sup>115</sup> for the genocide. This act sparked renewed use of terrorism, particularly through the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA) which targeted Turkish diplomats around the world, in part because Yanikian himself sent a letter out to newspapers asking Armenians everywhere to “start a war against Turkish diplomats and officials.”<sup>116</sup> He told Minier that the trial should “bring forth an indictment against genocide... You stand to become an immortal symbol of justice around the world.”<sup>117</sup> His trial mimicked Tehlirian’s, with tear-jerking stories of his memories of Turks

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<sup>114</sup> Robert Fisk, “My Conversation with the Son of Soghomon Tehlirian, the Man Who Assassinated the Organizer of the Armenian Genocide,” *The Independent*, June 20, 2016.

<sup>115</sup> Nareg Seferian, “Forty Years on: Gourgen Yanikian and Us,” *The Armenian Weekly*, January 29, 2013. (accessed Mar. 16, 2018).

<sup>116</sup> Haluk Şahin, “Resounding Impacts of Two Santa Barbara Murders,” *Santa Barbara Independent*, January 27, 2016. (accessed Mar. 16, 2018).

<sup>117</sup> David Minier, “Armenian genocide: How Valley Prosecutor Missed His Chance to be ‘Immortal Symbol of Justice’,” *The Fresno Bee*, January 26, 2018. (accessed Mar. 16, 2018).

massacring his family during the genocide. The jury, however, “followed the law and gave me what I asked: two first-degree murder verdicts.”<sup>118</sup>

Although Tehlirian’s terrorist acts were iconic for the Armenian-American community, violence was not the best way to evoke sympathy, especially not by the government. Terrorism as a strategy was emotionally and symbolically powerful for the Armenian-American community but damaged their reputation with the U.S. public and government. Without the legitimacy that support from the state and public could give, international recognition of the genocide’s injustice was unlikely to happen. If violence was not effective, perhaps the American political system could provide better results.

### *III. A New Generation in America: The Politics of Ethnic Lobbying*

The use of violence to attract attention to the cause of justice for the Armenian genocide proved to be ineffective outside of the community. Further, as time went on there were less obvious victims for vengeful Armenians to target. Although the Turkish state was seen as the inheritors of the Ottoman legacy, their distance from the genocide and adamant rejection the genocide labeling, along with Turkey’s geopolitical importance to the U.S. meant Turkish officials would not easily fit the “Terrible Turk” trope as Talaat had. This was proved by the verdict of the 1973 murder in Santa Barbara. Lobbying was a far safer option, and ethnic lobbying in the U.S. had a long due to the diversity of American citizens and the structure of the American political system.

Ethnic lobbying groups grow from the deep concerns of diaspora communities whose attachment to their ethnic background and collective identity encourages political mobilization

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

on behalf of their mother country.<sup>119</sup> The most well-known and influential of these is the Jewish Lobby, which has served as a model for success for many other lobbies.<sup>120</sup> There are several lobbying models, from those focusing on grassroots organizing and charitable donations, to non-profit advocacy groups that focus on information dissemination and education. The success of an ethnic lobby is rooted in its ability to mobilize its base towards political action and to provide information to lawmakers based on this ability.<sup>121</sup> Success is also dependent on how closely a lobby can make specific ethnic interests relevant to greater national interests, especially as part of existing status quo policies.

According to Paul and Anderson's work, the Armenian lobby "has established itself as one of the most influential of the ethnic lobbies."<sup>122</sup> Armenian lobbies grew out of Armenian political groups, particularly the Dashnak, and have been extraordinarily successful in their ability to mobilize and organize Armenian-Americans.<sup>123</sup> Although the population of Armenians is relatively small, they are politically active and concentrated in congressional districts, mostly in California, that further extend lobbying efforts.<sup>124</sup> Congressman Adam Schiff from California's 28<sup>th</sup> district, for example, contains 10% of the total Armenian-American population. It is therefore no surprise that he has been one of the most vocal supporters of Armenian-American

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<sup>119</sup> Paul and Anderson, 10-11.

<sup>120</sup> James M. McCormick, "Ethnic Interest Groups in American Foreign Policy," in James M. McCormick, ed., *The Domestic Sources of American Foreign Policy: Insights and Evidence*. Sixth Edition. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2012), 70.

<sup>121</sup> Paul and Anderson, 60-61.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 143-145.

<sup>124</sup> McCormick, 78.

interests. The ability of Armenian lobbying organizations is also a result of combining several lobbying techniques to more fully mobilize the Armenian-American community in a way that Heather Gregg describes as “hypermobilization.” Political lobbying was a new method of articulating the Armenian-American “reality of the past,” one that had a broader reach and more control.

The most prominent group is the Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA), affiliated with the Dashnak. Developed in 1948 out of the 1918 Armenian Committee for Independent Armenia (ACIA), the ANCA follows Dashnak principles. Their top goals involve encouraging the U.S. to pressure Turkey “to come to terms with its past” and “recognize the genocide.”<sup>125</sup> The ANCA has multiple chapters across the U.S. and three headquarters in Watertown, MA, Glendale, CA, and Washington D.C. which aids in its function as a grassroots political organization with goals of mobilizing its members to “influence and guide U.S. policy on matter related to Armenia.”<sup>126</sup> The youth branch of the ANCA, the Armenian Youth Federation (AYF) is a significant organization that encourages political involvement beginning at the age of seven.<sup>127</sup> A key draw of the AYF is its historical legacy and connection to the Dashnak party, which has lent the organization a “rich history” and a concrete ideology.<sup>128</sup>

The initial function for Armenian-American lobbying groups was to organize and educate the Armenian-American community. With a new generation of Armenians that could speak English

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<sup>125</sup> “Truth & Justice for the Armenian Genocide,” *Armenian National Committee of America*, <https://anca.org/issue/truth-justice-armenian-genocide/> (accessed Mar. 14, 2018).

<sup>126</sup> U.S. Department of State, *Experience Engaging Diaspora Communities – Armenia* (Washington, DC: Wikileaks, 2009), 4.

<sup>127</sup> Hasmik Burushyan, interview with author, January 19, 2018.

<sup>128</sup> Burushyan interview, Jan. 19, 2018.



and integrate more fully in American society and politics was being born in the 1930s and 40s came a renewed need to imprint the importance of the genocide. They strove to address the issue by inducing the new generation to “feel American by having outlets to celebrate their distinctive identity.”<sup>129</sup> Involvement in the U.S. political system was a way of encouraging youth be connected with their Armenian heritage and history while supporting the expression of American civic rights.

However, many saw the failed relationships between the Armenian community and the Ottoman Empire, Russian Empire, and now the USSR as reasons to not get involved in politics. A new attitude towards domestic politics was encouraged by a wave of immigration from Middle Eastern countries Armenians had fled to after the Armenian genocide. This immigration was usually the result of political turmoil, particularly the Arab-Israeli Wars (1967, 1973), the Iranian Revolution (1979) and the Lebanese Civil War (1975).<sup>130</sup> These later immigrants were entering as refugees from prosperous and well-established communities that had avoided assimilation in their new Arab countries. They brought a “resurgence of traditional Armenian culture to the Armenian community in the United States”<sup>131</sup> and echoed the persecution that Armenians had faced at the end of WWI. These new immigrants wanted more than organization – they wanted action and they “almost immediately took on leadership roles in community organizations.”<sup>132</sup> They a new elite “largely rooted in Middle Eastern habits, memories, and experiences, and which

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<sup>129</sup> Alexander, 72.

<sup>130</sup> Georges Sabagh, Mehdi Bozorgmehr, and Claudia Der-Martirosian, *Subethnicity: Armenians in Los Angeles*, ISSR Working Papers in the Social Sciences, 1989-90, Vol. 5, No. 6, 3.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 726.

<sup>132</sup> Der-Mugrdechian, 726.

understands the diaspora as a direct effect of genocide.”<sup>133</sup> This is a pattern that continues today – a member of the AYF stated that most members are “Western Armenians, they came from Syria or Lebanon.”<sup>134</sup>

A second lobbying group was set up in 1972, the Armenian Assembly of America (AAA), unofficially affiliated with non-Dashnak communities, and functioned as an “elite organization designed to mobilize the Armenian-American community and its financial resources for national policy objective.”<sup>135</sup> The goals of the AAA and the ANCA were nearly indistinguishable but served to mobilize different parts of the community, resulting in what Heather Gregg describes as the “hypermobilization” of the Armenian community towards important issues.<sup>136</sup>

Until the fall of the Soviet Union and the establishment of an independent Armenia, the difference between the ANCA and AAA lay in their attitude towards the Soviet government. The ANCA, drawing from Dashnak ideology, was staunchly anti-communist and unwilling to communicate with Russia on matters pertaining to the Armenian SSR. Their unwillingness to engage internationally meant the ANCA could focus on domestic community building, which is one reason why they are the largest and most influential group amongst Armenian-Americans. On the other hand, the AAA was associated with non-Dashnaks and therefore “less dominated by

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<sup>133</sup> King, 105. (referencing Giorgi 2012, Mekdjian 2008, and Tölöyan 2001).

<sup>134</sup> Burushyan interview, Jan. 19, 2018.

<sup>135</sup> David King and Miles Pomper, “The U.S. Congress and the Contingent Influence of Diaspora Lobbies: Lessons from U.S. Policy Toward Armenia and Azerbaijan,” *Journal of Armenian Studies* 8:1 (Summer 2004), 14.

<sup>136</sup> Heather S. Gregg, “Divided They Conquer: The Success of Armenian Ethnic Lobbies in the United States” (working paper, MIT, 2002), 10.

anti-Soviet ideology”<sup>137</sup> and therefore instrumental in fostering a relationship between the Armenian-American diaspora and the Armenian homeland.

Armenia’s declaration of independence in 1991 cemented new Armenian unity, introducing a state “aware of its responsibility for the destiny of the Armenian people engaged in the realization of the aspirations of all Armenians and the restoration of historical justice.”<sup>138</sup> The fall of the USSR made the issue of supporting or rejecting the Soviet government a moot point and gave the Armenian-American community more legitimacy for their demands in U.S. politics. Further, the end of the Cold War meant there was new opportunities for ethnic groups to lobby for interests outside of communism. The new infusion of Armenians from the Middle East revitalized Armenian-American interests in visibility. At the end of the Cold War, came a new opportunity for Armenian-Americans to encourage a broader remembrance of the genocide through political channels and public gestures of genocide memory. The Armenian-American community had, through remembering the genocide, developed a community and organizations strong enough to demand a public response similar to the outrage felt seven decades before. The wound of genocide would bleed openly.

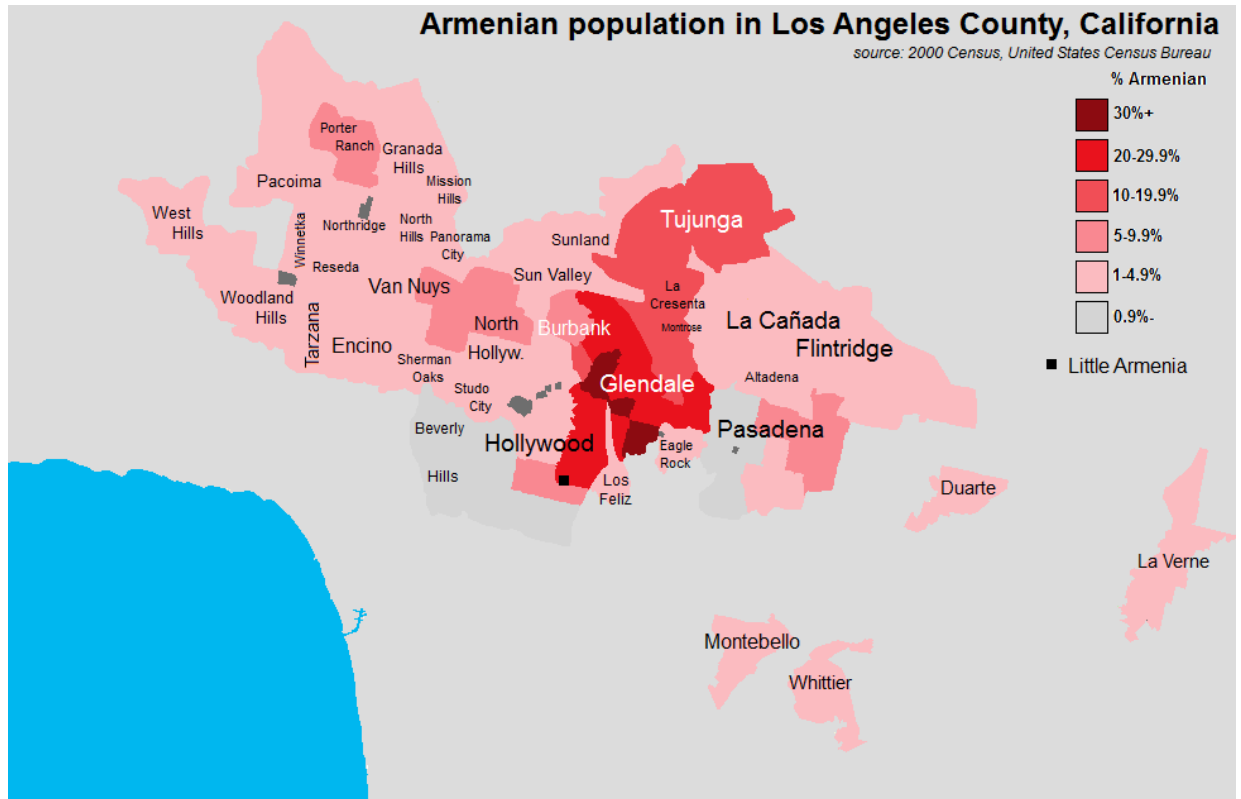
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<sup>137</sup> King and Pomper, 14

<sup>138</sup> The Supreme Council of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic, *Declaration of Independence*, The Government of the Republic of Armenia, <http://www.gov.am/en/independence/> (accessed Mar. 11, 2018). [Original Source: (Yerevan: 23 August 1990)].

## Chapter Three

### Publicizing Memory: Embodying Remembrance in the Public Sphere



“Armenian Population in Los Angeles County, California, 2000.” Image by Yerevanci, based on self-identification as Armenian from 2000 census data, found on Wikipedia, December 9, 2012.  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Armenians\\_in\\_Los\\_Angeles\\_County\\_\(2000\).png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Armenians_in_Los_Angeles_County_(2000).png). Accessed Apr. 17, 2017.

In the wake of the Armenian genocide, the Armenian diaspora – particularly in America – had overwhelming success in using the genocidal experience to create a cohesive identity, community, and organizations. Memories of the genocide were instrumental in overcoming Armenian-American geographic and political differences. However, this was also a highly insulated practice. The focus on creating a community located around genocide memory was private almost by nature: focused on the experience of victimization and survivorship. The new generation’s insistence for broader recognition of the genocide as an affirmation for the genocidal experience would require that memory to be publicly embodied.

This chapter explores publicization and embodiment of Armenian genocide memory through political action and material culture in contemporary Armenian America, focusing on the past two decades and using field research conducted in LA. I begin by looking at the successes of lobbying organizations to demand official state reaction by the U.S. Most of these lobbying efforts are focused in Los Angeles. According to U.S. Census Bureau data from 2016, roughly 196,075 of the 468,342 Armenians in the U.S. live in Los Angeles County. The density of Armenian-Americans in LA County means that the community there has overwhelming political sway. Almost half of LA County's Armenian population lives in California's 28<sup>th</sup> Congressional District, which elected Rep. Adam Schiff, a non-Armenian, who has been one of the most vocal supporters of Armenian issues in Congress.

I then move on to examine the more visible sites of memory: monuments and museums. There are several monuments dedicated to the memory of the Armenian genocide in Los Angeles, where I was able to conduct field research. These monuments illuminate the narratives that Armenian-Americans want to highlight, and their erection in public reflects the success of Armenian-Americans in these communities. Museums also reflect upheld narratives about Armenian history, and their existence illuminates the broader ability of Armenian-Americans to pool resources and sympathy to erect huge receptacles of memory.

I finish with projections of the future of Armenian-American efforts, especially as expressed by youth, to broaden the reach of Armenian genocide memory beyond the community. This is primarily informed by the field research I conducted and the interviews I was able to have with young Armenian-Americans active in local organizations. My time in Los Angeles, and particularly in the suburb of Glendale, which has a dense Armenian population, also gave me access to events held by Armenian-American community. Using this research, I explore different

ways that the Armenian-American community has tried to entrench their memory of the genocide in the public sphere.

### *I. The Power of Organization*

Ethnic lobbying after post-Cold War saw a dramatic increase as the dichotomy created by the threat of communism allowed ethnic groups to broader demands in U.S. foreign policy. The impact of this lobbying, seen by some as divisive and threatening and by others as a way to promote American values abroad, is widely debated.<sup>139</sup> Regardless of these interpretations, ethnic lobbies have a clear impact on U.S. foreign policy and Armenian lobbies are no exception. The ANCA, which appeals to the broader Armenian-American community as a more grassroots political organization, and the AAA, which targets its efforts on lawmakers in Washington, have had significant success working together. However, these successes are always tempered by the underlying strategic relationship between the U.S. and Turkey.

Despite some of the fundamental differences in the histories of the ANCA and AAA, their different but complimentary lobbying techniques serve to elevate Armenian interests in Washington and present the “image of a strong and united lobby.”<sup>140</sup> The issue of genocide recognition has taken the forefront of lobbying efforts, partly because, as Julien Zarifian argues, evoking the genocide became a surefire way of mobilizing the community on “all types of issues related to Armenians.”<sup>141</sup> Linking various policy issues to the genocide, including the “security

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<sup>139</sup> Gregg, 3-4.

<sup>140</sup>Julien Zarifian, “The Armenian-American Lobby and Its Impact on U.S. Foreign Policy,” *Society* 51 (2014), p. 508.

<sup>141</sup> Zarifian, 509.

and prosperity of Armenia”<sup>142</sup> was a way of uniting Armenian-Americans around a singular non-contentious issue within the community.

These groups achieved significant political success on behalf of genocide recognition at the national level with House Joint Resolution 148 in 1975, establishing April 24 as a day of remembrance for “all the victims of genocide, especially those of Armenian ancestry.”<sup>143</sup> Since President George H.W. Bush’s term, this day has been commemorated through an annual speech. However, the only president to explicitly say “genocide” has been Ronald Reagan when he stated “Like the genocide of the Armenians before it, and the genocide of the Cambodians which followed it (...) the lessons of the Holocaust must never be forgotten”<sup>144</sup> during a speech on April 22, 1981, Day of Remembrance of Victims of the Holocaust. Every president since has alternatively used “massacres,”<sup>145</sup> “Great Calamity,”<sup>146</sup> and the Armenian term “Meds Yeghern.”<sup>147</sup> Lobbying success is more visible in the amount of aid for the independent Republic

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> H.J. Res. 148, 94<sup>th</sup> Cong. (1975). (<https://www.congress.gov/bill/94th-congress/house-joint-resolution/148>)

<sup>144</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Proclamation 4838 -- Days of Remembrance of Victims of the Holocaust,” (Proclamation, April 22, 1981), The Armenian Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=43727>. (accessed Mar. 14, 2018).

<sup>145</sup> George Bush, “Armenian Remembrance Day,” Statement issued by White House on April 20, 1990, republished by the Armenian National Institute, [http://www.armenian-genocide.org/Affirmation.54/current\\_category.4/affirmation\\_detail.html](http://www.armenian-genocide.org/Affirmation.54/current_category.4/affirmation_detail.html). (accessed Mar. 14, 2018), Bill Clinton, “Armenian Remembrance Day,” Statement issued by White House on April 24, 1996, republished by the Armenian National Institute, [http://www.armenian-genocide.org/Affirmation.59/current\\_category.4/affirmation\\_detail.html](http://www.armenian-genocide.org/Affirmation.59/current_category.4/affirmation_detail.html). (accessed Mar. 14, 2018).

<sup>146</sup> George W. Bush, “Armenian Remembrance Day,” Statement issued by White House on April 24, 2005, republished by the Armenian National Institute, [http://www.armenian-genocide.org/Affirmation.340/current\\_category.4/affirmation\\_detail.html](http://www.armenian-genocide.org/Affirmation.340/current_category.4/affirmation_detail.html). (accessed Mar. 14, 2018).

<sup>147</sup> Barack Obama, “Armenian Remembrance Day,” Statement issued by White House on April 22, 2016, republished by the U.S. Embassy in Armenia, <https://am.usembassy.gov/statement-president-armenian-remembrance-day/>. (accessed Mar. 14, 2018); Donald Trump, “Armenian Remembrance Day,” Statement issued by White House on April 24, 2017, White House, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-donald-j-trump-armenian-remembrance-day-2017/>. (accessed Mar. 14, 2018).

of Armenia after its split from the Soviet Union. This has come in the form of both financial aid, over \$1 billion USD by USAID alone since 1992,<sup>148</sup> and the maintenance of the Freedom of Support Act Section 907, blocking aid to the Armenian enemy of Azerbaijan.<sup>149</sup>

The political power of lobbying groups, especially the ANCA, is most visible in local elections. Predominantly Armenian districts succeed in electing representatives that represent Armenian community interests. Rep. Adam Schiff (D-CA) is one example, having introduced HR 106, a bill that explicitly declares that the genocide was “conceived and carried out by the Ottoman Empire,”<sup>150</sup> which did not pass due in part to Turkish lobbying efforts.<sup>151</sup> Rep. Schiff has continued to introduce legislation relevant to the Armenian-American community, such as HR 220 which is a measure drawing on the experience of the American response to the Armenian genocide to inform present-day genocide prevention.<sup>152</sup> The performance of elected representatives is monitored closely by the ANCA, which releases Congressional “report cards” that grade and endorse Members of Congress based on their performance on Armenian issues.<sup>153</sup> Rep. Schiff has an “A+” rating for his work cosponsoring resolutions, voting against Turkish and Azeri interests, and participating in commemorations of the genocide.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Deborah Grieser, “Op-Ed by USAID Armenia Mission Director Deborah Grieser,” last modified October 11, 2017. <https://am.usembassy.gov/usaaid-oped/>. (accessed Mar. 28, 2018).

<sup>149</sup> Gregg, 22-23.

<sup>150</sup> H.R. 106, 110<sup>th</sup> Cong. (2007-08).

<sup>151</sup> Ruzanna Amiraghyan and John Hughes, “HR 106 Loses Support: Dozens of US Lawmakers Yield to Expediency Over History,” *Armenia Now*, December 10, 2007. (accessed Mar. 28, 2018).

<sup>152</sup> H.R. 220, 115<sup>th</sup> Cong. (2017-18). (<https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-resolution/220>)

<sup>153</sup> “ANCA Report Cards,” *Armenian National Committee of America*, <https://anca.org/report-card/>. (accessed Mar. 28, 2018).

<sup>154</sup> “ANCA Report Card: 115th Congress (2017-2018): Adam Schiff,” *Armenian National Committee of America*, <https://anca.org/congress/adam-schiff-160-115/>. (accessed Apr. 1, 2018).



Youth outreach has also been a significant platform for encouraging greater community involvement, and more radical political action. The largest Armenian youth organization, the Armenian Youth Federation (AYF) is a branch of the Dashnak. They seek to preserve Armenian pride and identity while promoting the “moral, social, and intellectual advancement of all Armenian youth”<sup>155</sup> in the service of Dashnak goals. As stated in its promotional material, the AYF further acts through “demonstrations, marches, letter-writing campaigns, hunger strikes” and encourages unity and interaction between Armenian youth to “grow closer to Armenian culture and heritage.”<sup>156</sup> The AYF is seen as a group for the most passionate young Armenians, although membership is often encouraged by legacy involvement. One article in the Summer 2016 edition of the AYF’s official publication, *Haytoug*, describes generational activism through involvement in the AYF as “an ideology; a way of life; a resilience that transcends generations.”<sup>157</sup>

Political organizing reflects moderate success by Armenian-Americans, but in the American political system the U.S-Turkey relationship fundamentally undermines efforts for recognition. To overcome this issue, the issue of Armenian genocide recognition became connected to the broader issue of human rights education and genocide prevention.<sup>158</sup> In this way, the Armenian genocide became an issue more salient for the greater American public. However, to further awareness of the genocide outside the political sphere, more public and

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<sup>155</sup> *Armenian Youth Federation Western Region*, pamphlet (Glendale, CA: AYF West, 2018).

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> Arek Santikian, “A Story of Generational Activism,” *Haytoug*, Summer 2016, 10.

<sup>158</sup> This sentiment is reflected in resolutions presented by Congress and championed by Armenian groups, such as HR. 202 as well as educational initiatives like <https://genocideeducation.org/> and in my conversation with Rouben Adalian, director of ANI.

visible symbols became an important tool for establishing Armenian presence and presenting the Armenian narrative of the genocide.

## ***II. Materiality and Remembrance***

Physical reminders of the past, commonly represented in monuments, memorials and museums but also communicable through art, literature, and music serve as important reminders of the past, accessible to a wide audience. As Barbie Zelizer argues in *Remembering to Forget*, material reminders of memory help to “stabilize and anchor collective memory’s transient and fluctuating nature.”<sup>159</sup> Monuments, memorials, and museums serve to function as representation of “selective historical narratives”<sup>160</sup> that physically embody symbolic, emotional, and historical meaning. Their existence not only gives insight into the kind of narrative and memory that is trying to be evoked, but also displays a clear attempt to assert power and influence over their location of displacement. The ability to materialize memory therefore works to increase “our ability to make the past work for present aims.”<sup>161</sup> Material forms of memory created by Armenian-Americans announce their existence to non-Armenian communities while also articulating the community’s “basic values and principles of belonging.”<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory Through the Camera’s Eye* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 6.

<sup>160</sup> Federico Bellentani and Mario Panico, “The meanings of monuments and memorials: toward a semiotic approach,” *Punctum*, 2(1): 28-46, 2016, 29.

<sup>161</sup> Zelizer, 7.

<sup>162</sup> Marek Tamm “Beyond History and Memory: New Perspectives in Memory Studies,” *History Compass*, Vol. 11, Issue 6, 2013, 652, as quoted in Bellentani and Panico, 37.



“Armenian Martyrs Memorial.” Photograph by author, January 14, 2018.

One of the earliest monuments to Armenian genocide memory was erected in 1965, when a successful march in Los Angeles commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the genocide sparked the idea for a “permanent location...to be found to honor and preserve the memories of the martyrs of the Armenian Genocide.”<sup>163</sup> Ten miles east in Montebello is the Armenian Martyrs Memorial. Dedicated on April 21, 1968 by “Americans of Armenian descent...dedicated to the 1,500,000 Armenian victims...and to men of all nations who have fallen victim to crimes of humanity,”<sup>164</sup> the tall structure forms a shape resembling the “cone-shaped steeples characteristic

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<sup>163</sup> “Montebello Armenian Genocide Martyrs Museum History,” *United Armenian Council for the Commemoration of the Armenian Genocide – Los Angeles*. <http://www.uacla.com/montebello-monument.html>. (accessed Mar. 28, 2018).

<sup>164</sup> Inscribed on the Armenian Martyrs Memorial in Montebello, CA.

of Armenian churches.”<sup>165</sup> Its height and location on a hill was intended to be visible from the freeway, where it would be exposed to anyone on the road. The language of the monument utilizes the Armenian narrative of “victims,” but also makes the genocide a “crime of humanity.” This, coupled with its prominent public position, reflects a desire for greater public recognition. The monument serves as a site of memory for the Los Angeles community as part an annual pilgrimage site on April 23<sup>rd</sup>.<sup>166</sup>



“iWitness: Armenian Genocide Memorial.” Photograph by author, January 5, 2018.

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<sup>165</sup> “Overview of the Monument,” *Armenian Genocide Martyrs Monument*. <http://armenianmonument.org/monument-overview.html>. (accessed Mar. 28, 2018).

<sup>166</sup> “Genocide Commemoration to be held at Montebello Genocide Monument on April 23,” *Asbarez*, March 8, 2016. (accessed Mar. 28, 2018).

A more recent memorial, located in Grand Park, was carved by Vahagan Thomasian, an architect from Glendale<sup>167</sup> and dedicated on 17 September 2016. The monument was created after a public art installation in Grand Park the previous year called “iWitness” featuring enlarged photographs of Armenian genocide survivors<sup>168</sup> led to demands for a permanent dedication to the Armenian genocide. The monument features a dark volcanic rock cleanly split in two to “symbolize the disruption in humanity caused by genocide,” standing “a witness and a reminder of man’s inhumanity to man.”<sup>169</sup> Surrounding the sculpture is a quote by Armenian-American author William Saroyan: “In the time of your life, live – so that in the wondrous time you shall not add to the misery and sorrow of the world, but shall smile to the infinite delight and mystery of it.” The recent dedication of this monument reflects a renewed desire by the community to establish physical sites of memory and its central location in Los Angeles broadcasts to the Armenian presence to the city. The hopeful tone of Saroyan’s quote also reflects a desire to use the genocide in a hopeful manner, expressed by one of the monument’s creators: “We wanted something that was uplifting and also spoke to a much broader audience.”<sup>170</sup>

The physical presence of Armenians is also expressed through public art. “Little Armenia” is a neighborhood located in East Hollywood where early Armenian immigrants settled during their early entrance into the Los Angeles area. The neighborhood, while retaining

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<sup>167</sup> Bettina Boxall, “Memorial to Armenian Genocide Unveiled in L.A.’s Grand Park,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 17, 2016.

<sup>168</sup> Arin Mikailian, “Trio of Artists Recognized for Collaborative Project in Remembrance of Armenian Genocide Survivors,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 31, 2015.

<sup>169</sup> Inscribed on the Armenian Genocide Memorial in Grand Park in Los Angeles, CA.

<sup>170</sup> Levon Parian as quoted in *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 17, 2016.



the title of “Little Armenia” on signposts along with signs written in Armenian and stores named after Armenian landmarks like Mt. Ararat and Van, shares its Armenian population with the larger and richer suburb of Glendale. The historical Armenian presence is literally written on its walls.



“Our Wounds are Still Open.” Mural finished on April 17, 2014, Photography by author, January 6, 2018.



“Mural in Little Armenia.” Mural restored on April 23, 2016, Photography by author, January 6, 2018.

One mural graphically depicts a bloody arm being cut open to reveal “1915” embedded underneath, declaring “Our wounds are still open.” The visceral imagery likens the genocide to an open wound embedded in the bodies of Armenian-Americans. Another evokes the Armenian

homeland displaying Mt. Ararat and the Etchmiadzin Cathedral, mother of the Armenian Apostolic church. It also features the symbolic flower of the 1915 genocide, the forget-me-not, and the Statue of Liberty fashioned as Mary holding Christ in the Pieta. The mural encapsulates many of the underlying themes of memory that run through the community: the necessity of remembrance, the centrality of the historic Armenian homeland, and the religious underpinnings of America's savior-like role. Both murals serve as graphic visual forms of memory: public form of remembrance and political demand expressed by the significant Armenian communities in the Los Angeles area.

Museums are perhaps the most powerful physical containers for collective memory, representing an attempt "to solidify memories' meanings,"<sup>171</sup> according to Susan Crane. As such, museums serve as holders of memory while reinforcing their place in the national and community landscape. The Armenian-American community has tried hard to institutionalize their own collective memory through both the Armenian American Museum and the Armenian Genocide Museum of America (AGMA). Although both boast impressive websites, neither have physically materialized, reflecting the limits of Armenian-American community power. The Armenian Genocide Museum of America, proposed in 2000 by the AAA as a privately-funded institution in Washington DC, has instead become an online-only museum hosted by the AAA following an ugly legal battle over property.<sup>172</sup> The Armenian American Museum remains controversial due to concerns over its location in busy downtown Glendale<sup>173</sup>, although a petition

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<sup>171</sup> Susan A. Crane, "Introduction: Of Museums and Memory," in Susan A. Crane, ed., *Museums and Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 1.

<sup>172</sup> Michael Doyle, "Appeals Court Ends Armenian Genocide Museum and Memorial Challenge," *McClatchy Washington Bureau*, July 17, 2014. (accessed March 30, 2018).

<sup>173</sup> Arin Mikailian, "Armenian American Museum Plan in Glendale Brings Concerns Over Traffic," *Los Angeles Times*, January 20, 2016.

was recently released urging the community to show support for the project.<sup>174</sup> One successful museum has been the Armenian Museum of America, located in Watertown. The museum hosts the largest number of Armenian artifacts in North America, and a several exhibits relating to the genocide including “Scars of Silence,” a photography exhibit documenting an Armenian-American father and daughter’s journey back to Turkey. The museum also houses a library housing books, documents, and oral histories.

The Armenian-American experience with establishing museums is representative of an inability to make the Armenian-American story broadly accessible, reflecting a weakness in outreach initiatives. However, the digitization of the AGMA demonstrates an awareness of this issue. When speaking with Rouben Adalian, director of Armenian National Institute (ANI), the research branch of the AAA in charge of the AGMA, he seemed excited about broader audience that is given access through the internet. In this sense, the success of these institutions can be measured in education. Education is at the forefront of Armenian-American attempts to broaden interest in the Armenian genocide, which is also pursued legislatively. Currently, discussing the Armenian genocide in classrooms has been mandated in eleven states including California, often as part of curriculum relating to the Holocaust.<sup>175</sup>

The hundredth anniversary of the genocide in 2015, was a culminating public display of strength and unity by the Armenian-American community. Many organizations organized events

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<sup>174</sup>“Armenian American Museum Urges Community to Sign Petition,” *Asbarez*, March 26, 2018. (accessed Mar. 30, 2018).

<sup>175</sup>“State Educational Requirements,” The Genocide Education Project. <https://genocideeducation.org/resources/state-educational-requirements/>. (accessed Mar. 28, 2018); Mackenzie Mays, “Armenian Genocide Has Long Been Largely Hidden. California Schools Might Change That,” *Fresno Bee*, Last Updated November 28, 2016. (accessed Mar. 28, 2018).



to coincide with the centennial anniversary. The ANCA launched its “America We Thank You” initiative, aimed at honoring the work of the Near East Foundation which included a travelling exhibit and an educational tour in the months preceding the anniversary. The Armenian Apostolic Churches of America came together to form the National Commemoration of the Armenian Genocide Centennial, which remembered the Armenian genocide through events taking place in Washington D.C. over several days. The AYF also launched its 100 Days of Action campaign to coincide with the centennial, most prominently through a “Die-in” in front of the Staple Center to raise awareness.<sup>176</sup> In the months preceding April 24<sup>th</sup>, major news outlets reported on the controversy surrounding the Armenian genocide, including CNN, Huffington Post, the Guardian, and the New York Times.<sup>177</sup> These events culminated in massive demonstrations on April 24<sup>th</sup>, which received wide coverage.

Also occurring with the 2015 centennial anniversary were renewed attempts to reach out to a broader audience through media. The huge demonstration in Los Angeles received worldwide attention and was further highlighted by media surrounding the Kardashian family’s visit to Armenia, broadcast to 1.29 million viewers.<sup>178</sup> A significant project was the independently produced film “The Promise,” a period drama about the Armenian genocide featuring big-name stars such as Oscar Isaac and Christian Bale that was financed by the late

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<sup>176</sup> “Armenian Youth Stage ‘Die-in’ on ‘Zero Discrimination Day’,” *The Armenian Weekly*, March 2, 2015. (accessed Mar. 28, 2018).

<sup>177</sup> See: Tim Arango, “A Century After Armenian Genocide, Turkey’s Denial Only Deepens,” *New York Times*, April 16, 2015.; Ian Black, “A Small Country but a Big Nation: How Genocide Shaped the Armenia of Today,” *The Guardian*, April 22, 2015.; Sophia Jones, “100 Years Ago, 1.5 Million Christian Armenians Were Systematically Killed. Today, It’s Still Not a ‘Genocide’,” *Huffington Post*, April 23, 2015.; Don Melvin, “8 Things to Know About the Mass Killing of Armenians 100 Years Ago,” *CNN*, April 27, 2015.

<sup>178</sup> “Sunday Cable Ratings,” *TV By The Numbers*, September 22, 2015, <http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2-featured/sunday-cable-ratings-fear-the-walking-dead-tops-night-nfl-countdown-rick-morty-basketball-wives-the-strain-more/469914/>. (accessed Mar. 28, 2018).

billionaire Kirk Kerkorian.<sup>179</sup> The film's plot, a love triangle between an aspiring Armenian doctor, an American reporter, and a young, wealthy Armenian woman caught up in the Armenian genocide, was the backdrop of tropes of American humanitarianism, the "Terrible Turk," and Armenian godliness and victimhood. The film highlights key moments of Armenian genocide memory in the U.S., including Ambassador Morgenthau's talk with Talaat Pasha and starving Armenians marching across the desert. It ends with the Armenian protagonist in Watertown, MA twenty years after the film's main events, sharing a toast about hope and good fortune to future Armenian generations.

The film was accompanied by a celebrity-backed social campaign and the stated intention of donating all proceeds to nonprofit groups.<sup>180</sup> The coverage of the movie and interviews with its stars broadcast the Armenian genocide story to a non-Armenian audience, and its philanthropic intentions tied the events of the movie in with broader goals of genocide recognition and fighting injustice. The accessible nature of the movie along with its easily digestible Armenian-sympathetic narrative made it a perfect vehicle for disseminating the Armenian story and politics and is even going to be used as part of UCLA's Genocide Awareness Week activities.<sup>181</sup>

The interest in extending the message and lessons of the Armenian genocide to broader issues of genocide prevention and human rights is part of a new Armenian-American politics. Although cognizant of the strides that the community has made over the past hundred years, the

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<sup>179</sup> Ashley Lee and Rebecca Ford, "'The Promise': Can Armenian Genocide Drama Bring Charity Success?," *The Hollywood Reporter*, April 14, 2017. (accessed Mar. 28, 2018).

<sup>180</sup> Ashely Lee, "'The Promise' Film Proceeds to Be Donated to Nonprofits," *The Hollywood Reporter*, February 22, 2017. (accessed Mar. 28, 2018).

<sup>181</sup> Ara Mandjikian, interview with author, January 14, 2018.

continued lack of recognition by the U.S. serves as a looming hurdle. New connections and alliances made by the community broaden the relevance of the Armenian genocide and rethink the political goals of the community.

### *III. Emerging Connections in Armenian America*

During my time in Los Angeles conducting research over Winter Term, the most valuable and illuminating experience I had was speaking with young politically active Armenian-Americans. Two were kind enough to sit down with me for an interview. The first, Ara Mandjikian, is sophomore at UCLA serving as the Political Committee Chair for UCLA'S Armenian Student Association (ASA). Ara grew up in a suburb slightly outside of Glendale but was tapped into Armenian politics in Glendale and abroad from a young age due to his parents. Both his parents immigrated to the U.S. from Lebanon during the Lebanese Civil War, but met after immigrating. Ara's background provides interesting insight into the experience of the second generation of later immigrants from a highly politicized background, and the work that he does at UCLA gives insights into the thoughts and opinions of other politically active young Armenian-Americans.

The second person I was able to conduct an interview with was Hasmik Burushyan, a sophomore studying Political Science at Glendale Community College. She is a member of the AYF, serving as chair of AYF Glendale's social and fundraising committee while participating in her college's ASA chapter. Hasmik grew up in Glendale but got involved in Armenian politics and organizations relatively late, partially due to both her parents having immigrated from Armenia. As such, Hasmik provides an important perspective on some of the tensions between Western and Eastern Armenian politics as well as into the larger institutions of AYF and ANCA.

The attempted erasure of Armenians through genocidal acts have made assimilation a key fear and cultural preservation a clear goal. Hasmik expressed this when talking about the issue of assimilation, claiming that “we were about to be extinct, so I feel like that’s why we have this tendency... We come off that way (insulated) because we were about to lose ourselves, we were about to lose our country, our language.”<sup>182</sup> Similarly, Ara talked about the need to keep “the culture alive, going... I think because of the genocide, the cultural preservation attitude is always there... [to] keep fighting for the culture that’s been downtrodden.”<sup>183</sup>

Political mobilization is one way of preserving culture. Hasmik explained that Glendale AYF actives ranged from “constantly sending reminders to our membership, to the city, and calling people”<sup>184</sup> to vote for ANCA-backed candidates to staging protests and demonstrations. One act that she was particularly proud of was mobilizing AYF members to act in Orange County against a motion to pass a Turkish Remembrance Day on April 23<sup>rd</sup>. She described how AYF leaders mobilized immediately to call on members to complain about the motion, resulting in it being cancelled from the agenda. This response was “the beauty of the organization; we’re the first responders when it comes to anything anti-Armenian.”<sup>185</sup>

Similarly, Ara described to me the annual events that he helps coordinate as part of ASA events around the country such as “State of Denial”, traditionally a silent protest held around April 24<sup>th</sup> and a Genocide Awareness Week, often held with other clubs as part of an “atrocious

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<sup>182</sup> Burushyan interview, Jan. 19, 2018

<sup>183</sup> Mandjikian Interview, Jan. 14, 2018.

<sup>184</sup> Burushyan interview, Jan. 19, 2018.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

week.”<sup>186</sup> Both Ara and Hasmik expressed that knowledge of the genocide as an Armenian was almost inherent, with Hasmik claiming that “every Armenian just knows the Armenian genocide...it was in my head planted already.”<sup>187</sup>

Language holds a particularly special place in discussions of cultural preservation and is considered a “traditional marker of Armenian membership.”<sup>188</sup> Both Ara and Hasmik could speak Armenian, although Hasmik expressed her worry that “older people are going to judge my language skills.”<sup>189</sup> The generational split, and the potential loss of a connection with the Armenian homeland and the living past, was a clear concern of the community. The survival of Armenian language serves as a tether for diasporan Armenians to Armenia as well as a defiance of Turkish attempts to erase or assimilate Armenian culture. I attended an event called “Words in Action: Language and Education in the Armenian Diaspora” sponsored in part by UCLA and the UNC Dornsife’s Institute of Armenian Studies. The event discussed how Armenian language acquisition can be promoted outside of Armenia and how to incorporate emerging mixed dialects between Armenian and English. The presenters had a full and riveted audience of fluent Armenian speakers of varying ages, and I stood out as a clear non-Armenian.<sup>190</sup> Additionally, the event was broadcast live – the importance of the event, and more broadly the issue, was apparent.

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<sup>186</sup> Mandjikian Interview, Jan. 14, 2018.

<sup>187</sup> Burushyan interview, Jan. 19, 2018.

<sup>188</sup> King, 99.

<sup>189</sup> Burushyan interview, Jan. 19, 2018.

<sup>190</sup> Before the event got underway, I was jokingly asked by an older (presumably Armenian) man if I would need a translator. As far as I could tell, I was the only one approached in this way and was the only obviously non-Armenian attendant.

Connections with the Armenian state, like the Armenian language, also encourage Armenians to connect with their history and culture. Current projects by the AYF like “We Are Gyumri,” which seeks to rebuild the youth center destroyed in Gyumri, Armenia by the devastating 1988 earthquake,<sup>191</sup> focus on providing the Armenian-American community with an opportunity to contribute directly to Armenian homeland. Ara discussed with me an organization called RePat Armenia, which encourages members of the Armenian diaspora to repatriate to Armenia. Ara, who has travelled to Armenia on a volunteer basis, said his friends expressed enthusiasm for the initiative but was more cautious himself: “...I think about it and I’m like, well I went to Armenia, what is that like? (...) It’s a completely different culture and to say that you’d like to repatriate and that’ll solve all our problems... it’s not, it won’t.”<sup>192</sup> Hasmik, on the other hand, said that one of the key aspects of being Armenian-American is that “this (America) is not our home; we one day want to hopefully return to our homeland, that’s one of the goals of the AYF, to one day have the diaspora move back to Armenia.”<sup>193</sup> Understandings of belonging and responsibility clearly vary between individuals, but for both Hasmik and Ara the Armenian homeland was a strong point of identity.

Hasmik was also eager to discuss the ways that the AYF works as an organization “for anyone who goes through suffering,”<sup>194</sup> talking about initiatives to include LGBTQ rights, Syrian and Greek communities, and even Black Lives Matter as a “way of bringing two culture groups

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<sup>191</sup> “We Are Gyumri,” *AYF West*. <https://ayfwest.org/campaigns/we-are-gyumri/>. (accessed Mar. 30, 2018).

<sup>192</sup> Mandjikian Interview, Jan. 14, 2018.

<sup>193</sup> Burushyan interview, Jan. 19, 2018.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*

or different groups that go through different [human rights] violations.”<sup>195</sup> Comparisons with the Holocaust are frequently evoked by Armenians as proof of the genocidal nature of 1915, and encourage connections with the Jewish community. The Holocaust, whose events were the first to be described as “genocide,”<sup>196</sup> is particularly powerful as a source of memory and imagery in the American context.<sup>197</sup> However, the prominence of the Holocaust has been both a boon and a hindrance to the Armenian-American cause. On the one hand, the Jewish population represents a powerful potential ally whose interests in genocide prevention are aligned with Armenian interests. On the other, recognition of the Holocaust is widely accepted and has the tendency to overshadow all other discussions of genocide.

When discussing this potential issue with both the young political leaders I met in Glendale, there is a sense of competition. Hasmik, for example, attributes the more significant backlash encountered by Armenians to be because “Armenians are scattered and there’s not a lot of voice representation...it’s harder for us to create this buzz over creating awareness on the Armenian genocide so sometimes maybe it does feel like there’s, we’re under the shadow.”<sup>198</sup> Ara acknowledged that although the Jewish community is not actively trying to work against Armenians, he felt that “sometimes it’s like we are a little undermined.”<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> The term “genocide” was coined by Raphael Lemkin in 1944 in an effort to describe Nazi actions against Jews in direct reference to the Armenians. (Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, 80.)

<sup>197</sup> Discussing Holocaust imagery and interpretations were beyond the scope of this paper, but for an important and interesting discussion of Holocaust imagery (particularly photographs) and its impact on how genocide was discussed and interpreted, see Barbie Zelizer’s *Remembering to Forget*.

<sup>198</sup> Burushyan interview, Jan. 19, 2018.

<sup>199</sup> Mandjikian Interview, Jan. 14, 2018.

It is clear that active bridges are trying to be built between Armenian and Jewish communities. One of the clearest examples of this that I encountered during my time in Glendale was an event held at the Glendale Central Library called “L’Dough V’Dough: Bread baking with Jewish and Armenian breads,” focused on connecting Jews and Armenians through similar traumas. Members of the Glendale community of all ages gathered to make traditional breads while listening to the stories of survivors of both the Armenian genocide and the Jewish Holocaust in order to promote dialogue between communities and generations. The event highlighted the impact of the genocide on the Armenian community as a means of pursuing a closer connection between people, generations, and geographic space.

I believe these emerging connections are representative of a new direction for the Armenian-American community. The success of this direction remains unseen, as does its impact on the greater basis of understanding the Armenian identity. However, this desire for broad cooperation represents new hope for a community that has struggled to encourage broader cooperation around the memory of the genocide. Genocidal memory has been integral to the formation of Armenian-American identity and community. Extending this memory’s impact and using the organizations that budded from genocidal events provides a powerful new opportunity for Armenian-Americans to grow beyond the boundaries of their own community.



## Conclusion

The Armenian presence in America – beginning in the American imagination and then manifesting in a physical community – grew around the Armenian genocide. The genocide, initially utilized to privately encourage unity and cohesion amongst Armenian-Americans from different geographic and political backgrounds, then became the central political and public concern of the community. The continued evocation of the genocide within a community that has for generations been removed from the Anatolian context reflects the genocide has become a unifying marker of identity and belonging; a singular point of connection with the distant past and homeland. Continued usage of this memory, evolved from the narratives of the genocide built immediately post-WWI, places diaspora Armenians in the historical fight of their ancestors. In this way, genocide remembrance and recognition moved away from a mournful practice. Instead it became productive: a means of making Armenian history, politics, culture, and identity salient to the diaspora and to a greater global community. Ironically, the attempt to erase Armenians instead become their greatest source of power and relevance.

Recognition of the genocide by the U.S. government has long been considered the central political concern of the Armenian-American community and its greatest measure of success. This thesis followed, over the course of more than a century, how this began and evolved in the U.S. Despite the genocide dispersing Armenians around the globe and contentious internal politics, the narrative of victimhood and attempts to catapult the Armenian story into the international sphere helped crystalize Armenian-Americans into a cohesive political community. Their identity and political organization primarily came to be founded upon the legacy of genocidal memory: from attempted erasure, to displacement in a new land, to seeking retribution.

Genocide recognition would affirm the historical record on the Armenian genocide and prove beyond doubt the political might of Armenian-Americans.

The centrality of the fight for recognition to the community's sense of identity raises the question of what achieving recognition would actually mean. Symbolically, the fight for recognition reflects the politicized understanding of the genocide that formed the Armenian-American collective memory and identity. Realistically, the chances of achieving recognition by the U.S. is unlikely –and part of its strength as a political goal lies in its very unlikeliness. It lends the Armenian-American community political continuity and keeps the genocide as a point of mobilization relevant. This point is not lost on the community itself. My interviewee Ara acknowledges that lobbying and protest efforts “realistically speaking...[are] not gonna change anything, it's more of a symbolic thing...you have an obligation to keep fighting for it on whatever terms.”<sup>200</sup> He admits that this form of expression could lead to a “generation that's like ‘why do we do this anymore? My parents did it so...’”<sup>201</sup> Hasmik, however, had the opposite sense:

If we reach recognition...it will be the same after. What is right now will be what it is then. We just have this huge accomplishment which hopefully every Armenian community member has their back for. (...) We still have things to work on besides the Armenian genocide. I feel like getting that recognized will be a big thing for our community and hopefully other communities so hopefully it can inspire them to also work for their liberation movements, to liberate themselves.<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Mandjikian Interview, Jan. 14, 2018.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Burushyan interview, Jan. 19, 2018.

It is hard to imagine the Armenian-American community without thinking of the genocide. Without the events of 1915, many Armenians would never have found their way to U.S. shores, nor would have had the impetus to establish the rich cultural and political traditions that have become embedded in the American landscape. What began as a traumatic wound on the Armenian people transformed into the means of hopeful possibility – using memories of the past that has created a present-day understanding of community and identity. The issue of recognition remains unresolved and it may never be resolved, but perhaps recognition is no longer the most important resolution of the Armenian genocide. As Iwona Irwin-Zarecka writes, “actively attending to the past...need not mean critically attending to remembrance.”<sup>203</sup> The strength and vibrancy of today’s Armenian-American community stands in defiance against the principles of genocide and as testament for the memories of their ancestors.

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<sup>203</sup> Irwin-Zarecka, 137.



**Figure 1:** “Soghomon Tehlirian, June 1922.” From the family archive of Ara Oskanyan. Found at <http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/soghomon-tehlirian-eng.php>. Accessed April 17, 2018.



**Figure 2:** “Mehmet Talaat Pasha (1874-1921), Ottoman Minister of the Interior.” From Edwin Pears, *Forty Years in Constantinople: The Recollections of Sir Edwin Pears, 1873-1915*, 1916. Found at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Mehmed\\_Talat\\_Pasha.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Mehmed_Talat_Pasha.jpg). (Accessed April 17, 2018).



**Figure 3:** “Genocide Survivors and Victims.” In front of St. Sarkis Monastery, Urfa, Turkey, 1919. Courtesy of Garbis Kazanjian. Found through Project SAVE. <http://projectsave.org/vexhibit/vex2/E3BCB1D6-DDAA-449C-8BF9-603628255591.htm>. (Accessed April 17, 2018).

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