

MUSEUMS AND MONUMENTS


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Harutyun Marutyan, Yerevan, 14 November 2014

This is an abridged version, by Jirair Tutunjian, of Mr. Marutyan's article. The author is Doctor of Sciences (History), a leading researcher at the Institute of Archeology and Ethnography at the National Academy of Sciences in Armenia, Fulbright and USHMM-CAHS Alumni. Doctor Marutyan compares and contrasts how Armenians and Jews have memorialized the Genocide and the Holocaust.-Ed. 

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The Genocide of Armenians took place in the Ottoman Empire. That is to say, within one state. The mass killings of Jews occurred mostly in Eastern Europe occupied or dominated by Nazi Germany, and also in the Soviet Union. Thus the boundaries of Holocaust directly or indirectly included 17 (now 25) European countries.

The geopolitical events that resulted in the formation of the two post-World Wars states impacted the memory policies relating to both genocides. Whereas in the case of the Holocaust there are now 17 to 25 states in Eastern and Western Europe that can run memory policies, in the case of the Genocide of the Armenians, only two states can do that: Turkey and Syria. Due to Turkey's state-sponsored policy of denial, the transference of information about massacres and mass deportations have been suppressed in Turkey. Thus the territorial and quantitative frames of the bearers of

collective memory (Genocide of the Armenians and the Jewish Holocaust) are considerably different.

Also for a part of European population (in particular the people in France and Greece) the development of collective memory about the Genocide was conditioned by contacts with *solely* the survivors – refugees. Armenians were massacred or deported during World War in an arena that was *outside* Europe. While in case of the Holocaust, World War II has been part of history of many of the European countries. This fact was certain to influence the creators of historical memory. In the first case the message was mediated by stories of refugees speaking a strange language; in the second, they and their immediate milieu were the direct bearers of the message.

Armenians Genocide survivors (500,000) settled in countries other than their motherland. The Jewish number might reach about three million. It is true that in both cases the survivors usually and for quite a long time refused to share their experiences with their descendants and other people.

Some of the Armenian survivors immigrated to Russian where after the end of World War I the first Republic of Armenia was formed. It lasted two-and-a-half years, and perished as a result of joint military attacks of Kemalist Turks and Bolshevik Russians. The Second Republic of Armenia (1920–1991) was part of the Soviet Union, and was, in most cases, devoid of any opportunity for an independent policy. Turkey – the country that had perpetrated the Genocide – had signed a friendship treaty with Russia/USSR that lasted from 1921-1925 to 1945. In 1953 the USSR declared that it had no territorial claims on Turkey.

After the establishment of Soviet power in Armenia on December 2, 1920, talk of the Genocide gradually died down and discussion of Turkish-Armenian antagonism was not encouraged. The situation started to change in the second half of the 1950s and reached its culmination on April 24, 1965 – the 50th anniversary of the Genocide, with mass demonstrations in Yerevan.

These demonstrations, along with the rapid growth of interest in the Armenian Genocide in art and literature, came to prove that the memory of the Genocide persisted in the minds and hearts of the people, despite the official policy of consigning it to oblivion. In those memories Armenians were seen solely as martyrs who had lost their land and were in need of compassion. That is, only the memory of pain, loss and victimhood was emphasized. Free circulation of the themes of the national liberation struggle, partisan heroes (*fedayees*) and independence remained under an undeclared ban. In 1965-1967 the Memorial Complex to the Martyrs of the Armenian Genocide was built in Yerevan and starting with 1975 Soviet Armenian leadership started to officially visit it, and to lay wreaths on Commemoration Day.

On November 22, 1988 the “Law on the Condemnation of the 1915 Genocide of Armenians in Ottoman Turkey” was passed in the Armenian SSR which determined April 24 as the Genocide Martyrs’ Commemoration Day. On August 23, 1990 the issue of the Genocide was included in the Armenian Declaration of Independence with the following wording: “The Republic of Armenia stands

in support of the task of achieving international recognition of the 1915 Genocide in Ottoman Turkey and Western Armenia." This was also a declaration in the foreign policy of Armenia.

Ideological Background of Genocide Museum Foundations in Successor States

Several hundred thousand Jewish survivors, who had settled in Palestine, established Israel three years after the end of World War II. In about two decades the Holocaust memory became one of the central components of Israel's national identity. The first Holocaust museum in Israel was founded by Holocaust survivors, as soon as spring 1949. In 1953 the Israeli parliament decided to determine a "[Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Day](#)." In the same year "Yad Vashem: The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority" memorial complex with accompanying museum was founded.

In the case of Armenia discussions about the Genocide started to appear 40-50 years after the start of the Genocide (1915). The first official visits of authorities to the Genocide Memorial Complex started 60 years after. The Genocide became a political factor 75 years after; and the first museum was founded only 80 years after the Genocide. In Israel only eight years after the Holocaust a law was passed to commemorate the victims yearly on state level and the first museum was founded. This naturally implies considerably different opportunities and scales of propagation. For Armenians one important reason for the delay was the absence of an independent state.

Meanwhile, the Armenian historiography began to research the Genocide issue, followed quite another route. Because of Turkish denial of the reality of the Genocide was, for decades, a major goal of the historiography of the Genocide. This led to approaching the issue as an ethnic conflict. Although in the last two to three decades, scholars have departed from this trend and relocated the Genocide of Armenians in a global and political history, there is still a strong legacy of the ethnic approach.

In contrast, the Holocaust was condemned during the Nuremberg trials (1945-1946). In September 1951 the Chancellor of West Germany addressed the Parliament, stating that Germany was willing to pay indemnity to Israel for the crimes committed by Nazis. Thus the Holocaust was recognized internationally and by the new leadership of the country most responsible for its perpetration. Scholars of the Holocaust did not need to engage in *proving its veracity*.

For several decades many researchers have emphasized that the guilt should not be placed on "Germans" (as a people) but with the SS, Nazism, fascism, racism and other equivalent ideologies. In the Armenian Genocide's case, and as far as Armenia is concerned, a series of factors have weighed on the imprisonment of the issue within an ethnic approach. Some of them are legacies of Soviet ideology and historiography. Others belong to post-Soviet geopolitical and socio-economic factors, such as: lack of access to international academic publications due to socio-economic hardships; ongoing Turkish denial unsuccessfully countered by incomplete international recognition. For these reasons, the issues of the Young Turk ultra-nationalist and racist ideology has not yet received the

same level of attention as in international scholarship.

Holocaust and Genocide Memories in the United States and Western Europe

There are 67 museums of the Holocaust. Over half of them are in Europe. The majority of the other half is in the US. Australia, Canada and South Africa host two each, and Argentina, Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Japan one each. There are four in Israel.

Why would one-third of the number of Holocaust museums be located in the United States? The reason is likely not just the existence of a large and influential Jewish Diaspora, but also because from early Jewish presence in American history up to the Cold War period. As a result the memory of the Jewish Holocaust is now officially accepted by the *world* as an important part of the international memory of struggle against evil. This is the niche that for different reasons wasn't occupied by the Armenian Genocide. Faced with the claim of the uniqueness of the Holocaust, the impression is that the Armenian Genocide was often only perceived as the first genocide of the 20th century, instead of an event connected to the world history.

The above means that we have to deal with two opposite approaches to the appreciation and propagation of the issue on the territories of implementation of the Genocide/Holocaust. And the outcome is natural: half of all the existing museums of Holocaust are in Europe; there is no Genocide museum in Turkey. There was one in Syria, at the now-destroyed Church of the Holy Martyrs in Deir ez-Zor. This gap is acutely felt by leaders of Armenia.

In the foundation and functioning of Holocaust museums, a certain part belongs undoubtedly to the Jewish factor, which has different formats in different countries. In one case the decisive factor may be the activity of the Jewish community, in another, the participation of international Jewish structures. Often the functioning of a museum is financed by the state and Jewish organizations, as well as by private benefactors. Thus a Holocaust museum, as well as a monument or a memorial complex, is an indicator of an active community.

In the case of Armenians the ideological emphasis on the Genocide has been insufficient. Thus it has not reached the same kind of commitment. As a result of Turkey's denialist policy, lobbying structures in the US and in Europe considered the pursuit of the Armenian Cause to be their main aim, and were thus more interested in gaining the recognition of the Armenian Genocide through working with political circles. Of course, numerous monuments were built through donations by Armenian communities and private benefactors. Yet these monuments, which served for annual commemorations of the Genocide martyrs on April 24, were built more for these communities and their memory rather than for the general public.

The propagating scope of a monument is usually comparatively low for the people of the given country. Information about the Armenian Genocide may be conveyed either by inscriptions on monuments, or personal contacts with Armenians, books, the media and the internet. In comparison,

the propagation scope of a museum is considerably higher than that of a monument. The information contained in a museum exhibition is much more coordinated, persistent, and is also presented in different languages. It is not just a purposeful and scientifically grounded exhibition of classified, commented, technically and artistically designed museum objects. A museum exhibition is a cultural text of a kind, a public memory system, and by way of communicating with it people with various different attitudes may reach common approaches to certain issues.

The Armenian Diaspora is the result of the Genocide, thus making the memory of that event crucially important. So it is that Armenians are expected to explain to the citizens of the countries that have received them, why and how they have come to be in their countries. So far, monuments give public information about this origin, yet not an explanation of how that history is connected to the history of the states in which they are living.

As regards museums initiatives, one attempt has so far failed in Washington; one is currently underway in Paris. A museum would require vast organizational and collecting activities, intellectual resources and museum curators' professional experience as well as the mobilization of state and community. The realization of these requirements for the purpose of spreading knowledge about the Holocaust/Genocide tells us something about the quality of the interaction between the said community, society and the state. In the case of the Armenians the absence of such realization and the ways chosen for the defense and diffusion of the Genocide memory can be explained by the original "ghettoisation" of the Armenian refugees and their slow departure from foreign immigrants up to a full-fledged American/French/ or otherwise Armenian communities. While the concept of a "community" presupposes complete integration in the political, social, economic and cultural life of a given state, the existence of not just senators and congressmen assisted by lobbyists, but of serious public figures within the government.

In addition to these factors, there's a relation between the amount of research, research centers and inclusion in education curricula devoted to the Holocaust, and the variety of means used to preserve memory and communicate about the event. The Holocaust has for a long time been firmly included in the curricula of American and European schools, and this geography has a tendency to spread.

