

**ENDANGERED MEMORY:
THE ARMENIAN EXPERIENCE IN THE CONTEXT
OF NEW INTERNATIONAL POLITICS**

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9/11 was an unequivocal turning point in international politics. Perhaps, this is less so in terms of the real political intents and objectives of international political relations, which are still about the traditional political efforts based on interests and hegemony. The difference is that these efforts are currently pursued just in a more open and aggressive manner than it used to be in the past decades. However, a new phase of political reasoning and perspectives of international politics has begun.

Indeed, today the political actors not only base their political statements on such aspects as shaping¹ and responsibility, but also consider the possibility to implement these shaping transformations themselves. The horizon of such claims is constrained neither in national, nor in regional dimensions. It is about shaping the whole world. The early 21st century political projects again address things like identity, stability and power, and especially structures, order, hierarchy and power claims.

The turning point in prospects of international politics that bears such immense consequences for the future sought by Armenians may be described as follows: a shift from perception of the world as a *political background* formed by multi-lateral cooperation on one hand, and conflicts on the other hand, to a perception of the world as a *global society*. This society is not about communities and their political forms, or states and their structures. Conversely, it is focused on regions and their risks. Therefore, we are talking about global actors and global arenas of activity in the world politics, and once again, about threats and risks.

Since mid-1990s, the powers that shaped international politics were focused on so-called *World Risks* that the states of the world will face. Along with the weak-

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¹ *Translator's note*. Here the author means activities aimed at transformation of societies.

nesses of the state and democracy, such processes were specified as emergence of the “New Weapon States” with irrational behavior¹, varieties of religious fundamentalism, international terrorism, global shortage of resources (e.g. water, oil), climate change and climatic disasters. When these risks were voiced at global political conferences of late 1990s, new processes surfaced in parallel that raised hopes for the carriers of the Armenian memory. Internet not only became a platform for inter-community networking, but also started facilitating the knowledge exchange. Establishment of the International Criminal Court and extensive activities in the framework of International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia promised a new chapter in the worldwide commitment against genocidal crimes and by that signified sensitivities toward genocide experience. It also seemed that international discourses, such as debates on “collective memory” or “memory culture” boded a place in the world history for the memories of the victims, as well as for the victims themselves. However, the belief that the world politics in the incipient 21st century of communication and networking would be thereby marked by a new openness, increased ethics of intelligence and responsibility, proved to be misleading. In this new context, it is important to get an idea about what really the emphasis on memories and memory culture brings in the form they appeared in politics: the pathway to the 21st century and new global world order must be based on the shared memory of wars and violence that had such a strong impact on the shape of the 20th century Europe. A closer look at political discourses in which the category of “memory” is a centerpiece, quickly reveals that the historical responsibility constitutes a memory-based responsibility for persecutions, violence, wars and displacements only indirectly, in a form of a special-type responsibility before the victims. On the other hand, the European-style policy of memory also covers such aspects as abuse of power, gaps in democracy and images of enemy in politics. When it comes to “memory,” a specific form of politics is involved. A universally binding, global memory is built in such politics, and the diversity of individual experiences is not in the focus at all. On the contrary, the interest is focused on constructing a commonly valid and non-specific experience of “memory” as a moral imperative. On the verge of the 21st century anticipations were high about such common memory, but the breakup of Yugoslavia and ensuing wars, as well as violent armed conflicts in different parts of the disintegrating Soviet Union caused a problem in the view of the European powers that was called a ghost; that is the ghost of newly formed ethno-national identity, for which a term was soon coined in political discourse – “balkanization.”

¹ *Editor's note:* i.e. new states that possess weapons of mass destruction.

9/11 irreversibly swayed the balance of the world politics toward those who pointed out particularly in the context of Yugoslav wars that the “dangers” of identity politics of non-sovereign nations and ethnic groups, as well as diasporas are a new world risk. Quoting Mary Kaldor, a British political scientist whose analysis of “old” and “new” wars (New and Old Wars. Organized Violence in a Global Era, Stanford/Cambridge 1999) underlies the new policies of strengthening the state powers positions, it is about “disaffected groups living far away, often in the new melting-pot nations, who find solace in fantasies about their origins which are often far removed from reality.”

In the recent years many political scientists agree with Kaldor in their studies and analyses that diaspora communities represent a significant threat. They argue that the “horizontal *and* vertical” networks and nationalistic identity politics constitute the dangerous nature of these groups, who defy state borderlines. Ulrich Schneckener, a renowned German political scientist, classified diasporas among the groups that “do not want peace” and clearly defined them as “troublemakers” in one of his analytical studies. His study lays special emphasis on describing structures, activities and behaviors of diaspora as “radical” and “autistic,” i.e. performing only self-related actions. The concept of “egoistic interests of risky actors” has become one of the most frequently used notions in international political theory after 9/11. Against this backdrop the Armenian demand for genocide recognition looks like a solely self-interest dominated retrograde stance that impedes political communication with Turkey and causes conflicts. At the same time these conflicts today are treated as if they had no previous history.

In this regard conflicts are viewed as potentials for risks with hardly assessable patterns. With that in mind, since the global world is closely intertwined and interconnected, it is inferred that any conflict at the ends of the earth may pose a risk of shattering the whole world order. Because of this, mitigation and settlement of potential conflicts is brought to the forefront of the modern politics. This is exactly what comprises a major challenge that Armenians and the Armenian history currently face.

If the international community insists that Armenia and Turkey should sit around a table to “talk about” the past and future, whereas the directly affected party, namely the Armenian diaspora, is excluded from the process, then this must be attributed exactly to the global strategy of the world powers that be. This strategy turns the *historical veracity* of the genocide and its social effects on entire generations into a mere *political discord*. As a *political discord*, which ultimately is nothing more than an overly long-lasting divergence of views, it can be made part of the day-

to-day business of politics. A strategy like this aims at mitigating the risks potential. At the negotiation table arranged by the international community for the memory of genocide, talks would be around reconciliation and maybe even token recognition of genocide by Turkey in a form of “yes-and-no.”¹ However, arranging such negotiations pursues a single important goal, which is neither the recognition of genocide, nor stopping its denial. The goal is to ease the conflict so that it no longer causes political problems.

The problem is not only in this strategy of forcing Armenians to negotiate about their own history. It is problematic that against the backdrop of the new world order policies no room is left today in global politics for drawing attention to such strategies. In that case it is proclaimed that the historical veracity of genocide is a matter of divergence of views and discord between two states. In that case the ideological approach of the perpetrators is disputed. In that case the insistence of Armenians on their history is not treated as a part of their historical identity, but rather it is interpreted as a manifestation of a chronic trouble-making pattern.

Therefore, it can be seen that these new post-9/11 political strategies are actually directed against communities having radical experiences of facing a destructive violence, although after the World War II reminding about them has become a paradigm of memory culture determining the political rhetoric. Memory policies, as we experience them today, aim at an abstract memory culture detached from the carriers of these very memories; i.e. the victims and their successors. A memory about the experience of violence has to be built equally binding for everybody and common for perpetrators and victims, despite the fact that the experiences of the victims and perpetrators are fundamentally different and incomparable as they stand at diametrically opposite poles of violence.

In this context of memory policy that tends to equalize the experiences of victims and perpetrators, the specific memory of the victims and their successor communities who insist on their own history without dissolving it in the abstract global memory, is interpreted as an extreme and reactionary obstinacy. In particular, this applies the Armenian community whose memory of the genocide experience has been discredited by Turkey’s policy of fierce denial and whose calls for recognition of its history are considered a dangerous annoyance hampering relations with an important ally and economic partner. Since the paradigm of memory culture cannot be questioned as it has become a political imperative after the experience of the Holocaust, the policy to overcome this hindrance is then directed against these very

¹ *Translator’s note:* The author has used a neologism combining the German words for “yes” (*ja*) and “no” (*nein*) in a single word “jein”.

memory bearers. Therefore, this policy of the West turns not against the powerful Turkish nation-state which promotes a political denial, but rather against the Armenian diaspora, which follows the imperative of remembrance and demands adhering to it, consequently being almost unanimously discredited in the Western media as nationalist and extremist.

This strategy is expressed not least by calls for a dialogue in which the veracity of the genocide becomes a matter of an opinion poll. In such dialogue, insisting on remembrance of the genocide and demands for its recognition are perceived as nationalistic as the genocide denial, and consequently the memory and denial are contemplated in parallel. This parallelism incidentally permeates the entire discourse around the "dialogue," so in this context it is hard to find any component that does not equally refer to the "Turkish nationalism" and "Armenian nationalism."

We encounter here the dual strategy of the world political actors and Turkey; namely, along with the state policy of denial, reduce the discourse about the genocide to a negotiable disagreement on one hand, and discredit and marginalize the Armenian diaspora as the carrier of this experience, on the other hand. This strategy is most vividly reflected in the calls for a dialogue between Armenia and Turkey, which is supposed to lead to reconciliation.

The concept of "reconciliation" per se has a rather positive connotation and actually it was a key to political discourse after the World War II. Thinking of the "Franco-German reconciliation" after the World War II one may mention even some specific policies of forward moves to each other and cultural exchange.

Therefore, "reconciliation" is not just an empty word reserved for anniversary events. However, in case of Turkey and Armenians the idea of reconciliation today may prove to be a political trap.

A "policy of reconciliation" refers to political discussions and programs that enable conflicting parties, as in the example above – Germans and French, to sit together around negotiation tables after a conflict has ended. The two reconciling parties would have to make moves toward each other, be on an equal footing and in a symmetric relationship to each other.

Thus, in a "policy of reconciliation" we observe solidarity of states. The "policy of reconciliation" should enable cooperation at international level and defuse conflicts in the global society by trying to round out the rough corners of conflicts.

Nevertheless, it is difficult, if not problematic to talk about reconciliation after a genocide. This is because genocide is not a result of just a conflict between parties that are more or less on equal standing. The policy of genocide is distinctly characterized by unilateral use of force and targeted determination of the perpetrator, i.e.

clear intent of violence. Therefore, in genocide there are no conflicting parties, but rather “perpetrators” and “victims.” In this context it has to be asked under what conditions “reconciliation” could be possible after genocide is committed. Would such reconciliation require the perpetrator to acknowledge the fact and admit the guilt? Could there be a hope for forgiveness and hence, for reconciliation without admission of the guilt and plea of responsibility?

Quite possibly, the process that started with pre-established concepts of “dialogue” and “reconciliation” and definitely contributed to a cautious opening in Turkey, may take another direction and lead to results different than the architects of this strategy had intended. However, this can only be expected if the Armenian side casts an attentive and critical look over the concepts and strategies.

Thus, first of all it is important to note that today when it comes to reconciliation between Armenia and Turkey concerning the genocide, the initial idea of political reconciliation must be strategically pushed to the sidelines. When with reference to Germany we talk about full awareness of the Holocaust, we mean the work on reconsideration¹. Such reconsideration and remembrance implies readiness to accept that the line between the victims and perpetrators will never disappear. Reconciliation in Germany also means seeking reconciliation with the own past of having been the perpetrator, i.e. the acceptance of the past as perpetrator. In contrast, when a dialogue between Armenia and Turkey is called for, it implies negotiating the history with a purpose of replacing recognition and reconsideration by reconciliation.

What remains to be done in the light of these developments and powerful, complex strategies?

First of all, it is important not to be discouraged, but persevere with the same consistency, as well as formulate one’s own position and demands with a confidence and clarity. We shall do what causes the fear of the global world order powerful states who are concerned about peace and quiet in their own house: never stop claiming our action space in politics. Yet in doing so, the above mentioned paradigm shift in the strategies of international politics shall be duly regarded, and our own strategies realigned correspondingly. Here a special role is reserved for diaspora. This is because in the context of the new world order politics, it is required that the Republic of Armenia follows the nation-state logic of actions as a small state in an important geostrategic region. Conversely, diaspora is in position to break the hegemonic constraints of this logic of actions and become politically effective thanks to

¹ *Translator’s note:* the term “*Aufarbeitung*” (“*re-processing*”) coined after WWII is used here, which encompasses the whole complex of work with the WWII violence and aggression experience in Germany, including both theoretical/intellectual work and activities in culture/education.

its decentralized and interrelated structures present in various world centers. Diaspora can influence the policies of the respective Governments, pursue its right of having its own history and memory, and unlike a nation-state, diaspora can refute in a different manner the argument that it interferes with the schemes of alliance policies or development of the world financial markets.

This difference in the domains of activity between a nation-state and diaspora leads to the aforementioned intense discrediting of the diaspora, targeted at its elimination from processes. It is not surprising that dialogue is always offered exclusively to the Republic of Armenia which is subject to the action logic of powers that be.

However, in order to comprehend and influence the world politics, one must know its concepts and notions, as well as stay at its hotspots. Today, only our own voice at the world centers can help us succeed in securing a place for the Armenian memory, Armenian interests and Armenian future. Then, and only then it would be possible to explain it to the coming generations why it is so important to resist the world politics. The decentralized structure of diaspora must not weaken, precisely because such decentralized structure is essential for handling numerous roles and opportunities in various world centers. Quite the opposite, this structure must be strengthened and its networks must be optimized.

At the same time we must realize that the question we ask today – what needs to be done in order to secure a place for the Armenian Cause in the world? – is not a new question at all. In fact, every generation has asked this question over and over again for centuries. And as far as the future of Armenians is concerned, there have always been two answers to this question; one for the homeland, and one for the numerous communities abroad. Today we must equally strengthen both of these pillars. We have to form networks of knowledge and actively influence the politics through these networks. This is not only in our "own" and "selfish" interests. Rather, the mission of standing up against new hegemonies and nationalisms of states is currently pursued.

While nation-states hoard all the rights in their hands and proclaim themselves keepers of the knowledge, guardians and warrantors of security, health and justice, what the diaspora communities have is not only an ancient history, but also a self-criticism of their past. Therefore the diaspora may claim the right of co-authorship to the preface of a world history that will be rewritten in the era of globalization. The time for recognition requests seems to expire, because the global world order is relying on a bastion of "strong states." Our mission is to be a critical and dedicated potential in this bastion so as to make the diaspora a non-negotiable asset of the Armenian history as part of the global knowledge, and hence, the politics.

For this reason I believe that considering the above mentioned arguments we have to re-conceptualize our activities till 2015, in order to change the direction of the discourse on the Armenian experience which is currently under threat of being taken away from its carriers. This means the discourse on genocide must be removed from the vicious circle of the currently dominant discussion "genocide - Yes or No," in which the victim is reduced to a status of a conflicting party and, being subject to the power of denial, is ultimately squeezed into the logic of the perpetrator. Therefore, intellectualization of own history and experience should be one of the priorities for Armenians. That is, the Armenian experience needs to be reflected and its importance for the fundamental aspects of thinking, social relations, individuals, ethics and politics has to be studied. Consequently, the relevance of this experience to the fundamental issues of individual and collective being would be clarified in a general framework, and the work with the Armenian experience could be protected from accusations of nationalism or grudge-holding. In my opinion, it would be important, for instance, to resume and continue those multi-aspect literary, artistic and philosophical works on rethinking the Armenian experience, which were commenced in 1920s. It has to be clear though, that in this case we will have to deal with some very distinctive and far-reaching reflections of a typical modern experience far beyond the Armenian specifics.

Here are several concrete, but certainly not exhaustive proposals on how these basic ideas could be materialized:

- Promotion of historical research, which no longer focuses on or even is restricted to seeking proofs, but reviews all aspects of annihilation of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire (background history, implementing structures, ideological aspects, identification of culprits, etc.). With this, a framework would be set for a complex and in-depth scientific work on the subject matter, free from the necessity to search for evidences.
- Promotion of interdisciplinary approach in dealing with the issue of genocide and its effects. It is also worth considering, inter alia, to incorporate the perspectives of social psychology, sociology, trauma research, literary studies and art history.
- Establishment of research and doctoral scholarships for scientists involved in the genocide history studies in the mentioned manner. Creation of a special foundation for targeted research and funding policy should be contemplated.
- Translation and republishing of written reflections on Armenian experience in the literature of the 1920s.

Eventually, it may become possible to remove the memory of genocide and insistence on its recognition from the forefront of the political postulate, and primarily counter the political instrumentalization of genocide discourse described in the required “dialogism.”

Moreover, against the backdrop of the current geopolitical developments mentioned above, in conceptualizing our strategies in future it is extremely important that at conferences, hearings and other activities, as well as in formulation of our claims (compensation, restitution, etc.) we consult with scientists and politicians who are fully knowledgeable about global political developments and interpretation of concepts.

Time has come for the knowledge to take over the postulate of morality, which so far has been determining our efforts. This is a necessary precondition for being able to decisively intervene in the discourse and regain control over the definition of notions (categories). In my view this is the only way we can overcome the posture of a beggar and get rid of the self-induced dependence on third parties who feel so comfortable in their role of "rational, objective mediators."

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