

CELEBRATING THE ZORYAN INSTITUTE

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Keghart.com Team Editorial, 20 September 2011

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The Zoryan Institute has two arms: The Institute for Contemporary Armenian Research and Documentation (established in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1982) and The Zoryan Institute of Canada (incorporated in Toronto in 1984 as a non-profit research institute). Together, the two organizations form an international academic and scholarly centre devoted to human rights studies, genocides in the 20th century, contemporary diasporas and the documentation, study, and dissemination of material related to the life of Armenians in the recent past and the present, and within the context of larger world affairs.

To accomplish its wide-ranging mission, the "institute sponsors, supports and encourages multi-disciplinary scholarly research, documentation, conferences, and publications...colloquia, seminars, lectures," according to the institute's website. Zoryan also publishes books and monographs on the above topics.

Zoryan provides its analyses to scholars, writers, journalists, film-makers, government agencies. For example, it provided research material to the Canadian government when Ottawa was considering the recognition of the Genocide of Armenians. In 1999 it provided the US House of Representatives a report to address allegations made by the Turkish ambassador in Washington that there was no genocide against Armenians.

Two years into its formation, Zoryan announced it had arrived into the big league of international

genocide research studies when it helped sponsor the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal on the Armenian Genocide in 1984. The gathering brought together some of the world's leading jurists, including Nobel Prize winners, to review the legal case for the Armenian Genocide. It also co-sponsored (1995) Problems of Genocide, a major international conference on comparative genocide. Some 30 of the world's top authorities on the Jewish Holocaust, the Armenian, Cambodian, Gypsy and Ukrainian Genocides participated.

The institute's studies of diasporas—Armenian and non-Armenian--would come as news to many Armenians. Zoryan research deals with the mass movement of peoples across continents and seeks to analyze the cultural, social, political, and economic issues that arise when different national groups emigrate and mingle with other cultures in their new homes. As part of its work on the highly-topical international trend, Zoryan co-publishes the award-winning periodical "Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies." The publication has featured the African, Armenian, Chinese, Filipino, Greek, Indian, Iranian, Italian, Jewish, and Palestinian diasporas.

Although based in Toronto and in Cambridge, Zoryan's activities are not confined by geography. Through its outreach program it has held "open university" seminars in Montreal and in New York universities. At these gatherings experts discuss their research and engage participants in debates. The aim of the program is to prepare university students to become the next generation of genocide scholars.

Perhaps the most high-profile activity of Zoryan is the annual Human Rights and Genocide Studies. Every summer specialists and students from around the world take part in the accredited university program in Toronto. Now in its 10th year, the program has 250 graduates from 20 countries, including Turkey. Recently the program received plaudits from the prestigious "Human Rights Review" in an article by Dr. Joyce Apsel. The author, a former president of the International Association of Genocide Scholars and current president of the Institute for the Study of Genocide, wrote, "Ten years is an long time and quite an accomplishment for the Zoryan Institute...It actually is quite remarkable to see the development and the added layers of richness of the course as it has evolved over the past decade."

In an August interview with "Agos" the Armenian newspaper in Istanbul, Zoryan Institute President K.M. Greg Sarkissian, summarized one of the missions of his organization with these words: "We study the forces and factors that shape the Armenian reality worldwide." 

Demonstrating that the institute is pro-active and more than a repository or data on genocides, diasporas and human rights research, in the interview Sarkissian blamed the Turkish mindset that engendered the fanaticism of Hrant Dink's killer. He said that mindset is the same mentality as that

of the Young Turks in 1915.

In his efforts to reach the Turkish government and public, Sarkissian said, "It's immensely heart-warming to see that some people in Turkish civil society have accepted the truth of 1915 and are sympathetic to the painful experiences of the Armenians."

He went on to say, "An apology campaign is very much appreciated, and I hope that someday, the whole of Turkish society may be sensitized to come together on April 24 to commemorate the pain of the Armenians. However, official reconciliation will come only when the Turkish government itself comes to terms with the historic truth of 1915 and liberates its citizens from this burden."

People fighting the good fight for human rights need more people like Sarkissian and organizations like the Zoryan Institute.

Happy 30th Anniversary—in advance—to the Zoryan Institute.

