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ARMENIAN-AMERICAN SOLDIERS AS LIBERATORS AGAINST NAZISM[1]

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Abstract

Armenian-American soldiers during World War II joined the military largely for the same reasons, as other ethnic Americans at the time, to prove they were just as patriotic as any other American and to erase the derogatory "foreigner" label that had been applied to them by the larger society even though most were born in the United States. However, they were different than most other ethnic American soldiers in that they were the offspring of genocide survivors. Although they did not initially make the connection between the extreme nationalism of the Committee of Union and Progress of the Ottoman Empire that perpetrated the Armenian Genocide and the ideology of Nazism, their wartime experiences, both at home and in Europe, made this connection for them. The highly stressful and emotionally-charged experience of leaving home, with their survivor parents in a very distraught state, made them much more conscious of the genocidal experience. And once these soldiers reached Europe and engaged in the fighting, they saw first-hand what such an evil ideology did to the peoples of that continent. Seeing the effects of the Nazi ideology not only against Jews who were murdered in great numbers in the concentration camps but against fellow Armenians who were brought to Germany as slave laborers and prisoners made them understand that the fight against Nazism was indeed a noble cause and worth all of their sacrifices. From these experiences, some of them indeed saw similarities between what the Armenians had been subjected to in World War I and what the peoples of occupied Europe had just experienced in World War II. The wartime experiences also enhanced their sense of responsibility toward fellow Armenians in need, something they knew their parents would be proud of.

Keywords: Armenian Genocide, World War II, survivors, identity, ideology, prisoners, concentration camps.

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Introduction

World War II brought Americans of all races and ethnic groups into the struggle against the Axis powers made up of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and Imperial Japan. About 16 million Americans served in the armed forces, while millions of others worked in the defense industries. Of this large cohort were Armenian-Americans. Although the figures concerning the number of this ethnic group are not precise, it is estimated that out of an Armenian-American population of approximately 200,000 in the early to mid-1940s, about 18,500 of them served in US military.[2] Most of these servicemen (and some servicewomen) were born in the early 1920s as offspring of Armenian Genocide survivors. However, research on these veterans has also revealed that many of them were child survivors of the Genocide[3] who arrived in the United States in the years 1919 to 1924. These soldiers' experiences as liberators against Nazism is the subject of this paper based on personal interviews, research in Armenian-American newspapers of the 1940s, and stories in book anthologies of Armenian-American veterans of World War II.

Motivations and the experience of leaving home

Like most Americans, most of these Armenian-American service members volunteered or were willingly drafted for the same reason as millions of other young American citizens. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941 and the German declaration of war against the United States shortly thereafter, a great patriotic wave swept through the United States, and young men and women were eager to defend their country. There were other motivations as well—young Armenian-Americans, like those of other ethnic groups such as Italian-Americans, also wanted to erase of the stigma of being a "foreigner" in the eyes of many Anglo-Saxon Americans even though they were born in the United States.[4] They saw the war as a way to prove they were just as "American" as anyone else. Some Armenian-American veterans whom I interviewed said they were "gung-ho," an expression from the time that described someone who

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[2] James H. Tashjian, *The Armenian American in World War II* (Boston: Hairenik Association, 1952), viii.
[3] Ibid. See also *Armenian-American Veterans of World War* II [also known by the cover title, Our Boys] (New York: Armenian General Benevolent Union, 1951).
[4] The famous Armenian-American writer William Saroyan even wrote about this stigma in one of his short stories. See William Saroyan, "The Foreigner*," Armenian Review* I, no. 2 (1948): 17-22. Several documentaries about the Italian-American experience in the 20th Century also noted this "foreigner" label that was applied to the American-born generation of that ethnic group as well. See: https://www.pbs.org/show/italian-americans/.

was "all in" to fight against America's enemies.[5] As one Armenian-American from this generation from Providence, Rhode Island observed: "A swelling of new nationalistic American pride encompassed the Armenian Community [as they honored their returning veterans]. This first American-born generation became secure as they entered civilian life as American veterans. They…[were] no longer concerned about being foreign."[6]

But the war was a very traumatic event for the Armenian-American community, particularly for the genocide survivors. As this same observer from Rhode Island noted, the Armenian-American soldiers were "the first off-spring from the families of immigrant genocide survivors. It should be remembered that it was only twenty years or so from the time their fathers and mothers arrived as survivors of the genocide that they sent off their first born to fight a war for their new country. It was traumatic for many to fathom this new crisis after having lived through their own war experiences that had devastated their lives."[7]

Armenian parents of the survivor generation understandably were not as "gung-ho" as their sons (and there were some cryptic comments in the Armenian-American newspapers at the time from younger members of the community about their parents "not having the proper attitude").[8] After witnessing so many deaths of family members during the genocide, the survivor generation understandably had a difficult time sending their sons off to war where they possibly could be killed. A story that was passed down to this author from an older relative was that there was an Armenian man on the draft board of Watertown, Massachusetts (home to a substantial number of Armenians) and this man "caught holy hell" from Armenian mothers whose sons had just received a draft notice.[9]

But many Armenian survivor parents put on a brave face and realized that their sons had to serve their adopted country, as did millions of other families in the United States. One Armenian American soldier from Fresno, California said: "My parents were heartbroken about

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[5] This "gung-ho" comment was expressed to me by several Armenian-American World War II veterans at a conference at the University of California, Los Angeles, March 17, 2007," where I gave a paper on Armenian-American soldiers stationed in India during World War II. In addition, Varoujan Karentz from the Providence, Rhode Island, Armenian community wrote: "As the war escalated, more young men entered the armed forces, and there was an unbelievable period when they were joining up one after another." See Varoujan Karentz, *Mitchnapert (The Citadel): A history of the Armenians of Rhode Island* (New York and Lincoln, NE: iUniverse Press, 2004), 185.
[6] Karentz, *Mitchnapert*, 298.
[7] Ibid., 296.
[8] Such comments were aired in some issues of the *Hairenik Weekly* in 1941 and 1942.
[9] Phone Interview with Aram (Sonny) Gavoor, 10 August 2012. Gavoor had grown up in Watertown, Massachusetts.

my receiving my induction (draft) notice, but they were patriotic and knew I had to go and so they held up well."[10]

One story that was passed down to me was an episode at my grandparents' home in Medford, Massachusetts. My grandmother (a genocide survivor) was having several Armenian women, including her sister-in-law, over to lunch one day during the war, and her sister-in-law was in a fraught state because her son had just received his draft notice. She kept repeating the phrase, "chojokh-e, chojokh-e," a mixed Turkish-Armenian phrase meaning "he is just a child." Later, after the guests returned home, my grandmother called her on the phone to admonish her for acting this way, emphasizing that many of the women who were at the lunch had two or three sons already serving in the military and they were stoically keeping their emotions to themselves, but her sister-in-law's outbursts had upset them all (my grandmother's son, my uncle—the sister-in-law's nephew--was already serving in the US Army Air Corps in the Pacific theatre at this time).[11]

Nonetheless, this research demonstrated that the act of leaving home for the military was a highly traumatic event for Armenian-American families, as emotions ran high as the horrible experience of the genocide inflicted on the Armenians resurfaced, making these young soldiers much more conscious of what their parents had gone through a generation earlier.[12] Many Armenian survivor parents had attempted to shield their children from the horrors of the genocide as much as they could, but when the United States entered the war, and young men were being called up to serve, many of these parents' horrific memories came to the surface.

My mother recalled that the day her brother (my uncle) was scheduled to report for military service was a highly painful and an emotionally-draining day for the entire family as he getting ready to leave home. When my uncle surprised everyone later that evening by returning home because there was a mistake in his papers and he was told to report to the military the next week, the family was of course happy to see him but then dreaded the prospect of going through another emotionally-draining day again.[13] Such traumatic scenes were typical in many Armenian-American households. My aunt, in a letter written to her uncle (he was a child survivor of the genocide who would soon be joining the US Army) in April 1943, recalled that

[10] As quoted in Richard Demirjian, *Triumph and Glory: Armenian World War II Heroes* (Moraga: CA: Ararat Heritage Publishing Co, 1996), 260.
[11] Interview with Helen Baronian, Falmouth, Massachusetts, 17 February 2009.
[12] Interview with Ralph Talanian, Milton, Massachusetts, 31 March 2005.
[13] Interview with Stella Baronian Aftandilian, Vienna, Virginia, 4 December 2004.

her social life as a teenager consisted of going to the movies and attending "farewell parties" for Armenian-American boys going into the military service. She wrote: "I don't think I could stand another one [of these farewell parties]. They are *so sad* [emphasis added], when really everyone [in our age group] should be enjoying himself."[14]

Revealingly, two Armenian-American veterans (one of whom was a navigator on bombers and flew many dangerous missions over Germany) broke down in tears to me, not of their wartime experiences of seeing their comrades die, but of leaving home and witnessing their mothers chasing after their troop train or troop bus as it was leaving the station.[15] Of course, sad farewells were common in most American families at the time, but given the Armenian experience of genocide, it was undoubtedly even more stressful for Armenian parents and the siblings of the service members.

Although most Armenian-American service members joined the war effort for the same reasons as those in the broader American population, some, who were more politically conscious, did so out of the belief that Nazism was an evil ideology that had to be defeated,[16] similar to the attitude of most Jewish-American soldiers.[17] Whether these Armenian-American soldiers tied this strong anti-Nazi attitude to what their own parents had experienced in Ottoman Turkey may not have been front and center in their minds when they joined the military, but once they landed in Europe it became clearer to them what they were fighting against, and some of them indeed made this comparison as the testimonies of some of these veterans will show.

Profound Experiences in Europe

For many Armenian-American soldiers serving in the European theatre of war, their first baptism under fire was in France during and soon after the Normandy invasion. The sheer destruction, deaths and severe hardships they witnessed first-hand brought home to them the experiences that their own parents must have gone through. Max Boudakian, who fought in France and Germany, stated many years after the war: "as an 18-19 year-old, I was fortunate to count on the

[14] Letter from Helen Baronian to Her Uncle, Rouben Gavoor, 24 April 1943, from the author's private collection.
[15] Interview with Haig Tashjian, Laguna Niguel, CA, 18 April 2006; Interview with Vahan Aghajanian, Tewksbury, Massachusetts, February 7, 2007.
[16] During my interviews with three Armenian-American veterans in Fresno, California, 13 April 2006, one of them expressed strong political and ideological reasons for fighting in the war.
[17] For the motivations and experiences of Jewish-American veterans who fought in World War II, see Deborah Dash Moore, *GI Jews. How World War II Changed a Generation* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2004).

tremendous resources of the US military. In my mother's case [she was a genocide survivor], there was no support system to protect her."[18]

Ashod Jelalian of Cambridge, Massachusetts, who was a US Army photographer, saw French citizens in Normandy, France rummaging through the garbage of the American soldiers in search of food. Recalling this scene many decades later, he got very emotional and said: "Those people [meaning the French citizens] really had it rough," referring to their lives under Nazi occupation. He also recalled giving one very hungry Frenchman his own GI food rations.[19] While in Normandy, Jelalian also photographed a Jewish religious service attended by Jewish-American soldiers shortly after the area's liberation.[20] In the backdrop of this photo are two large German swastika flags. One is initially disoriented by viewing this photo but keeping the Nazi flags in place was likely these soldiers' way of saying to the Nazis that "you haven't killed us all and that your demise will arrive soon." Jelalian, perhaps because of his Armenian background, wanted to capture this moment. He later went on to photograph the dead and the barely living emaciated bodies of the concentration camps victims in Germany, which also had a profound effect on him. Many of these photographs are now part of the collection of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

Interestingly, because there was a large Armenian community in France, many of these Armenian-American soldiers encountered fellow ethnic Armenians in that country. Usually, they would find them by seeing an Armenian name on a store as the US Army was going through towns and villages. After greeting each other in Armenian, the French-Armenian would invite such soldiers into their homes for a meal even though they barely had enough food to eat for themselves. Usually in these cases, the Armenian-American soldier would offer his GI food rations to his French-Armenian new acquaintance.[21]

After the liberation of Paris, two of such soldiers went to the Armenian Church in that city and, by chance, stumbled upon a baby's baptism ceremony. When the two entered the church, the ceremony stopped and the parishioners wondered why these two American soldiers had come by. When they realized these soldiers were of Armenian heritage, the parents of the

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[18] Max Boudakian's story and direct quotes are in Richard Demirjian, *The Faces of Courage. Armenian World War II, Korea, and Vietnam Heroes* (Moraga, CA: Ararat Heritage Publishing Co., 2003), 226-246.
[19] Interview with Ashod Jelalian, Vienna, Virginia, 22 May 2002.
[20] This photo can be accessed by going to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum website, https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1175481.
[21] See the story of Charles Shenloogian in Demirjian, *Triumph and Glory*, 427.

child insisted they should be the baby's godfathers. Respectfully declining this kind offer (they said there was plenty of fighting ahead and they could possibly be killed in the coming months) they then agreed to be "honorary" godfathers to the baby and stayed on for the ceremonial meal which reminded them of the Armenian food that they missed from home.[22] Other Armenian-American soldiers also had the opportunity in France to look up relatives in such cities as Marseille or Paris either after the liberation of France or soon after the war in Europe ended.[23]

But some Armenian-American soldiers, outside of these more pleasant encounters, also interacted militarily with French Armenians who were involved in the resistance movement. Homer Lafian of Michigan, who parachuted into Normandy with the famous 82nd Airborne Division the evening right before D-Day, fought all the way through France and Germany from June 1944 to the end of the war, losing many of his comrades. In late 1944, he later recalled, his division's intelligence section had made contact with a French-Armenian "by the name of Mooradian or Manoushian" who told him in Armenian that he was a member of the French Communist party and was active in the French Underground for some time. Lafian, for unspecified reasons, was unsure at first of this man's resistance background, but agreed to help him nevertheless. In Lafian's words:

> He wanted 12 men to go into the Ardennes Mountain area with him. He said the Germans had a large supply of fuel hidden in the mountains and he wanted to blow it up with demolitions. So twelve of our paratroopers volunteered to go up into the mountains on patrol to find the fuel depot and to try to blow it up. Since he was demolitions expert, he needed help to do so. We were told this was a highly secret mission and that we were not going to be dressed as GIs because of the nature of the mission…Finally we went up the mountain with him. He had all kinds of demolitions stashed away. Where he got it, I don't know, but I speculate that some of it was smuggled from the Soviet Union through the French Communist Underground. He knew what his goals were and, and he said he wished to contribute to the cause of the Allies by blowing up this vast fuel depot. We helped him carry all of the explosives into position and helped wire them up. We were up in that mountain a good day and a half setting up the explosives without detection. This French-Armenian set it up in such a fashion

[22] Phone interview with George Ovigian, 7 February 2010.
[23] See, for example, the letter from Private Nazar Manoogian, "Soldier Meets Relatives in Marseilles," *Armenian Mirror-Spectator*, 20 January 1945.

> that he blew the whole side of the mountain up where the fuel was stored. He had speculated that the Germans had secretly stored this fuel as a backup supply in their retreat for a possible future counteroffensive. After the successful conclusion of this operation, all 12 of us returned to our unit.[24]

Soon after this secret operation, Hitler launched the surprise German offensive in the Ardennes known as the Battle of the Bulge, and Lafian found himself in the midst of it, fighting in the besieged Belgian town of Bastogne surrounded by German troops. That the lack of fuel was one of the reasons this large offensive did not succeed in reaching all the way to Antwerp, as was envisioned,[25] may have been partially the result of the secret operation that this French-Armenian Communist resistance fighter and his Armenian-American soldier partner undertook.

While in Belgium, Lafian and his fellow members of the 82nd Airborne came across the massacre of American prisoners of war (POWs) in Malmedy, perpetrated by a Nazi SS unit. Lafian and many other American soldiers became so incensed at this scene that he and others vowed not to take any German prisoners alive and had to be calmed down by his superior officers.[26]

Another Armenian-American, Lieutenant Dickran Hovsepian, a US Army intelligence officer, wrote that he met many Armenians throughout the European continent, including Soviet Armenian soldiers at the end of the war with whom he shared a special bond. Reflecting on his time in France, he also noted that "many of our [Armenian] people in France worked actively in the Underground—their lives not worth [a 5-centime piece] if they were ever caught."[27]

Liberating the Concentration Camps

One of the most noteworthy and gut-wrenching experiences for Armenian-American soldiers as they entered Germany and Austria was taking part in the liberation of the concentration camps. Lafian and his comrades did so at Bergen-Belsen, where he said the stench of the dead was overwhelming. In his words: "It was so bad, we all started throwing up. It was very hard to take,

[24] Homer Lafian's story and direct quotes are in Demirjian, *Triumph and Glory*, 381-389.
[25] US Army, "Battle of the Bulge Ends: January 25, 1945."
https://www.army.mil/article/15949/battle_of_the_bulge_ends_25_january_1945.
[26] See Lafian's story.
[27] Letter from Dickran Hovsepian, dated October 9, 1945, and printed in the *Armenian Mirror-Spectator*, 3 November 1945.

seeing all of those bodies lying there, melting, bloated up and many in a skeletal mess… I could see many of the bodies on the ground that their skin was removed."[28]

Another Armenian-American soldier, unbeknownst to Lafian, who liberated Bergen-Belsen, was Fred Randolph (his Armenian last name was Anglicized). Randolph mentioned to me many years ago that when his unit entered Bergen-Belsen and came across these scenes and other victims of grotesque medical experiments, they were so incensed that they rounded up the Nazi doctors at the camp, put them up against a wall, and shot all of them. That Randolph's military superiors were also so repulsed by what they saw that no punitive action was taken against these American soldiers, including Randolph, who participated in these executions.[29]

Later, at the end of war, Lafian served as one of General Dwight Eisenhower's bodyguards and even attended the Nuremburg Trials of Nazi war criminals before being discharged in 1946. Looking back at his experiences, he expressed pride serving in the war as an Armenian-American soldier. He added: "Our numbers were small in America. We were maybe 200,000 in the US population. I would say per capita that there were more Armenian-Americans in the military service than any other nationality. We distinguished ourselves for our country."[30] This comment was similar to an article penned during the war by Private Berj Hoogasian who wrote from an Allied military camp in Italy about an impromptu gathering of 10 Armenians (9 from the US Army and one from the Canadian Army): "we are resolved that although our numbers may be few, our courage and patriotism will be high and that our families and our country will be proud of our achievements."[31]

Other Armenian-American soldiers who liberated the concentration camps felt a direct connection between what they witnessed and the genocidal ordeals experienced by their Armenian parents. Walter Basmajian of Massena, New York, wrote to his parents the following letter toward the end of the war:

> I wouldn't believe this [stories of utmost cruelty] had I not seen all this and more. I wouldn't believe that such people could live upon the earth if I hadn't seen the bodies alongside the roadsides and the ones found at

[28] See Lafian's story. See also "Soldier Describes Horror Scenes of Concentration Camp," *Armenian Mirror-Spectator*, 28 July 1945.
[29] Randolph mentioned this episode to me when he was visiting my relatives in Medford, Massachusetts when I was a high school student in May 1975.
[30] See Lafian's story.
[31] Letter from Private Berj Hoogasian, published in *Hairenik Weekly*, 22 March 1944.

> concentration camps. I couldn't tell you about this before but now it will be revealed to the world and will shock everyone. These [Nazi SS men] aren't people. They are monsters and I guess I can't write about this and tell it decently, because it isn't a decent thing to tell. *You have never seen such hellholes of torture, bodies tortured and destroyed beyond recognition. I keep remembering that this is what the Turks did to the Armenians, only the Armenians never had a chance to let the world know; actually nobody cared or probably wouldn't believe them. Now I know, because I have seen this* [emphasis added].[32]

Ralph Talanian of Boston, Massachusetts, who was part of General George Patton's 3rd Army sweeping through southern Germany and Austria, at one point had the gruesome task of burying murdered Jews from several smaller concentration camps that had been dumped on the side of a road. In one instance, he noticed a captured German SS officer standing nearby. When he ordered this officer to do the same job, the German responded smugly in perfect English that, "under the Geneva Convention, officers who are prisoners of war are not required to do manual labor." Talanian became so incensed that he took out his pistol, put it under the German officer's chin, and said in a very stern voice. "I am Armenian, I am Armenian, do you understand? You start digging now!" The officer, understanding what this phrase meant (many German officers were assigned to the Ottoman Turkish army during World War I), became visibly scared at Talanian's threat and immediately started to do this "manual" work.[33]

After he came home from the war, Talanian told his parents (both genocide survivors from Kharbert) about the atrocities he witnessed against the Jews. His parents became so visibly distraught and upset at these stories of what he saw and experienced first-hand that he stopped talking about them.[34]

As part of the liberation of Dachau concentration camp, Burt Martinson (his Armenian last name was Anglicized) described the "incredible macabre sight across the road where a train of open box cars was strewn, literally dripping with hundreds of skin-stretched skeletons that arrived at Dachau the night before the Americans from Buchenwald [arrived]." He added that he "talked to many men in three languages, and almost had to fight off their affections and perhaps,

[32] Letter from Walter Basmajian published in Hairenik Weekly, 28 June 1945.
[33] Interview with Ralph Talanian, 31 March 2025.
[34] Ibid.

infection—and it was hard to keep from bawling (crying), particularly at a little Polish Jewish boy of 15 who answered all of our questions with great poise, in good English."[35]

Sergeant Harry Garabedian from Detroit, in a letter to his friend, another Armenian-American by the name of Karl Couyoumjian, was so shocked by what he witnessed at the concentration camps that he wrote the following: "I'm telling you Karl, the Germans in this war have far surpassed what the Turks did during the last war…some of their doings are unbelievable and far more ghastly than the human mind can imagine. I don't know of any punishment that can be meted out to them to make restitution for their crimes."[36]

Armenian-American soldiers also played a role in liberating slave labor and prisoner of war camps of citizens of the Soviet Union from different nationalities, including many Armenians. One soldier, Henry Bashjian, who was with the 8th Infantry Division of the US Army was part of the liberation of one of these slave labor camps. He recalled: "As we were liberating this one camp, we busted the locks and as people came running out of the gate I was yelling, 'Hos Hye ga?' (are there Armenians here?) when all of a sudden one of these fellows in stripe uniform stopped and responded, 'Yes Hye em' (I am Armenian). I was surprised, he was surprised. There was a lot of screaming and happiness."[37]

Walter Basmajian also took part in the liberation of one of these camps. He wrote to his parents in the last weeks of the war:

> Ever since I have been overseas I've been looking for Armenians constantly. I never thought I'd have any luck, but I kept asking just the same. Anyway, we liberated quite a large group of Russian prisoners at this one camp and [asking whether there were any Armenians there], one of the Russians came running out of the building with three men who were Armenians…They were between the ages of 48-50 and about the happiest three people I had seen. They were so happy to meet me, I guess they never expected to see an American soldier of Armenian heritage and I guess they couldn't get over it. Neither could I. They shook hands with me and hugged me and there were tears in their eyes and they were so moved they could hardly talk. I felt pretty emotional myself…They said that despite everything, they were the lucky ones. That thousands had died of starvation, or had been tortured to death. They said that

[35] Letter from Burt Martinson, published by the *Armenian Mirror-Spectator*, 11 August 1945.
[36] Letter from Sergeant Harry Garabedian to Karl Couyoumjian, as printed in the Armenian Mirror-Spectator, 4 August 1945.
[37] As quoted in Demirjian, *Triumph and Glory*, 255.

> for three years they had lived only by a sheer will to survive. They had been without food and clothing for days. They were pitifully thin and haggard looking…They called their Russian friends and proudly told them I was Armenian.[38]

Ralph Talanian, at the end of the war, was assigned to a joint American-Soviet unit at a camp in Steyr, Austria to help process through liberated slave laborers. When a Russian colonel noticed that he was of Armenian heritage, he asked Talanian for help with several hundred Armenians "whom he couldn't talk to." Walking down a field where these Armenians were gathered, Talanian, only 20 years old at the time, appeared as a kind of God to them. When he spoke to them in Armenian and asked what they needed, they told him they did not have enough food. Talanian, in response, befriended a sympathetic Russian army sergeant who told him that the Soviets were hoarding Red Cross supplies in a nearby warehouse. The two got a hold of a truck, filled it with supplies from the warehouse, and then Talanian distributed the food to these destitute Armenians. Talanian also was put in charge of getting these people de-loused, as lice on bodies was a common affliction of nearly all prisoners. The Armenians in this group were ashamed to take their clothes off for this purpose but Talanian put them at ease by first asking them to write letters in Armenian so he could send them to his father in Boston. This strategy seemed to have worked because, after writing such letters, they felt more comfortable in going through the de-lousing process.[39]

What These Experiences Meant to Armenian-Armenian Soldiers

Although most Armenian-American soldiers did not initially join the military out of the conviction that they wanted to fight against an evil ideology (Nazism) that was similar to the ideology of the Committee on Union and Progress (CUP), the party in charge of the Ottoman Empire in 1915 that had perpetrated the Armenian Genocide, their wartime experiences, both at home and in Europe, made this connection for them. The highly stressful and emotionally-charged experience of leaving home, with their survivor parents in a very distraught state, made

[38] Letter from Walter Basmajian, dated 19 April 1945, from "somewhere in Germany," published *in Hairenik Weekly*, 28 June 1945.
[39] Interview with Ralph Talanian.

them much more conscious of the genocidal experience. And once these soldiers got to Europe and engaged in the fighting, they saw first-hand what such an evil ideology did to the peoples of that continent. Seeing the effects of the Nazi ideology not only against Jews who were murdered in great numbers but against fellow Armenians who were brought to Germany as slave laborers and prisoners made them understand that the fight against Nazism was indeed a noble cause and worth all of their sacrifices. From these experiences, some of them indeed saw similarities between what the Armenians had been subjected to in World War I and what the peoples of occupied Europe had just experienced in World War II. The wartime experiences also enhanced their sense of responsibility toward fellow Armenians in need, something they knew their parents would be proud of.

Interestingly, the sisters of these soldiers were also impacted by the war in ways that are not readily apparent. Besides those who joined the military services, Armenian-American young women had to be caretakers at home for their anxious parents, reassuring them that their brothers would be safe, and comforting them if they received a "missing-in-action" or even a death notice telegram from the War Department. These young women would also be interpreters of letters from their brothers to their parents because while most young Armenian-American soldiers could speak Armenian (the language spoken at home), only a fraction of them could write in Armenian, and their parents were often not educated enough to read and write a letter in the English language. These young women would often verbally translate the letters into Armenian for their parents to understand and would then write letters in English to their brother or brothers from the gist of what their parents would verbally dictate to them in Armenian.[40]

That the wartime experiences affected these young women was evident by the fact that many of them, after the war, could not bear to watch documentaries on the Holocaust of the Jews in Europe because seeing the pictures of the dead and emaciated bodies reminded them of what their own parents must have gone through a generation earlier.[41]

[40] Interview with Helen Baronian. See also Karentz, *Mitchnapert*, 298
[41] Interview with Norma Kennian Mugerdichian, Needham, Massachusetts, 23 February 2013.

Conclusion

While most Armenian-American soldiers joined the military services largely for the same reasons as other Americans—to show they were as patriotic as anyone in else in America and to erase the "foreigner" stigma that was often placed on them before the war, many of them came to understand that the fight against Nazism had a greater meaning, not just because Nazi Germany was an enemy of the United States, but because Nazism represented an ideology and a cruelty that was similar to what the CUP had perpetrated against the Armenian people. These wartime experiences made these soldiers more American and more Armenian at the same time, and it is noteworthy that it was this generation that came to lead the Armenian-American community in the 1970s to advocate for Armenian Genocide recognition in the United States.[42]

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[42] For an understanding of Armenian-American activism in the 1970s, see Julien Zarifian, *The United States and the Armenian Genocide. History, Memory, Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2024), 83-89.

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