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MEDZ YEGHERN, THE SILENCED NAME: LANGUAGE, POLITICS, AND THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

Vartan Matiossian

This study overviews some of the issues surrounding the use, abuse, and misuse of *Medz Yeghern*, the most common proper name for the genocide of the Armenian, tracing the genealogy of the term *yeghern* and the evolution of its primary meaning from “evil” to “(heinous) crime,” “massacre,” and “genocide” over the past century and half. An erudite conflation of the Classical Armenian homophone words *yeghern* (եղեռն, “evil, crime”) and *yegher* (եղիլ, “lamentation”) in the nineteenth century resulted in the secondary meaning “tragedy, calamity, catastrophe.” It also marked the conflation of cause and consequence in a single word, despite the use of *yeghern* accompanied by active verbs only, which indicates cause. The use of *Medz Yeghern*, therefore, point out to the central role of the perpetrator; the word *yeghern* has been used to translate “cultural genocide” and “genocide recognition” as synonym to *tseghasbanutiun* (ցեղասպանություն). This ambiguity was exploited during the first two decades of the current century, especially in Turkey and the United States. Interpretive denial adopted the name *Medz Yeghern* to avoid the use of “genocide,” choosing the meanings “Great Catastrophe” and “Great Calamity” and turning the cause into consequence. The article offers a reconsideration of the semantic and political issues behind the use of *Medz Yeghern* and suggests, on the basis of linguistic evidence, that the literal translation of the proper name, according to context and time of use, should be “Great (Heinous) Crime” or “Great Genocide.”

Keywords: *Medz Yeghern*, genocide, Armenian Genocide, denial, semantics, crime, relation of cause and consequence

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Introduction

The annihilation of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire was a searing open wound when Bertha Sullivan Papazian pointed out to its symbolic representation in 1918: “How shall we name the dastardly crime which robbed them of life and homeland? How shall we describe that catastrophe?”¹

This study will overview some of the issues surrounding the use, abuse, and misuse of *Medz Yeghern* (Մեծ Եղեռն, Great [Heinous] Crime), the most common proper name for the genocide of the Armenians, which also had the variant *Abrilean Yeghern* (Ապրիլեան

1 Bertha S. Papazian, *The Tragedy of Armenia: A Brief Study and Interpretation* (Boston and Chicago: The Pilgrim Press, 1918), 112.

Եղիւն, April [Heinous] Crime), almost discontinued nowadays. It entails the testimony of an eloquent but neglected survivor, the Armenian language, whose evidence sheds light over the misrepresentation of facts and words in the politics of genocide.

It is noteworthy that in November 1918, the first issue of the newspaper *Artaramard*, organ of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), evoked in Constantinople the editorial board of its predecessor *Azatamart*, arrested and exiled to death on April 24-25, 1915, as victim of “the [Heinous] Crime of Crimes [*Yeghernneru Yeghern*],”² thirty years before Raphael Lemkin characterized genocide as “the crime of crimes” that “must be treated as the most heinous of all crimes.”³

Armenian instrumentalization for the goal of recognition has subsumed the generic legal denomination “genocide” into the formula “Armenian Genocide,” which discounts the unique characteristics of the annihilation of 1915. “Today, [Armenians] are using a common name as a proper name. They do not respect the identity of the Event that has shaped them for the past 80 years. They do not respect their own memory of the Event,” has observed Marc Nichanian.⁴

Several questions are at the core of the issue:

1. What does the common name *yeghern* mean?
2. Does *Medz Yeghern* explicitly point to the perpetrator’s central role or implicitly leave the executing agent out?
3. Is there a direct relationship between *Medz Yeghern* and genocide?

This study summarizes some of the findings of my recent book,⁵ which may be subsumed into the following answers:

1. Languages abound in words that have changed their meaning over time. The primary meaning of *yeghern* (evil > crime > massacre > genocide) indicates cause.
2. Since *yeghern* indicates cause, then *Medz Yeghern* points out to the central role of the perpetrator.
3. *Yeghern* and *tseghasbanutiun*/ցեղասպանութիւն (“genocide”) have become synonyms. The use of *yeghern* in the phrases “cultural genocide” (մշակութային եղիւն, *mshagutayin yeghern*) and “genocide recognition” (եղիւնի ճանաչում, *yegherni janachum*) for instance, supports their interchangeable nature. The literal translation of

2 *Artaramard*, 20 November 1918. See the use of *Yeghernneru Yeghern* in the book review by Hagop Oshagan, «Մեր խաչը (Տր. Մ. Սալբի)» [Our Cross, by Dr. M. Salpi], *Djakatamart*, 17 October 1921. It also appeared in the gruesome description of the ordeal of a group of Armenian women in Malatia, where “the heinous crime of crimes [*yeghernneru yeghern*] was committed” (Bedros Bondatsi, «Եղիւնային հարսանիք», in «Երևան»ի տարեգիրք [“Criminal Wedding” in Yerevan Yearly], Constantinople: Yerevan, 1920, 30). Thanks are due to Lerna Ekmekcioğlu for this reference.

3 Raphael Lemkin, “Genocide as a Crime under International Law,” *UN Bulletin*, 15 January 1948, 70.

4 David Kazanjian and Marc Nichanian, “Between Genocide and Catastrophe,” in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, eds. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (California: University of California Press, 2003), 127.

5 Vartan Matiossian, *The Politics of Naming the Armenian Genocide: Language, History, and ‘Medz Yeghern’* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2022). The adjective *medz* may be elided as native speakers frequently do, with *Yeghern* standing alone for the sake of brevity.

Medz Yeghern, according to context and time, may be either “Great (Heinous) Crime” or “Great Genocide.”

The historical facts of the Armenian annihilation document exhaustively all five acts enunciated in article 2 of the Genocide Convention that are “committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, any national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, as such,” from killing members of the group (clause a) to forcibly transferring children to another group (clause e). Its perpetration three decades before Raphael Lemkin’s coinage of genocide shows that the issue belongs more to language than to sociology.⁶

During the first two decades of the current century, *Medz Yeghern* was the subject of extensive interpretive denial, a process that acknowledges the existence of facts, but introduces a different set of views through euphemism, technical jargon, or word change, re-allocating the meaning given to an event to a different type of event.⁷ Three key episodes should be mentioned, although they did not resemble each other in their details: Pope John Paul II’s visit to Armenia (2001), the Turkish apology campaign (2008-2009), and the “Armenian Remembrance Day” statements of U.S. presidents George W. Bush (2003, 2005), Barack Obama (2009-2017), and Donald Trump (2017-2020). Except for discourse analysis of the statements by Bush and Obama, the politics surrounding the name has not been addressed by the scholarship.⁸ It is hardly accidental that the instrumentalization of *Medz Yeghern* was recorded in Turkey, the country that practices denial as state policy, and the United States, the country where a veneer of self-righteousness fails to cover the preeminence of power politics in American-Turkish relations.

John Paul II prayed in 2001 for God to listen “to the call of the dead from the depths of the *Metz Yeghern*” at the memorial of Tsitsernakaberd in Yerevan. The prayer was contextualized within his own recognition of the genocide, and his successors Benedict XVI and Francis explicitly used the translation “Great Evil,” even though “Great Crime” was also widely recorded. In the wake of the Pope’s visit, however, media reporting gave primacy to translations of *yeghern* like “catastrophe,” “calamity,” “disaster,” or “tragedy” without further elaboration or acknowledgment for their source.

The mentions of “Great Calamity” in George W. Bush’s statements of 2003 and 2005, which their official Armenian translations rendered as *Medz Yeghern*, laid the logical groundwork for the statement of the Turkish apology campaign in late 2008. The latter adopted the major premise *Medz Yeghern* = *Büyük Felâket* = “Great Catastrophe,” which

6 Irving Louis Horowitz, *Genocide: State Power and Mass Murder* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1977), 183.

7 Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 8.

8 Vicky Tchapanian, “The Armenian Genocide in American Presidency Discourses from George W. Bush to Barack Obama: A Political Discourse Analysis Study,” *Haigazian Armenological Review* 34 (2014): 221–56; Suren Zolyan, *ԱՄՆ նախագահների Հայոց ցեղասպանության մասին (խուսա՛նալիղ դիսկուրսի իմաստա-գործարանական վերլուծություն)* [American Presidents on the Armenian Genocide: The Semantic and Pragmatic Analysis of the Evasionist Discourse] (Yerevan: Limush, 2015), 40–82; idem, “How Not to Do Things with the Word: Barack Obama on the Armenian Genocide,” *Russian Journal of Linguistics* 1 (2019): 62–82.

minimized agency to the point of its elimination.⁹ The equation involved the minor premise that catastrophes have no legal standing and the obvious conclusion that *Medz Yeghern* does not have it either. It trivialized *Medz Yeghern* (= *Büyük Felâket* / “Great Catastrophe”) in the public discourse as a name that was claimed to reflect the reality lived by the survivors and would have supposedly advanced Turkish-Armenian reconciliation much further due to its “more human, more dignified” character, as imagined by Thomas de Waal,¹⁰ while “genocide” was said to be a term of legal and political contents lacking humanity.

The statement became a forerunner, from a different ideological standpoint, to the discourse of “just memory” and “shared pain” briefly embraced by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) as a variation on continuing denial.

The Turkish misleading use of *Medz Yeghern* and the absence of an Armenian appropriate response became the driving force behind the follow-up: the mention of “Meds Yeghern,” untranslated, in the statements of Barack Obama and Donald Trump, which reflected the conventional wisdom of “Great Calamity” = *Medz Yeghern* at the White House and the Department of State. This silver line of semantics threaded in the upper echelons of government used *Medz Yeghern* without translation as a compromise between genocide and the preferred Turkish formulas, “events of 1915” or the unofficially used “catastrophe.”¹¹

The policy of “no context” adopted by the apology campaign and the presidential statements was matched by the Armenian response of “no contest.” The refusal to consent terms of recognition other than the word “genocide” or the formula “Armenian Genocide” admitted those translations without further question and likened the use of *Medz Yeghern* to plain whitewash without any attempt at owning the name. Remarkably, President Joseph Biden mentioned both “genocide” and *Medz Yeghern* in his statements of 2021 and 2022, and the use of the Armenian name elicited no objections from the Armenian side.

9 See Ayda Erbal, “Mea Culpas, Negotiations, Apologies: Revisiting the ‘Apology’ of Turkish Intellectuals,” in *Reconciliation, Civil Society, and the Politics of Memory: Transnational Initiatives in the 20th Century*, ed. Birgit Schwelling (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2012), 85-86.

10 “Armenian-Turkish Relations by a ‘Historian of the Present,’” *Agos*, 3 February 2017, www.agos.com.tr/en/article/17632/armenian-turkish-relations-by-a-historian-of-the-present, accessed 06.05.2022. De Waal appears to have adopted “Great Catastrophe” (Thomas de Waal, *Armenia and Turkey: Bridging the Gap*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Policy Brief 87, October 2010, 7) following the apology campaign of 2008-2009, preceded by “great calamity” (idem, *The Caucasus: An Introduction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 58) following George W. Bush’s statements of 2003 and 2005. Interestingly, he had originally used “great slaughter” (idem, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 103, crediting Nora Dudwick, “Armenia: Paradise Regained or Lost?,” in *New States, New Policies: Building the Post-Soviet Nations*, eds. Ian Bremmer and Ray Taras (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 475).

11 Tessa Hofmann, “Մեծ էղինն: Das ultimate Verbrechen,” *Pogrom* 6 (2014): 46, 51.

The Dastardly Crime against Humanity

The notion that Ottoman Turkish perpetrators committed a criminal act against Armenian victims has sufficient factual ground to override claims of unsophistication, notwithstanding the demand for a nuanced approach to an extremely complex issue. Incidentally, the concept of “crime against humanity,” which had been previously mentioned since the mid-nineteenth century, was used by three Allied governments for the first time ever in May 1915 to charge another government with its perpetration.

During March-April 1915, the Western Bureau of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) managed to send reports to the Central Committee of the Balkans in Sofia about local massacres and removals of Armenian population before becoming victim of the police roundup of the Armenian political and intellectual elite in Constantinople on April 24-25.¹² On April 18, a summary of those reports was dispatched from Sofia to the Armenian National Bureau in Tiflis (Tbilisi), capital of the viceroyalty of the Caucasus.¹³ Two days later, Gevorg V, Catholicos of All Armenians, cabled Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Sazonov upon the suggestion of Viceroy Ilarion Vorontsov-Dashkov to ask Italy and the United States, the neutral powers, to stop the massacres “for the love of Christianity and humanity.” He also cabled their leaders, King Victor Emmanuel III “in the name of Christian faith and humanity” and President Woodrow Wilson “in the name of humanity and our holy Christian faith.” The Catholicos drafted appeals to President Raymond Poincaré of France “in the name of humanity and Christianity” and King George V of England “in the name of Christianity.”¹⁴

Gevorg V’s cable to Wilson was forwarded by Russian ambassador Georges Bakhmeteff on April 27 and the next day, the Ottoman government tried to mollify American ambassador Henry Morgenthau Sr. and his Italian colleague Eugenio Garroni with claims of having issued orders to protect innocent people and punish disobeying officials.¹⁵ On April 28 and May 5, Sazonov suggested to his French colleague Théophile

12 See Yervant Pambukian (ed.), *Նիւթեր Հ. Յ. Դաշնակցութեան պատմութեան համար* [Materials for the History of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation], vol. 11 (Beirut: Armenian Revolutionary Federation, 2015), 228–242.

13 Letter from the Armenian National Bureau vice-president H. Khununts to Gevorg V, 6/19 April 1915, in *Վաներագրեր Հայ Եկեղեցւոյ պատմութեան* [Documents of the History of the Armenian Church], vol. 13, ed. Sandro Behbutian (Yerevan: Mughni, 2005), 355–356. The date of the document has been misread in the publication as September 6 (September 19 in the Gregorian calendar).

14 Mkrtich Nersisian (ed.), *Геноцид армян в Османской империи. Сборник документов и материалов* [The Genocide of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire: Collection of Documents and Materials] (Yerevan: Hayastan, 1983), 278; «Թիւրք[ական] պատերազմը եւ հայերը» [The Turkish War and the Armenians], *Mshak*, 2 [15] May 1915. The appeals to Victor Emmanuel III and Wilson were sent on April 22 (Yves Ternon, *The Armenians: History of a Genocide*, transl. by Rouben C. Cholakian (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1981), 336; *Boghos Nubar’s Papers and the Armenian Question 1915–1918*, ed. and transl. by Vatche Ghazarian (Waltham: Mayreni, 1996, 17). For a less known appeal by Gevorg V to Wilson in June 1915 “in the name of humanity and our holy Christian fate,” see Simon Payaslian, *United States Policy toward the Armenian Question and the Armenian Genocide* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 95.

15 “Appeal to Turkey to Stop Massacres,” *The New York Times*, 28 April 1915; “Morgenthau Intercedes,” *The New York Times*, 29 April 1915. See Sarafian, *United States Official Records*, 18–9, 22; Zaven Messerlian,

Delcassé to release an Allied statement holding Ottoman officials responsible. Probably on Sazonov's cue, Gevorg V sent his appeals to Poincaré and George V on May 6. Sazonov drew upon their language on May 11 in a draft statement denouncing "these fresh crimes of Turkey against Christianity and civilization." Delcassé and Grey, weary of fallout with Muslim subjects, objected to the use of Christianity.¹⁶ The draft was still in limbo on May 23, when the British Press Bureau surprisingly published an English version of the statement using the expression "these fresh crimes committed by Turkey."¹⁷ After Russia consented to drop or replace her formula, the official statement in French condemned "these new crimes of Turkey against humanity and civilization" on May 24, declaring that all government members and others involved would be held responsible.¹⁸

The orders for regional deportation issued by Interior Minister Mehmet Taleat between May 10 and May 27, 1915, prompted Morgenthau to report to the State Department on May 25 that Ottoman policy was breaking up the Armenians "by wholesale deportation which must deprive them of their ordinary means of livelihood."¹⁹ The news of the Allied statement probably spurred Talat to draft a temporary Law of Deportation (*Tehcir Kanunu*) and send it to Grand Vizier Said Halim on May 26 with a memorandum on the official anxiety aroused by Armenian claims for reforms, which stated that "a radical solution was needed to end and to completely wipe out the problem."²⁰ The draft was signed off by Said Halim and War Minister Ismail Enver the next day. After the formality of cabinet approval on May 30, it became law with its publication in the official journal *Takvim-i-Vekayi* on June 1.

The English translation of the Allied statement was cabled to the U.S. State Department on May 28 and forwarded the next day to Morgenthau, who delivered it to Said Halim on June 3.²¹ The response, on June 4, used a draft provided by the German embassy to deny the existence of massacres; allege Armenian treason, massacres of Muslims, and collusion

Before and after the Armenian Genocide, transl. by Maral O. Sarkissian-Kaloustian (Beirut: Chemaly and Chemaly, 2015), 39.

16 Arthur Beylerian (ed.), *Les Grandes Puissances, l'Empire Ottoman et les Arméniens dans les archives françaises (1914–1918). Recueil de documents* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1983), 18–20, 22, 26–27; Messerlian, *Before and after*, 40–41.

17 "Allies' Stern Warning to Turkey," *The Times*, 24 May 1915; "Allies to Punish Turks Who Murder," *The New York Times*, 24 May 1915. See Christopher J. Walker, *Armenia: The Survival of a Nation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 231.

18 "Les massacres en Arménie. La Triple-Entente tiendra par responsable le gouvernement turque," *Le Matin*, 25 May 1915. See Beylerian, *Les Grandes Puissances*, 29–30.

19 Ara Sarafian (ed.), *United States Official Records on the Armenian Genocide, 1915–1917* (Princeton and London: Gomidas Institute, 2004), 33. See Wolfgang Gust (ed.), *The Armenian Genocide: Evidence from the German Foreign Office Archives, 1915–1916* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2014), 183–193; Kamuran Gürün, *The Armenian File: The Myth of Innocence Exposed* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 209–210.

20 Muammer Demirel, *Birinci Dünya Harbinde Erzurum ve çevresinde Ermeni hareketleri* (Ankara: General Staff, 1996), 52–53, quoted in Vahakn Dadrian, *Warrant for Genocide: Key Elements of Turko-Armenian Conflict* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1999), 124.

21 Beylerian, *Les Grandes Puissances*, 31; Sarafian, *United States Official Records*, 29–30.

with the Entente, and argue matters of internal security and national sovereignty.²²

Outside Constantinople and Smyrna, where deportations were relatively small in number, the Armenian population from Eastern Thrace to the Ottoman-Russian border was massacred, forced to convert to Islam, or expelled toward Syria and northern Mesopotamia between June and November. Morgenthau first informed the State Department on July 10 that many reports hinted at a “systematic attempt” of destruction through arrests, tortures, wholesale expulsions, and deportations often accompanied by rape, pillage, and massacre,²³ and warned in a cable of July 16 that “a campaign of race extermination is in progress under a pretext of reprisal against rebellion.”²⁴ The report of the American Committee on Armenian Atrocities, formed in New York under his inspiration, highlighted in October 1915 that “the crimes now being perpetrated upon the Armenian people” surpassed anything recorded during the prior millennium,²⁵ and the American ambassador stated to Secretary of State Robert Lansing in a confidential letter of November 18: “I am firmly convinced that this is the greatest crime of the ages.”²⁶ The Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople, Archbishop Zaven Der Yeghiayan, wrote to Morgenthau on December 24 that the perpetrators could boast “that not a single Armenian is to be found in the districts under their jurisdiction” more than seven months after “History began to register the most horrible crime ever recorded in the annals of the human race, the carefully planned ignominious project of exterminating a whole nation.”²⁷

The Ottoman Army Group East led by Enver’s uncle, Halil Kut, which invaded Eastern Armenia in April 1918, proposed onerous conditions of peace aimed at “the definitive occupation of the Armenian districts and the extermination [*Ausrottung*] of the Armenians,” Major General Otto von Lossow, German delegate, reported on May 23.²⁸ A last stand allowed the proclamation of the first independence of the Republic of Armenia (1918-1920). In August, during a brief visit to Yerevan, Halil gave a speech from the balcony of his hotel where he offered “an amazingly clear insight into the thinking of a senior Young Turk leader” with an “astonishingly open confession”:²⁹

22 Esat Uras, *The Armenians in History and the Armenian Question*, transl. by Süheyla Artemel (Istanbul: Documentary Publications, 1988), 869–873; Sarafian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 198–201.

23 Payaslian, *United States Policy*, 95.

24 Sarafian, *United States Official Records*, 55.

25 “Tell of Horrors Done in Armenia,” *The New York Times*, 4 October 1915.

26 Sarafian, *United States Official Records*, 373.

27 Ibid. 423.

28 Johannes Lepsius, *Deutschland und Armenien 1914–1918. Sammlung Diplomatischer Aktenstücke* (Potsdam: Tempelverlag, 1919), 388–389.

29 Thomas de Waal, *Great Catastrophe: Armenians and Turks in the Shadow of Genocide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 72. The literal correlation of Halil’s threat with article 2 of the Genocide Convention (“acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part”) has been overlooked by the author’s sophism that the use of crimes against humanity (art. 7 of the Rome Statute) instead of genocide (art. 6 of the same statute, repeating verbatim art. 2 of the Genocide Convention) is applicable to the Armenian case, arguing that “the perpetrators may not have intended to eradicate an entire nation but have still killed an awful lot of innocent people” (idem, “The G-Word: The Armenian Massacre and the Politics of Genocide,” *Foreign Affairs*, January-February 2015, 148).

The Armenian nation that I tried to destroy down to the last individual [*son ferdine kadar yok etmeye çalıştığım Ermeni milleti*] for attempting to erase my homeland from history as slave to the enemy during my homeland's most terrible and painful days (...). Yet if you stand attached to a group of mindless committee members and try to betray the Turks and the Turkish homeland, then I will order my army surrounding your entire country not to leave a single breathing Armenian on the face of the world [*dünya üstünde nefes alacak tek Ermeni bırakmayacağım*].³⁰

Eight months after the Ottoman defeat, on 17 June 1919, Grand Vizier Damad Ferid Pasha submitted a memorandum to the Peace Conference. He stated that “almost the entire civilized world was shocked by the account of the crimes that the Turks had reportedly committed” and targeted the CUP leaders with the declaration that his goal was “to show to the world, with supporting proofs, who are truly responsible for these horrific crimes.”³¹

The nationalist movement headed by Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) reacted to the Ottoman defeat with strong support and participation of former CUP elements. The proposition that “the Turks are a people who speak Turkish and live in Turkey” cleared the road to start “one of the major revolutions of modern times, involving a radical break with the social, cultural, political traditions of the past,”³² with blood. After the annihilation, ethnic cleansing, and expulsion of Armenians, Greeks, and Assyrians were finalized, the Treaty of Lausanne marked the burial of the Armenian Question in July 1923. It declared amnesty for all crimes related to political events between 1914 and 1922, concealing the foundational crime that set up the state-nation of Turkey under a cloak of oblivion.

Genocide and Literal Denial

The history and politics of the annihilation, like any murder case where the suspect claims innocence and blames someone else, have been suffused since its very perpetration with denial. Ottoman diplomats argued that the reports about massacres were fabrications,³³ government propaganda books concocted rebellions and conspiracies,³⁴ and the

30 *İttihat ve Terakki'den Cumhuriyete Bitmeyen Savaş: Kutulamare Kahramanı Halil Paşanın Anıları*, ed. Taylan Sorgun (Istanbul: Yedigün, 1972), 241. Halil was imprisoned by the British in 1919 and boasted to a visiting British officer about having killed around 300,000 Armenians by using reserve forces to punish those he claimed as rebels and by asking to deport those likely to rebel (idem, 274).

31 “La Turquie devant la Conférence,” *La Renaissance*, 20 July 1919. See the Armenian translation in «Թիւրքի լուծարումը» [The Death Sentence of the Turk], transl. by G. M. Manavian, *Gochmag Hayastani*, 5 July 1919, 851–852, where “crime” was first translated as *vojir* and then as *yeghern*.

32 Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 1.

33 “Les Arméniens,” *Journal de Geneve*, 28 August 1915; “Turkish Official Denies Atrocities,” *The New York Times*, 14 October 1915.

34 *Verité sur le mouvement révolutionnaire arménienne et les mesures gouvernementales* (Constantinople: n. p., 1916); *Ermeni komitalarının amâl ve harekât-ı ihtilâliyesi: ilân-ı meşrutiyetten evvel ve sonar* (Istanbul: Matbaa-i Amire, 1332 [1916]).

architects of the annihilation managed to set the parameters of an alternative narrative for generations to come.³⁵ Atatürk completed and canonized that narrative as official history, with silence reigning unopposed as language of denial despite Bernard Lewis' farfetched claim that his healthy and reasonable nationalism neither trampled on the rights of other nations nor rejected responsibility for the past.³⁶ The ARF English-language weekly in Boston, *Hairenik Weekly*, made the following summary in an editorial of 1951:

On the contrary, they tried to put the blame of their crime on their victims, and completed their abominable action by trying to destroy the very traces of their victims, closed their country against those who had miraculously survived their barbarous slaughter, and even tried to destroy the remnants of the Armenian people in the Caucasian section of their homeland.³⁷

The memory of a step by step program has historically coalesced around the intent to destroy symbolized by genocide. The perpetrator is prone to rationalize the deed; his refusal of the evidence and his penchant for blaming the victims eliminate the possibility of mourning and sanction the impossibility of closure, putting the onus on the survivors and their descendants "to prove time and again that they have indeed been wronged, individually and collectively."³⁸ As part of the denier's agenda to which the victims are bound, the narrative based on the insanity of repetition demands to prove the factuality of the fact and relive the genocide, forcing "to enter into the endless game of proving it, to detach ourselves from ourselves in order to come forward as proofs, as so many living proofs of our own death."³⁹

In January 1965, Spyros Kyprianou, Foreign Minister and later President of Cyprus, mentioned the "wholesale massacre" of Armenians for the first time at the United Nations in a rebuttal to a claim of presumed destruction of the Turkish Cypriot community. Turkish representative Orhan Eralp criticized the reference "to certain massacres alleged to have been committed by Turks in the past."⁴⁰ In April, Turkish Prime Minister Ali Suat Hayri Ürgüplü regarded the worldwide commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the "Armenian massacres," as they were known then, as an attempt "to revive a series of events which had no connection whatsoever with the Turkish Republic after these 50 long years," while President Cemal Gürsel affirmed that "there is no such thing as Armenian

35 "Posthumous Memoirs of Talaat Pasha," transl. by M. Zekeria, *The New York Times Current History*, November 1921, 287–295; Djemal Pasha, *Memoirs of a Turkish Statesman 1913–1919* (New York: George H. Doran, 1922).

36 Lewis, *The Emergence*, 386.

37 "Striking Contrast," *Hairenik Weekly*, 25 October 1951.

38 Richard G. Hovannisian, "The Armenian Genocide and Patterns of Denial," in *The Armenian Genocide in Perspective*, ed. Richard Hovhannisian (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1986), 131.

39 Kazanjian and Nichanian, "Between Genocide and Catastrophe," 133.

40 "1915 Armenian Atrocities Cited at UN by Cyprus Foreign Minister," *Hairenik Weekly*, 4 February 1965.

massacres.”⁴¹ An editorial of *The New York Times* rejected the comparison of the Armenian and Jewish cases, equalized Armenian and Turkish deaths, and invited to “let the dead past bury the dead,” insinuating that “Armenians, naturally, cannot forget, but perhaps they can forgive.”⁴² Altemur Kiliç, press attaché of the Turkish embassy in the United States, doubled down in a letter to the editor with the suggestion to “forget and to strive together for a better future for all citizens of Turkey in a better world.”⁴³

The litigation of the facts has completed the presentation of suffering in the production of history with a war of words. In the March 1974 session of the UN Commission of Human Rights, Turkish representative Osman Olçay criticized the preliminary version of the report on genocide by special rapporteur Nicodème Ruhashyankiko for its mention of the Armenian “genocide myth” derived from the deportation of “those rebel populations (living in minority) (...) toward other regions of the Ottoman Empire where they could not threaten the rearguard of the defensive front.”⁴⁴ Journalist Jean-Marie Carzou commented with thinly veiled irony: “Then what? Did we imagine this genocide? No. It is a perfect genocide: it has not happened ...”⁴⁵

In the 1980s, Mustafa Şükrü Elekdag, Turkish ambassador to the United States, pushed forward the “complex tragedy” of a civil war coupled with famine and epidemics claiming 2 million Turkish and a “grossly exaggerated” number of Armenian victims.⁴⁶ The CUP-Kemalist narrative blamed the victims, lined up untoward circumstances, and minimized casualties, and Western scholars sympathetic or openly adept to it have added a patina of “tragedy” as a pseudo-humanistic concession: “unrelieved tragedy”;⁴⁷ “part of a general tragedy that engulfed *all* peoples of the Empire”;⁴⁸ “an appalling human tragedy” derived from the struggle for a single homeland;⁴⁹ “a special tragedy” due to famine, epidemics,

41 “Turkish President, Prime Minister Deny Massacre,” *Hairenik Weekly*, 20 May 1965.

42 “Armenia Remembers,” *The New York Times*, 24 April 1965.

43 “Turkish Citizens All,” *The New York Times*, 3 May 1965.

44 Levon Keshishian, “The Turkish Genocide of Armenians and the U.N. Commission on Human Rights,” *The Armenian Reporter*, 20 June 1974.

45 Jean-Marie Carzou, *Un génocide exemplaire: Arménie 1915* (Paris: Flammarion, 1975), 210.

46 “Turks Protest Inclusion of Armenians in Holocaust Memorial,” *The Armenian Reporter*, 24 July 1980; “Turkish-Armenian Issue: The Complex Tragedy of 1915,” *The New York Times*, 5 May 1983.

47 Lewis V. Thomas and Richard N. Frye, *The United States and Turkey and Iran* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), 60–61.

48 Stanford J. Shaw and Ezel Kural Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), X (emphasis in the original). Similarly, Valerii Soldatenko, former director of the Institute of National Memory of Ukraine, echoed Russian historians in his claim of 2012 that the Holodomor was a “common tragedy shared by all the people of the former Soviet Union” (quoted in Olga Andriewsky, “Towards a Decentred History: The Study of the Holodomor and Ukrainian Historiography,” *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 1 (2015): 29).

49 Bernard Lewis, *Semites and Anti-Semites: An Inquiry into Conflict and Prejudice* (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1986), 21, quoted in Rouben Paul Adalian, “The Ramifications in the United States of the French Court Decision on the Denial of the Armenian Genocide and Princeton University,” *Revue du monde arménien moderne et contemporaine* 3 (1997): 110.

and warfare.⁵⁰ The foundations of the past should not be stained by doubt or moral opprobrium, Frank Mankiewicz – vice chairman of Hill and Knowlton, the public relations firm then representing Turkey – railed in 1990: “When you start talking about genocide or extermination or systematic elimination of people – those are terrible words to say.”⁵¹ The exhortation to study the history of Armenians and Turks “as a great human loss” and abandon “propagandistic terms”⁵² was echoed by Mankiewicz, who stated that the Turkish government was open to terminological transactions: “Tragic loss of life, brutal loss of life, widespread killings, sure. But on both sides.”⁵³

The denialist discourse has continued unabated across the political spectrum of Turkey, embracing “an overdetermined forgetfulness to spare [the] worldly embarrassment of making a full account of what they did and a willingness to assume responsibility for it.”⁵⁴ In December 2008, the far-right Nationalist Action Party (MHP) drew upon the decades-old playbook to denounce the campaign of apology for the “Great Catastrophe” launched by a group of leftist intellectuals: “There is no single page in the honorable history of the Turkish nation for which we should be embarrassed, and no crime for which we should apologize.”⁵⁵ The AKP went down the same path after the recognition of the genocide by the German Parliament in June 2016. Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım repeated that “there is no shameful incident in our past that would make us bow our heads,”⁵⁶ while President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan raised the stakes: “We have nothing in our past to be ashamed of, but those countries that often accuse Turkey of ‘Armenian Genocide’ have the blood of millions of innocent victims.”⁵⁷ Historian Mark Mazower’s remark carries the same weight twenty years later:

The question of whether they were victims of genocide now matters intensely to the Armenians, whose lobbying has brought this issue to the fore again and again in the past few years; and it matters equally to the Turkish authorities, who do not seem to blanch at the term ‘massacre’ but are beside themselves when the G-word is mentioned.⁵⁸

50 Guenter Lewy, *The Armenian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey: A Disputed Genocide* (Salt Lake City: Utah University Press, 2005), 241. See also Lewis, *The Emergence*, 356.

51 Elizabeth Kastor, “The Armenian Tragedy that Has No Name,” *The Washington Post*, 25 April 1990.

52 Justin McCarthy and Carolyn McCarthy, *Turks and Armenians: A Manual on the Armenian Question* (Washington, DC: Assembly of Turkish American Associations, 1989), 66.

53 Kastor, “The Armenian Tragedy.” The same transactional model allowed suggesting that Armenians abandon the use of genocide in exchange for recognition of their suffering (Lewy, *The Armenian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey*, 271).

54 Harry D. Harootunian, *The Unspoken as Heritage: The Armenian Genocide and Its Unaccounted Lives* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 142.

55 Esra Özyürek, “A Turkish ‘I Apologize’ Campaign to Armenians,” *Los Angeles Times*, 5 January 2009.

56 “German Parliament Recognizes Armenian Genocide, Angering Turkey,” *The New York Times*, 3 June 2016.

57 “Armenian Issue Exploited to Blackmail Turkey, President Erdoğan says,” *Daily Sabah*, 4 June 2016.

58 Mark Mazower, “The G-Word,” *London Review of Books*, 8 February 2001, 21.

***Medz Yeghern* and Interpretive Denial**

The repetition of unproven claims gives further voice to a trend as old as the crime itself to rationalize, refuse, and rewrite what happened more than a century ago. The perversion of the meaning of *Medz Yeghern* brought its own share to the efforts to silence the name of the act and its recognition, maintain it as an ongoing event, and keep its identity in flux, preventing the annihilation from gaining a place in history.⁵⁹ The essence of genocide is denial, Marc Nichanian has remarked: “Why? Because those who conceived and carried out the extermination conceived and carried out, by the same token, the elimination of every trace of their act.”⁶⁰

The survivors, immersed in the harsh task of rebuilding their life and deprived of the power to have their voice heard, were forced to speak to themselves in their own language, except for a brief hiatus when claims for restitution of Armenian territories were made after WWII. The words *aksor* (*ւքսոր* “exile; ban; banishment”), *chart* (*չարդ* “massacre; butchery; carnage; slaughter”), and *godoradz* (*կոճորաձ* “carnage; massacre; slaughter; butchery”)⁶¹ translated what the survivors had experienced and lived through, beyond and above legal issues or epistemological nuances. “When they were children in Armenia terrible things happened to them and hundreds of thousands of others,” a reporter of *The Washington Post* wrote in 1990. “The chart, they call it – the kill. The kodoradz – the genocide [*sic*].” The daughter of a survivor recalled that, unlike other families who told fairy tales to their children, Armenian families would gather at a social event “and at the end of the evening they would start talking about the *chart*.”⁶² In a different take, parents and grandparents rarely spoke, and when this happened, it was a private talk in whispers: “Was it a ‘grownups’ secret’? What had happened? What was this ‘Akhzor’ and ‘Chardt’ [*sic*]?”⁶³

“Those who avoided the great horror for any reason – say, for being born under a lucky star – probably assess the savagery of the Crime [*Yeghern*] with whatever images imagination may create and the words ‘massacre’ [*chart*] and ‘exile’ [*aksor*],” as one survivor wrote three decades after the annihilation:

It is not perhaps an exaggeration to say that the Crime [*Yeghern*] and its consequences went far and beyond the hopes and the imagination of its savage planners.

They massacred, but not just the Armenian body, but particularly the soul.

59 Michael Stanford, *The Nature of Historical Knowledge* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 32, quoted in Gregory F. Goekjian, “Diaspora and Denial: The Holocaust and the ‘Question’ of the Armenian Genocide,” *Diaspora* 1 (1998): 14.

60 Kazanjian and Nichanian, “Between Genocide and Catastrophe,” 133.

61 Z. D. S. Papazian, *A Practical Dictionary Armenian-English* (Constantinople: H. Matteosian, 1905), 65, 232, 410.

62 Kastor, “The Armenian Tragedy.”

63 Haig Sarajian, *The Silent Generation* (n.p.: n.p., 2009), IV–V.

They exiled people on the road and into the human-forbidden deserts. The Armenian soul was particularly exiled, and later became a wanderer.

That was the most terrible blow dealt by the Crime [*Yeghern*]: the destruction of the Armenian collectivity, the dissolution of the Armenian national soul.⁶⁴

Despite their use in everyday language, *aksor* and *chart*, along with *godoradz*, reflected a partial side of the events, which explains why neither of them ever became a proper name. Conversely, *yeghern* (*եղեռն*) encapsulated all three words: deportation and massacre were the two essential components of the crime. It became a concept of intergenerational transmission. “I am not a writer, I am a humble worker,” a survivor attested in 1937. “I had barely seen a school when the *medz yeghern* drowned everything in its blood.”⁶⁵ It became commonplace to label April 24 as a darkest date in the annals of humanity, “when the criminal Turks gave the first signal of the unprecedented crime [*vojir*] known as the Armenian Great Crime [*Haygagan Medz Yeghern*],” and to refer to Talat, the architect of the genocide, as “the great criminal [*yeghernakordz*].”⁶⁶ A sixth grader from the village of Anjar (Lebanon), descendant of survivors from the self-defense of Musa Dagh in 1915, wrote in 2004: “I have heard about the *Yeghern* from my grandfather and grandmother, from my parents, from scouts and youth clubs, from Armenian language and history teachers.”⁶⁷

The current state of the etymology of *yeghern*, the original meaning and evolution of the word, and the grounds to translate it as “crime” have been recently discussed in a few articles.⁶⁸ A conceptual history of the word, its origin and usage from the beginning of written literature in the fifth century AD until the end of the nineteenth century, when the end of Classical Armenian as literary language and the early stage of Modern Armenian overlapped, shows that the initial meaning of moral transgression (“evil”) gradually evolved to one of legal transgression (“crime”). This meaning of *yeghern* continued unaltered during the reign of Sultan Abdul Hamid II, the massacres of Cilicia (1909), and the annihilation of 1915 and its aftermath, even developing to “heinous crime” (translated

64 Arsen Jamgochian, *Դրուագներ հայկական Եղեռնին և վերածնունդ* [Episodes from the Armenian *Yeghern* and Rebirth] (Paris: H. Turabian, 1947), 4–5.

65 Harutian Kefelian, *Աշխարհադաշտ (Եղեռնի դրուագներ Անդրեասի և շրջաններու)* [World Field: Episodes of the *Yeghern* in Antreas and Surroundings] (Paris: Araz, 1937), 3.

66 «Նահատակներու պատգամը» [The Message of the Martyrs], *Asbarez*, 25 April 1948.

67 Shiraz Tashjian, «Մեծ Եղեռն» [*Medz Yeghern*], in Մուսա լճ տարեգիրք [Musa Dagh Yearbook] (Beirut: Vahe Sethian, 2003–2004), 46–47.

68 Antranik Granian, «Բառերու միւս երեսը (Գ.)» [The Other Side of Words III], *Haigazian Armenological Review* XV (1995): 34–35; idem, «Բառերուն միւս երեսը. ջարդարանութիւն և մասամբ նորին» [The Other Side of the Words: Words Denoting Massacres, Etcetera], *Haigazian Armenological Review* XXXV (2015): 422; Parandzem Meytikhianian, «Եղեռն բառի լեզվական քննություն» [Linguistic Examination of the Word *Yeghern*], *Vem* 1 (2009): 144–147; Seda Gasparian, «Եղեռն բառի համարժեքության դաշտը անգլերենում» [The Field of Equivalence of the Word *Yeghern* in English], *Vem* 1 (2010): 125–135, transl. in idem, *The Armenian Genocide: A Linguocognitive Perspective* (Yerevan: Yerevan State University Press, 2014), 167–186; Vazgen Hambardzumian, «Հայերեն եղեռն բառի ծագումը և տիպարանությունը» [The Origin and Typology of the Armenian Word *Yeghern*], *Lezu yev lezvabanutyun* (2016): 40–49.

into French as *forfait*). This heightened meaning of crime accounts for its preeminence over the more pedestrian word *vojir*.⁶⁹

Among the many examples unrelated to the genocide that are backed by translations from and into Armenian, we can mention one brought by noted Eastern Armenian historian Leo (Arakel Babakhanian, 1870–1932) in the first book of his multivolume history of the Armenian people, published in 1917. There, he referred to the capture of King Artavazd II of Armenia in 34 B.C., scapegoated by Roman general Mark Antony after he had been routed by the Parthians in a humiliating defeat two years before. Artavazd, imprisoned in Egypt, would be beheaded by order of Queen Cleopatra three years later, before her own suicide after her lover Antony took his own life following their devastating defeat against Octavian, the founder of the Roman Empire as Augustus. Leo wrote that Antony had inflicted a terrible blow to Rome’s influence in Armenian with his callous behavior, “which the famous Roman historian Tacitus characterized with the word ‘*yeghern*.’”⁷⁰ Tacitus wrote about “the *crime* of Antonius, who had enticed Artavasdes, the king of the Armenians, in a display of friendship, then weighing him down with chains and finally killing him.”⁷¹

The first use of *yeghern* to name the annihilation may be traced back to *Hayastan*, a biweekly published by the ARF Balkans Central Committee between March and October 1915 in Sofia. The Armenian historical core was being emptied, making impossible “to penetrate the essence of the new Exodus,” an editorial of June 1915 wrote, “because we do not know the name of this horrifying Turkish heinous crime [*yeghern*].”⁷² Another editorial about the mourning day held by Armenians of the Balkans in August 1915 used *medz yeghern* for the first time to point out to the responsibility of the civilized world as “accomplice to the great crime [*medz yeghern*].” The survivors would become a monument to it: “Thus, the future will be unable to forget the great crime [*medz yeghern*] ever.”⁷³

The meaning “crime” was backed by various sources translated from and to Armenian, although a minority of authors still preferred “tragedy.” The secondary meaning “tragedy, catastrophe, calamity” for *yeghern*, derived from the conflation of the distinct words *yeghern* (*եղիշն* “crime”) and *yegher* (“lamentation”) in the *New Haigazian Dictionary* (*Նոր Հայկազեան Լեզուի Բառարան*), the best dictionary of Classical Armenian published in 1836-1837,⁷⁴ was defined as defunct or obsolete in the modern language

69 Matioossian, *The Politics of Naming the Armenian Genocide*, 19-50.

70 Leo, *Հայոց պատմություն* [History of the Armenians], vol. 1 (Tiflis: Slovo, 1917), 436.

71 Tacitus, *The Annals*, transl. by A. J. Woodman (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Co., 2004), 43.

72 «Հայաստանը կը պարպուի» [Armenia is Being Emptied], *Hayastan*, 3 [16] June 1915. The dates of the newspaper are in the Julian calendar used in Bulgaria until late March 1916.

73 «Պատմութեան եւ ոչ մարդկութեան համար» [For History and Not for Humankind], *Hayastan*, 3 [16] August 1915.

74 Matioossian, *The Politics of Naming the Armenian Genocide*, 22-23.

by the 1940s⁷⁵ and excluded by most monolingual and bilingual dictionaries published afterwards. However, it persisted as the outcome of a post-genocidal mindset relying on antiquated sources or received wisdom and oriented toward the idea of mourning.

Yeghern was capitalized alone or with the adjective *medz* (*մեծ*), which highlighted the scope of the destruction. *Medz Yeghern* was mentioned in countless speeches and editorials, memoirs and testimonies, political discourse and historiography, inscriptions and advertisements. The semantic pattern continued in the Diaspora and Soviet Armenia and the understanding of *yeghern* as “crime” or “heinous crime” underwent a passage to collective crime in the period 1920–1950. In April 1939, the first issue of the literary monthly *Hay Kir* (Beirut, 1939–1944), edited by Kevork Baghdjian, bore the following dedication: “We dedicate the first issue of *Hay Kir* to the unforgettable memory of the martyr writers of the *Medz Yeghern*.” The dedication was also published in French, with *Medz Yeghern* translated as *Grands Massacres* (“Great Massacres”): *A la mémoire éternelle des Ecrivains martyrs, des Grands Massacres d’Arménie, nous dedions le premier numéro de “Haï Kir.”*⁷⁶

The metaphoric identification of *Medz Yeghern* with genocide led gradually to their semantic identification after 1965, which was paralleled by the normative use of *tseghasbanutiun* (ցեղասպանություն, literally “race murder”) as calque word for “genocide” over competing terms like *azkasbanutiun* (ազգասպանություն, literally “nation murder”) and *zhoghovrtasbanutiun* (ժողովրդասպանություն, literally “people murder”). A sizable number of books, newspapers, memoranda, presidential speeches, and other sources between the 1960s and the 2010s feature *Medz Yeghern* along the translations “genocide,” “Armenian Genocide,” “genocide of the Armenians,” or “Holocaust.” The double meaning “Great [Heinous] Crime” and “Great Genocide” eliminates the artificial opposition of *Medz Yeghern* and genocide by default as it upends and transcends denial.

The evolution of *yeghern* from “massacre” to “genocide” mirrors the Arabic word *ibādah* (“annihilation, extermination, eradication, extirpation”), which was adapted to the generic term “genocide” (*ibādah jama’iyyah* “collective extermination”) and its particular cases (e.g., *al-ibādah al-armaniyah* “the Armenian Genocide”). The identification of the common name *yeghern* and the legal label “genocide,” which became more widespread after the turning point of the Karabagh movement in 1988, goes beyond the generic relationship of signifier (*Medz Yeghern*) and signified (genocide). *Medz Yeghern* became fully dominant as proper name of the annihilation and remains in use to this day, although subordinated to *Hayots* or *Haygagan Tseghasbanutiun* (Հայոց / Հայկական

75 Two authoritative linguists established the parameters. Hrachia Adjarian’s etymological dictionary stated that the meaning of *yeghern* in the “modern literary language” was “crime” (Hrachia Adjarian, *Հայերէն արմատական բառարան* [Dictionary of Armenian Roots], vol. 2 (Yerevan: Yerevan University Press, 1928), 694. On the other hand, Stepanos Malkhasiants’ dictionary of the Armenian language marked the meaning “evil, catastrophe, calamity” with the sign of “obsolete” (Stepanos Malkhasiants, *Հայերէն բացատրական բառարան* [Armenian Explanatory Dictionary], vol. 1 (Yerevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1945), 558.

76 «Զօւ – In Memoriam» [Dedication – In Memoriam], *Hay Kir*, April 1939, 1.

Ցեղասպանութիւն “Armenian Genocide”).⁷⁷

The absence of a conscious decision or intent to injure someone is typical of “acts of God” or *force majeure*, recorded in the case of natural (e.g., earthquakes, floods, pandemics) and human-made disasters (e.g., ship collision, nuclear accident) of unplanned origin and uncontrollable characteristics. The logical relation of cause-effect between a malevolent action and its outcome makes unlikely that *yeghern* may singlehandedly represent both cause (e.g., crime, massacre, genocide) and effect (e.g., tragedy, calamity, catastrophe, disaster) in Modern Armenian. Semantic contradictions and political misrepresentation account for the failure to take this premise into consideration. In fact, the principle of causation reflects a binary relation that connects victimizer, who commits an evil action, and victim, who submits to that action. The victimizer performs the action (e.g., execution, explosion, arson, poisoning, death march) through active verbs (to do, make, cause, perpetrate, commit, execute, inflict) to effect agency (e.g., assassination, crime, plunder, mass murder, genocide). At its turn, the use of passive verbs (befell, fall upon, strike, happen) reflects the victim’s physical (e.g., injury, death, trauma) and mental/spiritual perception (e.g., catastrophe, calamity, disaster, tragedy, cataclysm) of the action. For this reason, the linguistic worldview including but not limited to English and Armenian vocabulary establishes that, for instance, neither a crime can befall a victim nor a catastrophe can be committed.

Indeed, the word *yeghern* has not been used in a contextual vacuum. Its agency was thoroughly enhanced by the roots *kordz* (գործ “work”) and *portz* (փորձ “attempt, try”) in the compound words *yeghernakordz* (եղեռնագործ “criminal, perpetrator of a crime”), *yeghernakordzutium* (եղեռնագործութիւն “crime, criminal action”), and *yeghernaportz* (եղեռնափորձ “criminal attempt”), and specialized terms like *yeghernatad adean* (եղեռնադատարան “criminal court”) or *yeghernapan* (եղեռնաբան “criminologist”). The active verbs *kordzel* (գործել “to work; commit”) and *kordzatrel* (գործադրել “to put into action, execute, perpetrate, implement”) have strengthened the meaning “crime” in phrases like *yeghern kordzel* (եղեռն գործել “to commit, perpetrate [a] crime”) and *yeghern kordzatrel* (եղեռն գործադրել “to execute, implement [a] crime”).

The Criminal Code of the state of Maine (United States) offers a telling example of the straightforward relation between cause and effect:

1. A person is guilty of causing a catastrophe if the person recklessly causes a catastrophe by explosion, fire, flood, avalanche, collapse of a structure, release or dissemination of poison, toxin, radioactive material, bacteria, virus or other biological agent or vector or other such force or substance that is dangerous to human life and difficult to confine.

(...)

4. Causing a catastrophe is a Class A crime (Title 17-A, §803-A).

⁷⁷ Matioossian, *The Politics of Naming the Armenian Genocide*, 72-85.

The characterization of intentional actions as events without agency contributes to create or affirm a narrative of unspecified calamity. Hundreds of articles in the Armenian press throughout the world have used the word “tragedy” in different languages with mentions always contextualized, explicitly or implicitly within agency. “A tragedy of such monstrous proportions,” a sentence typically stated in 1979, at a time when the genocide of Namibia was barely recalled, “it was indeed the first genocide of the 20th century – a genocide premeditated and perpetrated by the Turkish government.”⁷⁸

The practitioners of interpretive denial, whether they appear on the stage or work behind the scenes, have agency as the last of their worries, however. At a White House reception in May 1978, U.S. President Jimmy Carter left agent, time, and place undefined in his reference to “one of the greatest tragedies,” which was tantamount to the omission of the cause: “But it’s generally not known that in the years preceding 1916, there was a concerted effort made to eliminate all the Armenian people, probably one of the greatest tragedies that ever befell any group. And there weren’t any Nuremberg trials.”⁷⁹ Lack of agency was even more obvious in his successor Ronald Reagan’s “Statement about the Armenian Genocide” during his first presidential campaign in 1980. The text referred to “one of the greatest tragedies in the annals of recorded history” with the proviso that the 1980s were going to be “when Americans and its [*sic*] allies throughout the Free World resolve that the tragedy of 1915 never again be repeated,” but without any mention of genocide, agent, or place.⁸⁰ All genocides become a tragedy, but since not all tragedies derive from genocide, the U.S. State Department adopted the formula “the Armenian tragedy” while actively opposing genocide resolutions during Reagan’s years,⁸¹ and Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres reached the apex of denial in April 2001: “We reject allegations to create a similarity between the Holocaust and the Armenian allegations. Nothing similar to the Holocaust happened. It is a tragedy what the Armenians went through but not a genocide.”⁸²

The Armenian Orphan Rug, weaved by genocide survivor girls in Lebanon and presented to President Calvin Coolidge in 1925 as token of appreciation for American humanitarian assistance, had been kept in storage at the White House since 1982. In November 2013, the U.S. National Security Council pretexted potentially inappropriate use of government property and transportation risks to deny its loan to the Smithsonian Museum for the launch of a book on its history. After public outcry, this remarkable rug

78 Vahan H. Tootikian, “What Does April 24 Means for Us Today?” *The Armenian Weekly*, 28 April 1979.

79 *The Armenian Genocide: Facts and Documents* (New York: St. Vartan’s Press, 1985), 48.

80 “Gov. Reagan Issues Statement on April 24,” *The Armenian Reporter*, 24 April 1980; “Ronald Reagan’s Letter to Hairenik Publications,” *The Armenian Weekly*, 26 April 1980. For the original text, see www.reaganlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/digitalibrary/smf/cos/cicconi/box-6/40-94-6914308-006-008-2016, accessed 06.05.2022. The original title appears in Michael Bobelian, *Children of Armenia: A Forgotten Genocide and the Century-Long Struggle for Justice* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009), 169.

81 John M. Evans, *Truth Held Hostage: America and the Armenian Genocide – What Then? What Now?* (London: Gomidas Institute, 2016), 71.

82 “Israeli Foreign Minister Says No Similarity between Genocide and Holocaust,” *The Armenian Weekly*, 14 April 2001.

was exhibited at the White House Visitor's Center in November 2014, along gifts by France and Japan after American help for homelessness following WWI and the tsunami of 2010. Ironically, the rug was shown without proper identification of the orphans and how and where they had become orphans, blurring the distinction between a criminal act (genocide) and catastrophic events (war, tsunami).⁸³

In June 2018, a motion was submitted to the Australian House of Representatives to acknowledge the humanitarian relief efforts of the country after the Armenian annihilation. During the ensuing debate, Rep. Tim Wilson noted that previous speakers had mentioned events like loss of life, desert marches, and people in desperate need, “but did not dare to speak the tragedy's name: genocide.”⁸⁴

Aghed (*աղէտ*), one of the denominations referring to 1915, has been cited along *Yeghern* as most used proper name.⁸⁵ Literary works used *aghed* most often to name the catastrophic elimination of Western Armenians, which they represented and narrated beyond historical testimonies or documents.⁸⁶ Nichanian has borrowed the word from survivor writer and literary critic Hagop Oshagan and expanded it into a metahistorical concept that encompasses the notions of catastrophe of memory and meaning. He has argued that *Aghed* is “the proper word for the Armenian Genocide, one that expresses the complete annihilation of a people” as exact equivalent of *Shoah*,⁸⁷ while making a clear distinction between genocide as a historical event and object of historical discourse, and *Aghed* as an event that “does not belong to history as historians conceive it.”⁸⁸ Nevertheless, some historians have mistakenly cited *Aghed* as proper name for

83 Richard Simon, “White House Urged to Display Armenian Orphan Rug Commemorating Genocide,” *Los Angeles Times*, 12 November 2013; Rafael Medoff, “With Armenian Orphan Rug, Obama Stumbles Again on Genocide,” *The Jewish Press*, 20 October 2014.

84 “MP to Australia – ‘Speak the Tragedy's Name on Armenian Genocide,’” *Panarmenian*, 26 June 2018, www.panarmenian.net/eng/news/257213/MP_to_Australia__Speak_the_tragedys_name_on_Armenian_Genocide, accessed 07.05.2022.

85 Boghos Levon Zekian, *L'Armenia e gli armeni. Polis lacerata e patria spirituale: la sfida di una sopravvivenza* (Milan: Guerini e Associati, 2000), 35; idem, “Armenian- Turkish Relations in the Framework of Armenian and Turkish Scholarships,” *Iran and the Caucasus* 14 (2010): 371.

86 Krikor Beledian, “L'expérience de la catastrophe dans la littérature arménienne,” *Revue d'histoire arménienne contemporaine* 1 (1995): 131; idem, “From Image to Loss: The Writers of Kharpert and Provincial Literature,” in *Armenian Tsopk/Kharpert*, ed. Richard Hovhannisian (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2002), 271–272; Marc Nichanian, *Writers of Disaster*, vol. 1 (The National Revolution, Princeton and London: Gomidas Institute, 2002), 10.

87 Marc Nichanian, “Sarafian: The Conquest of the Exile,” in *The Bois de Vincennes*, transl. by Christopher Atamian (Dearborn: The Armenian Research Center, University of Michigan-Dearborn, 2011), 9. The French original was published in 1993.

88 Nichanian, *Writers of Disaster*, 247; idem, *The Historiographic Perversion*, transl. by Gil Anidjar (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 9. Despite the claim that Oshagan was the first to use systematically *Aghed* or invent it as proper name in his interview published in 1932 and his posthumously published monograph of 1944 about Aram Andonian (idem, “The Truth of the Facts: About the New Revisionism,” in *Remembrance and Denial: The Case of the Armenian Genocide*, ed. Richard Hovhannisyian (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999), 269; Kazanjian and Nichanian, “Between Genocide and Catastrophe,” 128; Nichanian, *The Historiographic Perversion*, 15), the word always appears lowercased (Peniamin Tashian, «Մայրիներու շուրին տակ (զբալան զոյց Յ. Օշականի հետ)» [Under the Shade of Cedars: Literary Conversation with H. Oshagan],

the genocide,⁸⁹ despite the fact that its absence from newspaper advertisements and memorial inscriptions shows that it was not used either to publicize commemorations or to memorialize the annihilation. It failed to prevail in popular awareness and daily language, and today occupies a marginal place as a literary term.⁹⁰

The survey of a bibliography of Armenian books on the genocide has yielded a total of five volumes published between 1915 and 1965 with *Aghed* in their title, while general bibliographies of Armenian books published in the United States (1915–2011) and Lebanon (1915–2012) show only one use as subtitle for the same book in both countries. In comparison, twenty-three books were published worldwide with the word *Yeghern* in their title from 1915 to 1965, nine in the United States (1915–2011), and twenty-five in Lebanon (1925–2012).⁹¹

Conclusion

The power of language frames memory and legitimizes the knowledge of history, which makes possible to understand the past, but may limit the ways to see it.⁹² More than just the representation of a certain concept, words may sometimes be an embodiment of collective memory. *Medz Yeghern*, the name born from the vocabulary and the experience of

Hairenik monthly, March 1932, 128–31; Hagop Oshagan, Համապատկեր տրեւանտահայ գրականութեան [Panorama of Western Armenian Literature], vol. 9 (Antelias: Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia, 1980), 255, 267, 282–3, 286.

89 Donald Bloxham, “Determinants of the Armenian Genocide,” *Looking Backward, Moving Forward: Confronting the Armenian Genocide*, ed. Richard Hovhannisyian (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2003), 24; Mark Levene, *Genocide in the Age of the Nation-State, vol. 1: The Meaning of Genocide* (New York and London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 70; Stefan Troebst, “Europäisierung der Vertreibungserinnerung? Eine deutsch-polnische *Chronique scandaleuse* 2002–2008,” in *Verflochtene Erinnerungen: Polen und seine Nachbarn im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, eds. Martin Aust, Krzysztof Ruchniewicz and Stefan Troebst (Cologne, Weimar, and Vienna: Böhlau, 2009), 245 (“Aghet or Yeghern [Genocide of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire]”). Stephan Astourian, who used *Aghed* as denomination in the early 1990s (Stephan Astourian, “The Armenian Genocide: An Interpretation,” *The History Teacher* 2 (1990): 113, 145, 147, 159; idem, “Genocidal Process: Reflections on the Armeno-Turkish Polarization,” *The Armenian Genocide: History, Politics, Ethics*, ed. Richard Hovhannisyian (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 5, most recently has cited *Medz Yeghern* translated as “Great Crime” (idem, “Hybrid Warfare, a Pseudo-Scandal and the Armenian Genocide Museum Institute,” *EVN Report*, 21 June 2020 (www.evnreport.com/raw-unfiltered/hybrid-warfare-a-pseudo-scandal-and-the-armenian-genocide-museum-institute), accessed 06.08.2020).

90 Nichanian, “The Truth of the Facts,” 269; Kazanjian and Nichanian, “Between Genocide and Catastrophe,” 128. Taline Voskeritchian, “Between Massacre and Genocide: On Eric Friedler’s ‘Aghét: Nation Murder,’” *Jadaliyya*, 16 May 2011 (www.jadaliyya.com/Details/23990/Between-Massacre-and-Genocide-On-Eric-Friedler-s-Aghet-Nation-Murder), accessed 05.05.2022).

91 Nersisyan, *Armenian Genocide*, 621–38; Hovsep Nalbandian, *Աներիկահայ գիրքի պատմություն 1858–2011* [History of the Armenian-American Book 1858–2011] (Los Angeles: Yerevan, 2011); Antranik Dakessian and Armen Urneshlian (eds.), *Լիբանանահայ գիրքը 1894–2012. մատենագիտական ցանկ* [The Armenian Lebanese Book 1894–2012: Bibliographical List] (Beirut: Haigazian University Press, 2012).

92 Jay Winter, *War beyond Words: Language of Remembrance from the Great War to the Present* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 124–125.

survivors, becomes the most suitable way to liberate the meaning of the annihilation from the shackles of semantic relativism and give a historical explanation of the experience of crime, in the same way that *Aghed*, “the name that will come at the end of history, when history as a series of denials will come to an end,”⁹³ gives a metahistorical explanation of the experience of catastrophe.

Language has occupied an important place in Armenian identity, becoming a fundamental component when the process of cultural awakening was underway in the nineteenth century. Powerless children witnessed the rape of their mothers and sisters, namely, the victimization of the mother tongue. The popular image of Mother Armenia, created in the early 1860s, was periodically subjected to Ottoman censorship from the 1880s, along with other cultural artifacts.⁹⁴ Mother Armenia became Ravished Armenia, to paraphrase the title of survivor Aurora Mardiganian’s (1901–1994) memoir and the silent film she starred in 1919:

Mother Armenia seated among the ruins, weeping – many of us grew up with that picture as children, and you can still see it here and there from Los Angeles to New York to Paris to Buenos Aires to Beirut. Ruins and graves make nations, and we Armenians have also millions of our unburied dead.⁹⁵

Most speakers of Western Armenian and its dialects disappeared with the destruction of the milieu that fostered their sustainable development. The descendants of survivors worldwide are the remainder of the linguistic heritage that included some of the finest names in the letters. However, when outsiders who lacked “either the moral or the scholarly authority to assert what terms should or should not be used”⁹⁶ started dictating the terms of engagement with the past, those descendants forfeited their right to speak, namely, they rejected the words of their own language and refused bearing witness to a cornerstone of their identity. In the ultimate stage of genocide, those bound to fight against denial were ensnared in the cruelest of ironies: denying themselves.

The meaning “tragedy, catastrophe, calamity” fostered a misrepresentation of facts when interpretive denial managed to cross the language barrier and turn *Medz Yeghern* into collateral damage of the war of words. The innate ability of native speakers to be the final arbiters of what their own words mean had the potential to thwart the ongoing assault on substance that victimized language once again. Its manipulation by euphemism

93 Kazanjian and Nichanian, “Between Genocide and Catastrophe,” 128. Nichanian paraphrases a sentence by Hagop Oshagan that prefaced his inquiry into the moral grounds of the perpetrators: “History can prove nothing, since it is a display [*hantes*] of denials” (Oshagan, *Հանսպասելիք*, 276).

94 M. Hakobian, «Մայր Հայաստանի զաղսփարը հայ ազատասիրական մտքի ոլորտներում» (The Idea of Mother Armenia in the Realms of Armenian Freedom-Loving Thought), *Echmiadzin*, April 1985, 73–75.

95 Leon Surmelian, “Wanted: A New Armenian Image,” *The Armenian Mirror-Spectator*, 24 February 1973. Thanks are due to Hagop Gulludjian for bringing the concept of victimization to my attention.

96 Marc Mamigonian, “A Commentary on the Turkish ‘I Apologize’ Campaign,” *The Armenian Weekly*, special issue, 25 April 2009, 21.

and equivocation offered Armenians an unexpected path to achieve the literal recognition that had been studiously avoided. Emphasis on the synonymous character of *yeghern*, *tseghasbanutiun*, and “genocide,” as well as of *Medz Yeghern* and *Hayots Tseghasbanutiun* (“Armenian Genocide”) would have likely countered the logical fallacy behind the translations “Great Catastrophe” and “Great Calamity.”

However, their uncritical acceptance squandered the opportunity for a proactive response and legitimized *Medz Yeghern* as an outdated expression without agency. The connection of “*Abrilean Yeghern*” (Ապրիլեան եղեռն) and “Armenian Genocide” in the memorial of Soghomon Tehlirian in Fresno, California, and “1915 *yeghern*” (1915ի եղեռն) and “1915 genocide” in the April 24 memorial in Niagara Falls, New York, for instance, was lost in the fog of genocide politics amid no less than two dozen memorials featuring similar translations worldwide. Word meanings are not etched in stone, but words etched in stone have a meaning.⁹⁷

Foreign proper names and words are no longer exotic. Hebrew and Ukrainian speakers have thrown their substantial weight behind *Shoah* and *Holodomor*. Official statements, press, and academia have adopted *Shoah* from Europe to the Americas following the impact of Claude Lanzmann’s homonymous film and the polemics over the meaning and trivialization of the name “Holocaust.”⁹⁸ *Holodomor* (“killing by hunger”), which appears to have been coined in the Ukrainian community of North America in the 1960s and popularized in Ukraine during the final years of the Soviet Union, has replaced both “Famine” and “Ukrainian Holocaust” as name of choice, since no “single locution in English articulates what Stalin inflicted in 1933 on the people of the Ukrainian countryside.”⁹⁹

The use of *Shoah* and *Holodomor* outside their ethnic realms disproves the claim that *Medz Yeghern* may be meaningless outside the Armenian realm. As a matter of fact, the word “genocide” originally happened to have no meaning for the common reader, given the absence of *genos* in English and French vocabulary.¹⁰⁰ *Medz Yeghern*, which should be translated as “Great Crime” for any context prior to the first published use of “genocide” in 1945, with the option to use “Great Genocide” in contemporary contexts, enjoys a gradual recognition in the media, academia, and even popular publications (Paolo Cossi’s graphic novel *Medz Yeghern: Il Grande Male*, for instance). It has the potential to become a meaningful carrier of memory in English like *Shoah* and *Holodomor*, along other foreign, older proper names like *Reconquista*, *Renaissance*, or *Risorgimento*.

97 See a catalog of 114 memorial inscriptions containing the words *yeghern* and/or “genocide” and its analysis in Matiossian, *The Politics of Naming the Armenian Genocide*, 147–160.

98 Charles Passy, “New Word to Replace Holocaust Wins Favor,” *Palm Beach Post*, 18 April 2004; Philologos, “Roots of the Holocaust,” *Forward*, 16 September 2005. See also Robert S. C. Gordon, *The Holocaust in Italian Culture, 1944–2010* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 177–178.

99 Michael Naydan, “A Lasting Imprint,” *The Ukrainian Weekly*, 22 January 1995. See also Andriewsky, “Towards a Decentred History,” 25–26.

100 Perry S. Bechky, “Lemkin’s Situation: Toward a Rhetorical Understanding of Genocide,” *Brooklyn Law Review* 2 (2012): 614.

The heirs of the original perpetrators are prone to uphold the foundational sin embedded into Turkish identity with a replay of hackneyed assumptions and clichés, echoed by toned-down versions from outside purveyors with credentials of dubious objectivity. “Words cannot change or rewrite history,” Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu tweeted on 24 April 2021, in response to Joseph Biden’s statement using “genocide” and *Medz Yeghern*.¹⁰¹ The irony should not have been lost to a keen observer.

Although words do not change the past, the ultimate goal of their corruption is to rewrite the facts or, in other terms, “to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind” (George Orwell). Context matters even more than words, because “the nameless tell us what happened and that is all the evidence that we need,”¹⁰² including the proper name of the century-old crime that they bequeathed to their descendants and remains under a cone of silence that awaits to be lifted.

¹⁰¹ twitter.com/MevlutCavusoglu/status/1385988990080360448, accessed 24.04.2021.

¹⁰² Harootunian, *The Unspoken as Heritage*, 127.