

THE ROLE OF THE ARMENIAN MASS MEDIA IN COMPOSING SOCIAL MEMORY CONCERNING "THE ARMENIAN PROBLEM"*

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Abstract

The article analyzes the Armenian problem from a different perspective. It asks whether societies have memories just like individuals, and if such a social memory exists how it can be modified. Composition of social memory on the Armenian problem and the role of Armenian mass media are specifically explored by the writer in the context of the theoretical discussions on social memory.

Keywords

Social Memory, Armenia, Armenian Problem, Armenian Mass Media, Armenian Social Memory.

The discussion as to whether societies have memories like individuals has today led to the investigation of social memories. Discussions on the issue date back as long as half a century; however, the history of memory formation of societies is as old as the social life of humanity. This deduction arouses questions about storing knowledge in the memories of societies, saving the stored ones, the tools used for taking out this knowledge with a view to pass it down to the coming generations, amnesia, and the likelihood of deleting the present social memory and replacing it with a brand new one. This article focuses on particularly the last of these. There are highly diverse views on the issue of replacing social memory. Paul Connerton, handling it in an analytical method, says in "*How Do Societies Remember?*", "Whatever the kind is, to ensure that a certain experience is reasonable, we must connect it to the experience formed by the previous ones."¹ The whole world witnessed the failure of such an application in the USSR in 1991. The response of the Russian society to the political power trying to produce a new social memory was outstanding. The group refusing to untie itself from

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¹ Paul Connerton, *How Do Societies Remember*, translated by Alaaddin Şenel, (Istanbul: Ayrıntı, 1994), p. 14.

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the past broke away from this process. Yet, those volunteering for a new future and a new memory were as equally voluntary to demolish the old memory, as they had been to establish it.

Turning to "the Armenian Problem," it is evident that theoreticians of social memory, working for centuries to place that of Armenian society, reformulated their ideas in the 20th century under the title of the "Armenian Problem." Towards the end of the 20th century, aided by technological advancements in mass media, they have found a speedy and vast area in which to maneuver, that even they could not have imagined.

I would like to mention two problems of the field in which I specialize: the first is that we should ask right questions in the right order to get the right answers.² The other problem that should be underlined is that available materials written in Armenian have not yet undergone scrutiny in Turkey. Therefore, the information in these documents cannot be evaluated.

In this study, ideas that have been adopted in line with the Armenian views in order to develop a prejudice in the readers will be compared with ideas from opposing texts. Moreover, much care is taken to choose ideas for comparison that derive mostly from texts in Armenian.

Due to technological developments of the 20th century, the mass media seem to have gained a function of not only storing, saving or transferring information, but also, potentially, of directing and composing completely new social memories – controversial though the subject may be. In this respect, the ethical values of those using mass media, and if proper to say, their objectives in using this power is of much importance. For example, the image of war in the minds of societies in the past was restricted to the memories and letters of soldiers, the explanations of military

² For detailed information see Yu. M. Lotman, *O poetah i o poezii*, (Petersburg, 1996).

sources or the writings of a few writers who had had the opportunity to be in battlefields. Therefore, the discussion that the events belonging to that era may have been misevaluated and distorted is still a neverending matter of importance in our agenda. In his preface to *"War and Peace"*, Tolstoy makes crucial evaluations on this subject.³ He states that in each minute following the end of the combat, the statements of the narrators begin to change, as their imaginative powers and feelings began to prevail. In our own day, although we can watch live combats audio-visually through television and internet, the reporter's way of choosing among, using and presenting the available materials, may be done with the intention of disturbing one of the sides. This problem, rendering discussion on the reliability of the document, usually stems from deliberate attitudes. Even the apparent 'reality' of a photograph can be evaluated in different ways, as Özcan Yüksek explains:

*Photography changed the way human beings see the world, and many things. This art or means of communication had the power of displaying naked reality. At least it had such persuasiveness. Such a power that would also hide the reality while showing! The reality that is presented to the people who think they see might be a reality whose reality is removed; a piece of the reality, a moment of it with no future or past, for instance."*⁴

These features of photographic texts are frequently exploited by the written texts dealing with the "Armenian Problem." Very often this is done by presenting events belonging to isolated moments, which are torn away from their ties of the past and future completely. Like the photo-shots used for commercials, episodes effective in storing knowledge in the memories of societies and individuals without questioning are juxtaposed. What should especially be underlined is the discrepancy in the assertion that the written documents are not artistic, but considered realistic. However, this is highly controversial matter.

Austrian author Franz Werfel's novel *Forty Days on Mount Musa* is a typical example of this issue. Werfel, 1890-1945, chooses the theme of his novel from Turkish history, and claims to have culled the materials from Syria and Antakya; he says:

³ Leo Nikolayevich Tolstoy, *The War and Peace*, translated by Atilla Tokatli, (Istanbul:Sosyal Publications, 1985), Vol.1.

⁴ Özcan Yüksek, *The Camera Between The Reality and the Image*, Atlas/the Book Of War, May, 2003, p.36.

This work was framed in Damascus in March 1929. The impetus was the desire for the revelation of the happenings in the country of the dead, the unbelievable fate of a people, and the misery of the perished immigrant children working in a rug factory.”⁵

This extract placed on the back cover of the book gives considerable information to the reader about the content of the book and the attitude of the writer towards the narration. Another claim of the work is that what was told is true. After a 70-year lapse following the first printing, some photos from a private archive are annexed to the end of the novel so as to make it more striking and enhance the reliability of its so-called realistic claims. It has also been filmed in order to reach a wider audience. The fact we must include in our object of discussion here is that Franz Werfel completed his novel in 1933.

To better assess this work, we must first consider how two other authors, who had lived, thought and debated in the same period, but in different places than the Austrian writer Werfel, interpret those days, and also look at how the events lived on Mount Musa in 1915 are handled in an Armenian encyclopedia.

The first example is the short story entitled “Hegnar Fountain,”⁶ written in 1935 by a Soviet Armenian author named Mkirtich Armen (1906-1972).

The topic Mkirtich Armen chose for his work is striking. While people in the story with Turkish, Armenian and Greek ethnic backgrounds lead their lives in a harmonious, peaceful and friendly way they witness a tragic end of a forbidden love. In the end of the story it turns out that a young Armenian woman, disguised under the veil worn by Turkish women in those years, betrayed her husband, her husband exploited people’s good will by tapping their superstitious beliefs. The events portrayed in the story take place around the end of the era of Tsardom and the first decade of Socialism. The topic is based on the author’s memories and daily lives of people.

Another example is a story by Ömer Seyfettin titled “Ashab-ı Kehf” published in 1918. In the foreword the author stated his aim as follows; “I wrote this story five years ago. I did not set out to

⁵ Franz Werfel, *Forty Days in Mount Musa*, trans. By Saliha Nazlı Kaya, (Istanbul: Belge Publications, 1997), back cover

⁶ Armen Mkirtich, *Hegnar Fountain*, (Istanbul: Belge Publications, 1998).

come up with a literary work. I just wanted to compare the odd thoughts of our intellectuals with social ideas."⁷ In 1914, Istanbul, being the capital of the Ottoman Empire, was the city where the events taking place in Anatolia were most deeply felt and discussed. Ömer Seyfettin chose as the hero of his story an Armenian youngster from that time and setting. The author views the nationalist ideas of this youngster named Hayk with respect and tolerance and showcases him to the Turkish intellectuals.

The question to pose here is, how could Turkish and Armenian authors, who should logically have shared the impressions that Franz Werfel saw from Austria and depicted, not do so?" Or is there the possibility of a kind of intolerance by Ömer Seyfettin and Mkirtic Armen? The information presented in the Armenian Soviet Encyclopedia can be an answer to this question.⁸

The encyclopedia depicts in Armenian the events in 1915 on Mount Musa. As the target reader audience has changed, the description techniques have changed too. Above all, instead of poor people placed as a visual object in the end of Werfel's novel, children with weapons in their hands and a young girl with a weapon around her belt stand proudly.

There is further striking information in a text written in Armenian by Arzumanyan. That is the similarity between Gabriel Bagratyan, whom Werfel introduced as an Ottoman army officer on leave, and Tigran Andreasyan – the preacher of the Protestant church in Zeytun who had come to Yoğunoluk a few days before the events on Mount Musa took place.

Arzumanyan's data state that Tigran Adreasyan was in Zeytun during the insurgency there. He comes to Yoğunoluk a few days before the insurgency on Mount Musa starts, and he paves the way for and participates in the insurgency.

In Werfel's novel, as in data presented by Arzumanyan, a clergyman named Aram Tomasyan comes to Yoğunoluk, the place where he was born and raised, from Zeytun. Yet, Werfel, who was also a clergyman, does not have Aram unite the people whose religious service he is in and incite them into an insurgency. The author assigns Aram an inactive role, placing a figure from the

⁷ Ömer Seyfettin, *The Dairy of an Armanian Young Man*, (Istanbul, Malazgirt Publications, 1972), p.9.

⁸ M. Arzumanyan, *Musa Ieran herosamart 1914, Haykakan sovetakan hanragitutyun, hator 8*, (Yerevan, 1982).

civilian populace, Gabriel Bagratyan, in his fictitious world. In the web of events Bagratyan, just like Aram, came to his birthplace of Yögunoluk before the insurgency on Mount Musa started. Bagratyan is described as a member of the richest family in the region. It is written that he went to France with his family at the age of 12, lived far from the Armenians for many years. Now he is 30, he is married to a French woman and has a 12-year-old child. In spite of long years away, this key figure of Bagratyan did not lose his loyalty to the Ottoman Army where he once served and finds himself an insurgent among other insurgents while he waited for his relief from service as part of his civic duty as a citizen.

Werfel, thanks to his key figure of Gabriel Bagratyan, has thus rid readers of all means by which they can question a clergyman like Tigran Andreasyan. Moreover, the author introduces Bagratyan as the person who has been compelled by external factors in inciting the insurgency. Data presented so far and to be presented below lead us to believe that through this novel Werfel had aimed at forming a prejudice in the world against Turkey.

On the other hand, in Arzumanyan's article it is stated that, in line with views of the Taşnak Party and after suppressing the inner opposition, six Armenian villages agreed to move to Mount Musa and initiate the insurgency. They engaged in many armed conflicts with the Ottoman Army, inflicted many losses in the Ottoman Army, and returned gun fire to every "Surrender" call by the Ottoman Army.

Arzumanyan describes how Mount Musa was transformed into a military camp by the Armenian insurgents as follows:

"... İsvendia Armenians led by Andreasyan and other leading activists moved at night to Mount Musa with their guns in their hands, food and animals. In a short time this place turned into a military camp. A special military organization was founded and Ye. Yagubyan became the administrator of the organization".⁹

Yet Werfel filled his novel with motives that would compel readers to forget that the event was an insurgency and foregrounded images of Christianity. Through this image Mount Musa is depicted as the symbol of the mountain where Jesus Christ was crucified. Paralleling that, while the big size of Armenians' eyes

9 *Ibid.*

is often repeated as a leitmotiv, a weird simile is made by the author. This is the analogy between the form of Jesus Christ's eyes during crucifixion and the big size of Armenian eyes. Consequently Werfel intended to come up with a story to which no Christian could bear to remain indifferent.

Concerning this dimension of the problem, how Armenian intellectuals have interpreted Christianity in its own history is the aspect that has not been evaluated so far. Let us make a reference to Prof. G.H.Sarkisyan's study for that:

It must be underlined that the restrictive structure of Christianity, at least its intolerance towards other ideas has made a very negative impact on the development of Armenian Culture. As mentioned before, pre-Christian Armenian culture had reached a very high level and had accumulated many material and non-material cultural values. Christianity spoiled many cultural traditions of the past."¹⁰

The problem that must be considered here concerns the author's / researcher's approach. It is striking that so far no single author / researcher of non-Armenian ethnic background who has chosen "the Armenian Problem" as a topic to study and supported Armenian view, has directed his / her attention toward Armenian documents written in Armenian or in Armenian script. One of the many important reasons of this is the language problem. Today, as in past, the only way a non-Armenian researcher can reach documents in Armenian is through the help of an Armenian. Two important people from the world of Russian literature are worth mentioning about this topic. One of them is Valeri Bryusov. The famous Russian poet published in 1915 an anthology of Armenian poetry in Russian thanks to financial and informational support from Moscow Armenian Committee. The book was aimed at initiating a reaction among the Russian public against Turkey. In the preface of this anthology there is a survey by Bryusov of Armenian history. Noteworthy in this research is the fact that translations were made by Armenians and information was dictated to Bryusov.¹¹

The second example is the contemporary Russian journalist Andrey Bitov. He was transferred to Armenia by his newspaper and assigned to write a paper about Armenia. No paper was written, but

¹⁰ M.G. Nersisyan, *Istoria armyanskogo naroda*, (Yerevan, 1980), p.89.

¹¹ Birsen Karaca, , V.Ya. Bryusov kak perevodchik armyanskoy poezii, *dissertatsia na soiskanie ucyonoy stepeni kandidata, hauchny rukovaditel* : Halik Guseynoviç Kor-oglu, (Moscow, 1999) and Birsen Karaca, *Almanac of Armenian Literary* , Ministry of Culture,2001.

one year later Bitov published travel notes titled "Armenian Lessons."¹² As is the tradition of such notes, the work is in the form of memories. These memories, which are alleged to be true, are translated into Russian and inserted into the text of the book by using montage or footnote techniques.

These two examples help enlighten another fact, namely, together with the political and academic circles in the West, the academic circles worldwide either display a consistent attitude to listen to and perceive the topic only from the Armenian point of view or provide a covert support by ignoring this attitude. However, the ethic of science is not to forgive such an attitude, deliberate or innocent, for ignoring one side.

To evaluate, let us return to the social memory issue. The dictionary meaning of the word "memory" is defined as "the power of storage and recall. The process in which the things, situations and experience leave trace in human memory and accumulate, and the ability to produce these again when necessary."¹³ In this paper, what is meant by the term "social memory" is the common memory of large or small human groups. To fulfill the main function of memory, that is, to bridge the past and present, it has to be remembered. Nevertheless, what individuals and societies remember about the past may drastically change in relation to psychological properties, interest, power of perception, level of education, aspirations, age, and environmental factors and may be misleading. In short, when a group of people who witnessed the same event are required to retell the event, there will be as many different retellings as there are people witnessing the event. The French author Marcel Proust, who is the indispensable reference on memory, relates the memory of little Marcel and other family members about their neighbor Swan in his book called "Remembrance of Things Past".¹⁴ The well-known result is of course quite colorful, as every member of the family keeps a different concept of Swan that they have created in their minds.

Archeologist Prof. Dr. Mehmet Özdoğan has some remarks about the topic:

¹² Andrey Bitov, *Voskresniy den*, (Moscow, 1980), pp. 265-393

¹³ Pars Tuğlacı, *Turkish Dictionary*, (Istanbul: Okyanus, 1995) p. 1.

¹⁴ Marsel Prúst, *Time Regained (Swan's Ways)*, translated by Roza Hakmen, (Istanbul: YKY, 1999).

Thinking about the past is unique to human beings. We can perceive the past as "legendary past" and "scaled (measured) real past" in two different ways. The former one is a flat one in which reality, rumor, and belief get mixed and have no time scale (measure) and depth. From this point of view nothing has to be proven; it is enough to believe in what is told. Thinking about the past is a part of belief system. The opposite of this, examining the past with a concrete time scale (measure) is based on search and inquiry. Everything said has to be proven in a scaled (measured) time dimension and has to be connected with each other....¹⁵

As can be seen in the Werfel and Bitov examples, a past which has no scientific basis, written in the form of memory and presented as a proof (scientific document) in the materials about the "Armenian Problem," has the features of a "flat past" and reflects uni-dimensional fiction. Moreover, the literary (artistic) value and guided aspect of these books have to be put on the agenda and presented to the world public opinion.

As a result, when the written, oral, and visual materials about the "Armenian Problem" presented to the world public opinion are examined, it can be argued that a systematic psychological war against Turkey has been carried out. What is aimed at by the Armenian society is to form a new social memory. For this purpose, the Armenian society tries to forget their common past with the Turkish society. Clearly, research on social memory should be included in strategic studies and has to be conducted via an interdisciplinary research and methodological approach. In particular, parallel to recent studies, research and evaluations carried out on social memory, a sharp increase in the number of theoretical studies has been observed. France and other countries like the USA, England, and Russia are leading on this topic. The transfer of the findings of the applied research and theoretical studies in the international arena, to the Turkish scientific circles, will help to facilitate the methodology required to reach a solution.

¹⁵ Mehmet Özdoğan, "Tarih Öncesi Arkeolojisine Giriş", *Atlas/Arkeo*, No. 1, 2002, p.10.