

The book cover features a light-colored background with a delicate floral pattern of small red flowers and green leaves. The title is printed in large, bold, white, sans-serif capital letters. The word 'WOMEN' is on the top line, 'AND' is smaller and positioned between 'WOMEN' and 'GENOCIDE', and 'GENOCIDE' is on the bottom line. The text is centered horizontally.

WOMEN AND GENOCIDE

GENDERED
EXPERIENCES
OF VIOLENCE,
SURVIVAL, AND
RESISTANCE

EDITED BY
JoAnn DiGeorgio-Lutz
and Donna Gosbee

Women and Genocide

Gendered Experiences of Violence,
Survival, and Resistance

**Edited by JoAnn DiGeorgio-Lutz and
Donna Gosbee**

Women's Press
Toronto

Women and Genocide: Gendered Experiences of Violence, Survival, and Resistance
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Dedication

This book is dedicated to all women who have endured loss or violence at the hands of perpetrators of genocide: those who made it through to tell us their story, those who have suffered in silence, and those who did not survive to tell of their experiences.

For Michael and Gerry—the men in my life who made this project possible.

—JoAnn DiGeorgio-Lutz

To my son, David, my rock, my unpaid editor, and my sounding board on this project; and to JoAnn, for your belief in me.

—Donna Gosbee

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Women of the Armenian Genocide: From Eyewitness Accounts to Literary Echoes

Sona Haroutyunian

Armenian Genocide: An Historical Overview

Combining *geno*, from the Greek *γένος* for family, race or tribe, with *cide* from the Latin word for killing, Polish-Jewish lawyer Raphael Lemkin, whose family members were victims of the Jewish Holocaust, created the word *genocide* in 1944, when writing a pioneering book about Nazi Germany. By creating and defining this term, Lemkin sought to describe and categorize Nazi policies of systematic persecution and murder of the Jews under the Third Reich. While the term was created amid World War II and initially applied to the Holocaust, it was a term intended to help the world understand mass atrocity crimes throughout history and provide a legal framework to prevent genocide from occurring in the future. As a university student, Lemkin had read with considerable concern about the Young Turk deportations and mass killing of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, and later applied the concept of genocide to the Armenian case. He was quite clear that while the term was new in World War II, the deed was not, and in fact had occurred throughout history, with the Armenian case a leading example at the beginning of the 20th century.¹

The atrocities committed against the Armenian people of the Ottoman Empire during World War I are defined as the Armenian genocide. The Young Turk party—officially known as the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), or *İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti*—which was in power at the time and dominated by Mehmed Talaat, Ismail Enver, and Ahmed Djemal, perpetrated deportations and massacres across much of the Ottoman Empire. When World War I broke out, the Young Turk government, hoping to save the core of a shrinking and greatly weakened Ottoman Empire, adopted a policy of Pan-Turkism: the establishment of a mega Turkish empire comprising all Turkic-speaking peoples of the Caucasus and Central Asia, extending to China. The intent was to either “Turkify” or eliminate all ethnic minorities within the Empire. The Armenian population became a major obstacle to the realization of this policy. Although the Young Turks made the decision in late 1911 to deport all Armenians from Western Armenia (Eastern Ottoman Empire/Turkey), they used the cover provided by World War I as a suitable opportunity for implementation of their plan.

On February 12, 1915, a key opening phase of the genocide occurred when Armenian conscripts in the Ottoman army were forcibly disarmed by their fellow Ottoman military colleagues on the order of Enver, the Minister of War. The Armenian conscripts were then either killed outright or worked/starved to death in labour and cargo transportation battalions. As a result of the conscription, and later murder, of military-age men, Armenian families and communities became increasingly vulnerable.

The second phase of the Armenian genocide began on April 24, 1915, with the mass arrest and subsequent murder of several hundred Armenian leaders in Constantinople (present-day Istanbul). Those murdered included clergy, educators, authors, professionals, and political figures—the Armenian intelligentsia. The Armenian people were now without most of their key leadership figures. The date became symbolic, as Armenians worldwide observe April 24 as a day to memorialize all victims of the Armenian genocide.

The third phase of the genocide comprised deportations and death marches of women, children, and the elderly into the Syrian desert. During these marches hundreds of thousands of Armenian victims were

massacred by Ottoman soldiers, gendarmes, special killing units (Special Organization), and Kurdish irregulars. A multitude of others died because of famine, dehydration, exposure to the elements, and disease. Countless numbers of women and children were raped. Tens of thousands of Armenian Christians were forced to convert to Islam.

In the fourth phase of the genocide, vast numbers died in concentration camps in the Syrian Desert, or perished later as emaciated and malnourished survivors in refugee camps in the Near East and the Caucasus.

The fifth and final phase of the Armenian genocide emerged with the total and utter denial by the Ottoman and Turkish governments of the mass killings and elimination of the Armenian nation from its homeland. Despite the ongoing international recognition of the Armenian genocide, Turkey has consistently fought against the labelling of what happened to the Armenians as genocide.

The Armenian genocide is referred to as the first genocide of the 20th century. As such, it holds crucial historical significance. It is frequently considered the template for subsequent genocides. When Adolf Hitler sent to death men, women, and children of Polish derivation and language, with the justification of gaining the living space (*Lebensraum*) that Germany needed, he claimed, “*Wer redet heute noch von der Vernichtung der Armenier?*” (“Who still talks nowadays of the extermination of the Armenians?”)² There were an estimated two million Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire on the eve of World War I. Approximately one and a half million Armenians perished between 1915 and 1923. About half a million Armenians, with substantial assistance from foreign aid organizations (e.g., Near East Relief), found shelter abroad, and their descendants now constitute much of the Armenian diaspora.³

Armenian Genocide Scholarship

The early scholarship in relation to the Armenian genocide was primarily descriptive in nature. After 1965 a body of English-language scholarly material, initially primarily by scholars of Armenian ethnicity, began to grow. Some of these works were influenced by the also-nascent field of Holocaust scholarship. In the 1970s and early 1980s a number of Holocaust

scholars began to expand this approach, by taking the Holocaust experience into a comparative dimension. Robert Melson, Israel Charny, Helen Fein, Leo Kuper, and Frank Chalk—all involved in Holocaust studies—began to look at the commonalities of the Armenian and Jewish experiences. As Richard Hovannisian attested, “The challenge is for us to work together because the problem is not an Armenian problem or a Jewish problem or a Cambodian problem. It’s a human problem.”⁴ At the same time a few Armenian scholars, primarily the leading sociologist and political historian Vahakn Dadrian—recognized as one of the “key thinkers” on the Holocaust and genocide—explored the phenomenon and made it their field of expertise.⁵ Dadrian’s work on modelling and conceptualizing helped establish the study of the Armenian genocide as a scholarly discipline. Also of fundamental importance were the efforts of Richard Hovannisian in creating the field of modern Armenian historical studies; training scholars who would go on to do important work on the genocide; and organizing conferences and publications.

Until the 1970s, Armenian genocide scholarship was dominated by historians, and their attention was firmly—and almost exclusively—fixed on documents, statistics, and data. Scant, if any, attention went to oral history and literary responses. Two main factors account for this state of affairs. The first is an ideological one, given that scholars were faced with the denial of the basic facts, and laboured to document and validate the factuality of the Armenian genocide. Moreover, in the name of academic objectivity, some historians were downplaying the importance of Armenian sources in the reconstruction of the history of the Armenian genocide. Still others were arguing that because those sources were testimonies from the victim group, they could not constitute valuable or reliable historical documentation, since they lacked objectivity. Following this line of reasoning, some Armenian historians, to avoid being labelled biased by international historians or Turkish scholars, have systematically avoided the use of Armenian sources in their scholarship. The second factor is eminently practical: there was no systematic initiative for collecting oral histories or considering narrative works until the 1970s. With the passage of time, scholarship on the Armenian genocide changed character from descriptive to analytical, and broadened its historical approach to

encompass cultural, artistic, visual, and literary aspects, thus emphasizing the importance of eyewitness accounts, memoirs, and artistic literature, which provide a broader understanding of the Armenian genocide.⁶

In their book *Women in the Holocaust*, Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman tell us that “questions about gender lead us to a richer and more finely nuanced understanding” of trauma.⁷ Through the prism of testimonies from survivors, memoirs, and literary echoes, this chapter focuses on gendered aspects of the Armenian genocide in the experiences of its female victims. Gendered experiences were historically downplayed in scholarly works, and have only recently begun to be investigated.⁸ The examination of these gender-specific aspects within the Armenian genocide can not only inform us about this particular genocide, but also contribute to comparative work with other genocides. In looking at gendered experiences within the Armenian genocide, this chapter will explore the impact of culturally defined roles of Armenian women in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; the women’s awareness of events and anticipatory reactions as the genocidal process unfolded; the extent to which women were treated differently than men; and these women’s reactions and processes as women to the physical and emotional circumstances of experiencing genocide.

Culturally Defined Roles of Armenian Women

Armenian culture has always assigned a strong emphasis to the family as the centre of society, with the image of “sacred mother” at its core.⁹ The history of the Armenian nation has systematically acknowledged the active role women played in the public and patriotic realms, even though, traditionally, Armenian men have been responsible for the economic support of the family, and women the household.¹⁰ Yet in the period before the genocide, women took on a two-fold role: in addition to being caring mothers and obedient wives, some also assumed public roles, led national charitable organizations, and undertook political activities by becoming party members and participating in the nascent nationalist and reformist movements.¹¹

Women also acted in the field of education. In 1866, among 46 Armenian schools, 14 were for girls, with enrolment of 1,472. Girls' schools opened both in Eastern and Western Armenia, but women took on particularly active roles in Western Armenia—especially in Constantinople. After finishing school, many of these girls had the opportunity to continue their education at some of the best universities in Europe. On January 14, 1895, *The New York Times* reported, “The Armenians are as highly educated as Americans. They speak English fluently. It is taught in all the colleges.”¹²

According to author Arpena Mesrobian, “the role of the Armenian woman in public and private life, although clearly differentiated from that of men, was nonetheless considered to be complementary, not inferior to the male role.”¹³ This, of course, does not mean that it was easy for a woman to have a place in society at the end of the 19th century. In her autobiographical narrative, *The Gardens of Silihdar*, Armenian writer Zapel Esayan recalls a visit she paid to the feminist writer Srбуhi Dussap in 1895:

Mrs. Dussap, when she heard that I contemplated a literary career, warned me against it. For a woman, she said, there were in that career more snares than laurels. In the Armenian reality as it was, people were not ready yet to accept that a woman makes a name and a place for herself.¹⁴

Yet in the early 20th century—before the eruption of the genocide—Esayan not only became famous but, along with other female writers and activists such as Zabel Asadour (better known as Sibyl) and the very same Srбуhi Dussap, found her literary voice in the public sphere and advocated, supported, and struggled for women's rights. Moreover, Sibyl and Dussap designed the project *The Declaration on Women's Role* with articles relating to equal rights for men and women¹⁵; the right to choose one's profession; elimination of double moral standards that benefit men in conjugal life; the right to higher education as a means of improving child-rearing; women's equal participation in community activities; elimination of the dowry custom; acceptance of the role of women in the preservation of the nation; and the transfer of culture.

These female authors supported women's emancipation, believing that if women were able to exercise their talents through education and employment, social conditions for all Armenians could be improved.¹⁶ Female writers also used models from Armenian history to encourage their female readers, as well as to uplift the national spirit of the women. After the Adana massacres of 1909, Armenian writer/activist Sibyl evoked the women of the Battle of Avarayr in the 5th century as an inspiration for Armenians, underlining the importance of women in educating the orphans: “Centuries ago, in the time of Vartan's troubles, the wives of martyred princes didn't lounge about on cushions, crying, in their fine palaces. In spite of all of their troubles and sorrows, they lavished great care [on children] and the children weren't allowed to remain uneducated.”¹⁷ Along with active participation in Armenia's social life, women continued to shoulder their traditional tasks of housekeeping and caring for their families. The following passage from a survivor's testimony offers a glimpse into Armenian life, customs, and rituals prior to 1915:

We used to bake *lavash* every day.... Seven women lived peacefully in the house, daughters-in-law and sisters-in-law; the eldest woman was the manager. Elderly women, young women and girls used to wear their nice clothes and went to church ... there was church service every day.... The clothes of our country were nice.... During the feast days we made *bishi*. There was a school in our village. There was a teacher in our village. There were books. The people of our village read the Bible; they read Armenian books.¹⁸

Anticipatory Reactions of Armenian Women to the Genocide

The anticipatory reactions of Armenian women to what they perceived might happen to them were based primarily on the awareness of past massacres that their co-nationals had experienced more than two decades before the Armenian genocide. On July 26, 1890, *The New York Times* reported, “On June 20 the soldiery were ordered to disperse Armenians who were holding a meeting in a churchyard. The soldiers began a massacre of the Armenians, and the Turkish populace joined in the attack.”¹⁹

There followed the Hamidian massacres of 1894 to 1896, with estimates of the dead ranging from 80,000 to 300,000, resulting in at least 50,000 orphaned children. A *New York Times* article from November 16, 1894, entitled “Massacre of Armenians: Equals the Bulgarian Butcheries Which Led to War. Over Six Thousand Murdered,” reported details of a letter sent from Bitlis on October 9 from the chairman of the Armenian Patriotic Association in London to Lord Kimberley, Foreign Secretary. The letter described the horrors of the massacre in Sassoun, south of Moosh, where 27 villages were annihilated:

On the admissions of the Turkish soldiers ... no compassion was shown to age or sex. In one place 300 or 400 women, after having been forced repeatedly to submit to the soldiery were hacked to pieces with swords and bayonets. In another place 200 weeping women begged at the commander’s feet for mercy. The commander, after ordering that they be outraged, had them all dispatched with the sword. In another case 60 young brides and maidens were driven into a church and were violated and butchered until their blood flowed from the doors.²⁰

The initial slaughters had not impacted the Armenians of Central and Western Anatolia. But their turn came when, in 1908, the Young Turk party came to power after the fall of Abdul Hamid II. Local massacres of Armenians began during the Holy Week of 1909 in Adana and its environs, and neither women nor children were spared.²¹ As a result of these and other massacres prior to the Armenian genocide, thousands of Armenian women and their families left their hometowns in an attempt to escape the persecutions of the Ottoman Empire. This post-trauma expatriation turned out to be an anticipatory reaction that allowed some to escape the upcoming genocide.²²

Yet many Armenian women stayed in the regions alongside their families and, besides fulfilling their traditional roles, took on added responsibilities in the midst of the violence and repression. As Payaslian explains, “In areas where Armenians formed armed resistance such as Van, Shabin-Karahisar and Musa Dagh ... young girls served as runners, reporting

movement of Turkish soldiers and police in and about the Armenian quarter of the town.... The women were also required to serve in armed combat, although the resistance leaders were exclusively men.”²³

Women may have been more vulnerable, but the lessons of past experiences in some ways helped them in their anticipatory reactions when the actual genocide, with its deportations and massacres, began in 1915. Eyewitness testimonies and memoirs attest to how Armenian women recognized the ominous fate that awaited their people. There was an attempt by many women to join forces among friends and relatives in an effort to make sense of what was happening, and perhaps even prevent the unknown—in effect to try to save the savable. While Armenian women may not have known the degree of danger looming ahead of them prior to the genocidal events that began in 1915, there was a recognition that violence was a possibility. As Antonia Arslan’s autobiographical narrative of her family’s history in the book *Skylark Farm* attests, “what Armenian youth doesn’t know about massacres and threats?”²⁴

Difference in Treatment of Women and Men

When discussing the gendered aspects of the Holocaust, Ofer and Weitzman assert, “it is not possible to assume that women’s experiences were totally different from those of men. That would be as false and misleading as to argue that their experiences were identical to men’s.”²⁵ This is also true in the case of early Armenian massacres when Turkish policy targeted all Armenians as Armenians, and the main importance was their “race,” not their gender. Payaslian writes that though Armenians were targeted simply because they were Armenian, and were equally defenceless to the slaughters of the pre-genocide era whether they were men or women, they “experienced crisis of a different nature,” based on gender.²⁶ The experiences of Armenians during the genocide that began in 1915, however, had a much more gendered aspect to it. The first act of the race annihilation program focused on men, who were murdered at the outset. Thus rendered vulnerable, it was easier to deal with the unprotected women, children, and elderly. Smbiyul Berberian, a survivor from the town of Afion-Garahissar, attests to the practice by the Turks of eliminating any male resistance:

The Turks had killed my father and had tortured and slaughtered my mother's brother. They drafted my elder brother into the Turkish army. Later they drafted also my younger brother. We heard afterwards that, together with seventeen other Armenian young men, they had massacred them by night and had thrown them under the bridge. Thus, when we were deported, there were no males left in our family. They took away my five aunts in Der-Zor, later they cut off their heads, impaled the heads with their bayonets to show them to us and then they threw their corpses into the Euphrates. We found only half of the body of my mother's aunt. My mother buried her in the earth. They massacred everybody.²⁷

The male survivors, mainly young boys who escaped the initial round-ups, were massacred during the deportation. Survivor Souren Sargsian recounts:

The next day the Kurds came, bringing with them the notorious Zeynal Bey and his brothers, the wicked executioners. They collected among the caravan all the little boys, bound their arms and took them farther on the mountain top, where the bonfires were burning. There they cut their heads with axes and threw them into the valley. They had done the same to the children of the previous caravans.²⁸

Women, despite their own struggle to stay alive and out of danger, also tried to find ways to save the young boys who were targeted during the deportation process; realizing that without young Armenian male survivors, they—the Armenians—as a group could not survive. The efforts by the women are seen in the actions of one woman whose heroic stance was recounted by survivor Shogher Abraham Tonoyan:

There was a very old woman among us.... When smoke began to enter the stable, she gathered the children and made them lie on their faces, their nose and mouth on the ground, then she made their mothers lay on them. She made my brother also lie on the

ground. She took off her apron, covered him with it and pushed me to lie down on my brother and not let him get up, even if he cried. May God bless her soul! That woman said: "*Lao*, what's the use of crying, we must act so that from each house one boy remains alive and comes out of the fire, so that their hearth is not extinguished, so that they may tell the world the acts of these godless and ruthless Turks."²⁹

There are reported cases of young mothers themselves, seeing no other way out, killing their own infant male children in order to "save them" from the horrors awaiting at the hands of the Turks; but infants were also sometimes sacrificed by the mother so that older children might be saved instead. A passage from Alice Tachdjian's memoir, *Stones on the Heart*, illustrates this phenomenon:

Our two-months old baby was crying because he was hungry, there was not milk in Hripsimé's breasts, the grass that she ate on the streets caused terrible stomachache for the child. However, the poor creature was destined to die of hunger, diarrhea, or by the sword. To avoid being discovered by his cries, our mother and sister suffocated the baby in the middle of their backs, one against the other, without looking at him. He extinguished like a candle.³⁰

After fulfilling the initial act of the race annihilation program by eliminating the Armenian men, it became easier for the Turks to deal with the now unprotected women, children, and elderly. Despite the fact that Interior Minister Talaat's telegrams called for Turkish troops to "exterminate entirely all the Armenians living in Turkey ... without regard for women, children, and the infirm," the path the women were forced to traverse was paved with different processes.³¹

One of those processes was to "Turkify" some Armenian women and incorporate them into the perpetrators' society through forced assimilation, which meant compulsory conversion to Islam: "Several attractive women were told they might live if they would recant their faith. They replied: 'Why should we deny Christ? We have no more reason to do so

than had these,' pointing to the mangled bodies of their husbands and brothers, 'kill us, too.' This was done.... [B]etween 6,000 and 10,000 were killed. Babes were impaled on the same weapon with their mothers."³²

According to Turkish traditional ideas, men were the bearers of ethnicity, while women and children were susceptible to assimilation.³³ A female survivor from Yozhat recounts how some high-ranking Turkish officers approached their group, and began trying to convince them to become Turks:

"We ask you to think well. Are you willing to become Turks or not? You have seen the slaughtered people. Would you like to be similarly treated? Isn't it better for you to become Turks, otherwise you shall also be butchered...." There was an Armenian girl: her name was Arshalouys. She had long plaited hair. She was very pretty. They took her also and cut off her head. The gendarme came with her hair wrapped round his hand, brought Arshalouys' head, threw it before us, and said, "Either you become Turks, or you shall become like this."³⁴

Aram Kyosseyan, from Harpoot, who survived the death marches the Armenian women and children were forced to endure, recalled,

We had walked so much that we were exhausted. At last they ordered us to come to a halt. We stopped in a valley. They began to ask the adults: "Are you Turkish or Armenian?" Those who replied, "I am an Armenian," were set apart and those who said, "I am a Turk," were put on another side. The ones that did not deny their Armenian origin were taken to a remote place and slaughtered. The others who agreed to become Turks were saved.³⁵

Another tool used by the Turks was the systematic nature of mass rapes of Armenian women and young girls. The German Consul to Trabzon, Heinrich Bergfeld, reported that "[t]he numerous rapes of women and girls, was part of a plan for the virtually complete extermination of the Armenians."³⁶ These rapes often took place in the presence of the women's own family members as the following witness statement attests: "Early in

July [1915] ... the leading Armenians of the town [Sassun] and the headmen of the villages were subjected to revolting tortures.... The female relatives of the victims who came to the rescue were outraged in public before the very eyes of their mutilated husbands and brothers."³⁷

As Smith informs us regarding rape in times of genocidal violence, "rape signifies the masculinity and the victory of the perpetrators and the weakness and impotence of the defeated males.... The point is to humiliate the men along with the women and to signify to the men their utter powerlessness.... The functions of rape and other forms of sexual violence against males and females overlap, but diverge in certain respects."³⁸ We see this divergence in the difference in consequences: for example, women must address issues such as pregnancy, or the choice to keep or abandon the child in the fields after birth, as "the child is the reminder of what happened."³⁹

Pregnant women were often specific targets of violence, since they were viewed as the embodiment of biological continuity.⁴⁰ One survivor of the genocide from Igdir testified, "The Turks were approaching. They cut open the bellies of pregnant Armenian women with their knives, took the babies out and impaled their heads on stakes."⁴¹ Another survivor, Loris Papikian, confirmed this behaviour by the Turks when she recounted,

Four officers, the dregs of humanity, who had acquired the fierceness of wild hyenas and had lost their human form, were seated at a table, had gathered near them, standing, a group of pregnant women who would probably give birth in a few days, and they were betting whether the child in the woman's womb was a male or female, and then they ordered the soldiers to open the woman's womb with a dagger and bring the child out.⁴²

During the Armenian genocide the Turks not only separated men from women and children, but in some cases separated children from their mothers. Trvanda Mouradian, a survivor from Harpoot, recalled atrocities perpetrated by gendarmes on the roads of exile:

They took us out of our village, they confined all the young people in a cave-like place, poured kerosene from an opening in the

roof and set fire to them. Then [Turkish gendarmes] gathered all the women and smashed their heads with stones. They killed my mother and grandmother with stones, too. They separated the children like lambs from their mother-sheep. I had a three-year-old sister; they took her also, together with the other children near the Balou Mourat (Euphrates) River bridge, cut their throats and threw them into the river.... Two gendarmes drove 500 people to exile.”⁴³

Another tragic occurrence during the Armenian genocide was that some Armenian mothers were forced to leave their children with Arabs, in an attempt to save the lives of their children. Many Armenian women realized that their child stood a better chance of survival if handed over to strangers for conversion and possible life, versus almost certain death if the child stayed with the mother.

Reactions of Women to Their Experiences in the Armenian Genocide

Many who survived the unimaginable deprivations, hardships, and torture of the deportations refused to share their trauma for decades, and in some cases forever.⁴⁴ In their minds they “translated” the history into memory, which stayed blocked within psychological borders. My great-grandparents on my mother’s side, Mkrtych Atashian and Karmilè Paronikian, were from Van. During the genocide, Mkrtych was eight and Karmilè was four years old. They met in the orphanage in Yerevan, and married when Karmilè was 15 years old. They never told their family or anyone else the story of their survival—not a single word was uttered about the massacres. To any questions, they would simply answer, “We left Van a year before those events.” The only thing that Mkrtych would repeat was, “We buried a pot of gold under the pear tree. If you go there, you can take it. It is certainly still there.” And also, “When my father learned that the Turks entered his garden to steal apples, he went into a fury, took the axe, and began cutting the branches, shouting: ‘I’d rather cut them than leave the Turks to get the fruit.’” The Turks fled the yard, saying the man was an *atesh*, (meaning fire in Persian). From here comes his last name—Atashian. Karmilè

recalled her home in the district of Aygestan, where the rich people of Van lived and who were all called *barons* (from which derived their family name, Paronikian). The house was surrounded with such a big garden that her father, Stepan *agha* [lord/master in Turkish], travelled through it by mule. Instead of hedges there were quince trees dividing their garden from that of the neighbours.⁴⁵ This was the extent of what my great-grandparents were willing to discuss of their prior lives. Family members dared not ask my great-grandparents how they ended up in an orphanage, where their parents were, and so on. Relatives did not want to cause them additional trauma by asking difficult questions (though I wish they had found a way to talk to them). Yet this was also the period of the Soviet regime, when people were afraid of speaking about anything. As with my great-grandparents, so too we see that many other survivors of the Armenian genocide did not want to speak of their experiences, affirming that their “heart would not bear the tragic experience anew.”⁴⁶

Smith asserts that “the perpetrators attempt to extend their power through linking memory with pain, with the woman recalling for the rest of her life her violation and humiliation and, by extension, the shame brought upon her group.”⁴⁷ And yet the traumatic effect of the national calamity was perceived by every woman or girl in her own manner. Fortunately for us, many Armenian women managed to overcome the psychological blockages to reveal the story of their survival through their testimonies or memoirs.

Nichanian writes that the “catastrophe ... transformed the memory into an archive,” and that those who testified were “no more than secretaries of the archive.”⁴⁸ Nichanian further describes the difficulties writer Zapel Esayan struggled with in documenting the “unnamable,” the “catastrophe”:

For two years, between 1916 and 1918, Esayan lived a unique obsession: to testify.... During these same years, she wrote stories where she displayed an unprecedented sense for female psychology.... She had to deal with survivors, victims, orphans ... but she no longer had a grasp of the immeasurable event. Moreover in her obsession to gather testimonies, to give them a form and translate them into French, she was the first among Armenians to record and shape the originary cantings of testimony into a discourse of evidence.⁴⁹

During the Armenian genocide women stayed alive only after facing what scholar Lawrence Langer identified as “choiceless choices.”⁵⁰ Though Langer used the term in relation to Jewish victims of the Holocaust, it is certainly applicable to the “choices” forced on Armenian women during their genocidal experiences. Some women underwent assimilation, yet others passed through indescribable tortures and physical violence. These women bravely made sacrifices to protect their children. “They are not animals scrapping for the last mouthful of bread, but women, still with one final source of strength: the thought of saving the children,” writes Arslan.⁵¹

Armenian women sought not only to protect their families, but also to preserve the customs, traditions, and memories of their land, as well as books, photographs, and other objects. Considering the photographic metaphor of memory, Daniel Sherman observes, “Sight is the only sense powerful enough to bridge the gap between those who hold a memory rooted in bodily experience and those who, lacking such experience, nonetheless seek to share the memory.”⁵²

The lives of female Armenian survivors were shaken by almost immeasurable trauma. They experienced major burdens from the events and consequences of the genocide, such as lost family members and a lost homeland. Facing these challenges meant that they had to begin living life again, but in unfamiliar locations due to the forced Armenian diaspora, often without family members nearby. An excerpt from *Skylark Farm* is illustrative of the complex phenomenon of the diaspora that was created by the Armenian genocide: “My aunt always used to say: ‘When I’ve finally had it with you, when you get too mean, I’m leaving. I’ll go stay with Arussiag in Beirut, with Uncle Zareh in Aleppo, with Philip and Mildred in Boston, with my sister Nevert in Fresno, with Ani in New York, or even with cousin Michel in Copacabana.’”⁵³

Conclusion

Despite the threat of annihilation of the Armenian population, and the violence they were subjected to by the Turks, some Armenian women were able to survive. These survivors spread Armenian culture and seeds across the world through the diaspora. In so doing, the Armenian identity

evolved and became more diverse and complex, and contributed to an emerging multiculturalism in the 20th and 21st centuries. These women also gave us, in many cases, a record of their experiences during the genocide—whether through testimonies, interviews, memoirs, or even passed on orally to their children and their children’s children. Given that the Armenian genocide occurred a century ago, and the survivors and witnesses are no longer with us, their testimonies, interviews, and memoirs are now the only record we have of their experiences. Much like the women who subsequently experienced other genocidal events in the 20th and 21st centuries, Armenian women can take their place among the comparisons across a gendered divide and enrich our understanding of the gendered experiences of genocide.

Questions

1. What are some of the reasons that women’s voices regarding the Armenian genocide have been silenced?
2. How does nationalism, both Turkish and Armenian, play into the silencing of women?
3. What threats to both Armenian and Turkish masculinity and nationalism does the unsilencing of women’s narratives pose?
4. How do the concepts of sexuality and genocide coincide? Why might sexuality be a concept that threatens discourses of “tradition”? How does this relate to the silencing of women in genocide narratives?

Notes

1. For stages of genocide, consider, among others, Gregory Stanton, “The Eight Stages of Genocide,” in *The Genocide Studies Reader*, ed. Samuel Totten and Paul Bartrop (New York: Routledge, 2009).
2. Louis P. Lochner, *What About Germany?* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1942), 1–4. Hitler quotation is from the English version of the German document handed to Louis P. Lochner in Berlin. It first appeared in Lochner, *What About Germany?* The Nuremberg Tribunal later identified the document as L-3 or Exhibit USA-28. Two other versions of the same

- document appear in Appendices II and III. For the German original compare *Akten zur Deutschen Auswärtigen Politik 1918–1945*.
3. My special thanks to Alan Whitehorn, emeritus professor of political science, Royal Military College of Canada, for assisting me in bibliographic research, for putting me in contact with some of the authors cited, and for guidance on political issues of the Armenian genocide.
 4. Richard Hovannisian, "So, Where Do We Go from Here?" (lecture, The State of the Art of Armenian Genocide Research: Historiography, Sources, and Future Directions workshop, Clark University, Worcester, MA, April 9–10, 2010.)
 5. See Paul Robert Bartrop and Steven L. Jacobs, *Fifty Key Thinkers on the Holocaust and Genocide* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2010), 79; or Vahakn Dadrian, "The Secret Young-Turk Ittihadist Conference and the Decision for the World War I Genocide of the Armenians," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 7, no. 2 (1993): 173–201; or Vahakn Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide: Ethnic Conflict from the Balkans to Anatolia to the Caucasus* (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1995); or Vahakn Dadrian, *Warrant for Genocide: Key Elements of Turko-Armenian Conflict* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1999).
 6. For a broader understanding of the genocide, see the following works. Verjine Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide: Testimonies of the Eyewitness Survivors* (Yerevan: Gitutian, 2011). Michael Hagopian, an educational filmmaker, gathered 400 interviews of survivors or witnesses. The University of Southern California-Shoah Foundation has preserved Hagopian's interviews. In the early 1970s Richard Hovannisian undertook the largest oral history project in the Armenian community, recording survivor stories. All 800 interviews were digitized in 2005. Richard G. Hovannisian, *The Armenian Genocide in Perspective* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1986); Richard G. Hovannisian, *The Armenian Genocide: History, Politics, Ethics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992); Richard G. Hovannisian and David N. Myers, eds., *Enlightenment and Diaspora: The Armenian and Jewish Cases* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999). In 1983, the Zoryan Institute undertook an oral history program aimed at documenting survivor experiences on videotape. These and other oral history projects were of critical importance, since researchers began their work while there were a handful of survivors still alive. Without their work, the memories and experiences of these survivors or witnesses would have been lost to history. Rubina Perroomian (1993, 2008, 2012) took up the mantle of Armenian genocide literary scholarship in the 1990s. With the publication of several books, she furnished a database of relevant literary responses and analyses of a number of texts.
 7. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman, eds., *Women in the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).
 8. On gender issues during the Armenian Genocide, consider, among others, Roger W. Smith, "Genocide and the Politics of Rape," in *Genocide Matters: Ongoing Issues and Emerging Perspectives*, ed. Joyce Apstel and Ernesto Verdeja (New York: Routledge, 2013); Igor Kuznetsova and Rita Kuznetsova, "(Gendered) Unwritten Culture: Turkish Armenians, Ahishka Turks, Abkhaz," (lecture, Gender, Ethnicity and the National State: Anatolia and Its Neighbouring Regions, Hrant Dink Memorial Workshop 2009 Proceedings, Sabanci University, Istanbul), accessed September 1, 2014, www.hrant-dink.org/picture_library/HDMW-Proceedings%202009.pdf; Ayse Gül Altınay, "Gendered Silences, Gendered Memories," (Hrant Dink Memorial Workshop 2009 Proceedings, Sabanci University, Istanbul); Claudia Card, "Genocide and Social Death," in *Genocide's Aftermath: Responsibility and Repair*, ed. Claudia Card and Armen T. Marsoobian (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 10–11; Katharine Derderian, "Common Fate, Different Experience: Gender-Specific Aspects of the Armenian Genocide, 1915–1917," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 19, no. 1 (2005); Rubina Perroomian, "When Death Is a Blessing and Life a Prolonged Agony: Women Victims of Genocide," in *Genocide, Perspectives II: Essays on Holocaust and Genocide*, eds. Colin Tatz, Pater Arnold, and Sandra Tatz (Sydney: Brandl & Schlesinger with the Australian Institute for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, 2003), 314–332; Matthias Bjørnlund, "'A Fate Worse Than Dying': Sexual Violence During the Armenian Genocide," in *Brutality and Desire: War and Sexuality in Europe's Twentieth Century*, ed. Dagmar Herzog (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 16–59; Roger W. Smith, "Women and Genocide: Notes on an Unwritten History," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, VIII, no. 3 (Winter 1994): 315–334; Donald E. Miller and Lorna Touryan Miller, *Survivors: An Oral History of the Armenian Genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Eliz Sanasarian "Gender Distinction in the Genocidal Process: A Preliminary Study of the Armenian Case," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, IV, no. 4 (1989): 449–461.
 9. Sona Zeitlian, *The Role of Armenian Women During the Revolutionary Movement* (Hraztan: Sarkis Zeitlian Publications, 1992); Sona Zeitlian "Nationalism and the Development of Armenian Women's Rights Movement," in *Armenian Women in a Changing World*, ed. Barbara

- merguerian and Doris Jafferian (Belmont: Armenian International Women's Association Press, 1995), 84; Anny Bakalian, *Armenian-Americans: From Being to Feeling Armenian* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1993), 14; Anna Ohanyan, "State-Society Nexus and Gender: Armenian Women in Post-Communist Context," in *Women and Politics Around the World: A Comparative History and Survey*, ed. Joyce Gelb and Marian Lief Palley, vol. 2 (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2009).
10. In ancient times the Armenian women were treated as equal members of society in certain spheres, as evidenced in the code of Shahapivan (443 BCE): "... women [have] a right to possess a family property in case the husband deserted his wife without any reason," as well as indicating that a wife had the right "to bring a new husband home." Fifth-century Armenian historian Eghishe documented the revolt of the Armenians against the Sassanid Persians and dedicated a number of pages to praising the merits of Armenian women. See Robert Thomson, trans., *Elisha, History of Vardan and the Armenian War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982, 9). Many writers saw parallels in the story of Armenians struggling against the Persian Empire in 451 CE and their own situation as a conquered people living in the Ottoman Empire. See Victoria Rowe, *A History of Armenian Women's Writing, 1880–1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2003), 34–35.
 11. Zabel Asaour (literary pseudonym Sybil) was one of the founders of the Society of Nation-Dedicated Armenian Women, an organization that supported the construction, maintenance, and operation of Armenian girl schools throughout the Armenian-populated districts of the Ottoman Empire (<http://armenianhouse.org/sipil/sipil-en.html>, accessed September 15, 2015); consider also Agop J. Hacikyan, Gabriel Basmajian, and Edward S. Franchuk, *The Heritage of Armenian Literature: From the Eighteenth Century to Modern Times* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 541–542. Among other societies and organizations in which women took part were National Society (*Hamazgayin*) from Murad-Raphaelyan College, Siunyats Society (*Siunyats*) in Izmir, The Devoted Society (*Andznver*) in Constantinople, Senekerimian Society (*Senekerimyan*) in Sebastia, The Society of Education Advocates (*Usumnasirats*) in Brusa, The Society of Smbatian and Devout (*Smbatyan* and *Hogeser*) in Kharberd city, The Devoted Society (*Andznver*) in Huseynik, The Society of Education Advocates and Patriots (*Usumnasirats* and *Azgasirats*) in Mezreh, Vardan Society (*Vardanyan*), Ararat Educational Society (*Araratyan krtakan*) and Eastern School Society (*Dprotsasirats Arevelyan*) in Chmshkatsag, Artzn Society (*Artznyan*), Education Advocates (*Usumnasirats*), Society of Reading Lovers (*Yntercasirats*), and Sisakan (*Sisakan*) in Erzurum, www.genocide-museum.am/eng/online_exhibition_13.php.
 12. Vosgan Mekhitarian and Vahan Ohanian, eds., *Armenians at the Twilight of the Ottoman Era: News Reports from the International Press*, vol. 1, *The New York Times 1890–1914* (Yerevan: Genocide Documentation and Research Center, 2011), 133.
 13. Arpena Mesrobian, *To Preserve the Armenian People: The Armenian Relief Society, 1910–1970* (Boston: Armenian Relief Society, 1972).
 14. Marc Nichanian, *Writers of Disaster: Armenian Literature in the Twentieth Century* (London: Taderon Press, 2002), 191.
 15. For more information on the role of Armenian women prior to 1915, see Zabel Esayian, "La Role de la Femme Arménienne pendant la Guerre," *Revue des Études Arméniennes* (1922) 12: 1–138. See also Victoria Rowe (2000), *The "New Armenian Women": Armenian Women's Writing in the Ottoman Empire, 1880–1915* (Ph.D. Thesis, Graduate Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilization, University of Toronto). <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/13580/1/NQ53820.pdf>, accessed September 15, 2015. For information on The Declaration of Women's Role, see <http://hetq.am/arm/news/33007/hay-kiny-patmutyan-khorqeric.html>, accessed September 15, 2015.
 16. Rowe, *A History of Armenian Women's Writing*, 17.
 17. Sibyl, "Aganver Hayuhik" in *Yerker* (Yerevan: 1965). See also Rowe, *A History of Armenian Women's Writing*, 35. Consider also Zabel Esayan's accounts of the Armenian massacres of 1909 in Perroomian, *When Death Is a Blessing and Life a Prolonged Agony*, 322.
 18. Testimony of Shoger Abraham Tonoyan (b. 1901, Moosh Verdenis village). Verjine Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide: Testimonies of the Eyewitness Survivors* (Yerevan: Gitutian Publishing, 2011), 97.
 19. Mekhitarian and Ohanian, *Armenians at the Twilight*, 1.
 20. *Ibid.*, 40.
 21. Derderian, "Common Fate," 2.
 22. The main wave of emigration was to the United States, where a number of women's committees had already formed in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Providence to help the immigrants in facing their new reality. New York was also where the Armenian Relief Society was founded in 1910, becoming the second Armenian women's philanthropic organization, after the

- Armenian Red Cross. For more information, see Arra Avakian, *Armenia: A Journey Through History* (Fresno: The Electric Press of America, 2009), 81. Also see Hagop Ohanessian, "The Armenian Relief Society (ARS): A Case Study of Armenian-American Women in the Twentieth Century" (master's thesis, California State University, 2014).
23. Simon Payaslian, "Genocide and Women," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Women in World History*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 364.
 24. Antonia Arslan, *Skylark Farm*, trans. G. Brock (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 107.
 25. Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 2.
 26. Payaslian, "Genocide and Women," 364.
 27. Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 384.
 28. *Ibid.*, 315.
 29. *Ibid.*, 97.
 30. Alice Tachdjian, *Pietre sul cuore* (Milan: Sperling & Kupfer Editori S.p.A., 2003), 94.
 31. Tessa Hofmann, ed. *Der Völkermord an den Armeniern vo Gerich: Der Prozess Talaat Pascha* (Göttingen: Die Gesellschaft, 1980), 133–136; also see Derderian, "Common Fate," 1–25.
 32. Mekhitarian and Ohanian, *Armenians at the Twilight*, 40.
 33. Derderian, "Common Fate," 4.
 34. Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 351–352.
 35. *Ibid.*, 273.
 36. Vahakn Dadrian, "The Armenian Genocide: An Interpretation," in *America and the Armenian Genocide of 1915*, ed. Jay Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 83.
 37. James Bryce, ed., *The Treatment of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, 1915–1916* (London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1916), 85.
 38. Roger W. Smith, "Genocide and the Politics of Rape," in *Genocide Matters: Ongoing Issues and Emerging Perspectives*, ed. Joyce Apsel and Ernesto Verdeja (New York: Routledge, 2013), 90.
 39. Helsinki Watch, *War Crimes in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, vol. II (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1993), 219.
 40. Derderian, "Common Fate," 9.
 41. Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 176.
 42. *Ibid.*, 214.
 43. *Ibid.*, 313.

44. *Ibid.*, 352.
45. Dr. Sedmar Atashian, daughter of Armenian genocide survivors Mkrtich and Karmilè.
46. Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 351.
47. Smith, "Genocide and the Politics of Rape," 92.
48. Nichanian, *Writers of Disaster*, 233.
49. *Ibid.*, 196.
50. Lawrence Langer, *Versions of Survival, The Holocaust and the Human Spirit* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982).
51. Arslan, *Skylark Farm*, 5.
52. Daniel J. Sherman, *The Construction of Memory in Interwar France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 14.
53. Arslan, *Skylark Farm*, 5.

“Covering an unusually broad range of genocides around the world, this volume assembles highly original, empirically rich, and methodologically thoughtful research on the suffering and the agency of women during and after events of mass violence in France, Romania, Armenia, Cambodia, Rwanda, Guatemala, Kosovo, India, and Bangladesh in the twentieth century. This book is a must-read for students of women’s history and genocides, and it may serve as a model for further explorations into the gendered experience of violence, terror, and war.”

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Illuminating the unique experiences of women both during and after genocide, JoAnn DiGeorgio-Lutz and Donna Gosbee’s edited collection is a vital addition to genocide scholarship. The contributors revisit genocides of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, from Armenia in 1915 to Gujarat in 2002, examining the roles of women as victims, witnesses, survivors, and rescuers. The text underscores women’s experiences as a central yet often overlooked component to the understanding of genocide.

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JOANN DIGEORGIO-LUTZ is a Professor of Political Science and the Department Head of Liberal Studies at Texas A&M University (Galveston Campus). She teaches courses on comparative genocide, foreign policy, and international relations. She has published widely in a variety of formats on genocide in Guatemala and Cambodia and is the recipient of two J. William Fulbright Awards.

DONNA GOSBEE is a PhD student at the Ackerman Center for Holocaust Studies at the University of Texas at Dallas. She is a Jack Kent Cooke Graduate Scholar and a former adjunct instructor teaching Holocaust coursework at Texas A&M University–Commerce. Donna’s research and writing have primarily focused on the experiences of the Roma and Sinti during the Holocaust.



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