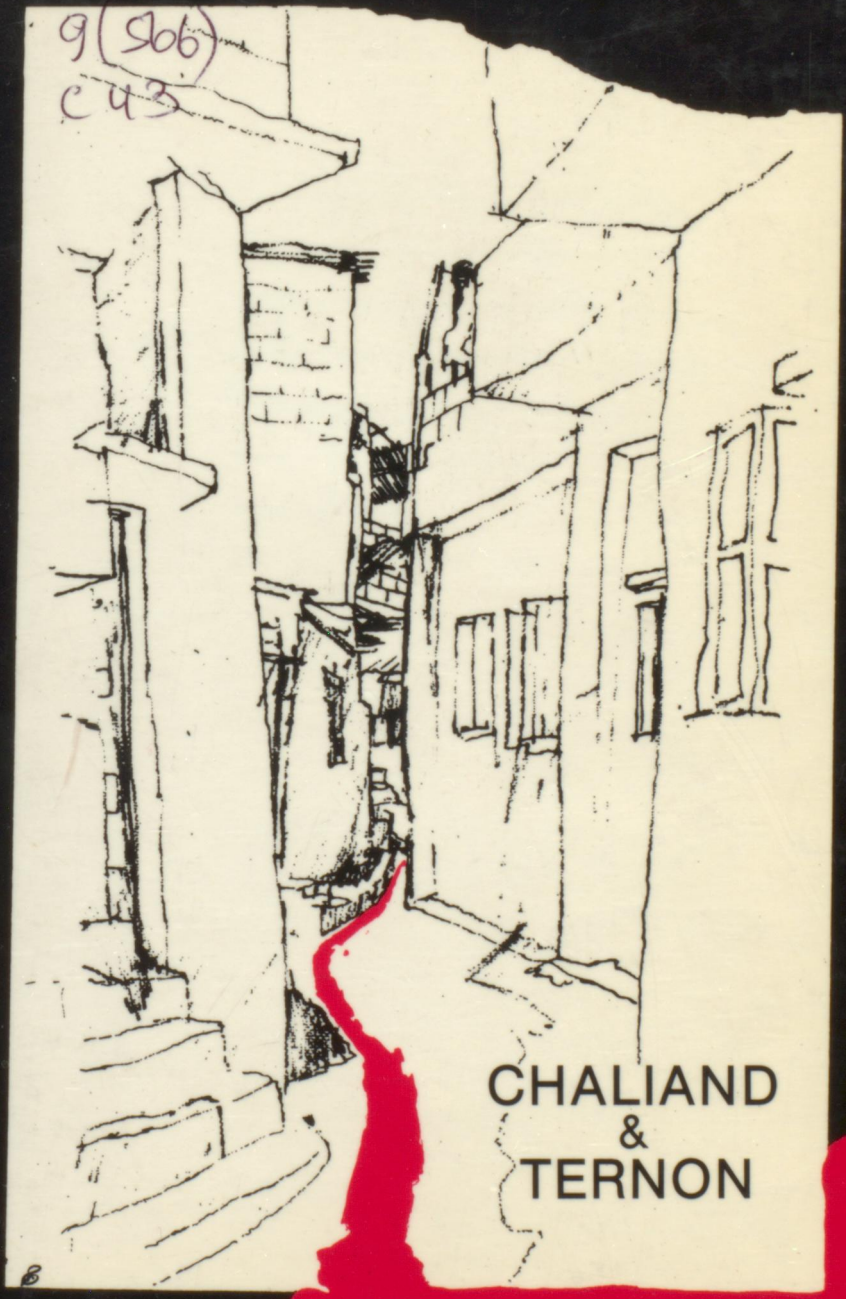
THE ARMENIANS

FROM GENOCIDE TO RESISTANCE



CHALIAND
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The Armenians: From Genocide to Resistance

Gerard Chaliand
and
Yves Ternon

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The Introduction and Part 4 were written by Gerard Chaliand; Parts 1 and 2 by Yves Ternon.

The Armenians: From Genocide to Resistance

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Introduction

Beginning in 1975, a series of attacks on Turkish diplomats all over the world drew people's attention once again to the Armenian question. Why has the first genocide of the 20th Century, which had been gradually forgotten, become, after 60 years, an integral part of current affairs?

The chronology given at the end of this book shows a large gap between 1923 and 1975. Except for articles commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Armenian genocide, on 24 April 1965, one could seek in vain in the Anglo-American or French daily press over the last 30 years for any substantial article on this subject.

Yet, as one of the major 'war crimes' of the century – along with the genocide of the Jews and the Gypsies – the physical liquidation of Armenians in 1915–17 was an immensely important event, the more so in so far as the crime has gone unrecognized. Armenians find themselves in the situation that Jews would be if the German state claimed that there had been no genocide by the nazis, during the Second World War.

But why did this violent reaction begin to show itself from 1975? It is because in itself it is the product of a long gestation and is only the most spectacular and violent manifestation of a general evolution and of a change in the *spirit of the times*.

After the genocide, the dispersal of the Armenians took them to a great number of countries. The only communities that remained where they were were those in Iran – where Armenians had been settled since the 17th Century – and Transcaucasia – mostly in Armenia but also in Georgia and Azerbaijan. The largest disposed communities settled in North America, mainly in the United States, in Canada, France, Lebanon and Syria. Other, smaller communities went to South America (Argentina and Brazil), and Eastern Europe (Bulgaria, Greece, Rumania, for example).

At first, the survivors were haunted by their trauma. There was scarcely a family that had not been directly affected. The old men and women talked endlessly of the massacres, *chart* in Armenian, the keyword in the collective memory.

In the meantime, the world was transformed. The 1930s had been the era of the great depression, of the rise of fascism and nazism and finally the Second World War.[1] The event that modified the 'psyche' of the Western

world was the discovery of the existence of nazi concentration camps where the extermination of nazi Germany's opponents and the genocide of Jews and Gypsies were carried out.[2]

The 'civilized' West discovered with shock and horror that 'inhumanity' was not the prerogative of more or less barbarous peoples, but could also occur within its own bosom. But the fact was attributed, rightly or wrongly, to the specificity of nazism and its crazy racist ideology. What had happened was significant and marked Western consciousness indelibly. Far from dying away after three or four decades, the full implications of the phenomenon became more acutely realized and henceforth part of the collective memory. This, in part, was because it was the Jewish people who had been victims of genocide, that is, it had been committed against a people amongst whom an outstanding intelligentsia existed, especially in the United States and Europe. What would have happened, after almost four decades, to the universal condemnation of the genocide perpetrated by the nazis if it had been limited to the Gypsies? What intelligentsia would have borne witness for them?

It is, moreover, interesting to note that the progressive elimination of the North American Indians in the 19th Century by a rapidly expanding industrial society only began to be perceived with a guilty conscience – and yet this was in a Protestant country – in the 1960s, a whole century later. Again, this raises the problem of the spirit of the times.

It is not really so very long ago that slavery, which is condemned today, was held to be part of the natural order of things, neither has much time elapsed since torture was legal. The relative softening of manners (in the Ottoman Empire people were being impaled until the end of the 18th Century) and the condemnation by international legislation of breaches of 'Human Rights' are only two centuries old at most, and still remain far from universal application.

The Nuremberg Trials mark an important date in the condemnation of 'crimes against humanity'. The term genocide made its appearance meaning the plan, carried out, to eliminate the whole of an ethnic, religious or social group. In a rather dated style, the United Nations General Assembly in its Resolution 96 (1) of 11 December 1946 stipulated that 'genocide is a crime under international law [which] . . . is contrary to the spirit and aims of the United Nations . . . [and] which the civilized world condemns'. In 1948, a Convention on Genocide was signed, and Turkey signed this Convention. Gradually, ideas were formed: on 26 November 1968, the United Nations adopted a Resolution on 'the non-applicability of statutory limitations to war crimes and crimes against humanity'.

But international law as it is conceived creates its own impediments. For the 1948 Convention on Genocide called on *states* to punish those responsible for committing genocide. But such a crime, given the means it involves, is committed only by states. The paradox is insoluble unless it concerns, as at Nuremberg, a *defeated* state, in the context of an *unconditional surrender*.

What is required in fact is the creation of a supranational Criminal Court,

accessible not only to states, but to non-governmental organizations and individuals, so that crimes against humanity can be effectively denounced and punished.

There are other factors working to change attitudes: our age has been marked by the appearance of problems of identity that have themselves arisen out of the national liberation movements of the 1960s. This has contributed to one unexpected, indirect effect: the rebirth of ethnic and minority movements, including in the West. Finally, never before has there been so much talk of human rights.

Such is the combination of circumstances that has gradually changed and radicalized the way in which the various Armenian communities, especially in the diaspora, look at the world and the place that they occupy in it. But, between human rights, which are essentially individual rights, and the rights of states, nothing except the goodwill of states guarantees the rights of minorities or allows them to have access to the agencies of international organizations. Until 1975 the Armenians, as a group, never got a hearing. Hardly anyone was interested in a genocide that had happened over half a century before. Memoranda sent by Armenian political organizations to the United Nations were simply pigeon-holed.

It was not only the spirit of the times that caused changes. There were also more concrete changes revealing that the genocide of the Armenians remains a live issue, while the Turkish state continues, obstinately, to deny the facts and to crush any attempt to have the truth divulged. In 1971, the UN Human Rights Commission appointed an expert to draw up a report on 'the prevention and repression of the crime of genocide'. On 16 September 1973, this report was presented to the 'sub-commission on the struggle against discriminatory measures and for the protection of minorities', and was adopted and published.

Paragraph 30 of the report read as follows:

> Passing to the modern era, one may note the existence of relatively full documentations dealing with the massacre of Armenians, which has been described as the 'first genocide of the twentieth century' . . . .

In March 1974, the report was presented to the Human Rights Commission, to be adopted by the representatives of states. The representative of Turkey, supported by other representatives, asked that paragraph 30 be deleted. The report was sent back to the sub-commission. In September 1978, the final document was presented to the sub-commission; paragraph 30 was not mentioned; Turkey, for the first time, was a member of the sub-commission. The Special Rapporteur stated that he had no proof that the genocide of the Armenians had taken place. Two non-governmental organizations, the International Society of Human Rights and the Minority Rights Group, asked for the restoration of paragraph 30. The debate ended without a vote on this paragraph.

In 1979, the report was again presented to the Human Rights Commission,