REMEMBRANCE DAY AND THE ARMENIANS

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Editorial, Canada, 11 November 2013

Remembrance Day has a special meaning for Armenians as they join the world in honoring all those who served in the wars of the past century. Armenians fought in the First and Second World Wars on the side of the Allies—as volunteers in the first and as part of regular forces (Red Army) in the second.

In both wars Armenians suffered horrific losses which were disproportionate to their population count. The First World War provided Axis power Ottoman Turkey with the opportunity to exterminate its Armenian citizens. On April 24, 1915, two days after the Canadian forces saw their first major action at Ypres, some 1,500 miles from that battlefield the Turks launched the genocide of their Armenian citizens, eventually killing some 1.5 million Armenians (the first genocide of the 20th century) and deporting around 500,000 from their ancestral lands to the Syrian Desert to die of hunger and the elements.

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Despite the genocide and the dispossession, Armenian volunteers from around the world headed to the Middle East to form the Armenian Legion and fight the Axis forces on the side of the Allies (Britain, France, and the U.S). The legion was part of Gen. Edmund Allenby's forces as the British army pushed north to dislodge the German-Turkish forces from Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria. At the Battle of Arara, in northern Palestine, the Armenian Legion fought valiantly and took a strategic hill from the German soldiers, a task which the British had been unable to accomplish. The Armenian dead were buried close to the battlefield and their relics were later interned at the St. Savior Church in Jerusalem, adjacent to the Armenian Quarter south of the Holy City.

In the Second World War some 500,000 Armenians (as part of the Soviet forces) joined in the fight to drive the Nazi army from Eastern Europe. Only 250,000 thousand returned alive, many of them

injured. Per capita, the Armenian death toll was one of the highest in the Soviet Union. The magnitude of Armenian dedication and heroism is particularly remarkable when one considers that Soviet Armenia had a population of a mere million and three million Armenians lived in Diaspora and other countries in Soviet Union.

In addition to fighting as part of the Red Army, many Armenians in German-occupied countries formed partisan groups to drive the Nazi forces back to Germany and to defeat.

Among the prominent Armenian military figures in the Soviet army were Marshal Ivan (Hovhannes) Bagramyan, Admiral Ivan Isakov (Hovhannes Ter-Isahakyan) and Marshal Sergei Khudyakov (Armenak Khanferiants). During the war, Armenian aircraft designer Artem Mikoyan co-invented the MiG fighter, Soviet Union's top fighter aircraft. Over 60 Armenians were promoted to the rank of general and 119 were awarded the rank of the Hero of the Soviet Union. Marshal Bagramian was the first non-Slavic officer to hold the position of Commander as he helmed the First Baltic Front in 1943.

The 89th Tamanyan Division, composed of Armenians, also distinguished itself during the war. It fought in the Battle of Berlin and was among the first to enter the city. Meanwhile, Diaspora Armenians raised funds to purchase tanks for the Sassuntsi Davit (David of Sasun) Tank Regiment. The force was also among the first to enter the Nazi capital.

Diaspora Armenians also participated in the Allied war effort in France, where Misak Manoushian, a Resistance leader, fought the German Occupation forces. He died a martyr and was honored as a hero of France and of the Allies.

Of the total 4 million world population of Armenians during both wars, more than 1,750,000 died through genocide and on the battlefield. No other nation—proportionately—lost as many of its sons and daughters in the two wars.

Referring to the Armenian soldier dead or were injured during the Second World War, Serge Sarkissian, the president of Armenia said: “Our people saved nothing for the victory.”

Armenian soldiers continue to participate in efforts to curb conflagrations around the world. In recent years they have served as peacekeepers in Afghanistan and in former Yugoslavia.