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Book review
Vartan Matiossian, The Politics of Naming the Armenian Genocide: Language, History, and "Medz Yeghern," London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2021, 296 pages

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BOOK REVIEW

Vartan Matiossian, *The Politics of Naming the Armenian Genocide: Language, History, and "Medz Yeghern,"* London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2021, 296 pages.

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"Words do not change the past, but the ultimate goal of their corruption is, needless to say, to rewrite the facts," (139) warns Vartan Matiossian in the concluding paragraph of *The Politics of Naming the Armenian Genocide: Language, History, and "Medz Yeghern."* In this book, Matiossian—a prolific writer and scholar of Armenian studies—examines the complex history behind naming the late Ottoman state violence against Armenians. He explores the profound influence of language in shaping collective memory and our understanding of historical events.

The book is structured into two main parts, complemented by an introduction, conclusion, and two extensive appendices. The first part, titled *"Language and History,"* comprises three chapters. The first two chapters trace the origins and usage of the term *"yeghern"* (եղեռն) from written sources dating back to the fifth century AD to its application during the late Ottoman massacres of Armenians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During this period, *"yeghern"* evolved from its original meaning of "evil" to "crime," a connotation that persisted through the violence of the Hamidian and Young Turk regimes. In 1915, Armenians first used the term *"Medz Yeghern"* (Great Crime) to describe the destruction that took place that year (11). In the third chapter, the author explores how the meaning of *"yeghern"* as "crime" or "heinous crime" further developed into "collective crime" between 1920 and 1950. By 1965, the term *"yeghern"* gradually became synonymous with "genocide," while *"tseghasbanutiun"* (ցեղասպանություն) emerged as the most widely accepted Armenian translation of "genocide." Since then, *"Medz Yeghern"* has been commonly used as a proper name for the destruction of Armenians, however it has been subordinated to *"Hayots"* or *"Haygagan Tseghasbanutiun"* (Armenian Genocide). The second part of the book contains four chapters examining the mistranslation and misuse of *"Medz Yeghern"* and its implications for the political misrepresentation of the Armenian destruction. The author delves into specific examples, including Pope John Paul II's visit to Armenia (Chapter 4), the Turkish apology campaign (Chapter 5), and the presidential statements of George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and

Donald Trump (Chapter 6). The final chapter underscores the critical role of the Armenian language in the discourse surrounding the Armenian Genocide and its naming.

Matiossian's summary of the book's content—that it addresses "the use, misuse, and abuse of the proper name *Medz Yeghern*" (135)—succinctly encapsulates his central argument concerning the naming of the Armenian Genocide and the semantic and political complexities surrounding the term. These issues are explored in detail throughout the book's first and second parts. His proposal to adopt *"Medz Yeghern"* as a proper name stems from a careful examination of three essential questions beyond its usage: the *meaning* it conveys, whether it *highlights the perpetrator's agency*, and *its relationship to the term "genocide,"* which carries distinct legal implications. Regarding meaning, the author traces the term's evolution from its original definition as "evil" to meanings such as "(heinous) crime," "massacres," and ultimately "genocide." He argues that the most accurate translation of *Medz Yeghern* should be "Great Crime" or "Great Genocide." Matiossian emphasizes that the term's logical connection between a malevolent action and its outcome makes it unlikely for *yeghern* to simultaneously represent both cause (e.g., crime, massacre, genocide) and effect (e.g., tragedy, calamity, catastrophe, disaster) in modern Armenian (12). He critiques alternative translations such as "tragedy," "calamity," "catastrophe," and "disaster" for erasing the agency of the perpetrator, stripping the term of its proper historical and contextual significance. Such translations, he contends, lead to a misrepresentation of the Armenian destruction, resulting in what he calls "interpretive denial," a concept borrowed from sociologist Stanley Cohen. This form of denial, he argues, transcends linguistic barriers and enables external parties to dictate other narratives of the past. Matiossian further asserts that the "perversion of language" has rendered *Medz Yeghern* "collateral damage in the war of words" (137). He emphasizes that the term not only underscores the agency of the perpetrator but has also become synonymous with *"genocide"* (ցեղասպանութիւն). As evidence, he highlights the usage of *yeghern* in phrases like "cultural genocide" (*մշակութային եղեռն*) and "genocide recognition" (*եղեռնի ճանաչում*), which, he argues, reflect the interchangeable nature of *yeghern* and *genocide* (83, 136). Lastly, the author observes that *yeghern* has the potential to serve as "a meaningful carrier of memory in English," much like foreign terms such as *Shoah, Holodomor, Reconquista, Renaissance,* and *Risorgimento* (138).

This work advances our understanding of one of the under-researched aspects of the Armenian Genocide. Overall, the author succeeds in achieving his goal of analyzing the politics

of naming, a feat made possible by his encyclopedic knowledge of sources in multiple languages, particularly Armenian and English. In this regard, Matiossian's contribution is difficult to overstate. One of the book's significant contributions, it is hoped, will be to inspire further research into the memory of the Armenian Genocide. As Matiossian himself observes, "words may sometimes be an embodiment of collective memory" (135), and *Yeghern* has become "a concept of intergenerational transmission" (11). His critique of the term *"aghed"* as a proper name for the Armenian Genocide reflects a broader issue in the study of its memory. Matiossian is particularly critical of the problems this term poses for historical research. Having literary origins and later developed into a metahistorical concept by Marc Nishanian, *aghed* never prevailed in popular culture, remaining confined to literary contexts. Moreover, framing *aghed* as a metahistorical or metaphysical event risks detaching the Armenian Genocide from its broader historical context, potentially transforming it into a myth and creating conceptual barriers to understanding the memory process, especially for the period prior to the 1960s. This perspective aligns more closely with historians who emphasize contextualizing memory within historical frameworks.

By tracing the evolution of the naming of the Armenian Genocide, the author takes a step toward a more satisfactory way of historicizing its memory. While conventional scholarship has not thoroughly addressed how genocide memory evolved during the interwar and postwar years leading up to the 1960s, the evidence presented in this book demonstrates that the memory of the Armenian Genocide has always been "in work" in Armenian word, and did not suddenly emerge during the "National revival" of the 1960s. Therefore, for future research in this vein, one might consider how commemorative practices evolved in the post-genocide period not only after the 1960s but also before that.