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BETWEEN THE LOCAL AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH: DIASPORA'S POLITICS FOR THE RECOGNITION OF THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE IN ARGENTINA 1965-2015

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Historiography has analyzed the recognition of the Armenian genocide using cultural and geopolitical coordinates belonging to both Western and Non-Western societies. However, the North-South dimension of this event and its effect on the diaspora has been neglected by most of the approaches taken by Armenian studies. In this article, I will analyze how the Armenian diaspora in Argentina advocated for recognition of the Armenian genocide from 1965 to 2015. This community is not only significant in terms of population - it is the largest in the Global South - but also because its contribution to the struggle for remembrance and recognition of the Armenian genocide is unique. Argentina is one of the few countries in which the genocide has been recognized by the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. In this article, I will analyze the specific dynamics of the Armenian-Argentine community's local activism and its contribution to the global recognition of the genocide.¹ The commemoration on April 24 in the official Argentine calendar, the recognition of the extermination of Armenians as genocide by Francis I, Roman Catholicism's first Argentinean Pope, demonstrate the importance of the interaction between the local and global.

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¹ For the recognition of the genocide in Latin America see Hayk Paronyan, Marvelio Alfaro Matos and Rogelio Meléndez Carbadillo, "El Genocidio armenio y su reconocimiento en América Latina," *Revista Dilemas contemporáneos: Educación, Política y Valores*, Mexico 8, no. 3 (2021). For the Armenian-Argentine community's local activism and its contribution to the global recognition of the genocide see *El derrumbe del negacionismo. Leandro Despouy, el Informe Whitaker y el aporte argentino al reconocimiento internacional del Genocidio de los armenios*, ed. Khatchik Derghougassian (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 2009).

The Armenian Diaspora between the Local and Global

The academic production on the Armenian Diaspora in Argentina has been less extensive than the large number of books and articles on other groups that emigrated to the country.² Narciso Binayan Carmona's 1974 book, *The Armenian Community in Argentina*, was one of the first published works that provided a narrative and met some academic standards. It also attempted to go beyond what were then the prevailing narratives, most of which were non-professional.³ During the 1980s, the works of the sociologist Beatriz Balian and psychologist Eva Tabakian dealt with the assimilation of this community to Argentine society.⁴ During that decade, and also during the nineteen nineties, some academic works - which employed a traditional perspective on migration studies - focused on the chronological tracking of events having to do with the arrival and adjustment of Armenians in Argentina.⁵ In the early nineteen nineties, American researcher Kim Hekimian also made a valuable contribution by examining the South American Armenian Diaspora as a case study.⁶ During that same decade, Eduardo Karsacian published a study that emphasized the importance of community educational establishments in Argentina.⁷ In addition to this research paper on Armenian schools, several authors - such as Libertad Telecemian - have researched the genocide's traumatic effects.⁸ In the new millennium, the contributions of the historian Brisa Varela - who does not belong to the Armenian community - have enriched historiographical discourse by problematizing the uses of memory and the construction of community spaces.⁹ In 2011, Vartan Matiossian published a book, which included detailed archival work and new conceptual tools with which to discuss and generate interpretations of the characteristics of the Armenian Diaspora in Argentina.¹⁰

The majority of the Armenians who arrived in Argentina became part of the global Diaspora because of the Armenian Genocide.¹¹ I will use the definition put forth by researcher

2 For an analysis on the historiographical production on the topic see Nélide Boulgourdjian, "Evolución de los estudios armenios en la Argentina," *Revista Espacios de crítica y producción* 51 (2015): 57-66.

3 Narciso Binayan Carmona, *La colectividad armenia en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Alzamor editores, 1974). From the same author, *Entre el pasado y el futuro: los armenios en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: n.p., 1996).

4 Beatriz Balian de Tagtachian "Inserción de la colectividad armenia en la Argentina: un estudio de dirigentes," in *Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas de la Facultad de Ciencias Sociales y Económicas de la Universidad Católica* (1981). Eva Tabakian, *Los armenios en Argentin* (Buenos Aires, 1989).

5 Nélide Boulgourdjian-Toufeksian, "*Los armenios en Buenos Aires*": *la reconstrucción de la identidad (1900-1950)* (Buenos Aires: Centro Armenio, 1997).

6 Kim Hekimian, "Armenian Immigration to Argentina, 1909-1938," *Armenian Review* 43, no. 1 (1990): 85-113.

7 Eduardo Karsacian, "Escuelas armenias de Buenos Aires: análisis de sus programas de estudio," *Los armenios en America del Sur*, ed. Vartan Matiossian (Buenos Aires: Primeras jornadas de estudio, 1991).

8 Azaduhí Libertad Telecemian, "Alcances del Genocidio en la colectividad armenia de la Argentina," in *Los armenios en America del Sur*. On memory also see, Rita Kuyumciyan, *El primer genocidio del siglo XX. Regreso de la memoria armenia* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 2009).

9 Brisa Varela, *Geografías de la Memoria Lugares, desarraigos y reconstitución identitaria en situación de Genocidio* (La Plata: UNLP, 2008).

10 Vartan Matiossian, *Pasado sin Retorno, Futuro que espera, Los armenios en la Argentina, ayer y hoy* (Mon-tevideo: Ediciones ASCUA, 2011).

11 On the Armenian Genocide see Donald Bloxham, *The Great Game of Genocide. Imperialism, Nationalism and the Destruction of Ottoman Armenians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Raymond. Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide a Complete History* (London and New York: Tauris, 2011); Ronald Suny, *They Can*

Gabriel Sheffer, who states that: “Modern Diasporas are ethnic minorities groups of migrant origins that residing and acting in host countries, but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with their countries of origin - their homelands.”¹² The traumatic effects of the genocide and the search for justice on behalf of the Armenian cause must also be added to this definition. Those individuals who belonged to Argentina’s Armenian minority arrived after completing a lengthy journey that often included a few months spent in places like Greece, Lebanon, or France.¹³ Thus, many families were scattered throughout the world, in places such as the United States, Canada, Brazil, or Uruguay. The oldest Armenian settlements were located in the Middle East in places like Lebanon, which, due to its proximity to the ancient Armenian territories, became a center for the global Diaspora. These settlements used churches, schools and representatives belonging to different political parties to build their community institutions. A large proportion of Armenians settled also in the United States, especially in California and in various locations on the East Coast, such as New York and Boston.¹⁴ As for the world beyond the Americas, France has the largest Armenian community in Europe: it is located largely in cities like Paris, Lyon and Marseille. In Latin America, the principal destination for Armenian migrants were countries of the Southern Cone: Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay. However, in other parts of Latin America, the Diaspora also has a presence: thus, in smaller numbers, we can find members of the Armenian Diaspora in Chile, Mexico, and Venezuela.

Armenians in Argentina

Armenians first began to arrive in Buenos Aires in the late nineteenth century. According to Matiossian, in 1907, a small group of them founded the first Armenian institution in Argentina: the Chamjlu Village Society for Education, which, though charitable contributions, enabled the functioning of a girls’ school in that village, located in what was then the Ottoman Empire.¹⁵ On the other hand, in 1912, the community celebrated their first mass in Buenos Aires - the first in South America - and founded the first parish organization of the Armenian Apostolic Church.¹⁶ Matiossian’s study, which used the 1923 internal census of Buenos Aires that was carried out by the Armenian Colonial Center, indicates 46.69 percent came from the region of Cilicia, 30 percent from Aleppo - in modern Syria - and 19.4 percent from Cappadocia.¹⁷ The author also includes a statement made in 1931 by the pastor of

Live in the Desert and Nowhere Else. A History of the Armenian Genocide (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015); Taner Akçam, *Killing Orders, Talat Pasha's Telegrams and the Armenian Genocide* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

12 Gabriel Sheffer, “A New Field of Study: Modern Diasporas in International Politics,” in *Modern Diasporas in International Politics*, ed. Gabriel Scheffer (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 3.

13 Juan Pablo Artinian, “La resistencia de los sobrevivientes armenios en la Argentina. A 100 años del genocidio armenio,” *Todo es Historia* (2015): 28-31.

14 Anny Bakalian, *Armenian-Americans. From Being to Feeling Armenian* (New Brunswick and London: Transactions Publishers, 1993).

15 Matiossian, *Pasado sin Retorno*, 58-59.

16 *Ibid.*, 59.

17 *Ibid.*, 69-70.

the Armenian Apostolic Church, Hovhannes Amiriántz, who indicated that more than half of the community was made up of people from Hadjin, Aintab, and Marash.¹⁸

For the most part, the Armenians who settled in Argentina took up residence in the city of Buenos Aires. They also settled in suburbs of the city. At the same time, other Armenians gravitated toward other areas of the country, such as the province of Córdoba and the city of Rosario. Vartan Matiossian explains that prior to 1915, between 2,000 and 3,000 Armenians arrived to the country. The devastating effects of the genocide, the frustrated Armenian Republic of 1918 (and its subsequent Sovietization) and Kemal Atatürk's attempt to annihilate the survivors in Asia Minor in the early nineteen twenties determined the shape that the flow of Armenians arriving to Argentina would take.¹⁹ Furthermore, the restrictions on immigration imposed by the United States government drove many of them to the coastal regions of South America.²⁰

Memory and Generations: from 1965 to the 1980s

As the Armenian genocide receded into history, the memories of the genocide, which had once circulated only in the private sphere, began to crystallize into various rituals and ways of remembering.²¹ In 1965, a global call for recognition of the genocide emerged, and this proved to be a pivotal moment in the process of recognition. Argentina was no exception: in a place where political instability and economic crises recurred, the Armenian community created a cultural framework and increased their visibility. Some of its members participated in national political life, while others had important roles in its economic and cultural activities. During the last military dictatorship (1976-1983), 22 Armenians disappeared because of state terrorism.

Since 1983, and with the return of democratic governments, the Armenian community in Argentina has initiated several changes. Thus, rather than emphasize key markers of difference - language and participation in community's institutions, such as the Armenian Orthodox church - the 1980s saw a turn towards the notion of a subjective identity. Thus, a sort of hybrid identity came into being during this period, in which certain subjective factors prevailed in ideas about identity. Along these lines, the researcher Khachig Tololyan affirms that: "the affiliation happens to replace the filiation."²² Therefore, the redefinition of "Armenianism" also featured elements of hybridization with the Argentinian local cultural and political environment.²³ In this new political atmosphere, the Armenian community in

18 Ibid., 70.

19 Ibid, 60.

20 In 1924 the Johnson-Reed Act was passed in 1924 that established "quotas" of income by national origin in the United States, closing doors for immigration from eastern and southern Europe.

21 On rituals and memory of the Armenian genocide in Argentina see Lucila Tossounian, "Usos del pasado: el '24 de Abril' como ritual conmemorativo," in *Genocidios del siglo XX y formas de la negación. Actas del III Encuentro sobre Genocidio*, eds. Nélica Boulgourdjian, Juan Carlos Toufeksian y Carlos Alemian (Buenos Aires: Centro Armenio, 2003).

22 Khachig Tololyan, "Rethinking *Diaspora(s)*: Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment," *Diaspora: a Journal of Transnational Studies* 5, no. 1 (1996):3-36.

23 On the concept of hybridization see the classic work by Hommi. K Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994). For the idea of hybridization and the Armenian diaspora in western societies see Razmik Panossian, *The Armenians. From King to Merchants and Commissars* (New York: Columbia Uni-

Argentina learned specific lessons from the success of Human Rights movements in Argentina. Also, Argentinian intellectuals and public figures sympathized with the cause of the campaign for the recognition of the Armenian genocide. A number of events in the historical record demonstrate this engagement. In 1984, in Paris, the Permanent Peoples Court, created in 1979 by the Italian senator Lelio Basso, debated the genocidal nature of the massacres of the Armenians. The jury heard arguments from a group of academics, including Tessa Hoffman, Richard Hovannisian, Christopher J. Walker, Jirair Libaridian, and Yves Ternon, as well as others who represented the Turkish state. The court, which included three Nobel Laureates - among them the Argentine Adolfo Pérez Esquivel - recognized the systematic killings of 1915 as a genocide. Another example of the engagement of Argentinian political figures occurred in August 1985, when the UN Subcommittee on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities approved - after intense debate - its report on Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. One of its members, Benjamin Whitaker, presented a report that in its twenty-fourth paragraph indicated that the Ottomans had committed a genocide against the Empire's Armenian minority. The pressures of the Turkish government were felt throughout the deliberation process in Geneva, but the experts - among them the Argentine Leandro Despouy - did not yield to them.²⁴ The precedent of the text, popularly known as the "Whitaker Report" once again made the question of the systematic extermination of Armenians a public issue. After these two instances of recognition, in 1987 the Armenian community of Argentina scored a landmark victory not just in a domestic political context but also at a global level when President Raúl Alfonsín officially proclaimed that the events that had begun in 1915 were indeed genocidal in nature.

From 20th to 21st century: Recognition of the Armenian Genocide in Argentina

The echoes of international events would also have repercussions in South America's Armenian community. The end of the Cold War redefined both political divisions and the ways that one could belong to a diaspora. In 1991 - in an unprecedented series of events - the Soviet Union collapsed and Armenia declared independence. A new historical moment marked by war, economic difficulties and future uncertainties shaped a new dynamic between the diaspora and a young Armenian nation-state. Even in this new era, the diaspora's struggle for recognition and justice continued throughout the world.

During this century, the efforts made by the local Diaspora have achieved a three-part success in Argentina - making it a unique case. Following the aforementioned presidential recognition of the genocide, the parliamentary and judicial branches of the Argentine government officially recognized the Armenian genocide.²⁵ In 2007, a law passed Argentina's congress declared April 24 to be "Day of Action for Tolerance and Respect between Peoples in Commemoration of the Genocide Suffered by the Armenian People."²⁶ Also during the

versity Press, 2006), 307.

24 On Despouy see Fabián Bosoer and Florencia Terruzzi, "Leandro Despouy. Trayectoria del Jurista Argentino que llegó a Ginebra," in *El derrumbe del negacionismo*, 65-155.

25 Juan Pablo Artinian, "El Genocidio Armenio 100 años después: Verdad, Memoria y Justicia desde América Latina" en *Cuadernos de Coyuntura*, UBA Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, primer cuatrimestre, 2015.

26 Law 26.199 of the Argentinian Parliament, January 11, 2011.

new century -thanks to the effort of different institutions and individuals of the Armenian community-both the Argentine government and the City of Buenos Aires published textbooks destined to teachers of national and district schools on the Armenian Genocide. Furthermore, several universities held academic conferences on the topic: one example of those conferences was the one at National University of Tres de Febrero in 2014. Also, the Center for Genocide Studies of the aforementioned university launched a collection with several books on the Armenian Genocide.

In the first years of the twenty-first century, inspired by a legal precedent set by the Argentine human right moment, a descendant of an Armenian family settled in Argentina initiated a legal process to assert his right to learn the truth about what happened to his relatives in 1915.²⁷ Finally, in 2011, after ten years had passed, a federal court ruled that the murder, torture and deportation that occurred in 1915 constituted a genocide by the Turkish state.²⁸

Thus, historiography has analyzed the recognition of the Armenian genocide using cultural and geopolitical coordinates belonging to both Western and Non-Western societies. However, the North-South dimension of this event and its effect on the diaspora has been neglected by most of the approaches taken by Armenian studies. In this article, I have argued that the specific dynamics of the Armenian community's local activism made a unique contribution to the campaign for the global recognition of the genocide possible. Argentina is one of the few countries in the world that has recognized the Armenian genocide by way of the executive, legislative and judicial branches of its government. Last but not least, in 2015 an Argentine pope, Francis I, formerly known as Cardinal Bergoglio, declared that the extermination of the Armenians was the first genocide of the twentieth century. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to reconsider the importance of the contributions made in the Global South and the need for strengthened ties between the diaspora's Northern and Southern outposts, as well as for stronger links between the diaspora, Armenia, Arstakh and Latin America in the new millennium.

²⁷ On the legal process see Federico Gaitan Hairabedian and Valeria Thus, "El juicio por el derecho a la verdad del Genocidio Armenio. Herramientas contra la negación, por la verdad y la justicia," *Bordes, Revista de Política, Derecho y Sociedad* 2 no. 8 (2018): 193-220.

²⁸ For more details see, Roberto Malkassian, "Una sentencia que hace historia," *Archivos del Presente, Revista Latinoamericana de Temas Internacionales* 15, no. 55 (2011): 83-117.