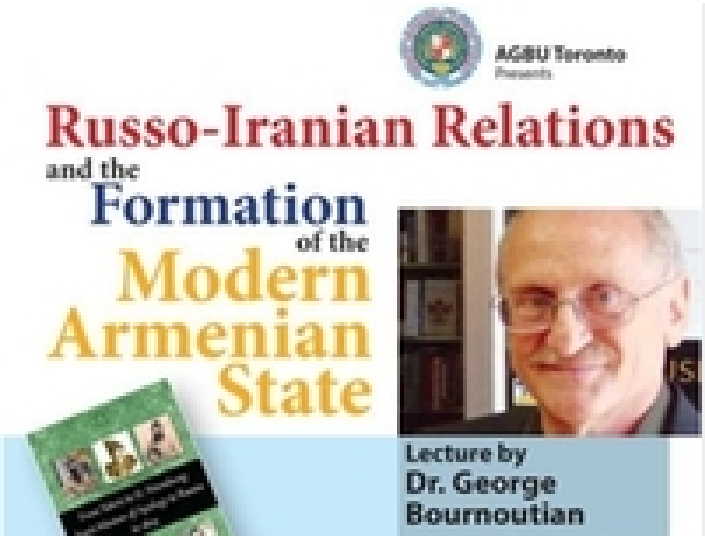
THE CREATION OF ARMENIA

Posted on May 11, 2014 by Keghart



Category: Opinions

By **Jirair Tutunjian**, Toronto, 11 May 2014

When considering Armenia's recent and somewhat reluctant alliance with Russia it's important to remember that today's Armenia is mostly a Russian creation.

Following more than a century of desperate lobbying by Armenia, tsarist Russia's army finally moved deeper into the Caucasus, in the early 19th century, and liberated most of the region from Turkic and Persian rule. What we now call modern Armenia was occupied by Russia and was named "Armenian Province". Thus for the first time, since 1375, Armenia appeared on maps as a political entity. Soon after ultranationalist and narrow-minded Tsar Nicholas I changed the region's name to "Yerevan Province", but it was now recognized that the region was Armenian, although the majority of population was non-Armenian due to foreign occupation.

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These and many other facts about the roots of modern Armenia were limned by Dr. George Bournoutian in his talk titled "Russo-Iranian Relations and the Formation of the Modern Armenian State" at AGBU's Alex Manoogian Cultural Centre in Toronto on May 9. Dr. Bournoutian is on a book tour about his recent "From Tabriz to St. Petersbourg".

Attendees at the standing-room-only event were also regaled by exciting mini-sketches of Peter the Great, Catherine the Great, the slaying of Sayat Nova, Shah Fath Ali who had 145 children, a eunuch shah, and Generals Tsitsianov and Paskievich. Attendees also took away stories about the several Russo-Persian and Russo-Turkish Wars, about the bravery of Armenian volunteers, the Karapagh meliks, the colorful Armenian, Russian, and Persian characters who were involved in the transformation of Southern Caucasus, and the several repatriations of Armenians from Persia, Ottoman Turkey and Russia.

One of the most dramatic stories Dr. Bournoutian told was that of the pro-Armenian Russian

Ambassador Alexander Griboyedov who was sent by Tsar Nicholas I, in 1829, to Persia to ratify the recent treaty between Russia and Persia. A larger-than-life character, Griboyedov was a famous playwright, poet, composer, and friend and rival of Alexander Pushkin.

One of Griboyedov's duties was to assure the return of Christian prisoners taken by the Persians during their recent war with Russia. An unexpected conflict flared up when an Armenian eunuch escaped from the harem of Fath Ali Shah and two Armenian girls escaped from the harem of the shah's son-in-law. All three sought refuge in the Russian embassy. The shah demanded that the Armenians be returned. When Griboyedov refused, Persian mobs, incited by the mullahs, attacked the Russian embassy. Griboyedov and his Cossacks put up a brave fight but were killed along with the 45-member staff. Griboyedov was 34. The Armenian eunuch was also killed. The fate of the two girls remains unknown. The young ambassador's body was taken to Tbilisi where it's buried.

Fearing a massive Russian retaliation, the shah sent a 40-man mission to Moscow, carrying fabulous gifts, including vast carpets, manuscripts, and a large diamond. With peace established between the two empires, the Yerevan Province, now largely inhabited by Armenians, became a backwater. It remained so for the next 80 years, said Dr. Bournoutian, and became important only in Soviet times. He pointed out that while there were many obvious negative aspects to Soviet rule, one should not forget that present-day Yerevan is a legacy of the Soviet Era, and that scientific and artistic life bloomed in that period as opposed to the post-independence era.