

# Armenia, the Armenians: between memory and future

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## Abstract

The article recalls how in 2015, the year of the centenary of the Armenian Genocide, important publications emerged, shedding a light on the incident that will be difficult to ignore. In particular, it was the archives of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, the Vatican Secret Archives and the Historical Archive of the Secretariat of State which offered up precious material for the knowledge of what was happening to Armenians in Turkey to Georges-Henri Ruysse SJ. To the latter is owed a valuable and significant work of reconstruction undertaken over many years, and consisting of eight volumes. These contain letters written in Turkey by those in contact with the people, who with their own eyes saw what was happening, and who followed what was occurring with dismay. Their relationship with the territory and their direct experience are fundamental.

The correspondences begin in the years 1894-1896, of which volume IV, ranging from 1908 to 1925, is drawn precisely from the Secret Vatican Archives (ASV) as well as the Historic Archives of the Secretariat of State, the Section for Relations with Territories (SS.RR.SS). The author also points out a small valuable contribution by Jewish intellectuals of the time, translated into Italian with the title *Pro Armenia*. She underlines how, immediately, some Jews tried to intervene, to stop the genocide, and to assist Armenians in various ways.

Today, it is difficult to ignore what happened, to ignore and to reduce what historically is the first genocide of the twentieth century in Europe. An event which has been minimized and denied: whose effects are still being felt today, and which has left a trail at individual, family and social levels. Armenian terrorism, which has resulted in attacks and deaths in Turkey and elsewhere, derives from these negations. The same is the case for a strong nationalism still prevalent today in the Republic of Armenia, which is constrained by circumstances to adopt a defensive political stance and – out of necessity – to maintain good relations with Russia. We have to wish that, after those resounding acknowledgement of the genocide, Armenia will be able to look forward to a more serene future.

**Keywords:** archives; correspondences; witnesses; collation of memories and history; migration; recognition; genocide

## Premise

It has been a hundred years since, in 1915, during the First World War, and with the inadvertence of the great powers, what has been described by many as the first genocide of the twentieth century occurred in the territories of present-day Turkey. The victims were the Armenians. Not only them: earlier, Greeks were persecuted and expelled, and Christians killed. But the persecution of Armenians was, for various reasons, a larger and harsher one. The objective was to make this minority disappear, alien in terms of religion and culture, yet with a strong feeling of identity based on its own language, its own alphabet, and on a different religious belief than the prevailing Sunni Muslim population. The Armenians were artisans and traders, and as a rule generally more affluent, or at least less poor than the Turks: all aspects increasingly less tolerated by those who dreamed of a modern, coherent, victorious and Muslim Turkey.

If the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries had already seen persecutions and plunderings of entire villages, with the killing of inhabitants, now, in 1915, under the Young Turks everything took on broader forms, becoming progressively more relentless. Armenians would lose any rights. They were to hand over their weapons and could not hold positions of command in the army any longer. Their passports were withdrawn. They were then killed, in various ways, the men now defenseless. Women, children and the elderly were forced to undertake tiresome marches to nowhere. They fall by the thousands: around a million and a half, it is estimated. Armin Wegner, a young German writer, took numerous photographs of dying Armenians, of emaciated bodies, and of the situations of extreme degradation into which they were forced. And he was not the only one.

A few women and children survived, forced by the Turks to live in Turkish families, if not in a harem. Even today some researchers have identified grandchildren of Armenian survivors, forced by fear to live as Muslims.

Today, however, with a hundred years having passed, many things have changed. The awareness of what occurred has become widespread, partly because of Armenian terrorism, which for years had Turkish targets in its sights, both in Turkey and elsewhere, inevitably attracting attention to the genocide and its non-recognition by Turkey. Today there is undoubtedly a greater, broader knowledge of what happened. Many studies have since been carried out and much new material has emerged. The media have drawn attention to the matter on many occasions, in Europe but also in other continents; wherever there are Armenian emigrants, and especially, therefore, in the U.S. and in Russia.

There have been important acknowledgements: the most resounding of which, and the one which attracted the attention of all the media was that of Pope Francis, who,

on April 11, 2015, during a solemn mass at St Peter's, spoke clearly of an 'Armenian genocide'. The recognition of the genocide by Germany and other countries was also important, and the envoy of significant delegations, such as the one sent by the Knesset to Armenia for the anniversary (the date of April 24 was chosen some time ago, in memory of the Armenian intellectuals rounded up and killed in Constantinople at the time).

In Italy, where the government maintained a low profile in this regard, sending a delegation which included neither the prime minister nor any other minister, the universities and various cultural institutions have rallied, as well as many Italians and Armenians. There have been international conferences, exhibitions of Armenian art, photo exhibitions, major concerts and shows. And, above all, a great effort in terms of publishing: significant books have emerged, the result of years of research.

In this short discussion, an account is given of some of these interesting and significant publications, and hopefully of the ability for Armenians to look more serenely to the future, knowing that even within Turkey dissent against the denial of the genocide is moving forward, with several Turkish intellectuals having spoken out about it. And that Armenia has much to offer the world in terms of art, literature, archaeology and, more generally, culture.

...Much has been said in Italy and beyond about Armenia, about the Armenian genocide and about its centenary, thanks mainly to Pope Francis' speech of April 12, 2015 in St. Peter's Basilica. The speech has been spotlighted in both a positive way, primarily by the Armenians, and in a negative way, especially by Erdogan, but also by those who are aware that Turkey belongs to NATO and assume it would be good for it to enter the European Union; the possibility of which has, once again, retreated into the background of late.

Beyond this occurrence and its political repercussions, I believe that the centenary has offered many countries, including Italy, the opportunity to better understand what happened in 1915, not to mention the massacres of the nineteenth century instigated by Abdul Amid, referred to as 'the red sovereign' in reference to the blood shed by Armenians. And not only this: the massacres of the early 1900s have been remembered in other places, thanks to the numerous recent publications appearing in Italy and elsewhere.

In the past, the discourse of the relationship between history and memory has been a difficult one: the Turkish archives are closed, and it was easy to discredit relatively scarce family memories that emerged to remember and tell of the events of that time. Doing this today is certainly more difficult thanks to research undertaken, to the

publication of numerous studies, and to the emergence of important documentation, chief among which is *La Questione Armena*, edited by Georges-Henri Ruysen SJ. To date, this is made of four volumes taken from the Archives of the Congregation for Oriental Churches (ACO) as well as from the Vatican Secret Archives (ASV) and the Historic Archives of the Secretariat of State, the Section for Relations with States (SS. RR.SS). These currently run from 1894-1896 (Volume 1, 2013) to 1908-1925 (Volume 4, 2015). Four more volumes are planned by the same publishers, Edizioni Orientalia Christiania, Valore Italiano Lilamé.

What do they contain? Letters, or rather correspondence, tickets, and documents of various kinds from priests in the Turkish territories at the time. Much of this correspondence is directed to their superiors, bishops and cardinals living in Italy, but also to others, such as nuncios and apostolic delegates, who in turn correspond with other contacts to control, and then to spread, the news obtained. These then respond to their interlocutors. The volumes also contain letters of ambassadors and academics, and, more rarely, letters addressed directly to the pope. The first volume, for instance, contains correspondence from the patriarch Azarian to Pope Leo XIII, as well as repeated letters to Cardinal Rampolla. A letter of alarm, written by Pope Leo XIII to the Turkish Sultan is in evidence, as well as a response by Abdul Hamid II to Pope Leo, which speaks of “unpleasant incidents”, as well as the contention that Christians have always been allowed “to enjoy numerous material and moral advantages” during his reign. Beyond complete freedom of conscience, writes the sultan, his government has never ceased “to grant justice and protection to all his subjects”, (vol. 1, pp. 357-358). Needless to say, the Vatican shows continued concern for Armenian Catholics, but also for Christians of various denominations, including Chaldeans and Maronites of Syria and Lebanon, who are threatened by massacres and by famine. There are also concerns for the Assyrians of Mesopotamia, and whole regions, especially in Anatolia, are eventually devoid of any Christian presence, a fact that is today reflected in the existence of a single diocese, in Constantinople. As much as possible, aid is sent to individuals and charities, but the needs are many, and the aid does not always reach those in need.

The volumes are made up of materials that require the good will of the reader, partly due to the sometimes archaic and convoluted language, to linguistic expressions that are today obsolete, and to errors made by foreign correspondents writing in Italian. Despite this, they contain content of great interest: Catholic observers see a situation that is becoming increasingly unsafe for Armenians. They speak of killings and looting, and attach disturbing documents: lists of the dead, lists of houses and shops looted (e.g. in Trabzon in 1895), excerpts of newspapers and more. Initially there are misunderstandings: it is assumed that the massacres of Armenians only concern the Church of Armenia, namely Armenian Christians but not Catholics. It would therefore

be enough to clarify, writes the apostolic delegate Dolci to Cardinal Gasparri, that one's faithful are Catholics, that they do not belong to the Church of Armenia, and are therefore not Armenian Gregorian rebels close to the Russians and the Turks. But then, as the cruelty, torture, killing and pillage continue and expand, the reality of the situation becomes all too clear: Turks and Kurds are together carrying out what in contemporary terms we would call 'ethnic cleansing'. Many Greeks have already been exiled; now the trend is to get rid of any Armenian presence, be it Catholic or Gregorian: isolated acts of cruelty that have occurred in the past become more determined and widespread under the government of the Young Turks, the infamous triumvirate (Cemal Pasha, Talaat Pasha and Enver Pasha).

The Catholic clergy attempt to take remedial action. Some members write to one of the powerful pashas asking pardon for certain Armenians individuals. They are informed of what is happening in countries like Lebanon and Syria. Nuncios are asked by the Secretariat of State in Rome to speak with the governments to which they are accredited, in defence of Christians: they also appeal to Germany, which, due to its alliance with Turkey, instead implements a clear policy of abstention. Documentation that exists from German sources is therefore mainly from non-governmental sources. I am thinking of the writings of Pastor Johannes Lepsius, but mainly of the valuable photos of Armin T. Wegner, and of the novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* by Franz Werfel, who has for decades succeeded in raising awareness of the Armenian Genocide.

Most historians and scholars see the year 1915 and the advent of the Young Turks as constituting a quantum leap in the persecution of Armenians and other Christians.

What had been isolated traumatic events, specific cases, are now much more widespread, and based on centralized directives. The goal, by now, as writes Marcello Flores, is the "removal" of Armenians from Anatolia and Cilicia (M. Flores, *Storia e giustizia nel genocidio armeno*, in *Il genocidio infinito*, edited by Martina Corgnati e Ugo Volli, Guerini e Associati, Milan 2015). The war favours this objective, and the Western powers are not in a position to intervene to save the Armenians, as they tried to do in the past, albeit with little effect. It is worth noting that among those who attempted to put a stop to what was happening, as for example the US ambassador Henry Morgenthau, were Jews; as was F. Werfel, who, through his novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, which was read the world over, did the most to raise awareness of what was occurring. A.T. Wegner, to whom are owed a considerable amount of photos taken in Turkey in 1915, whose subject are hungry, starving and dying Armenians, was not Jewish. But his wife was; a woman whose relationship with Wegner was close and significant. To her he wanted to show that Germany was not what the Nazis wanted the world to believe: hence his well known letter to Hitler of 1919, which resulted in his imprisonment and torture. To these can be added Raphael Lemkin, a Polish Jew who was responsible for the invention of the term genocide and the first attempts to define the concept. M. Flores

devotes several pages of his aforementioned essay to Lemkin and recalls how, for the latter, genocide comprises two phases, the first of which concerns the destruction of the national model of the oppressed group, while the second sees the imposition of the national model of the oppressor. He further remembers how Lemkin referred to the massacres against Armenians both before and after the invention of the term 'genocide', and that he found it questionable that Talaat Pasha, who had been one of the major contributors to the massacres, had not been put on trial. Talaat instead found refuge in Germany (a German destroyer had brought the best known among the most notorious persecutors of Armenians during the war out of Turkey, to safety). Neither seemed to him acceptable the idea that state sovereignty implies conducting an independent domestic and foreign policy: sovereignty, according to Lemkin, cannot be understood as the right to kill millions of innocent people.

Some other significant pages written about Lemkin can be found in a nimble book also recently published in Italy, entitled *Pro Armenia. Voci ebraiche sul genocidio armeno*, edited by Fulvio Cortese and Antonia Arslan (Giuntina, Florence 2015; Glendale, California 2011). The title *Pro Armenia* is that of the essay by Aaron Aaronsohn, and was originally a memorandum of 16 November 1916 sent to the Ministry of War in London. The author immediately makes it clear that he has not been to historical Armenia, and has thus not seen the worst atrocities. However he saw what happened in Syria, Konya and Constantinople. Other things were gleaned from representatives posted in the places most affected by the Turkish massacres: what he reports is therefore what has been directly observed, or what he has been told by reliable witnesses. Among these is his sister Sarah, a woman considered tranquil and of sound mind until she undertakes a trip in December 1915 from Constantinople to Haifa. On this journey, she sees hundreds of bodies of children, men and women piled up on the side of the railway, dogs feeding on them while Turkish women search the garments of the dead for useful or valuable objects. She also sees trains arrive with wagons full of Armenians stacked one on top of the other, from which those that had died from hunger and typhus were thrown. Epidemics spread, writes Aaronsohn, and the exhausted Armenians are robbed of all their possessions, while the price of a ride in a carriage rises. The dead lie unburied for days. He recalls an intervention by Cemal Pasha, appearing as a salvation for the Armenians, which would have avoided the massacre of about one hundred thousand of them. In reality they were deported to remote places, out of the sight of observers and foreign politicians, ending up in camps outside the city, forbidden to work for anyone but the government: they dig in the quarries and build roads. In return they receive a few coins, insufficient to ensure their livelihood. Often trains with water do not come. If and when they do come, they are besieged by thousands of distraught people on the brink of starvation. The guards, to maintain order, intervene with whips. Slave markets are born, writes Aaronsohn: he himself witnesses the sale of girls in Damascus, many of whom end up in harems. Several Armenian families in

the Caucasus are obliged to convert and recent surveys conducted in modern Turkey have in fact identified persons of Armenian origin forced to live as Muslims (see Laure Marchand and Guillaume Perrier, *La Turquie et le fantôme arménien*, Actes Sud, Arles 2013; the text is enriched by an introductory essay by Taner Akçam). Further, the author recalls the organization of labour battalions made up of Armenians, battalions including between 400 and 600 unarmed people, hungry, thirsty, and forced to walk under military escort. Not infrequently, the military would report a supposed rebellion: they would then intervene, and to crush the Armenians. The author goes on to speak of young girls forced into prostitution, of a frugal and industrious people, whose surviving members are now reduced to begging and to slavery in the homes of Turks. Everything, in his opinion, points to a destructive end aimed for by the government, and implemented in different ways in different locations of the Turkish Empire. According to Aaronsohn, the government's "full participation in the crime and incitement to it are beyond any shadow of doubt" (p. 73). He concludes that the massacres of the Armenians were "the fruit of the carefully planned action by the Turks, and the Germans, certainly, will forever share with them the infamy of this action" (p. 79). To those not aware of the debate, ascribing responsibility to the Germans might seem a rash judgement. If nothing else, it is worth remembering that Germany, an ally of Turkey at the time, had sent soldiers and officers to train the Turkish army. They had closed their eyes to the persecution and killings of Armenians and had not seen fit to intervene to stop the extermination. The German Ambassador in Constantinople, Wangeheim, although repeatedly asked about it by US Ambassador Morgenthau, had not deemed it necessary to take a stance on the matter, rejecting any suggestion and advice to do so: the Turks were allies of Germany, therefore untouchable and to be respected.

Historians are generally convinced of the responsibility of Germany for its abstention and for not intervening on behalf of the Armenians. Some French historians have also put forth the hypothesis that the suggestion for the deportation of Armenians came from the cabinet of William II; the same opinion was expressed by Morgenthau (Henry Morgenthau, *Diario 1913-1916*, Guerini and Associates, Milan 2010; see especially chap. 27, entitled: "I shall do nothing for the Armenians" says the German Ambassador. The text is translated from *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story*, Wayne State University Press, 2003); but concerning this disturbing hypothesis there is no certainty.

Certainly when, on the occasion of the centenary, the news arrived in Armenia of the recognition of the genocide by Germany, the news immediately spread and was warmly welcomed in the cities and villages: the Germans have thus, in some ways, redressed the balance. By comparison the recognition by Austria, although widely appreciated, caused less of a sensation, and resulted in the recall of the Turkish Ambassador.

Today, perhaps, Armenians can look forward in the knowledge of a broad and shared understanding of what took place in 1915, and later under Mustāfa Kemāl Atatürk,



when all their hopes were ended. The Treaty of Sévres had in fact just recognized the possibility of a large independent Armenia, including Russian and Turkish territories. But the US did not sign the treaty, and it was rejected by Atatürk, who already occupied the territories of Turkish Armenia, and pursued the massacres against the Armenians.

The following is known: the small republic of northern Armenia (1918-1920) is absorbed by Russia, and goes on to become one of the fifteen independent republics. It traverses a hard path until the fall of the USSR, and the proclamation of the present Republic of Armenia on September 21, 1991.

The Armenian Republic is today characterized by difficult economic circumstances, by a certain detachment of the population, and by a ruling party, which in recent years has had a low degree of consensus. Unemployment reached 17.3% in 2013, and in the same year nearly 64% of the population lived in poverty, which means that many who are in employment actually live in a state of destitution. The aid coming from the diaspora is essential- 1,869,788 US dollars - which makes the young republic increasingly dependent on foreign aid, and on the economic swings of other countries. Furthermore, Armenia now has an underground economy, which alone can explain the high living standards of certain social strata. The uncertainty of the future, the difficulties of the present, including the decline in business due to the closure of the borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan, the risk of war with Azerbaijan contained in supporting the independence of Nagorno Karabakh, a region currently inhabited by Armenians only, and claimed as their own by Azerbaijan, means that many Armenians dream of emigration, at least a temporary one (an estimate of 60% of the population) if not a definitive one (31%), as reported by sociologists Arthur Atanesyan and Ruzanna Karapetyan, of the State University of Yerevan (Human security: l'esperienza armena, "La critica sociologica" n. 192, Winter 2014).

The plight of the present Republic of Armenia means that there are different political orientations and different reactions to it by the Armenians of Armenia and the Armenian diaspora.

Nevertheless, they are today united by the awareness of the importance of their common history and the culture that characterizes their common tradition and their current identity; the arts, literature, music, and archaeological studies all testify to this. These are identity markers for Armenians, starting with the invention of the alphabet around the year 405 by the monk Mesrop Maštoc', author of the first translation of the Bible into Armenian. Gabriella Uluhogian in *Gli armeni* (il Mulino, Bologna 2009) devotes several pages to the creation of the alphabet, and points out that among the first words to be written in Armenian are these: "To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight" from the Book of Proverbs (Prov. 1.1): a confirmation of the importance traditionally given to learning and knowledge. To be



able to write also means to be able to translate: something that Armenians have done for centuries, preserving ancient scriptures which otherwise would have been lost, even communicating visually, thanks to the ability to create illuminated manuscripts, which are today numerous in the Matenadaran Museum in Yerevan, the capital of the small republic, characterized by the old houses in rose tuff.

Certainly the Armenians, who have a complex history, who suffered the Roman protectorate and the domination of Iran, who had to defend themselves from the imposition of Zoroastrianism and who have found themselves in Byzantine as well as Arab sights, who experienced a ruinous rivalry between the various Armenian families, not to mention the Mongol invasions, and who, in 1700 and in 1800, found themselves squeezed into conflicts between Russia and the Ottoman Empire, who have suffered painful massacres in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, would like to go beyond the issue of the genocide, to engender scenarios of peace, of productive and serene living. But this will only be possible to the extent that there is a recognition of their past, which can only then truly become the past and make way for a more serene future.

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<sup>1</sup> Originally published in Armenian in two volumes as [*Armenian Golgotha: Episodes from the Armenian Martyrology from Berlin to Zor*]; 1914-1920, Vienna, Mekhitarist Press, 1922, and [*Armenian Gogotha, volume 2: Episodes from the Armenian Martyrology from Berlin to Der Zor*], Paris, Imprimerie Araxes, 1959

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<sup>2</sup> This volume was published on the occasion of the exhibition "Armenia. Il popolo dell'Arca" (Armenia. The People of the Ark), Rome, complesso del Vittoriano, 6 March – 3 May 2015 (In Italian)

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<sup>4</sup> With regard to the qualitative approach and the use of life stories and fiction in the social sciences, introduced in Italy by Franco Ferrarotti

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- 24 April 2014, Rome, Russian Ecumenical Center, Lecture for the 99 year anniversary of the Armenian Genocide
- 29 May 2013, Rome, Sala valdese: *L'Armenia tra storia, cultura, cibo* [Armenia, history, culture, food]. Lecture
- Rome, La Sapienza, Master: *Immigrants and Refugees, Doctorate in Sociology and Applied Social Sciences SESSA, a sua cura, L'Armenia oggi. La Repubblica armena e gli armeni*, [Armenia today. The Armenian Republic and the Armenians] 23 October 2013. International convention with the presence of colleagues from the Yerevan State University and from the Armenian community in Rome
- 25 September 2012, Yerevan, Armenia, State University, Faculty of Sociology, *Social construction of Reality: Chances and Risks for Human Communication. Relatore, with Enrico Pugliese: The Building of the Italian National Identity and the Role of Migration.*

#### Photography:

- S. Gimignano, 26-29 August 2015, Photography Exhibition. Curator (19 photos of Armin Wegner; 32 of her own, as well as those of others)
- "La critica sociologica" n.182, Estate 2012, Cover photo (of Mount Ararat and the no man's land in front of the armed border between the Republic of Armenia and Turkey); a further 8 photos of Armenia inside.