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Yves Ternon

*The
Armenian
Cause*

Caravan

THE ARMENIAN CAUSE

By YVES TERNON

**Translated from the French
by Anahid Apelian Mangouni**



CARAVAN BOOKS
Delmar, New York, 1985

A Gift to
Yerevan State University
From
The National Association
for
Armenian Studies
and
Research
(NAASR)

Belmont, MA
USA

June 2005

Originally published as *La cause arménienne*
© 1983 Editions du Seuil

Published by Caravan Books
Delmar, New York 12054-0344

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Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Ternon, Yves.

The Armenian cause.

Translation of: *La cause arménienne*.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

I. Armenians--Politics and government.

I. Title.

DS195.T4713 1985 956.6'2 84-23228

ISBN 0-88206-060-0

ISBN 0-88206-503-3 (pbk.)

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Acknowledgments

This book is largely the fruit of a long association with the Armenian diaspora. In the course of numerous talks and debates, and friendly meetings, I have tried to gain a sensitivity to Armenian matters that would permit me to organize and treat the information acquired, and at the same time (as a non-Armenian) avoid the constraints of partisan engagement.

My thanks are addressed to all those who have aided me for many years in my quest for documentary material. First, to Arpik Missakian, who through his daily newspaper *Haratch* embodies the continuity of the Armenian cause; to Serge Afanasyan, who amiably translated and summarized the principal works published in the Armenian language; to Gerard Libaridian, to whom I owe a choice of books and articles produced in the United States and inaccessible in European libraries; to the Mekhitarist fathers of the Venetian island of San Lazzaro, who shared their monastic life with me and opened their archives to me, the Bibliotheque de Documentation Internationale Contemporaine at Nanterre and the Boghos Nubar Pasha Library; to Gerard Dedeyan; to Professor Richard Hovannisian; to Ara Krikorian; Serge Samuelian; Zaven Messerlian; Anahide Ter Minassian, and Professor Khachig Tololyan.

For the orthography of the Armenian names I have transliterated the pronunciations as used in the European diaspora, except in a few instances where other spellings have been well established.

Introduction

Armenia is the great love of the Armenian people. Its mountains, its valleys, its rivers, and its monuments are the objects of a worship made even more intense in the diaspora because the ancient homeland is distant and fragmented. Its name connotes ancient glory, unwavering faith through centuries of adversity, a perpetual struggle for liberty, and fierce national pride. The homeland is the fountainhead of all life, the mystical source of ethnic identity. Armenians live with a consuming passion which is fueled by their exile and their sense of being the victims of unjust treatment.

This idealized vision of Armenia is matched in intensity by despair over its disintegration. One must look back in time in order to find the brief glory of a Great Armenia, with its princes and palaces, its numberless churches, and its fertile fields. Today, all that remains in the tragic history of the Armenian homeland is devastation. The Armenian people narrowly escaped extinction in 1915 in the genocide instigated by the Turks, whose denial of historical responsibility for it continues to the present day.

What happens when such a cataclysm shatters the dreams of a people and seems like nothing but a nightmare to the survivors? How can one deal with worldwide indifference, with blithe denials by the perpetrators, with the repeated negation of one's ancestral patrimony and ethnic identity, except by letting his long-repressed anger erupt, to the bafflement of world public opinion which could not understand such a delayed explosion. The killers of 1915 are largely unremembered today, while the victims remain alive in the memories of the survivors and their descendants. It is this memory, surcharged with frustration, which is a central factor unifying the fragments of a scattered people. The Armenian ethos is heavy with sorrow for its martyrs and because its demands for justice have gone unanswered, it has fashioned its own avengers.

Armenian patriotism has been so intense and the open wound so painful that political action was inevitable. Contemporary events have continued to engulf the Armenians. The major factors in the history of this people in the 20th century include not only the

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genocide by the Turks but also the sovietization of the eastern part of the ancient Armenian homeland. Since 1920 Armenia has been reduced to a tenth of its historical surface area, and this only vestige is a Soviet socialist republic. It is there that the Holy See of the Armenian Apostolic Church resides, and, together with the soil and the language, constitutes the essence of Armenian nationalism. From the plains of Yerevan, the Armenian people see the snow-tipped heights of Ararat, whose twin peaks have filled their legends and animated their heroes, and which now symbolize their lost heritage.

History has not been kind to the Armenians. Through the centuries, the main objective of the people has been to survive through the conflicts of great nations. Today, geopolitical factors confront them with a dilemma: they must either endure their accession by the USSR and be used to further its ideological and territorial expansion, hoping to escape the Soviet orbit eventually, or refuse to be a pawn of the Soviets and indefinitely shelve the Armenian Cause, risking the assimilation of the Armenian diaspora, a result which would relieve the Western nations of further dealing with the issue. In the present situation, there seems to be no other alternative.

Nationalistic fervor is not patient. It prefers to nurture myths and to inhale the heady atmosphere of idealism rather than to draft clear formulations. The problems of the Armenians are complex, and non-Armenians tend to see only the violent acts of terrorism which have occurred, remaining blind to their causes. Of course, one cannot exclude the hypothesis that the terrorism has been fomented by politicians who have cast idealistic young men and women as the heroes their people yearn for and by involving them in contemporary newsmaking events have sought to create the illusion of a renascent Armenia.

The interval of sixty years between the genocide and the outbreak of Armenian terrorism has not been filled with indifference for the Armenian Cause. The old Armenian Question that the Young Turks had hoped to settle with finality in 1915, has been defined in different terms since the sovietization of Russian Armenia. The USSR considers the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic as an integral part of its territory, and the Armenians there are expected to be faithful to the regime; Armenians of the diaspora are also compelled to regard it as a reference point in order to clarify their political identity. For the past sixty years Armenian political parties have been polarized into two tendencies, with the appearance of being either pro- or anti-communist, depending upon their view of Soviet Armenia, and with

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the advent of Armenian terrorism in 1975, it is important to examine their nature in order to determine the motives of each terrorist group.

The genocide has provided the soil where memory is nurtured. The flowers of despair grow there naturally, and are more radiant with each rising generation. Ephemeral plants of a very ancient people, they seek the sun in all directions and like the mirrors of a prism reflect the light to better conceal its source. Intolerance feeds on lies and political strategy exploits ambiguity and speculates on ignorance. It is the duty of the historian to disentangle the skein and isolate the thread of truth.

PART ONE

THE DOUBLE DEATH OF THE ARMENIANS

1. Biography of Armenia

The revision of history is freely sanctioned by nationalistic passions and totalitarian motives which emphasize or disregard facts as they wish. Individual and collective attitudes often are based upon distorted views of history, with as many different versions as the interests they serve.

And so it is with the Armenian Cause. It claims territories and refers to a long past of twenty-seven centuries about which its supporters and adversaries have received conflicting interpretations, making dialogue between them impossible as long as there is no basic agreement on the content of that past. Moreover, public opinion places weight upon the time interval between the actions of impatient revolutionaries and the causative events which they cite for justification of their actions. The desire to understand and to judge this phenomenon of delayed-reaction terrorism must be preceded by information which implies a knowledge of the whole story, and especially the biography of Armenia.{1}

The Mother Earth

Armenia was born in the 7th century B.C., when Phrygians from Anatolia came to the kingdom of Urartu, which was then in a constant state of war with the kingdom of Assyria. These new immigrants, the Armenians, were therefore present in 590 B.C. when Urartu fell to the Persian Medes. The deportation of the Uartians gave the Armenians the opportunity to settle and to assimilate, with some difficulty, with the survivors. This interpretation, although still controversial, has the merit of locating the population geographically and of giving it a national identity at a specific time in history.

The location, Armenia, is a high, mountainous plateau south of the Caucasus range and north of the Mesopotamian plains. It is flanked by the Anatolian plateau in the north and the Persian plateau in the south. This Armenian Plateau, like an "island-mountain," is a natural fortress: in the north the Pontic mountains separate it from the Black Sea, in the east it merges with the lower Caucasus, in the southwest the Taurus range