

THE ARMENIAN MODEL: THE RECOGNITION OF GENOCIDES IN FRANCE

Mathieu Soula

University of Paris Nanterre, Paris, France

L’Institut universitaire de France (IUF)

Abstract

This contribution examines how the Armenian Genocide was officially recognized in France and explores the consequences of this recognition. Drawing on draft laws, parliamentary motions, enacted legislation, and presidential speeches, we analyze the political and legal dynamics that shaped this process. Our findings suggest that the French recognition of the Armenian Genocide exerted a significant influence on subsequent recognitions of other genocides, helping to usher in a broader era conducive to formal acknowledgment of mass atrocities.

Keywords: Armenian Genocide; French politics; recognition; symbolic justice

This article was submitted on 24.02.2024 and accepted for publication on 19.05.2025.

How to cite: Mathieu Soula, “The Armenian Model: The Recognition of Genocides in France,” *International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies* 10, no. 2 (2025): 103-124.

Introduction

Since the 1980s, France has officially recognized eight genocides through a combination of parliamentary legislation, resolutions adopted by the National Assembly or the Senate, and official presidential statements.¹ These recognitions include: President Jacques Chirac's speech of 16 July 1995 acknowledging France's responsibility in the genocide of the Jews;² Law 2001-70 of 29 January 2001 recognizing the Armenian Genocide;³ President François Hollande's speech of 29 October 2016 acknowledging France's responsibility in the deportation and extermination of the Roma;⁴ the Senate resolution of 6 December 2016 recognizing the genocide of the Yazidis; President Emmanuel Macron's speech of 27 May 2021 recognizing France's political responsibility in the genocide of the Tutsi;⁵ the National Assembly resolution of 20 January 2022 recognizing the genocide of the Uyghurs; the Senate resolution of 8 February 2023 addressing the Assyro-Chaldean genocide of 1915; the National Assembly resolution of 28 March 2023 and the Senate resolution of 17 May 2023 recognizing the Holodomor; and finally, the National Assembly resolution of 29 April 2024 recognizing once again the Assyro-Chaldean genocide of 1915.

This paper seeks to examine these official acts of recognition not as isolated or contingent events, but as components of a coherent trajectory within French political and memorial culture. In this context, the 2001 parliamentary recognition of the Armenian Genocide emerges as a foundational moment, or at least as a significant precedent, that has informed France's subsequent approaches to acknowledging other genocides. By situating the Armenian case within this broader genealogy, we can more effectively reassess both the substantive meaning of its recognition and the underlying dynamics that have guided France's progressively expanding acknowledgment of genocides in the decades that followed.

1 See the table in the Appendix.

2 "Allocution de M. Jacques Chirac, Président de la République, sur la responsabilité de l'État français dans la déportation des juifs durant la deuxième guerre mondiale et sur les valeurs de liberté, de justice et de tolérance qui fondent l'identité française, Paris le 16 juillet 1995," at <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/196345-jacques-chirac-16071995-deportation-juif-deuxieme-guerre-mondiale> (accessed 13.04.2024); Hubert Strouk, *Vel d'Hiv. Histoire et portée d'un discours* (Paris: Hermann, 2025).

3 *Journal officiel de la République française (JORF)*, 30 janvier 2001, 1590; Olivier Masseret, "La reconnaissance par le Parlement français du génocide arménien de 1915," *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire* 73 (2002/1): 139-155.

4 "Déclaration de M. François Hollande, Président de la République, en hommage aux nomades internés pendant la Deuxième Guerre mondiale, à Montreuil-Bellay le 29 octobre 2016," at <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/201018-declaration-de-m-francois-hollande-president-de-la-republique-en-homm> (accessed 13.04.2024); Lise Foisneau, "Le génocide des «Nomades»: figures du déni," *L'Homme* 249, no. 1 (2024): 113-130.

5 "Discours du Président Emmanuel Macron depuis le Mémorial du génocide perpétré contre les Tutsis en 1994," at <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2021/05/27/discours-du-president-emmanuel-macron-depuis-le-memorial-du-genocide-perpetre-contre-les-tutsis-en-1994>, accessed 13.04.2024.

The official recognition of the Armenian Genocide must first be situated within a broader category that may be termed state acts of recognition. Scholarly work devoted specifically to this phenomenon remains limited and often engages only partially with its comparative or historical dimensions. By acts of recognition, we refer to the spectrum of laws, parliamentary resolutions, and official speeches through which a state acknowledges a past atrocity, whether through recognition alone, expressions of regret, formal apologies, or requests for forgiveness.⁶ Existing research tends to analyze a single crime or focus on the practice of one state, with particular emphasis on the politics of apology. Yet all these instruments share a common foundation: they entail the recognition of a crime, of perpetrators and victims, and of partial or full responsibility. In doing so, they reconfigure the state's official narrative of the past by explicitly constituting that past as a crime.⁷

This is a global phenomenon that emerged in the 1980s. A pivotal moment was President Ronald Reagan's signing of the Civil Liberties Act in 1988, which offered an official apology to Japanese Americans interned in camps in 1942 following the attack on Pearl Harbor. From the late 1980s into the early 1990s, acts of recognition proliferated worldwide in relation to colonialism, imperialism, World War II, and the genocide of the Jews.

Two intertwined contexts help explain this expanding and increasingly globalized practice. First, the end of bipolarity following the collapse of the Soviet bloc ushered in a new multilateral dynamic in international relations, reshaping interactions between former colonial powers and formerly colonized states. Second, within former empires and imperial states, a growing "imperative of memory" generated pressure for political, moral, and sometimes legal reckoning with past atrocities. This introspective turn opened both a "market" for the recognition of historical wrongs and a discursive space in which states could either validate or reject demands for acknowledgment. The phenomenon is global

⁶ Jacques Sémelin, "Les excuses d'État en politique étrangère des crimes de masse," *Raison publique. La revue des humanités politiques*, <https://raison-publique.fr/2494/>; Renaud Hourcade, "La politique des excuses. Repentir officiel et gestion stratégique de la culpabilité dans un ancien port négrier (Liverpool)," *Ethnologie française* 50 (2020/1): 19-29; Magali Bessone, *Faire justice de l'irréparable. Esclavage colonial et responsabilités contemporaines* (Paris: Vrin, L'Esprit des lois, 2019); Antoine Garapon, *Peut-on réparer l'histoire? Colonisation, esclavage, Shoah* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2006). For further discussion of the notion of recognition, see, for example, Judith Butler, Axel Honneth, Amy Allen, *Recognition and Ambivalence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021); Axel Honneth, *La reconnaissance. Histoire européenne d'une idée* (Paris: Gallimard, Essais, 2020); Axel Honneth, *La lutte pour la reconnaissance* (Paris: Gallimard, 2013); Nancy Fraser, *Qu'est-ce que la justice sociale?* (Paris: La Découverte, Poche/Sciences Humaines et sociales, 2011); Paul Ricoeur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance. Trois études* (Paris, Stock, Les Essais, 2004); Special Issue of *Revue du Mauss*, *De la reconnaissance. Don, identité et estime de soi* 23 (2004).

⁷ Loramy Gerstbauer, *U. S. Foreign Policy and the Politics of Apology* (London: Routledge, 2017); Tom Bentley, *Empires of Remorse. Narrative, Postcolonialism and Apologies for Colonial Atrocity* (London: Routledge, 2016); Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, *A Guilted Age. Apologies for the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015); Daniël Cuypers, Daniel Janssen, Jacques Haers, Barbara Seghers, *Public Apology between Ritual and Regret. Symbolic Excuses on False Pretenses or True Reconciliation out Sincere Regret?* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013); Elazar Barkan, Alexander Karn (ed.), *Taking Wrongs Seriously. Apologies and Reconciliation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); Roy L. Brooks (ed.), *When Sorry isn't Enough. The Controversy over Apologies and Reparations for Human Injustice* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

in scope, yet its forms, intensity, and political implications vary considerably from one country to another.

By the late 1990s and early 2000s, public debates increasingly addressed slavery as well as genocides and mass atrocities beyond the Holocaust.⁸ Since the mid-2010s, and even more intensely after 2020, slavery, colonialism, and the treatment of Indigenous peoples have come to dominate the production of state acts of recognition.⁹ In numerous public spheres, debates have emerged over the need to acknowledge historical wrongs and crimes, even when such discussions do not necessarily culminate in apologies or formal acts of recognition. Across North and South America, Europe, and Asia, memory activists have increasingly brought demands for recognition into the public and political arenas.

The case of genocide is particularly significant. Not only have some states acknowledged their own share of responsibility for such crimes, but many have also recognized genocides in which they did not participate. For example, Germany, Austria, France, Switzerland, Latvia, Canada, and Argentina have each acknowledged their responsibility in relation to the Holocaust. Canada, Australia, Chile, and Taiwan have recognized their roles in the treatment of Indigenous peoples, with some explicitly referring to these policies as genocide. Today, thirty-three states recognize the Armenian Genocide, and thirty states recognize the Holodomor as a genocide.¹⁰

This process should not be understood as a linear or uninterrupted evolution: acts of recognition emerge from slow-moving, complex, and often contradictory dynamics that remain inherently incomplete.¹¹ Broadly speaking, these acts concern four principal categories of crimes often intertwined: genocides and crimes against humanity; slavery; violence committed within colonial frameworks; and crimes against Indigenous peoples.

Official recognition takes place within a broader struggle against forgetting. Acts of recognition contribute to the construction of collective memory. Through recognition, the state responds to mnemonic demands: it establishes an official relationship with a past that continues to shape the present and seeks to prevent that past from being obscured or erased. In both political and public spheres, forgetting is often resisted; it tends to be understood only as the inverse of memory and thus tends to carry a predominantly negative meaning. The remembrance of a forgotten, marginalized, or reinterpreted past, one that must be revisited in light of contemporary understandings of the social and political world, is often advanced by activists and advocates who aim to render their interpretation of the past collectively shared or publicly legitimate through an official act of recognition. In this perspective, forgetting is framed as an injustice that recognition seeks to repair.

8 Mathieu Soula, “Regrets, excuses et pardons, les actes étatiques de reconnaissance,” *Revue du droit public* 2 (2024): 57-63.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 See, on October 14, 2023, in Australia, the “no” vote in the referendum aimed at recognizing the Aboriginal people in the Constitution.

The official recognition of the Armenian Genocide must also be situated within a second series: the recognition of other genocides. It is this broader series, and the global context in which it has developed, that we propose to analyze here, focusing on the case of France. A global and diachronic perspective offers a productive analytical vantage point. It complements studies focused on the recognition of a single genocide by identifying historically favorable moments for recognition, and by tracing the emergence of distinct forms or modalities of recognition. In other words, acts of recognition are historically conditioned, and the recognition of any particular genocide is embedded within the specific historical moment that enables or constrains it.

The Armenian Cause: A Long and Uncertain Struggle

The struggle for the recognition of the Armenian Genocide in France was long and marked by considerable uncertainty. As early as the beginning of the 1980s, Communist deputies and senators from cities with significant Armenian diasporic communities, such as Lyon and Marseille, introduced bills seeking the official recognition of the Armenian Genocide.¹² Yet none of these initiatives advanced: the bills were neither debated nor brought to a vote in Parliament. The political and diplomatic climate was not yet conducive to such recognition. A political consensus was lacking, and since the presidency of Charles de Gaulle, French diplomacy had consistently prioritized maintaining cordial relations with Turkey, a stance that effectively constrained any move toward officially recognizing the mass extermination of Armenians as genocide.

Nevertheless, signs of change had begun to emerge. On 7 January 1984, during a speech delivered at the Armenian Christmas celebration in the town hall of Vienne, President François Mitterrand publicly referred to the Armenian Genocide. He stated:

As for history itself, I have just said it to you: on 23 April 1981, that is to say, a few days before I was elected to the office I hold today, I declared that it is not possible to erase the trace of the genocide that struck you. It must be inscribed in human memory. This sacrifice must, for the younger and the smallest among us, serve both as a lesson and as a will to survive, so that across time one can feel that this people is rich in resources, that it does not belong to the past, that it belongs very much to the present, and that it has a future.¹³

12 Bills in the National Assembly of 16 December 1985 by Guy Ducoloné (PC); bill in the Senate of March 1986 by 21 communist deputies; bill in the Senate of 10 August 1988 by 16 communist deputies.

13 Allocution de M. François Mitterrand, Président de la République, à l'occasion du Noël des Arméniens dans la salle des fêtes de la mairie de Vienne, samedi 7 janvier 1984, at <https://www.elysee.fr/francois-mitterrand/1984/01/07/allocution-de-m-francois-mitterrand-president-de-la-republique-a-l-occasion-du-noel-des-armeniens-dans-la-salle-des-fetes-de-la-mairie-de-vienne-samedi-7-janvier-1984>, accessed 23.09.2024.

This speech, delivered by a sitting president and articulated in unequivocal terms, marked a significant shift. Although it did not immediately translate into legislative action, it signaled an emerging willingness within the highest levels of the French state to engage with the memory of the Armenian Genocide and to acknowledge its enduring historical and moral significance.

At the same time, in April 1984, the eleventh session of the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal convened in Paris to address the question of the Armenian Genocide. The tribunal issued a verdict declaring that “the extermination of the Armenian population through deportation and massacre constitutes an imprescriptible crime of genocide within the meaning of the Convention of 9 December 1948,” and found the Young Turk government guilty of committing this genocide.¹⁴

Although these gestures were symbolic, neither official nor solemn, they nonetheless revealed a gradual politicization of the Armenian cause. Advocates began to find allies within political and public spheres who were capable of transforming the demand for recognition into a legitimate political issue. This dynamic was reinforced by the European Parliament's resolution (A2-33/87) of 18 June 1987, which characterized “the tragic events which took place in 1915–1917 against the Armenians living in the territory of the Ottoman Empire” as “genocide within the meaning of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 9 December 1948.”¹⁵

This resolution was adopted in a specific context: Turkey's prospective accession to the European Union. It made recognition of the genocide by Turkish authorities a prerequisite for any possibility of accession. Thus, in the European arena, the recognition of the Armenian Genocide was closely tied both to diplomatic considerations, especially in relation to Turkey, and to the affirmation of universal values.

Following this resolution, two European parliaments proceeded to recognize the Armenian Genocide, though for distinct reasons and within different political contexts. On 26 April 1996, the Greek Parliament characterized the massacres as genocide and designated 24 April as Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day. This decision followed an earlier act of recognition: on 24 February 1994, the Greek Parliament had formally recognized the genocide of the Pontic Greeks and established 19 May as its official commemoration day. On 26 March 1998, the Belgian Senate likewise adopted a resolution recognizing the Armenian Genocide.

In France during the 1990s, as historian Henry Rousso has observed, the central preoccupation of memory politics remained the question of Vichy collaboration with Nazi Germany, most notably the role played by Philippe Pétain's government in the implementation of the Final Solution.¹⁶ After a period of political hesitation, President

14 *Le crime de silence: le génocide des Arméniens* (Paris: Flammarion, 1984).

15 “Résolution sur une solution politique de la question arménienne (18 juin 1987),” *Journal officiel des Communautés européennes* (JOCE), 20 juillet 1987, N C 190, 119-121.

16 Henry Rousso, *Le syndrome de Vichy* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987); Henry Rousso et Éric Conan, *Vichy*,

Jacques Chirac officially acknowledged France's responsibility for the deportation of Jews from France, and, by extension, its participation in the genocide of the Jews, in his landmark speech of 16 July 1995 commemorating the Vel' d'Hiv roundup.

By contrast, the issue of the Armenian Genocide entered public debate in France primarily from outside the political sphere, and most notably through the judicial arena. A major controversy erupted following an interview with historian Bernard Lewis published in *Le Monde* on 16 November 1993, in which he claimed that describing the 1915 massacres of Armenians by the Ottoman Turks as genocide constituted "only the Armenian version of this history."¹⁷ He was first prosecuted before a criminal court, but the case was dismissed because, at that time, denial of genocide was punishable in France only in relation to the Holocaust. Subsequently, he was sued in civil court, and on 21 June 1995 the Paris Tribunal de grande instance held him liable on the grounds that "a historian incurs liability towards the persons concerned [victims and victims' associations] when, through distortion or falsification, he presents as true allegations that are manifestly erroneous."¹⁸

This judgment generated intense debate, particularly within the historical profession, and played a significant role in returning the question of the Armenian Genocide to the forefront of public discussion, precisely on the eve of Jacques Chirac's landmark Vel' d'Hiv speech.¹⁹

It was only after Chirac's recognition of France's role in the Holocaust that the question of the Armenian Genocide re-emerged fully as a political issue. Between 1997 and 2000, left-wing parties introduced four bills in the National Assembly and the Senate. Ultimately, however, it was a cross-party bill presented in the Senate that succeeded in being adopted by both chambers. This became Law no. 2001-70 of 29 January 2001, whose article 1 stipulates that "France publicly recognizes the Armenian Genocide of 1915."²⁰

The Law of 29 January 2001 helped crystallize the terms of the national debate concerning the legitimacy of parliamentary recognition of a genocide. Opposition to such recognition had long been organized around two principal sets of objections, both of which were addressed, at least in part, through the adoption of the law.

The first set of concerns centered on history and freedom of expression. By designating a past crime as genocide, critics asked, was the legislature not "writing history" and thereby restricting the work of historians? Did state recognition not infringe upon freedom of expression by implicitly delegitimizing dissenting scholarly interpretations?

un passé qui ne passe pas (Paris: Fayard, 1994).

17 "Un entretien avec Bernard Lewis," *Le Monde*, 16 novembre 1996, 2.

18 Thomas Hochmann, "Les limites à la liberté de l'historien en France et en Allemagne," *Droit et société* 2 nos. 69-70 (2008): 527-548; Jean-Pierre Le Crom, "Juger l'histoire," *Droit et Société* 38 (1998): 33-46.

19 Madeleine Rebérioux, "Les Arméniens, le juge et l'historien," *L'Histoire* 187 (1995), <https://www.lhistoire.fr/les-arm%C3%A9niens-le-juge-et-lhistorien>.

20 Journal officiel de la République française. Lois et décrets, n° 0025 du 30/01/2001, 1590.

The law itself provided a clear answer. Its text imposed no obligation or prohibition: it neither criminalized denial nor sanctioned alternative interpretations. Rather, it articulated a formal position of the French state, an official statement of fact, that the massacres of Armenians in 1915 constituted genocide. It was therefore not prescriptive, but declaratory.

The second set of objections questioned whether Parliament was entitled to intervene in the realm of diplomatic affairs. From this viewpoint, recognition was conceived as an inherently political act, aimed at shaping France's relationship with Turkey or Armenia. Yet, precisely in this respect, the 2001 law elevated ethical considerations above diplomatic strategy. By recognizing the Armenian Genocide, it affirmed a commitment to historical truth, recalled the monstrous nature of the crime, and thus paid indirect homage to the victims. As Deputy Pierre Lellouche argued at the time, the law was first and foremost an act of morality and justice.²¹

The Multiplication of Recognition Causes

It took seventeen years and eight separate bills before the Armenian Genocide was finally recognized in France. Yet France remained among the first states in the world to take this step. This recognition opened a broader window of opportunity for the acknowledgment of other genocides. In the years that followed, thirty-six bills or resolutions were introduced seeking recognition of other genocides: the Cambodian genocide (2001); the Holodomor (2001, 2006, 2007, 2022, 2023); the genocide of the Roma (2007, 2008, 2011, 2012, 2018); the killings in Vendée during the French Revolution (2007, 2012, 2013, 2018); the genocide of the Assyro-Chaldeans (2015, 2019, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024); the genocide of the Yazidis (2016, 2024); the genocide of the Tutsi (2017); the genocide of Srebrenica (2020); the genocide of the Uyghurs (2021); the genocide of the Kurds in Iraq (2021); and the genocide of the Rohingya (2022).

Not all of these initiatives were successful. For many years, the Armenian Genocide remained the only genocide recognized by French law, since the term genocide did not appear in President Chirac's 1995 speech acknowledging France's responsibility in the deportation and extermination of the Jews of France. In 2016, the Senate called on the government to recognize the genocide perpetrated by the Islamic State (Daesh) against Christian minorities and the Yazidis in Iraq and Syria; however, this amounted only to an indirect recognition.

This caution can be explained largely by the fear of diluting or trivializing the term genocide. Until around 2020, it was not considered desirable to extend the term beyond those recognized either by law or by international judicial decisions: the genocide of the Jews of Europe, the Armenian Genocide, Srebrenica, the Cambodian genocide, and the genocide of the Tutsi. For example, a 10 May 2001 bill to recognize the Cambodian

²¹ *Journal officiel de la République française*, Assemblée nationale 1re séance du 18 janvier 2001, 562-563. please, provide a full reference

genocide was rejected and widely interpreted as a political maneuver rather than a sincere effort to acknowledge the crimes of the Khmer Rouge. Introduced by right-wing deputies exactly twenty years after the election of the first left-wing president, François Mitterrand, it was seen more as a partisan attack on the left than as a serious engagement with the historical record.

By contrast, beginning in 2021, the pace of recognition accelerated, with four new genocides officially acknowledged: those of the Uyghurs, the Assyro-Chaldeans, the Yazidis, and the victims of the Holodomor. This broader application of the concept of genocide was facilitated by the constitutional reform of 23 July 2008, which introduced Article 34-1 into the Constitution and authorized Parliament to adopt resolutions. Unlike laws, resolutions have no normative force and do not require joint adoption by both chambers, making them easier to pass and increasingly the preferred instrument of recognition.

These divergent timelines underscore the fact that the recognition of genocides is a lengthy and uncertain process. Some genocides have still never been officially recognized, such as the Cambodian genocide, the massacres in Vendée, Srebrenica, the genocide of the Kurds in Iraq, and the genocide of the Rohingya. Others were acknowledged only after prolonged advocacy and repeated attempts: the Holodomor, for instance, was recognized after twenty-two years (2001–2023) and five successive bills and resolutions, its final adoption catalyzed by the outbreak of war in Ukraine; the genocide of the Roma was recognized after eight years and six proposals (2007–2016), and ultimately by presidential declaration rather than parliamentary action; and the Assyro-Chaldean genocide was recognized after eight years (2015–2023) and nine separate proposals.

As the first official recognition of a genocide in France, the acknowledgment of the Armenian Genocide opened a new political space of possibilities. The table of attempts at recognition (Annex 1) illustrates that only after this recognition did requests for acknowledging other genocides multiply. Until 2001, the Armenian Genocide was the sole subject of draft legislation; once it was formally recognized, thirteen other events described as “genocides” became the subject of parliamentary initiatives. The recognition of the Armenian Genocide thus served as a precedent, paving the way for a broader and more frequent application of the concept of genocide and facilitating its mobilization in relation to large-scale racist, ethnic, or religious massacres. In comparison, subsequent recognitions have generally proceeded more quickly and with fewer obstacles than the recognition of the Armenian Genocide itself. This acceleration can be explained by two broader contexts. First, the remarkable expansion of genocide studies since the late 1970s, which, through successful institutionalization via specialized journals, academic programs, and research centers, has developed into a dynamic scholarly field.²² Its interdisciplinarity, methodological diversity, and, in certain currents, activist orientation have broadened the

22 Kerry Whigham, “From Holocaust Studies to Atrocity Prevention: Genocide Studies and the Growth of Transdisciplinary Activist Scholarship,” *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 90, no. 4 (2023): 809–836; Samuel Totten, and Steven Leonard Jacobs, eds., *Pioneers of Genocide Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

analytical scope of genocide beyond the strict legal parameters of 1948, allowing an ever-increasing number of massacres, including those in more distant historical periods, to be examined through this conceptual lens.²³

Second, the term genocide has become a powerful political and social marker. It captures not only the intent to destroy a group but also affirms the existence of that group by defining it through the crime committed against it. Whereas crimes against humanity emphasize human dignity in universal terms, genocide is intrinsically tied to group identity. To designate a past atrocity as genocide is therefore to recognize a collective identity and restore its place in both historical narrative and contemporary public consciousness.

Since the 1980s, a global environment increasingly shaped by the politics of trauma and memory has encouraged societies to reinterpret the past through the prism of individual and collective suffering, prompting diverse forms of recognition.²⁴ As Yan Thomas famously observed, contemporary pasts are not simply inherited but constructed: “What effects do we decide to attribute to time?”²⁵ No past is inherently imprescriptible or immutable; its endurance depends on political, legal, and scholarly acts of validation.

Accordingly, since the early 2000s, official acts of recognition of genocides and mass killings have proliferated worldwide. At the same time, as Philippe Sands has demonstrated, the term genocide has become a central lens through which both past and present atrocities are interpreted. More than the category of crimes against humanity, genocide appears most suited to designate the gravest forms of violence, precisely because it functions as a powerful marker of collective identity.²⁶

Yet the expansion of the notion of genocide is not without limits. First, none of the recognitions by the French Parliament has been accompanied by the criminalization of genocide denial. Between 2004 and 2024, sixteen bills were introduced in France to penalize denial of the Armenian Genocide, and although one such law was adopted in January 2012, it was struck down by the Constitutional Council.²⁷ Recognition therefore remains an official and symbolic act, politically significant but lacking legal effect. Second, an examination of parliamentary bills and resolutions reveals that only a limited number of massacres are repeatedly targeted for recognition, with the Armenian and Assyro-Chaldean cases dominating the landscape and together accounting for more than half of all demands for recognition in France. This overrepresentation can be attributed

23 René Lemarchand, ed., *Forgotten Genocides. Oblivion, Denial, and Memory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Dirk A. Moses, ed., *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation, and Subaltern Resistance in World History* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010); Donald Bloxham and Dirk Moses, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

24 Soula, “Regrets, excuses et pardons,” 57-63; Mathieu Soula, “Faire justice aux passés irréparables. Reconnaissances, regrets, excuses et demande de pardon,” Bénédicte Girard, Étienne Muller, Delphine Porcheron (dir.), *Réparer les « crimes du passé »* (Paris: Dalloz, “Thèmes et Commentaires, 2025), 137-146.

25 Yan Thomas, “La vérité, le temps, le juge et l’historien,” *Le Débat* 102, no. 5 (1998): 27.

26 Philippe Sands, *Retour à Lemberg* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2017).

27 Decision n° 2012-647 DC, 28 feb. 2012.

to a combination of factors: the long-standing political resistance to acknowledging these genocides, which necessitated repeated proposals before recognition could be secured; the fluctuations in Franco-Turkish relations, whose periods of deterioration paradoxically facilitated recognition, often serving as an implicit signal of disapproval during moments such as Turkey's bid for EU accession; and, finally, the effectiveness of "moral entrepreneurs," to use Howard Becker's term,²⁸ that is, actors who actively construct these causes as public problems and succeed in mobilizing determined and influential allies within the political arena.

The recognition, or non-recognition, of a genocide is therefore fundamentally a political matter. Until 2001, the struggle for recognition of the Armenian Genocide in France was carried out primarily by left-wing parties: the Communist Party in the 1980s and the Socialist Party in the 1990s. All bills introduced during this period originated from one of these two parties. After 2000, however, the campaign to criminalize denial of the Armenian Genocide was taken up by both the left and the right, eventually becoming broadly consensual by the 2020s. A similar pattern emerged in the case of the Assyro-Chaldean genocide: demands for recognition came chiefly from the right, particularly from deputies such as Valérie Boyer in Marseille, a city with a substantial Armenian population, who also championed the criminalization of Armenian Genocide denial.

Other cases followed comparable political configurations. The far right regularly called for the recognition of the Vendée massacres as genocide; the right promoted recognition of genocides perpetrated by communist regimes (Cambodia, Ukraine) or by Islamist terrorist groups (the Yazidis in Iraq and Syria); while the communist left repeatedly, though unsuccessfully, pushed for recognition of the genocide of the Roma under Nazism. At times, however, a broad political consensus emerged: the demand for recognition of the Uyghur genocide was endorsed across the entire political spectrum and adopted rapidly.

In France, a clear division of labor has emerged between the President of the Republic and parliament. The two chambers tend to recognize genocides in which France bore no responsibility, while the presidency acknowledges France's own direct or indirect involvement. Thus, in 1995, President Jacques Chirac recognized France's complicity in the genocide of the Jews. On 29 October 2016, President François Hollande acknowledged France's responsibility in the genocide of the Roma. And on 21 May 2021, President Emmanuel Macron delivered an official speech at the memorial of the genocide against the Tutsi, recognizing a moral, though not legal, responsibility on the part of France.

By assuming such responsibility, the president performs what Max Weber termed an "ethic of responsibility"²⁹: he accepts accountability for wrongs he did not personally commit, but which implicate France in both its historical trajectory and its future conduct. Parliament, by contrast, does not engage in recognizing France's culpability; rather, it designates foreign mass atrocities as genocides within the national symbolic and political framework.

28 Howard Becker, *Outsiders, Études de sociologie de la deviance* (Paris: Métailié, 2024 (1963, 1985)).

29 Max Weber, *Le Savant et le Politique* (Paris: Plon, 1959), 232.

To be sure, recognition by the states that perpetrated these crimes would restore dignity to victims with far greater symbolic force. Yet when the French assemblies recognize these genocides, they give concrete expression to the idea that the debt of justice born of genocide is universal, that genocide wounds humanity as a whole. Parliamentary recognition thus functions as an invitation for all states to acknowledge the same genocide, committing them to pursue forms of justice that, given the temporal distance of these events, can no longer be achieved through other means.

Conclusion

The long struggle that led to France's recognition of the Armenian Genocide opened an entirely new political space: the possibility and legitimacy of officially recognizing genocides perpetrated by other states. While the question of recognition is first and foremost a political one, as the Armenian case demonstrates, it is also intimately tied to questions of justice and moral responsibility. Recognition through a speech, a law, or a parliamentary resolution may not constitute a judicial decision, yet it nonetheless carries significant symbolic weight: it restores, at least in part, the dignity of victims by naming the crime they endured and acknowledging the historical truth suppressed or denied for decades.

Since 2001, France has recognized six additional genocides. These recognitions must be situated within a broader international moment in which an increasing number of states, across Europe, the Americas, and Australia, have become more willing to confront historical wrongs, including colonial violence, slavery, and ongoing genocidal practices. The French case is emblematic of this wider trend: the political and moral framework forged through the recognition of the Armenian Genocide has enabled subsequent recognitions and contributed to a broader global shift toward accountability, memory, and the formal acknowledgment of mass atrocities.

Annex

1. Recognition Projects and Official Recognitions

Date	Legislative tools	Institution	Project leaders	Genocide	Result
Decembre 16, 1985	Bill	National Assembly	Guy Ducoloné French Communist Party	Recognition of the Armenian Genocide	
March 5, 1986	Bill	Senate	21 MPs of the French Communist Party	Recognition of the Armenian Genocide	Referral to the Committee on Constitutional Laws
August 10, 1988	Bill	Senate	16 MPs of the French Communist Party	Recognition of the Armenian Genocide	Referral to the Committee on Constitutional Laws
July 16, 1995	Speech	President		France's complicity in the genocide of the Jews	Official Ceremony
Novembre, 28 1997	Bill	Senate	16 MPs of the French Communist Party	Recognition of the Armenian Genocide	Referral to the Committee on Constitutional Laws
May 13, 1998	Bill	National Assembly	Didier Migaud Socialist Party	Recognition of the Armenian Genocide	
May 29, 1998	Law	National Assembly	Proposal of May 13, 1998	Recognition of the Armenian Genocide	Proposal adopted, but not debated in the Senate
March 21, 2000	Bill	Senate	Communist and Socialist Senators	Recognition of the Armenian Genocide	Rejected
Novembre 7, 2000	Bill	Senate	All parties	Recognition of the Armenian Genocide	Adopted
January 18, 2001	Law	National Assembly	Senate Law of November 7, 2000	Recognition of the Armenian Genocide	Adopted

Date	Legislative tools	Institution	Project leaders	Genocide	Result
January 29, 2001	Law 2001-70			Recognition of the Armenian Genocide	Promulgated
May 10, 2001	Bill	Senate	Serge Mathieu et Jean-Claude Carle UMP (right wing)	Recognition of the Cambodian Genocide	Referral to the Foreign Affairs Committee
May 10, 2001	Bill	Senate	Serge Mathieu et Jean-Claude Carle UMP	Recognition of the Holodomor	Referral to the Foreign Affairs Committee
January 15, 2004	Bill	National Assembly	Philippe Pémeze UMP	Criminalization of the denial of the Armenian Genocide	Referral to the Committee on Laws
June 8, 2004	Bill	National Assembly	83 Socialist MPs	Criminalization of the denial of the Armenian Genocide	Referral to the Committee on Laws
April 12, 2006	Bill	National Assembly	83 Socialist MPs	Criminalization of the denial of the Armenian Genocide	Referral to the Committee on Laws and the adopted
April 26, 2006	Bill	National Assembly	Éric Raoult UMP	Criminalization of the denial of the Armenian Genocide	Referral to the Committee on Constitutional Laws
Octobre 12, 2006	Law	National Assembly	Proposal of April 12, 2006	Criminalization of the denial of the Armenian Genocide	Adopted
Novembre 30, 2006	Bill	National Assembly	Christian Vanneuste UMP	Recognition of the Holodomor	Referral to the Foreign Affairs Committee

Date	Legislative tools	Institution	Project leaders	Genocide	Result
February 15, 2007	Bill	National Assembly	22 Communist MPs	Recognition of the genocide of the Roma	Referral to the Foreign Affairs Committee
February 21, 2007	Bill	National Assembly	9 UMP MPs (Lionel Luca)	Recognition of the genocide of the Vendéens (French Revolution)	Referral to the Committee on Cultural Affairs
Octobre 9, 2007	Bill	National Assembly	Christian Van-neste UMP	Recognition of the Holodomor	Referral to the Foreign Affairs Committee
Novembre 7, 2007	Bill	National Assembly	7 UMP MPs (Included Lionel Luca)	Recognition of the genocide of the Vendéens (French Revolution)	Referral to the Committee on Cultural Affairs
May 15, 2008	Bill	Senate	23 Communist Senators	Recognition of the genocide of the Roma	Referral to the Foreign Affairs Committee
July 5, 2010	Bill	Senate	32 Socialist Senators PS	Criminalization of the denial of the Armenian Genocide	Referral to the Committee on Constitutional Laws
April 13, 2011	Bill	National Assembly	19 Communist MPs	Recognition of the genocide of the Roma	Referral to the Foreign Affairs Committee
May 11, 2011	Bill	National Assembly	Maxime Gremetz French Communist Party	Recognition of the genocide of the Roma	Referral to the Foreign Affairs Committee
Octobre 18, 2011	Bill	National Assembly	Valérie Boyer (UMP)	Criminalization of the denial of genocide	Referral to the Committee on Constitutional Laws

Date	Legislative tools	Institution	Project leaders	Genocide	Result
Novembre 21, 2011	Bill	Senate	13 Socialist Senators	Criminalization of the denial of the Armenian Genocide	Referral to the Committee on Constitutional Laws
Decembre 22, 2011	Law	National Assembly	Proposal of Octobre 18, 2011	Criminalization of the denial of Genocide	Adopted
January 23, 2012	Law	Senate	National Assembly Law, Decembre 12, 2011	Criminalization of the denial of Genocide	Adopted
March 6, 2012	Bill	National Assembly	9 UMP MPs (Included Lionel Luca)	Recognition of the genocide of the Vendéens (French Revolution)	Referral to the Committee on Cultural Affairs
Octobre 19, 2012	Bill	National Assembly	10 Communists MPs	Recognition of the genocide of the Roma	Referral to the Committee on Constitutional Laws
January 16, 2013	Bill	National Assembly	9 UMP and National Front (Far right) MPs	Recognition of the genocide of the Vendéens (French Revolution)	Referral to the Committee on Cultural Affairs
Octobre 14, 2014	Bill	National Assembly	24 UMP MPs (Included Valérie Boyer)	Criminalization of the denial of Genocide	Referral to the Committee on Constitutional Laws
March 11, 2015	Bill	National Assembly	15 UMP MPs (Included Valérie Boyer)	Recognition of the Assyro-Chaldean genocide	Referral to the Committee on Constitutional Laws
January 19, 2016	Bill	National Assembly	Valérie Boyer UMP	Criminalization of the denial of genocide	Referral to the Committee on Constitutional Laws

Date	Legislative tools	Institution	Project leaders	Genocide	Result
Octobre 29, 20016	Speech	President		Recognition of the genocide of the Roma	Official Ceremony
Novembre 14, 2016	Proposed resolution	Senate	71 UMP and Centre Senators	Recognition of the genocide in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)	
Decembre 6, 2016	Resolution	Senate	Proposal of Novembre 14, 2016	Recognition of the genocide in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)	Adopted
March 16, 2017	Proposed resolution	National Assembly	2 Socialists et Ecologists MPs	Recognition of the genocide in Rwanda	
February 7, 2018	Bill	National Assembly	2 RN MPs	Recognition of the genocide of the Vendéens (French Revolution)	Referral to the Committee on Cultural Affairs
July 18, 2018	Proposed resolution	National Assembly	3 Communists MPs	Recognition of the genocide of the Roma	
April 10, 2019	Bill	National Assembly	18 LR (former UMP, right wing) MPs	Recognition of the Assyro-Chaldean Genocide	Referral to the Foreign Affairs Committee
July 28, 2020	Bill	National Assembly	3 Presidential Majority MPs	Recognition of the genocide of Srebrenica, 1995	Referral to the Foreign Affairs Committee
Novembre 3, 2020	Bill	National Assembly	34 Presidential Majority, Center and LR MPs	Criminalization of the denial of the Armenian Genocide	Referral to the Committee on Constitutional Laws
March 9, 2021	Bill	National Assembly	20 LR MPs	Criminalization of the denial of the Armenian Genocide	Referral to the Committee on Constitutional Laws

Date	Legislative tools	Institution	Project leaders	Genocide	Result
April 26, 2021	Bill	National Assembly	31 Presidential Majority and LR MPs	Criminalization of the denial of the Armenian Genocide	Referral to the Committee on Constitutional Laws
May 4, 2021	Bill	National Assembly	31 Presidential Majority and LR MPs	Criminalization of the denial of the Armenian Genocide	Referral to the Committee on Constitutional Laws
May 27, 2021	Speech	President		France's responsibility in the Rwandan Genocide	Official Ceremony
June 17, 2021	Proposed resolution	National Assembly	All Parties	Recognition of the Uyghur Genocide	
Octobre 19, 2021	Bill	National Assembly	15 Presidential Majority MPs	Recognition of the Assyro-Chaldean Genocide	Referral to the Foreign Affairs Committee
Octobre 5, 2021	Proposed resolution	National Assembly	14 Presidential Majority MPs	Recognition of the genocide of the Kurds in Iraq	Project withdrawn on October 21, 2021
Octobre 29, 2021	Proposed resolution	National Assembly	16 Presidential Majority MPs	Recognition of the genocide of the Kurds in Iraq	
Novembre 26, 2021	Resolution	National Assembly	Proposal of Octobre 29, 2021	Recognition of the genocide of the Kurds in Iraq	Not adopted
Novembre 26, 2021	Proposed resolution	National Assembly	All Parties	Recognition of the Uyghur Genocide	
Decembre 2, 2021	Proposed resolution	National Assembly	All Parties	Recognition of the Uyghur Genocide	

Date	Legislative tools	Institution	Project leaders	Genocide	Result
January 20, 2022	Resolution	National Assembly	Proposal of du Decembre 2, 2021	Recognition of the Uyghur Genocide	Adopted
February 15, 2022	Proposed resolution	National Assembly	11 LFI MPs (left wing)	Recognition of the Rohingya Genocide	
February 22, 2022	Bill	Senate	22 LR Senators (Included Valérie Boyer)	Recognition of the Assyro-Chaldean Genocide	Referral to the Foreign Affairs Committee
Decembre 9, 2022	Proposed resolution	Senate	59 LR Senators	Recognition of the Holodomor	
January 6, 2023	Proposed resolution	Senate	77 LR Senators (Included Valérie Boyer)	Recognition of the Assyro-Chaldean genocide	
January 27, 2023	Proposed resolution	National Assembly	All Parties	Recognition of the Holodomor	
February 8, 2023	Resolution	Senate	Proposal of January 6, 2023	Recognition of the Assyro-Chaldean genocide	Adopted
February 9, 2023	Proposed resolution	National Assembly	All Parties	Recognition of the Assyro-Chaldean Genocide	
February 14, 2023	Bill	National Assembly	Raphaël Schellenber GER (LR)	Recognition of the Assyro-Chaldean Genocide	Referral to the Foreign Affairs Committee
March 28, 2023	Resolution	National Assembly	Proposal of January 27, 2023	Recognition of the Holodomor	Adopted
May 17, 2023	Resolution	Senate	Proposal of du Decembre 9, 2022	Recognition of the Holodomor	Adopted
July 19, 2023	Bill	Senate	Rachid Thémal (PS) et Valérie Boyer (LR)	Recognition of the Assyro-Chaldean Genocide	Referral to the Foreign Affairs Committee

Date	Legislative tools	Institution	Project leaders	Genocide	Result
April 12, 2024	Proposed resolution	National Assembly	All Parties	Recognition of the Assyro-Chaldean Genocide	
April 17, 2024	Bill	Senate	Nathalie Goulet Union centrist	Recognition of the Yazidi Genocide	Referral to the Foreign Affairs Committee
April 29, 2024	Resolution	National Assembly	Proposal of April 12, 2024	Recognition of the Assyro-Chaldean Genocide	Adopted

2. Official Recognitions

Date	Type	Institution	Provenance	Genocide
July 16, 1995	Speech	President		France's complicity in the genocide of the Jews
January 29, 2001	Law 2001-70			Recognition of the Armenian Genocide
Octobre 29, 2016	Speech	President		Recognition of the genocide of the Roma
Decembre 6, 2016	Resolution	Senate	Proposal of November 14, 2016	Recognition of the genocide in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)
May 27, 2021	Speech	President		France's responsibility in the Rwandan genocide
January 20, 2022	Resolution	National Assembly	Proposal of Decembre 2, 2021	Recognition of the Uyghur genocide
February 8, 2023	Resolution	Senate	Proposal of January 6, 2023	Recognition of the Assyro-Chaldean genocide
March 28, 2023	Resolution	National Assembly	Proposal of January 27, 2023	Recognition of the Holodomor
May 17, 2023	Resolution	Senate	Proposal of December 9, 2022	Recognition of the Holodomor
April 29, 2024	Resolution	National Assembly	Proposal of April 12, 2024	Recognition of the Assyro-Chaldean genocide

Bibliography

Barkan, Elazar, and Alexander Karn, eds. *Taking Wrongs Seriously. Apologies and Reconciliation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006.

Becker, Howard. *Outsiders, Études de sociologie de la deviance*. Paris: Métailié, 2024.

Bentley, Tom. *Empires of Remorse. Narrative, Postcolonialism and Apologies for Colonial Atrocity*. London: Routledge, 2016.

Bessone, Magali. *Faire justice de l'irréparable. Esclavage colonial et responsabilités contemporaines*. Paris: Vrin, L'Esprit des lois, 2019.

Bloxham, Donald, and Dirk Moses, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Brooks, Roy L., ed. *When Sorry isn't Enough. The Controversy over Apologies and Reparations for Human Injustice*. New York: New York University Press, 1999.

Butler, Judith, Axel Honneth, and Amy Allen. *Recognition and ambivalence*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2021.

Cuypers, Daniel, Daniel Janssen, Jacques Haers, and Barbara Segaert. *Public Apology between Ritual and Regret. Symbolic Excuses on False Pretenses or True Reconciliation out Sincere Regret?* Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013.

Dirk, Moses, A., ed. *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation, and Subaltern Resistance in World History*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2010.

Fraser, Nancy. *Qu'est-ce que la justice sociale?* Paris: La Découverte, Poche/Sciences Humaines et sociales, 2011.

Garapon, Antoine. *Peut-on réparer l'histoire? Colonisation, esclavage, Shoah*. Paris: Odile Jacob, 2006.

Gerstbauer, Loramy. *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Politics of Apology*. London: Routledge, 2017.

Hochmann, Thomas. "Les limites à la liberté de l'historien en France et en Allemagne." *Droit et société* 2 nos. 69-70 (2008): 527-548.

Honneth, Axel. *La lutte pour la reconnaissance*. Paris: Gallimard, 2013.

Honneth, Axel. *La reconnaissance. Histoire européenne d'une idée*. Paris: Gallimard, Essais, 2020.

Hourcade, Renaud. "La politique des excuses. Repentir officiel et gestion stratégique de la culpabilité dans un ancien port négrier (Liverpool)." *Ethnologie française* 50 (2020/1): 19-29.

Le crime de silence: le génocide des Arméniens. Paris: Flammarion, 1984.

Le Crom, Jean-Pierre. "Juger l'histoire." *Droit et Société* 38 (1998): 33-46.

Lemarchand, René, ed. *Forgotten Genocides. Oblivion, Denial, and Memory*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.

Rebérioux, Madeleine. "Les Arméniens, le juge et l'historien." *L'Histoire* 187 (1995), at <https://www.lhistoire.fr/les-arm%C3%A9niens-le-juge-et-lhistorien>.

Ricoeur, Paul. *Parcours de la reconnaissance. Trois études*. Paris: Stock, Les Essais, 2004.

Roussel, Henry, and Éric Conan. *Vichy, un passé qui ne passe pas*. Paris: Fayard, 1994.

Roussel, Henry. *Le syndrome de Vichy*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987.

Rushdy, Ashraf H. A. *A Guilted Age. Apologies for the Past*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015.

Sands, Philippe. *Retour à Lemberg*. Paris: Albin Michel, 2017.

Sémelin, Jacques. “Les excuses d’État en politique étrangère des crimes de masse.” *Raison publique. La revue des humanités politiques*, <https://raison-publique.fr/2494/>.

Soula, Mathieu. “Faire justice aux passés irréparables. Reconnaissances, regrets, excuses et demande de pardon.” In Bénédicte Girard, Étienne Muller, Delphine Porcheron (dir.), *Réparer les « crimes du passé »*, 137-146. Paris: Dalloz, “Thèmes et Commentaires, 2025.

Soula, Mathieu. “Regrets, excuses et pardons, les actes étatiques de reconnaissance.” *Revue du droit public* 2 (2024): 57-63.

Thomas, Yan. “La vérité, le temps, le juge et l’historien.” *Le Débat* 102, no. 5 (1998): 17-36.

Totten, Samuel, and Steven Leonard Jacobs, eds. *Pioneers of Genocide Studies*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Whigham, Kerry. “From Holocaust Studies to Atrocity Prevention: Genocide Studies and the Growth of Transdisciplinary Activist Scholarship.” *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 90, no. 4 (2023): 809-836.

About the Author

Mathieu Soula is a professor of Legal History at Paris Nanterre University. He is a member of the Centre for Legal History and Anthropology (CHAD) and a member of the Institut Universitaire de France (IUF). His current research projects focus on state recognition of genocide.

Email: mth.soula@gmail.com