

# WHEN ARMENIANS TAKE TO THE STREETS: THE 1979 MARCH FROM LYON AND THE STRUGGLE FOR GENOCIDE RECOGNITION IN FRANCE

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## Abstract

This article examines how and why French Armenian activists mobilized around the recognition of the Armenian Genocide in late 1970s France. It suggests that Armenian street protests had a performative impact, consistently inserting the genocide issue into the French public sphere through a transnational repertoire of activism. These actions reflected overlapping identities, French, Armenian, diasporic, and global, and demonstrated how diasporic communities respond to both local and international events. By situating the Armenian case within the broader protest culture of the 1970s, the article highlights the value of using connected histories and multiple chronologies to understand diasporic political engagement.

**Keywords:** diaspora; Armenians; mobilization; genocide; march

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## Introduction

Since the 1970s, decades after their displacement resulting from the 1915 genocide, Armenians have become increasingly active in the public articulation and political mobilization of the Armenian Genocide within their host societies. This activism has reflected global protest trends by focusing on two new fronts. First, after decolonization in the 1950s-1960s, the scope of protests became more limited and centered on human rights. Consequently, Armenians began to advocate for the recognition of the Armenian Genocide. Second, street activism became a prominent method for making demands visible, particularly in France. The first wave of Armenian migrants arrived in France in the 1920s, following the Armenian Genocide. Many first-generation survivors, born in the Ottoman Empire, remained within their own community, driven by a desire for cultural preservation and difficulties to integrate to the host society.<sup>1</sup> After World War II, the repatriation effort to Soviet Armenia (*nerkagh*) from 1946 to 1948 left many disillusioned with the rigid Communist system.<sup>2</sup> As a result, naturalized Armenian immigrants and their descendants began to view their new country as their permanent home. For many of these Armenians, the genocide was central to their experience and identity, and so was its mourning. That was true in the first decades that followed the events, but the second and third generations' mourning became more public.

The Armenian presence in the French public sphere has a long history, as illustrated by the funeral of Avedis Aharonian, an Armenian politician and intellectual, and a major public figure, in April 1948, which drew a massive gathering of Armenians following the coffin in Paris and Marseille.<sup>3</sup> However, the Armenian presence in the French public sphere became truly visible on April 24, 1965, the 50th anniversary of the genocide. On that day, Armenians rallied worldwide: 10,000 in Paris, 80,000 in Beirut, and 200,000 in Yerevan.<sup>4</sup>

By the 1970s, Armenian protests became more political, and street demonstrations became more systematic, massive, and politically engaged. These street demonstrations must be understood within international, national, and local contexts. The frame of reference of the Diasporic Armenians was global.<sup>5</sup> The 1970s were a protest decade worldwide. Then Armenian mobilizations were changing fast for a few reasons: the political awakening of the third generation, the armed resistance to Turkish denialism (1975–1985), and new waves of migration from Soviet Armenia and the war-torn

1 Anahide Ter Minassian, "Les Arméniens de France," *Les Temps modernes*, no. 504-505-506 (1988): 204.

2 Jo Laycock, "Armenian Homelands and Homecomings, 1945-1949: The Repatriation of Diaspora Armenians to the Soviet Union," *Cultural and Social History* 9, no. 1 (2012): 103. <https://doi.org/10.2752/147800412X13191165983079>.

3 Henri Verneuil, *Avédis Aharonian, dernier président arménien* (Bois d'Arcy: Centre National de la Cinématographie, Archives cinématographiques, 1949): 30 minutes.

4 *Haratch*, 27 April, 1965; 2 May 1965.

5 Sebouh D. Aslanian, "The Marble of Armenian History: Or Armenian History as World History," *Études arméniennes contemporaines* 4 (2014): 137, <https://doi.org/10.4000/eac.707>.

Middle East, particularly Lebanon.<sup>6</sup> In France, mobilizations, in general, emerged independently from state institutions and political power but often intersected with other activist movements.<sup>7</sup> Social demands were putting pressure on an embattled right-of-center government, during the presidencies of Georges Pompidou and Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in particular, and were creating a volatile situation at a time of economic crisis. Mobilizations were more connected to specific groups with urban, highly-educated activists such as pacifist and regionalist movements. Armenians were integrated into French society, but they bore the legacy of an unrecognized genocide and a lost homeland, prompting them into political engagement. A new phase of Armenian mobilization began, where memory and mourning were transformed into a public and political issue. Armenian activists converted the emotional side of the Armenian Question. Lyon emerged as a critical site of activism.<sup>8</sup> Street demonstrations, especially on April 24, became a vital tactic in raising awareness and calling for justice. On 24 April 1976, activists staged a sit-in at the Turkish consulate, which led to numerous arrests.<sup>9</sup> These events helped catalyze a more sustained and visible Armenian movement in the public arena. Demonstrations encompassed a broad spectrum of actions—from traditional marches to hunger strikes and symbolic acts of occupation. One such moment was the 1979 march, from Lyon to Saint-Julien-en-Genevois, an event that crystallized the determination of the activists and contributed to publicizing the Armenian Question in the public space.

This article draws on my doctoral research, “When Armenians Take to the Streets: Fifteen Years of Activism Combining Heritages, Borrowings, and Reappropriations (Paris and Lyon / Early 1970s–Mid-1980s).” Inspired by Charles Tilly’s work on repertoires of contention,<sup>10</sup> this article argues that street demonstrations were central to elevating the Armenian Question to national and international visibility.<sup>11</sup> I also stress the necessity of using connected history and multiple chronologies to study these protests because the identities of the activists were mixed: the host country—France; ancestral Armenia; and the wider Armenian diaspora. This analysis is based on interviews with activists, the Armenian press (*Haiastan, Haratch*) and untapped public records, including police and diplomatic documents. The first part explains why French Armenian activists positioned themselves on the matter of the recognition of the Genocide at the end of the 1970s. The second part aims to demonstrate how they focused on the Genocide and how the march played a role in it. The third part studies why it was effective in France, especially in Lyon.

6 Ara Sanjian, “Armenians in the Midst of Civil Wars: Lebanon and Syria Compared,” *Massis Weekly* 35, no. 49 (2016): 2.

7 Lilian Mathieu, *Les années 1970: un âge d’or des luttes?* (Paris: Textuel, 2009), 11-16.

8 Sophie Toulajian, “Commémorer le génocide des Arméniens à Lyon en 1985. Emprunts et réappropriations d’une pratique protestataire,” 20 et 21. *Revue d’histoire* 150, no. 2 (2021): 33-34, <https://doi.org/10.3917/vin.150.0033>.

9 “Nor Seround de Saint-Étienne, ‘24 avril : pour qui ?’,” *Haiastan*, no. 371-372 (1976): 3.

10 Charles Tilly, *From Mobilisation to Revolution* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1978), 1-10.

11 Charles Tilly, “Spaces of Contention,” *Mobilization: An International Journal* 5, no. 2 (2000): 135, <https://doi.org/10.17813/maiq.5.2.j6321h02n200h764>.

## The Recognition of the Armenian Genocide: A Question of Justice and Dignity

In 1945, following the conceptualization of the crime of genocide by the jurist Raphael Lemkin, Shavarsh Missakian used the Armenian term *tseghasbanoutioun* [genocide] in France, in an editorial for the Armenian-language daily *Haratch* [Forward],<sup>12</sup> replacing the earlier use of *Medz Yeghern* [great crime].<sup>13</sup> By 1948, the United Nations had adopted the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, offering a potential legal framework, though political obstacles quickly emerged. At that time, two opposing Armenian political movements dominated the diaspora in France. They were divided over attitudes toward Soviet Armenia. The “Reds”—aligned with the French Communist Party—championed Soviet Armenia, as did the Armenian Democratic Liberal Party (ADL *Ramgavar*), while the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF, the *Dashnaksutyun* party), a transnational,<sup>14</sup> long-standing socialist and nationalist party,<sup>15</sup> active since the late 19th century in the Ottoman and Russian Empires,<sup>16</sup> had fought for an independent Armenian Republic (1918-1920) and opposed the Soviet system. After World War II, tensions ran high between the two political movements due to the Cold War and the question of repatriation. The ARF had become the leading Armenian party across the diaspora. In France, it was close to the French section of the Workers’ International (SFIO), later the French Socialist Party (PS).

From 1965 onward, the ARF increasingly prioritized genocide recognition to put pressure on French and international public opinion.<sup>17</sup> The Genocide of the Armenians, they argued, was not just a national concern; it was a universal human rights issue, a matter of people deprived of their land and oppressed by empires, plus an unrecognized genocide.<sup>18</sup> Branching out of this, organizations like the Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA) in the United States<sup>19</sup> and the Comité de Défense de la Cause

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12 It is interesting to note that this article was written and published in Armenian, but its title was in French: “Génocide”. See Chavarch Missakian, “Génocide,” *Haratch*, no. 4479, 9 December 1945, 1.

13 Vartan Matiossian, *The Politics of Naming the Armenian Genocide: Language, History, and “Medz Yeghern,”* (London and New York: IB Tauris, 2021), 2.

14 Khachig Tololyan, “Terrorism in Modern Armenian Political Culture,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 4, no. 2 (1992): 8-22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546559208427146>.

15 Ara Sanjian, “The ARF’s First 120 Years: A Brief Review of Available Sources and Historiography,” *The Armenian Review* 52, nos. 3-4 (2011): 1-16.

16 Houri Berberian, *Roving Revolutionaries: Armenians and the Connected Revolutions in the Russian, Iranian, and Ottoman Worlds* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019), 106-143.

17 Ara Krikorian, “La reconnaissance par la France du génocide des Arméniens,” *Revue d’histoire de la Shoah*, no. 177-178 (2003): 447.

18 *Ibid.*

19 Julien Zarifian, “The Armenian American Lobby and Its Impact on U.S Foreign Policy,” *Society* 51, no. 5 (2014): 506, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-014-9816-8>. See also Gevorg Vardanyan, “Remembering Medz Yeghern: Armenian Genocide and Armenian Americans, 1890s–1965” (PhD diss., North Carolina State University, Raleigh, 2023).

arménienne (CDCA) in France were founded to reshape the diaspora's priorities. The CDCA had two defining characteristics: it was open to all Armenians—not just ARF members—and operated autonomously in determining its course of action.<sup>20</sup>

By the late 1970s, Armenian activism had become increasingly sophisticated. Legal and technical expertise were growing in importance, as was historical knowledge of the genocide itself.<sup>21</sup> Activists sought to de-singularize the Armenian Question, framing it not as an isolated event but as a paradigmatic example within a broader global narrative of dignity and injustice. Drawing on Luc Boltanski's sociological framework, activists "grow" the victims by connecting their story to the mainstream. The Armenian cause was "exemplary" because it belonged to a "series" of injustices.<sup>22</sup> The CDCA sought to update the Armenian Question, situating it within international human rights discourse and fighting Turkish denialist narratives.<sup>23</sup> This can also be explained by the rise of mass communication, which opened new fields for influence, with a "systematic use of propaganda for the Armenian cause."<sup>24</sup> Born and educated in France, the activists of the second and third migratory generations became experts in mobilization. They embraced a new form of militancy based on institutional knowledge,<sup>25</sup> strategic communication, and media outreach. They wrote articles in French, participated in meetings, such as the one in Paris on 6 June 1975 (3,500 attendees) and the one in Lyon on 25 January 1976, and cultivated relationships with politicians and journalists.<sup>26</sup> This evolution reflected a broader transformation in French activism at the time, marked by professionalization and agendas. Armenian activists positioned themselves as the "sole defenders of the Armenian cause"<sup>27</sup> and capitalized on the anniversary of the genocide. They delivered speeches on April 24, organized demonstration itineraries, forged links with French politicians, and engaged in lobbying. This more institutional approach corresponded to a transformation in militancy in France, which was more focused on sectoral demands. The activists wanted to make public opinion aware of their case, and the march was another means of street protest. In this context, in February 1979, they accordingly organized a march in Lyon. By taking to the streets, they honored the memory of the victims of the genocide and sought

20 Krikorian, "La reconnaissance par la France du génocide des Arméniens," 447.

21 Stephan Astourian, "Armenian Genocide Studies: Development as a Field, Historiographic Appraisal, and the Road Ahead," *Genocide Studies International* 15, no. 2 (2023): 101, <https://doi.org/10.3138/GSI-2023-0001>.

22 Luc Boltanski, Yann Darré and Marie-Ange Schiltz, "La dénonciation," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 51, no. 1 (1984): 22, <https://doi.org/10.3406/arss.1984.2212>.

23 Boris Adjemian and Julien Zarifian, "The International Recognition of the Armenian Genocide: History, Stakes, and Practices," *20 & 21. Revue d'histoire* 158, no. 2 (2023): 152, <https://doi.org/10.3917/vin.158.0149>.

24 Archives Nationales (AN). 20030072/1. Communautés et organisations (1970-1999), quatre études sur les Arméniens en France. Rapport des RG, avril 1983.

25 Daniel Mouchard, "Expertise," in *Dictionnaire des mouvements sociaux*, eds. Olivier Fillieule, Lilian Mathieu, and Cécile Péchu (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2020), 258-263.

26 "Meeting du 25 janvier 1976 à Lyon," *Haïastan*, no. 67-68 (1976): 4-7.

27 AN, 20030072/5, *Commémorations annuelles de l'anniversaire du génocide des Arméniens*, Rapport de la Direction Centrale des Renseignements Généraux (DCRG), "Commémoration du 70e anniversaire du génocide le 24 avril," 25 April 1985.

to influence both the French state and international organizations, to make visible a long-silenced injustice and to harness public opinion to their cause.<sup>28</sup> They ushered in a new era of diasporic political engagement.

## How French Armenian Activists Focused on the Genocide through the 1979 March?

### *A Performative Action*

From the early 1970s onward, public demonstrations by Armenian activists in France stood on equal footing with diplomatic efforts and, later, with armed resistance. Such street actions—including the 1979 march—preceded and prepared the ground for lobbying efforts that would become central from the 1980s. They paved the way for it. These demonstrations had a powerful performative effect. They brought the Armenian Question into public space, understood here in its geographic, rather than symbolic sense, as put by Jurgen Habermas (i.e., not solely through media, public opinion, or political discourse).<sup>29</sup> This can be partly explained by the fact that these actions emerged across the diaspora and were part of a transnational repertoire, even if the forms of protest varied by country.<sup>30</sup> A classical street demonstration is a widely used means of protest, so its repetition represents a risk. In Lyon, the activist base was smaller than in Paris, so they needed a push for innovation and originality.

In 1973, the UN Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, was tasked with producing a report on prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide, known as the Ruhashyankiko Report. It identified the Armenian Genocide as the first genocide of the 20th century (paragraph thirty). The paragraph stated, “Passing to the modern era, one may note the existence of relatively full documentation dealing with the massacres of Armenians, which have been described as ‘the first case of genocide in the twentieth century.’”<sup>31</sup> However, under pressure from Turkey, this paragraph was withdrawn in March 1974. Armenian activists did their utmost to see it republished. The report was scheduled for review in Geneva in March 1979.

Because the Human Rights Commission was headquartered in Geneva, the idea emerged through *Nor Seround* [New Generation], a dynamic young organization affiliated with the ARF and the CDCA, to stage a symbolic march tied to paragraph thirty of the aforementioned report, which was withdrawn under Turkish pressure. Thirty walkers

28 Axel Honneth, *La lutte pour la reconnaissance* (Paris: Gallimard, Coll. “Folio Essais”, 2017), 98-99.

29 Luc Boltanski, Élisabeth Claverie, Nicolas Offenstadt, and Stéphane Van Damme, *Affaires, scandales et grandes causes: de Socrate à Pinochet* (Paris: Stock, 2007), 13.

30 Donatella Della Porta and Sidney Tarrow (eds.), *Transnational Protest and Global Activism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 2.

31 Julien Zarifian, *The United States and the Armenian Genocide: History, Memory, Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2024), 82.

would march thirty kilometers each day—from Lyon to Saint-Julien-en-Genevois, a French town close to Geneva—over five days, from 21 to 25 February 1979. The route passed through Meximieux, Pont-d’Ain, Nantua, Bellegarde, and finally Viry, where 1,500 additional walkers joined for the final leg of five kilometers. Participants came not only from France but also from England, Switzerland, and Italy. Unlike traditional demonstrations, which are often brief and require large numbers, a march lasts longer and relies on fewer but more committed participants. So the walkers covered 150 kilometers. Initially, they were met with suspicion; locals in Saint-Maurice de Beynost, a stop before Meximieux, alarmed by the banners, alerted the police, who checked IDs.<sup>32</sup> But reception soon improved: in Saint-Maurice, they were welcomed by a delegation from the Blue Cross and in other towns, sometimes by mayors. Participants slept in village halls, with logistics (accommodation and food) organized by the CDCA.<sup>33</sup>

### *A Political Action*

Although the march might appear apolitical at first glance, three dimensions reveal its political weight. First, it was a moral act of protest, requiring significant logistical planning. It was made possible through the grassroots social network of the Armenian community. Participants were diverse in geography—the walkers came from various cities in the Rhône-Alpes region—age (from 10 to 55, but mostly around 20), and social background. Their cohesion contributed to the march’s success. Second, the message centered on mourning, dignity, and remembrance, which sounds a far cry from politics. At least, the destination, Saint-Julien-en-Genevois, was not the seat of any diplomatic institutions and lay far from the political centers of Paris, and Geneva. There was internal debate among organizers and activists: some favored a more explicitly political endpoint, while others preferred neutrality. Mihran, a bank employee and CDCA member born in 1948 in Dijon, mentioned the respect toward France and the participants’ hesitations about the final destination. He recalled:

We staged a march from Lyon to Saint-Julien-en-Genevois. There have been debates between us, the most extremist elements—no, they were not extremists, but the most virulent ones—said, “why are you stopping in Saint-Julien-en-Genevois and why not go as far as Geneva?” That shows that we were not a bunch of hot heads: we said, “anyway we will be stopped at the border.” But maybe that would have been the interesting part, to be stopped in Geneva. But at the time, we were 30 years old, we were young.<sup>34</sup>

32 Patrick Tchobonian, “Marche des Arméniens de Lyon à Saint-Julien-en Genevois,” *Haïastan*, no. 401-402 (1979): 24-25.

33 *Haratch*, 23 February 1979.

34 Interview with Mirhan Amtablian, October 2017.

Marching invokes a language of pacifism and universal human rights; for Armenian activists, this symbolic appropriation became an act of civil disobedience reframed around the denial of the Genocide. The march reasserted the cause in a bold and highly visible manner. Interviews with participants further reveal how identity and political engagement became mutually reinforcing elements of diasporic activism.<sup>35</sup> Patrick, born in 1951 in Vienne (France), worked in footwear and was an ARF member. He emphasized the single-mindedness of the group, its sense of togetherness, and the organization of different actors. He remembered:

What can we do to make a difference... And this idea of marching had been raised, [we said to ourselves] it can't be done, 150 kilometers is too long, we won't find anyone [...]. Why stop us from doing this, since we want to do something to mobilize the Armenian community and draw attention! The idea came from *Nor Seround*, but all the logistics were handled by the CDCA. At the time, the MCA [Maison de la culture arménienne] played a role in the logistics; it is important [...]. Those who took part in the march were grassroots activists, and others transformed it into a meeting [...]. It was a great atmosphere. It was the first time this type of event was staged [...]. There was everything in it: the five-day march, a strong militant act, the possibility of communicating over the long term.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, the march, while peaceful, was radical in its endurance and discipline. It demanded physical efforts—like climbing slopes—and participants suffered from blisters, fatigue, bad weather (cold, snow and wind) and moral resilience.<sup>37</sup> Marching requires perseverance.<sup>38</sup> And so, it was an opportunity to display their solidarity. At the beginning, walkers moved together; then, at other times, they stretched into smaller groups. But on arrival, they walked arm in arm, a gesture as symbolic as it was sincere.

### *Multiple Identities, Chronologies and the Politics of Protests*

The 1979 march allowed Armenian activists to make mourning visible and to bring the memory of the genocide—long silenced—into public view. It struck a delicate yet resonant balance between ritual commemoration and political protest. The march gave voice to multiple and layered identities: French, Armenian, diasporic, and global.<sup>39</sup> As members of a global diaspora, Armenians were deeply influenced by the spirit of the 1970s, a decade

35 Julie Pagis, *Mai 68, un pavé dans leur histoire* (Paris: Presses de Science Po, 2014), 21.

36 Interview with Patrick Tchobopian, June 2019.

37 Tchobopian, “Marche des Arméniens de Lyon,” 24-25.

38 Michel Pigenet and Danielle Tartakowsky, “Les marches en France aux XIXe et XXe siècles: récurrence et métamorphose d'une démonstration collective,” *Le mouvement social* 202, no. 1 (2003): 79, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3780105>.

39 William Safran, “Recent French Conceptualizations of Diaspora,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 12, no. 3 (2003): 437-441, <https://doi.org/10.1353/dsp.2011.0032>.

steeped in protest and transnational solidarity. Their French identity expressed itself both in the decision to stage the march within national borders and in their use of the French language for placards, media outreach, and banners they carried articulated demands for justice and truth: “Justice for the Armenian people,” or “The Turkey must recognize and condemn the Armenian Genocide,” or “The UN in the pay of the great powers.” The placards also read: “France with us at the UN,” or “The UN must recognize the Armenian Genocide,” or “March of the Armenians Lyon/Geneva.” Marchers carried Armenian flags (red, blue, and orange) of the republic of 1918-1920, asserting both memory and identity, sang *Haratch Nahadag* [Onward, Martyr], the anthem of Armenian volunteer fighters, and of *Homenetmen*, a sports association affiliated with the ARF.

As members of a diaspora, scattered all around the world, Armenian activists were navigating and merging multiple chronologies. The very term “march” carries rich symbolic significance: in France, it recalls the revolutionary march of Parisian women to Versailles in 1789. Within Armenian diasporic memory, the march evoked the trauma of forced exile and the uprooting of a historically agrarian people—who, having fled the Ottoman Empire, were resettled largely in urban France. It conjured up images of forced exile. Symbolically, marchers were creating a territory of conquest. In India, Gandhi’s Salt March challenged colonial authority; in the United States, the civil rights marches led by Martin Luther King in the 1960s defined the moral consciousness of a generation. In this way, the 1979 march became a symbolic act of rerouting—a re-appropriation of space and narrative. Locally in Lyon, it resonated with recent activism, such as the hunger strike staged by the ARF in February 1979, in support of dissident movements within Soviet Armenia, which lasted a couple of days and was non-violent. The march on its own didn’t have much of an impact. It succeeded because it was part of a carefully orchestrated strategy of visibility. The walkers physically invested space by crossing through forty-six villages, marking each stop with action. The use of media and other actions put the march on the political agenda. First, the departure of the march outside the local FR3 TV station was deliberately staged to allow a revival of the Armenian Question.<sup>40</sup> Then, a press conference was organized, where the CDCA explained its motives.<sup>41</sup> At each stop, 10,000 brochures and flyers were distributed, and at the final meeting, 1,500 participants gathered to hear public motions. These motions were then sent to the UN in Geneva, French President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, the French Ministry of Foreign-Affairs, and the UN Secretary-General, urging intervention in the upcoming vote on the Genocide report. The event was widely covered in both regional and national press, including *Libération* and *Le Figaro*.<sup>42</sup> As Robert Tchobolian, an ARF member and brother of marcher Patrick Tchobolian, born in 1946 in Vienne and who also worked in footwear, recalled:

The march was within the framework of paragraph thirty, it concerned

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40 Tchobolian, “Marche des Arméniens de Lyon,” 24-25.

41 Ibid.

42 *Haratch*, 27 February 1979.

everyone, in a way, it concerned the Armenian cause, in the sense that it was about the genocide, the recognition of the genocide [...]. It was something that raised a lot of awareness in the community. There, there was no difficulty—if you wanted it—in being able to mobilize the community around it [...]. The march was to last a while, at least a week, if not more. So every day, at each stopping point, there was a reception by the local municipality, there were articles in the press, it was something we had wanted, like something that was going crescendo, which then ended at the Swiss border in Saint-Julien-en-Genevois.<sup>43</sup>

The march, paired with its media strategy, community outreach, and symbolic power, became a turning point in how the Armenian diaspora framed its past and asserted its demands. It channeled inherited grief into collective action and localized a global struggle for recognition.

## The Role of Demonstrations and Grassroot Activism in Influencing French Political Spheres

### *The Particularities of Lyon*

At the national scale, there is a history of France's strident criticism of Ottoman massacres since the end of the 19th century. The Armenian Question had long mobilized French intellectuals, including Jean Jaurès, who took a stand against the massacres of Armenians as early as 1896: "Les odieux massacres d'Arménie" [The Appalling Massacres in Armenia].<sup>44</sup> However, micro-analysis is essential to understand the impact of local activism—particularly in the Rhône-Alpes region. First, Lyon's proximity to Geneva, the seat of the United Nations, positioned it uniquely for transnational connections. This geographic advantage encouraged international involvement.<sup>45</sup> Also, one of the CDCA activists, Varoujan Attarian,<sup>46</sup> a physics researcher born in 1933, was a high-level public employee across the border in Geneva. Armenian migration to France in the 1920s initially settled in Marseille before moving to the Rhône Valley, to Lyon and other cities, then on to Paris. In Lyon, many Armenians would find employment in the silk industry, which fostered communal ties and continuity of traditions—conditions that strengthened the presence and influence of the ARF. By contrast, Armenian communities in Paris were

43 Interview with Robert Tchobolian, February 2019.

44 Vincent Duclert, *La France face au génocide des Arméniens* (Paris: Fayard, 2015), 146.

45 AN. 20030072/2. Situation des communautés arméniennes en France par implantation géographique, Communauté, Études régionales, Rhône-Alpes. Rapport des RG, C-69-H. E.ECJ/N° 40/ 2/BN: "Étude sur la communauté arménienne," 4 février 1983.

46 Varoujan Attarian, *Le génocide des Arméniens devant l'ONU* (Paris: Complexe, 1984), 59.

more fragmented by competing factions. Moreover, the Rhône-Alpes region also fostered cultural rootedness through symbolic infrastructure. Some cities had created houses of Armenian culture (Maison de la culture arménienne, mentioned by activist Patrick), spaces for intertwining memory, civic life, and political engagement. In Décines, for example, a town close to Lyon and home of a strong Armenian community, the 1972 naming of rue du 24 avril—April 24 street—a street commemorating the genocide, marked a significant moment in public recognition. Historian Boris Adjemian refers to this phenomenon as “Memorial Municipalism,” the use of urban public space to inscribe collective identity and historical trauma.<sup>47</sup> The participants would interconnect their lives, their works, their relationships, Armenian places, like the church, and their activism. In return, these articulations determined specific configurations. Activists were rooted in the host society.<sup>48</sup>

### *The Connections between the ARF and the French Socialist Party*

A second key factor in the impact of these demonstrations was the network of political alignments between ARF members and the French Socialist Party (PS), especially in cities with socialist mayors. The ARF, part of the Socialist International since 1907, is rooted in non-Marxist socialism emphasizing adaptability and pluralism. Its enduring influence across the diaspora stems from this ideological flexibility and its capacity to embody the expectations of all Armenians to resolve the Armenian Question. It allows activists to draw upon multiple political traditions while remaining centered on the Armenian cause. In France during the 1970s, 90% of Armenians (of the 103 activists whom interviewed) identified as socialists. This was not merely a result of ideological alignment but also of strategic affinity—France’s socialist infrastructure provided fertile ground for advancing the Armenian cause. In Lebanon, for example, the ARF was more conservative. As for protest practices, they were left to the free choice of the sections. The socialism of the ARF is based on global, malleable values, that could be viewed as similar to those of the Socialist Party in France.<sup>49</sup> The French Socialist Party itself mirrored the ARF’s capacity for ideological plasticity. As political scientists have noted, the Socialist Party often functioned as a “catch-all” party,<sup>50</sup> responsive to social transformation and capable of absorbing new actors and agendas. Both the ARF and PS emphasized values like social justice, worker emancipation, and humanism, principles that had been institutionalized in the short-lived Armenian republic of 1918–1920 through initiatives such as universal suffrage and the eight-hour workday.<sup>51</sup> The ideological axis of the French Socialist Party is

47 Boris Adjemian, *Les Petites Arménies de la vallée du Rhône* (Lyon: Éditions Lieux dits, 2020), 216.

48 Khachig Tololyan, “Restoring the Logic of the Sedentary to Diaspora Studies,” in *Les Diasporas. 2000 ans d’histoire*, eds. Lisa Anteby-Yemini, William Berthomière, and Gabriel Sheffer (Rennes: PUR, 2005), 137.

49 Frédéric Sawicki, “Les socialistes,” in *Histoire des gauches en France*, vol. 2, eds. Jean-Jacques Becker and Gilles Candar (Paris: La Découverte, 2004), 31.

50 Gilles Morin, “Les socialistes et la société française, réseaux et milieux (1905-1981),” *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d’histoire* 96, no. 4 (2007): 52-53.

51 Sawicki, “Les socialistes,” 31.

not rigid, and its values lend themselves easily to reformulation, in line with the ARF.

Another feature shared by the Socialist Party and the ARF is that both had multiplied their networks to extend their sphere of influence and were marked by an ability to bounce back and be joined by new actors. These shared ideals enabled the formation of local alliances. Armenian activists collaborated closely with socialist mayors such as Louis Mermaz in Vienne (elected 1971) and Charles Hernu in Villeurbanne (elected 1977), both influential PS members and future ministers during the presidency of François Mitterrand. Roughly a third of interviewees were PS members based in Décines, Vienne, and Villeurbanne. The Socialists' regional victories in the 1977 municipal elections and the 1978 general elections further solidified this alliance.

These connections bore tangible political outcomes. Since 1978, Socialist officials routinely joined April 24 genocide commemorations in Lyon, delivering public speeches condemning Turkey's denial. In one notable example, Mayor Hernu, who would become Minister of Defense in 1981, declared in 1978 that international institutions had not yet condemned Turkey and that France should recognize the genocide.<sup>52</sup> That same year, Armenian activists were invited to participate in the Socialist Party Congress in Isère—alongside Greek and Chilean delegations. These alliances were essential, they granted the group respectability, which reassured the community, which became aware of its collective power and provided them with a dynamic image. Many second- and third-generation Armenians were French citizens, no longer seen as outsiders but as an emerging electoral bloc. Their integration into municipal political life gave them both voice and visibility.

### *A Political Group United by Its Leader*

As a final point, the leader of a tight-knit ARF group in Lyon, Jules Mardirossian, a company manager and member of the ARF and the French Socialist Party, born in 1938 in Vienne, contributed to the dynamism of Lyon-based militance. Both internal and external sources agree: he was, according to a police report, a "prominent mouthpiece" of the party. "He oversaw various missions in Armenian associations and organizations in Lyon [...]. He enjoyed undisputed authority in the community."<sup>53</sup> Vahé, an ARF member born in 1943 in Trevoux (a small town 25 kilometers north to Lyon), who participated in the final meeting of the 1979 march, described the group as "united by his leader."<sup>54</sup> The activist core, who took part in the final meeting, was socially cohesive and was bonded by deep internal links dating back to their student years in the late 1960s; many were members of the Union des étudiants arméniens d'Europe (UEAE). They intentionally

52 AN, 20030072/5, *Commémoration annuelle de l'anniversaire du génocide arménien du 24 avril 1915, anniversaire du génocide de 1978, Lyon*, Ministère de l'Intérieur, Direction générale de la police nationale, DCRG, "Informations générales et étrangers, commémoration du génocide du 24 avril 1915," April 25, 1978.

53 AN. 20030072/1. Communautés et organisations (1970-1999), notes sur la communauté arménienne en France (1970-1988). Fiche des RG, 1 July 1985.

54 Interview with Vahé Muradian, October 2017.

settled in the same neighborhood in different cities in the Rhône-Alpes region, reinforcing daily solidarity and proximity. They were highly integrated into French society and could negotiate easily with the local political elite. As Isabelle, a potter and ARF member, born in 1955 in Épinay-sur-Seine, recalled: “they could speak as equals with politicians.”<sup>55</sup> Jules Mardirossian himself put it succinctly: “Nothing resisted us, we were so complementary.”<sup>56</sup> Interview testimonies consistently highlighted this camaraderie: collegial decision-making, the joy of shared action, and the sense of purpose anchored in friendship. These trusted networks accounted for the success of the 1979 march and the longevity of Armenian activism in Lyon.

## Conclusion

Though a single street protest rarely changes history, sustained and diversified activism sometimes does. The 1979 Lyon march sparked similar initiatives worldwide. On 24 April 1981, 130 *Nor Seround* activists organized a 200-kilometer march from Montreal to Ottawa, which culminated in clashes with police. In France, the famed 1983 *Marche contre le racisme* from Marseille to Paris also drew heavily from Lyon-based networks. And globally, mass demonstrations—like the 1989 Baltic human chain—signaled a broader era of performative, spatial protest.

On 16 March 1979, the question of reintroducing paragraph 30 was raised at the UN Human Rights Sub-Commission, and the session ended with a compromise, leaving hope for change. Two years later, in 1981, the Socialist Party in France won both the presidential and general elections, and all the above-mentioned mayors were promoted to top jobs in the government. This had the effect of boosting the effective lobbying of the ARF. On Saturday, 7 January 1984, during Armenian Christmas celebrated the day before, François Mitterrand, the French Socialist president, publicly used the “G word” in the French town of Vienne, home to an Armenian community, for the first time.<sup>57</sup> In August 1985, the UN Sub-Commission reinserted the term Armenian Genocide thanks to a new rapporteur, Benjamin Whitaker.<sup>58</sup> All this paved the way for the official recognition by the European Parliament in 1987 and the official recognition in France in 2001.

The 1979 march helped mainstream the Armenian Question, linking memory with protest and local space with international justice. It marked a pivotal moment in the transition from communal mourning to human rights discourse, reshaping not just the *chronology* but the *performative function* of diasporic mobilization. In the years that followed, the Armenian presence in the Rhône-Alpes region diversified. Activists of 1979 symbolically “*Armenized*” the landscape—transforming rural roads and urban

55 Interview with Isabelle Bédikian, January 2019.

56 Interview with Jules Mardirossian, August 2017.

57 *Arménia*, no. 81 (1984): 6-7.

58 “La première victoire des Arméniens à l’ONU,” *Arménia*, no. 95 (1985): 6-8.

neighborhoods into sites of remembrance and resistance. By appropriating space at the local level, they catalyzed ripple effects across France and the global diaspora.



**Patrick Tchobonian's photo**, third or fourth day of the march



**Patrick Tchobonian's photo**, last day (just before the gathering at the Swiss border)

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