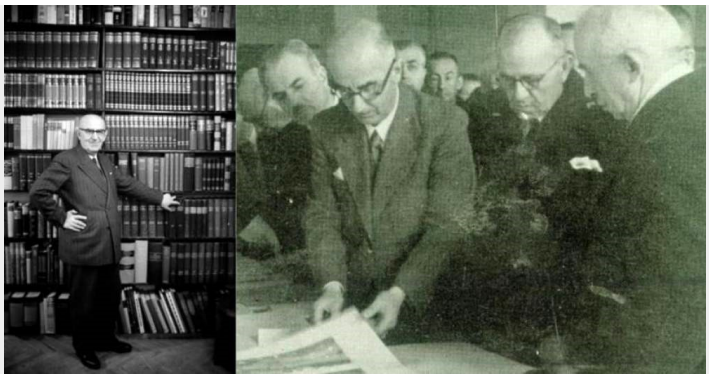
THE ARCHITECT OF MODERN TURKISH LANGUAGE

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Category: Opinions

By Margarita Krtikashyan, Yerevan, 4 November 2024

Hakob Martayan, better known as Agop Dilaçar, is an extraordinary yet often overlooked figure in the modern history of Turkey. Born into an Armenian family in 1895 in Constantinople, then part of the Ottoman Empire, Martayan was a polyglot with fluency in over twenty languages, a skill that quickly positioned him as one of the most influential linguists of his time. His life and career, intertwined with the cultural complexities between Armenians and Turks, reveal a layered and powerful story of identity, innovation, and resilience.Yet, beneath his achievements lies a narrative that underscores the enduring pain and unresolved grievances of the Armenian community, particularly in light of the Armenian Genocide and the ongoing struggles for the future of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Martayan's childhood in Constantinople unfolded against a backdrop of vibrant multiculturalism, yet this environment also concealed deep-seated tensions. His education at local Armenian schools instilled in him a rich cultural heritage, while Robert College, where he furthered his studies, served as a microcosm of the diverse society of the Ottoman Empire. However, the optimism of his early years would soon be shattered as the Armenian Genocide unfolded during World War I. The horrors faced by the Armenian community—widespread killings, forced deportations, and cultural erasure—haunted him, casting a shadow over his later accomplishments.

Following the genocide, as the Turkish Republic emerged in 1923, Martayan's linguistic skills drew the attention of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who sought to modernize Turkey and distance it from its Ottoman past. Martayan was appointed a key figure in the Turkish Language Association (TDK) in 1928, tasked with reforming the Turkish language by adopting a Latin alphabet and simplifying its structure. Martayan became instrumental in developing the new alphabet, setting grammatical rules, and even introduced the practice of adopting surnames in Turkey. He proposed the surname "Atatürk" (Father of the Turks) for Mustafa Kemal, symbolizing his role in the nation's founding. In return, Atatürk bestowed upon Martayan the surname "Dilâçar," meaning "language opener," honoring his indispensable role in the linguistic revolution.

However, it is crucial to contextualize Martayan's contributions within the broader historical narrative of Armenian suffering and resistance. While he made strides in Turkish linguistics, his work occurred against the backdrop of a state that systematically denied the Armenian Genocide. This denial has been a cornerstone of Turkish policy, creating a chasm between the two nations that remains unbridged today. The romanticization of Martayan's story often overlooks this fundamental reality—the myth of harmonious Armenian-Turkish relations fails to acknowledge the historical trauma and ongoing challenges faced by Armenians.

Martayan's career highlights the complexities of identity and loyalty, raising difficult questions for Armenians. While his linguistic achievements contributed to Turkey's modernization, they also exemplified the painful compromises faced by many Armenians living under Turkish rule. His decision to serve the Turkish state—one that had perpetrated genocide against his people—was met

with mixed reactions. Some viewed it as a betrayal of his heritage, a painful reminder of the sacrifices that intellectuals often had to make in navigating the treacherous waters of cultural and political identity.

One of the most symbolic moments of Martayan's career occurred in 1934 during a gathering organized by Atatürk for intellectuals and officials. The event, a relaxed and convivial evening, included a request from Atatürk himself that each attendee sing a song in their native language. This was a significant and bold invitation, especially in a political climate where expressions of non-Turkish identity were frequently suppressed.

When Martayan's turn came, he surprised the audience by choosing to sing a song about the Armenian national hero Andranik Ozanian. The song, with powerful lyrics praising Andranik as an "eagle soaring over mountains," resonated with Armenian pride and honored a figure who had fought fiercely against Ottoman forces. The room fell silent as Martayan sang, and a tension filled the air—singing about Andranik, an Armenian hero considered an enemy of the Ottoman Empire, was an act of defiance and pride.

As the song concluded, the guests looked to Atatürk, expecting an immediate reaction. Instead of showing anger, Atatürk calmed the gathering, even acknowledging the Armenians' right to honor their heroes. "The Armenians are right to remember their heroes," Atatürk is said to have remarked. This story remains one of the most compelling illustrations of Martayan's complex place within Turkish society—a loyal servant of Turkish linguistic progress, yet a proud Armenian.



Today, Martayan's legacy serves as a stark reminder of the enduring conflicts that shape Armenian-Turkish relations. The ongoing tensions, particularly regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and

the continued denial of the Armenian Genocide, illustrate the deep wounds that remain unhealed. The notion of positive Armenian-Turkish relations is often seen as a myth, glossing over the historical injustices that have shaped the identities and experiences of both nations. The Armenian perspective on reconciliation emphasizes the need for acknowledgment and justice, not mere dialogue that sidesteps these fundamental issues.

The recent events surrounding the Nagorno-Karabakh Wars in 2020 and 2023 serve as a poignant reminder of the historical animosities that persist. The conflict has exacerbated the plight of Armenians and highlighted Turkey's role in supporting Azerbaijan, further complicating any narrative of reconciliation. For many Armenians, the quest for recognition of the genocide and acknowledgment of their historical suffering remains paramount in discussions of peace. The idea that a shared future can exist without confronting the past feels naive to those who bear the scars of history.

In the contemporary landscape, the Armenian community continues to advocate for recognition and justice. This struggle is not merely about the past; it is about ensuring that the lessons of history are not forgotten and that the suffering of Armenians is acknowledged. Martayan's story, while significant in the context of Turkish language reform, must not overshadow the broader narrative of Armenian resilience and resistance.

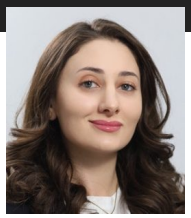
The myth of Armenian-Turkish relations as a tale of cultural exchange fails to recognize the deep historical grievances that permeate both societies. The ongoing denial of the Armenian Genocide by Turkey, coupled with the unresolved issues stemming from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, poses a significant barrier to meaningful dialogue and reconciliation.

Martayan’s life and career illuminate the complicated relationship between Armenians and Turks, a relationship deeply scarred by history but occasionally bridged by individuals like him. His work remains a testament to the power of language as a tool for both unity and division. Even today, unresolved issues of recognition and justice continue to shadow his legacy.

In his final days, Martayan reportedly reflected on the decisions and sacrifices he made. “I wasn’t thinking of the consequences,” he admitted about the night he sang the Armenian song at Atatürk’s banquet. These words capture the duality of Martayan’s experience—a man committed to his heritage, who nonetheless played a pivotal role in the very system that had once sought to erase it.

Hakob Martayan’s story endures as an emblem of resilience, intellectual brilliance, and the intricate intersections of culture, history, and identity. His life, bridging two worlds, underscores the indelible impact of the Armenian intellectual legacy within Turkish culture and serves as a testament to the strength of cultural identity even in the face of adversity. His contributions remind us that even amidst conflict, there exists the possibility of shared progress, though often fraught with the weight of the past.

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