

The Importance of National Identity

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Today, at a time of rampant upheaval and increased globalization, entire nations are being forcibly displaced, resulting in monumental demographic shifts; masses of people are being uprooted from their homelands and dispersed across the world. The natural course of people's history is being disrupted and they're being threatened with the eventual loss of their language and their old national traditions. It has become imperative to probe the issue of national belonging, without which it would be impossible for the nations of the world to promote peace.

Currently an alarming number of nations are being stripped of their human and territorial rights. Wars that strictly serve the interests of the world's great powers are directly responsible for this mass displacement, which is a key factor in the destruction of nationhood.

The West is redrawing the globe's political map, for its own interests. They are using economic might to justify their ongoing bid for globalization, promoting their own values and culture to the detriment of marginalized peoples. Ethnicities and ancient indigenous cultures are being trivialized and in many instances replaced by Westernized versions of themselves, creating cultural disruptions and double standards among "host" societies.

History provides ample evidence that ethnicity, which reflects local roots and origins across thousands of years of cultural development, is not easily given to suppression or adulteration. For centuries, indigenous peoples have remained self-sufficient in terms of national and cultural values with distinct identities.

Westernization underestimates these values and imposes new ones. It promotes its own values, marketing them under the heading of modernization.

As political scientist Samuel P. Huntington describes, "The Western virus, once it is lodged in another society, is difficult to expunge. The virus persists but is not fatal; the patient survives but is never whole". (*Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*). New York: Touchstone, 1996, 82, 83)

Westernization is not necessarily synonymous with modernization. Modernization is a natural process which nations undergo in an instinctive effort to evolve with the times and refresh their traditions, thereby renewing and enriching their national identities.

It is worth noting that as recently as a few decades ago; the West scorned the national identities of China, India, Persia, and other nations, considering them

exotic at best, even though their respective identities are the culmination of histories and civilizations that go back thousands of years.

Interestingly, in our information age, when human consciousness continues to expand influenced by breakneck technological innovation. Daily life is conditioned by the degree of connectedness with cyberspace. Individual consumers are able to link with each other across the globe, seeking to reconnect with their own cultural roots. It would seem that the reverse would occur: globalization — of which the Internet is a glaring function — would take the individual away from his or her origins and culture, and transform him or her into a non-culture-specific citizen of the world.

Then what is it that draws the individual to the national identity?

What are the fundamental attributes of the formation of national identity?

Why is national identity important?

These questions are as old as civilization itself, and much of philosophical inquiry. For instance, the Greek philosophers, among them Plato and Protagoras, saw national identity as a human sense of belonging, process of thinking, the values of moral behavior. All these are embedded in national identity.

The paper that I present today is an analysis of the evolution of Armenian identity, particularly in the past 100 years. That evolution is conditioned by a number of key characteristics, as follows:

- 1. Geopolitics, which includes internal and external politics.**
- 2. Education; language, culture and historical awareness.**
- 3. The individual's quest for national identity.**
- 4. Memory of instinct.**
- 5. Individual, familial and collective memory.**

1.The first and main characteristic, Geopolitics. The fundamental factor in the development of national identity; the loci, nature, environment, a nation's specific relationship with their land, its distinct history of evolution, economy and the political context in which a nation is shaped. It is through these elements that a nation sustains its existence, constructs its history, and enriches it.

Armenians even have an epos dedicated to the role of one's homeland in forging of national identity. It is the legend of "Hayk and Bel", where Hayk defeats Bel in a one-on-one battle as he stands firmly on his Armenian land.

It is due to geographical uniqueness that every nation has its own mindset, traditions, culture, and history, and even physical features, by which nations are distinguished from each other.

A nation's geographical setting is constant flux. Over the course of centuries, it can undergo significant changes, brought on by natural processes as

well as external political and military factors. Clearly, such changes affect the psychology, mindset, and way of life, and culture of the people living in a given territory. In other words, geographic evolution has a direct bearing on the evolution of national identity.

As one of the oldest people in the world, Armenians have more experience than most, influenced by several geographical and external political changes. For millennia, they have lived in Armenia Major (Mets Hayk) and Armenia Minor (Pokr Hayk). Later, after the fall of their last Armenian kingdom of Cilicia, Western Armenia came under the rule of the Ottomans. Armenia was divided into Eastern and Western segments. Due to different political and cultural influences, these two segments have developed independently of one another with different destinies.

Western Armenia (which is under Turkish occupation) was much larger than its eastern counterpart, encompassing a richly variegated topography that included numerous bodies of water, towering mountain ranges, and grasslands. This natural variegation has lent the Western Armenian a much “softer” and more colorful national character, as is typical of peoples living in ecologically diverse environments. Therefore the language, culture, history, and traditions of the Armenians who have lived in the seven provinces of Western Armenia, as well as Cilicia, are different than those of Eastern Armenia.

By contrast, the high altitudes and significantly mountainous terrain of Eastern Armenia have lent its inhabitants a “rougher” national character, amply reflected in their culture and traditions.

For five centuries under Ottoman rule, with their increasing oppression Western Armenians became docile, complacent imperial subjects. In 1915 with the Armenian Genocide, Western Armenians lost their homeland, millions of their people massacred and all their cultural, historical monuments and institutions destroyed and remnants of genocide were spread all over the world.

Eastern Armenians after 70 years of under Soviet regime fought and established their independence and even freed part of their ancient homeland, Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) from Azerbaijan’s occupation.

To illustrate the importance of land in peoples’ lives and their unconditional bond with their land, their soil, let me cite a simple example.

In 2005—90 years after the Armenian Genocide—Diana Margossian was about to take a journey to Western Armenia (now under Turkish occupation). She asked 94 years old Mariam, a Genocide orphan, if she wished for something from her old country. Mariam asked only for some soil from her native village, so that she would be buried with it when she died. As requested, she brought the soil. Mariam opened the package and said, ‘‘You brought the smell of my village to me’’. (<http://www.mediamax.am/en/news/society/1835/#sthash.vHX5eSSI.dpuf>)

Such an example might seem simplistic yet, it underscores the fundamental role of a locus—a homeland in the forging of national identity.

The formation of national identity requires much more than a geographic locus. It involves a long and difficult process of developing language, culture and national history. This takes us to the

2. The 2nd characteristic: Education.

If one's parents were Armenian, French or Chinese, it does not necessarily mean that he/she is going to feel Armenian, French or Chinese automatically. There are other important factors. One of them is the language, which apart from being a subconscious aspect of identity, is a fundamental tool for a nation's longevity, the development of a distinct culture and history created with that language, and also, for their further development.

Today, due to political, economic, and cultural pressures, generations of Armenians and other ethnic groups as well, are growing up outside their homelands without speaking their mother tongues, therefore engendering a new cultural type in the context of national identity. The absence of language from the national-identity equation will certainly signal a paradigm shift. But its particulars are as yet unclear, since this is a relatively new phenomenon.

The key is education; the high degree of knowledge, a desire to preserve one's own heritage and history. Without knowing your own nation's real history, one can't contribute anything to that history. But knowing your nation's history is not enough. You have to become a part of that history and not let outsiders to rewrite your nation's history.

In the past 20 years we are witnessing how Turkish intellectuals, barely a dozen of them—out of population of 70 million, have been trying to correct their fake history which, as Turkish scholar Dr. A. Zorlu-Durukan states in her "Ideological Pillars", that "the Turkish first president Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, in 1930 established a team of scholars to rewrite Turkish history not as it was, but as it should have been". (*Zorlu-Durukan, 'Ideological Pillars' 90-95*)

Turkey has used this fake history to invent a civilized national identity, branding it as a Western secular state. But as Samuel P. Huntington writes, "Turkey is a torn country due to the ambiguity of its identity. Political leaders can make history, but they cannot escape history. They produce torn countries; they infect their country with a cultural schizophrenia which becomes its continuing and defining characteristic". (*Samuel P. Huntington 'Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order' New York: Touchstone, 1996, 74,78*)

According to Plato, it is the duty of government to shape its citizens moral character, which is the axis of national identity.

3. The 3th characteristic is the individual quest for national identity.

In the Armenian people's cases, it is the re-emergence of national identity among second and third generations Armenians, who were forcibly Islamized during the Genocide and still live in Turkey. This national reawakening is taking place a full century after the Genocide and in a country which still oppresses and flagrantly discriminates against its Armenian citizens, even categorizing them in a derogatory manner. They call them "remnants of the sword", "kelech arteghe" in Turkish. (*R. Bedrosian, 'Armenian Mirror-Spectator', May 11, 2015*)

This last term begs the question: if the Armenians are referred by the Turks as "remnants of the sword", then isn't it logical to deduce that the Turkish population is perfectly aware of its genocidal past, its real history?

Although the number of Islamized Armenians is not exact, it has been estimated at more than 2 million. What interests us more, however is the fact itself.

Despite the tide of Turkish resentment and hostility a significant segment of Turkey's Islamized Armenians continued to preserve their dialects, dances and songs, their traditions, culture, in short, their national identity, making certain not to be assimilated by Turks or Kurds. Even some of them have been living with hyphenated names, consisting of Arabic, Kurdish or Turkish name and plus an Armenian one, such as Muhammad-Garo, Ahmed- Saro, and so on. Although they live as Kurds or Arabs, they feel Armenian, decorating their homes with Armenian symbols, giving their children Armenian names, marrying among themselves and yearning to return to their Armenian roots. (*Kevork Apelian, Yeghernen Brkvats Arabatsats u Krtatsats Hayeru Serundneru Surio mech – Arabized and Kurdified Genocide Survivors in Syria. Horizon: 2016, p. 32*).

There is a vast body of documentation about Armenians in Turkey who throughout their lives, fearing persecution, have concealed their ethnicity even from their children, yet confessed in their deathbeds, wishing that their children learn about their roots and return to them.

One of them was famous human rights activist, lawyer and writer Fethiye Cetin's grandmother. Fethiye Cetin published a book about her Armenian past entitled "My Grandmother: A Memoir", where she describes her grandmothers' sufferings about hiding her Armenian identity. Another journalist, Basyurt Erhan. in Dec.26, 2005, also announced "My Grandmother is Armenian". (*Anneannem bir Ermeni 'ymish*) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hidden_Armenians

A question arises again-why would people who kept quiet for 70 years or longer about their real roots, wish to reaffirm their national identity at the end of their lives? The answer is simple. They want to be recognized by their own national identity.

4. The 4th characteristic is memory of instinct, an unexplainable, which exists in the “inner” us and guides us during our lives.

One vivid indication of this is the case of Armenian orphans “Turkified” during the Genocide, and who refused to accept another identity, at the cost of their lives.

As far as forced cultural assimilation is concerned, children everywhere are always easy targets, given the fact that their national consciousness is in an embryonic state. This is why the Ottoman genocidists implemented a program **dubbed**, (devshirme, in Turkish) through which orphaned Armenian children whose parents were either massacred or perished during the forced death marches, were collected and subsequently Islamized.

On September 22, 1915, the Turkish authorities placed 1,426 Armenian orphans in Muslim orphanages. The boys were at once circumcised, and all the children were given Muslim names.

When observers from the League of Nations visited these orphanages, they found long lists of Armenian orphans who had been given Muslim names. Children with names such as Hagop and Vahan were renamed Hasan, Mahmud, Yusuf, and so on. The Western observers discovered that Islamization was in fact a matter of official policy, evidenced by an order issued Interior Minister Talaat Pasha on August 30, 1915, in which it was clearly stated that the ethnic identity of Armenian orphans should be wiped out by turning them into Turks. (www.ARMENOIDTEAM.COM)

As significantly, considerable segments of the day’s Turkish and Kurdish populations actively participated in the Islamization of Armenian orphans, by abducting or simply taking possession of them, renaming them, raising them as Turks or Kurds, and using them as slaves. The sexual exploitation of these defenseless children by their “adoptive parents” was likewise rampant.

Today many Turks and Kurds claim that their ancestors saved Armenians during the Genocide. In most cases, however, the reality was totally different, as documented in the memoirs and testimonies of Genocide survivors, and even in Turkish literature.

One of the most notorious Turkification orphanages was located in Antoura, a small town in Lebanon, which was under Ottoman occupation at the time. The building still stands, now housing the French Lazarist College.

The Orphanage was under the command of Jemal Pasha, one of the architects of the 1915 Armenian Genocide. There were 1,200 orphans, 200 of them were Kurds and Turks, and the rest 1,000 were Armenian children ages 3-14.

As author and journalist Robert Fisk writes in “The Independent”, **“Turkey’s first feminist, Halide Edip Adivar, helped to run this orphanage of terror in which Armenian children were systematically deprived of their Armenian identity and given new Turkish names, forced to become Muslims,**

and beaten savagely if they were heard to speak Armenian”. (Robert Fisk, “Living Proof of the Armenian Genocide”. *The Independent*, March 8, 2010)

Karnig Panian was one of those children who were taken to the Antoura orphanage when he was five years old. He was given a new name, Mahmud, and was listed as “Orphan #551.” Following the end of the First World War, the Turks left the orphanage and the Armenian Relief Society took over.

Panian left the orphanage, and later wrote a memoir titled “Goodbye, Antoura”. He wrote in detail about the horrific conditions where a new identity was forced on the Armenian orphans. He wrote: “Every evening, before sunset, we gathered in the courtyard to salute the Turkish flag and call out at the top of our lungs ‘long live Jemal Pasha’”. After flag ceremony follows corporal punishment. Children ages 3 to 10 were called up and repeatedly strike with an iron rod on their soles, until they lost consciousness. No matter how harshly they were punished, some of them couldn’t walk weeks, the orphans continued secretly to whisper Armenian words, call each other by their real names, utter their parents’ names”. (Karnig Panian, “*Goodbye, Antoura: A Memoir of the Armenian Genocide*”. Stanford University Press, 2015, p 92-93)

Another example; In the 1920s, some 300 Armenian Genocide orphans were sheltered and educated at Cedarville Farm, near Georgetown, Ontario, Canada. Spearheaded by the Armenian Relief Association of Canada and supported by the Canadian government, the orphan-care program, known as “Canada’s Noble Experiment,” was the country’s first humanitarian act on an international scale. Under that program, Armenian orphans were housed and educated at the farm for a period of five years. At some point, the Armenian Relief Association decided to change the orphans’ names to English ones, in gratitude for their Canadian sponsors. But when the orphans were presented a list of names such as Newman, Oliver, William, etc., and asked to pick their new names from that list, orphans were outraged and refused to accept.

www.heritagetrust.on.ca/corporatesite/media/oht/.../armenian-boys-farm-home-eng.pdf).

The orphans’ Armenian names were the only pieces of identity they had. Their names were their only link with what they had lost: their parents, their homes.

Let me emphasize that these orphans were children, with no awareness of a national identity. Yet they had a subconscious link with their past. That link is the memory of the instinct, which can be even more powerful than actual memories.

1. 5. The 5th characteristic is Individual, familial and collective memory.

For Armenians, like for all other peoples of the Caucasus and the Middle East, family ties are at the heart of their lives. It is also the strongest and most important components of their national life. In Armenian families each member has an obligation for the welfare of her/his family.

With the Genocide, the Turks attempted to destroy Armenian familial bonds by destroying families themselves. This made it easy to expropriate the properties and possessions of the Armenian population. By killing entire families the Turks were convinced that they were preventing any future possibility of Armenian demands for justice and the return of properties. But the Turks had not taken into account that Armenian's familial bond is the bond are the type of memory that's immune to re-engineering.

Consider the case of acclaimed Armenian-American author Levon Zaven Surmelian, who was five years old at the time of the Genocide. He was orphaned and Turkified. His name was changed first to Jemal, then to Yanko. Following a long odyssey of hellish proportions, he at last was able to come to America. In his book, titled "*I Ask You, Ladies and Gentlemen*", Surmelian describes the profound longing he felt all his life for the family he lost, his parents, his mother in particular, and his ancestral home.

The very same longing is a core theme in the work of another Armenian literary great, Vazgen Shushanian. After escaping from a death march bound for Der Zor, Shushanian, who was 12 years old at the time, lived through the Golgotha of orphanhood and subsequently extreme hardship before he could move to Paris. He spent his entire life with the memories of the loss of his parents and sister, his home, and his years as an orphan. Shushanian chronicled these memories in his novel *Yerkir Hishatakats (Country of Memories)*.

In the words of author Shavarsh Nartuni, "Hunger and the terror of the Turk could not break me as much as my longing for home."

Another writer, Mushegh Ishkhan (Jenderejian), recounts similar feelings about his family, home, and birthplace in his book *Mnas Barov, Mankutyun (Goodbye, Childhood)*.

At the time of the Genocide, these authors were teenagers — not mature, developed individuals — who had not had enough time to fully get to know their parents, environment, and community. Yet rooted in them was a powerful gene of familial memory which helped preserve their sense of national identity, the influence of which they have recounted in their literary works.

Genocide is not only the physical annihilation of a people, but the loss of peoples' collective memory. It is not only killing of a people, but also demolishing nations' historical monuments, or converting their cultural and religious institutions developed over centuries and contains a nation's collective memories. The Ottoman genocidists achieved both. They uprooted Armenian populace from

its ancestral lands and destroyed or converted all their cultural and religious institutions which preserved the nation's millennia old written heritage and cultural monuments.

Today the same methods are still being used to deracinate people in many parts of the world such as Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Rwanda, and so on. With the loss of lands, cultural institutions, and language, there will be little left to nurture. A given nation will easily assimilate into other peoples and eventually will lose its national identity.

No matter how enigmatic the rebirth of the Armenian people may seem, it is thanks to the existence of Eastern Armenia, the nation's ancient land, which kept people's collective memory alive.

It's hard to imagine any other nation that, immediately after experiencing the immeasurable catastrophe of being uprooted from its soil and being stripped of its millennia-old heritage — its language, culture, traditions, customs, and history — would be able to re-establish its national character and preserve it, despite living in foreign lands and dealing with foreign values.

That collective memory helped Armenians within the past 101 years to preserve the details of the genocide committed against their people, and all that was taken away from them between 1915-1923. Thanks to that collective memory the Armenian nation got back on its feet.

A long string of calamities — beginning with the Genocide and followed by the loss of the First Armenian Republic, Bolshevism, and 70 years of Soviet tyranny, including Stalin's reign of terror — gradually changed the character of Armenian national identity. As a whole, the Armenian people became dependent on the charity of foreign countries. It became gullible, docile, and complacent, without a distinct political direction or mandate.

In every country of the newly emerging diaspora, Armenians were directly or indirectly compelled to forget their past and immerse themselves in the present and future of their host society. In Europe and America, Armenians were once so scorned and harassed that many of them changed their names. Thus, for instance, Dikran Kuyumjian became Michael Arlen, Karnig Zouloumian became Carzou, and Vosdanig Adoian became Arshile Gorkey. Many even felt embarrassed to reveal their ethnicity and stopped speaking Armenian — a fact which added a new term to our lexicon of national identity: *otaralezu hay*, or foreign-speaking Armenian.

Irrespective of the extent and diversity of the influences which our adopted diaspora countries may exert on our cultural and intellectual lives, our collective memory impels us to maintain our national identity. One evidence of this lies in the distinctly Armenian oeuvres of outstanding diaspora musicians, painters, authors, and other artists — such as Alan Hovhaness, Arshile Gorkey, Carzou, Michael

Arlen, William Saroyan, and Charles Aznavour — who have maintained their national identity despite living in foreign countries.

Another factor that has played a vital role in the collective memory of the Armenian people is its internal cultural diversity: for millennia, the Armenian nation has functioned as a vast tapestry of dialects, customs, and traditions which, despite subtle differences from one locale to the next, have formed a clearly identifiable civilizational whole. Thus the Armenians who trace their origins to Cilicia, Yerznka, Van, Sassoon, and hundreds of other historic Armenian locales share an overarching Armenianness, despite their unique customs, traditions, and dialects. Even today, the Armenian language is comprised of two major dialects, Eastern Armenian and Western Armenian; but, quite remarkably, all speakers of the language maintain the very same national identity.

Yet it must be stressed that the repository of collective memory cannot last long in the absence of the land that nurtures it, and if the Armenian language and the culture that springs from it were to be allowed to decline. In other words, that repository must continually be refreshed, and developed day after day, for the benefit of future generations.

In terms of contemporary conceptions of the Armenian people, perhaps the most unacceptable reality is that the world recognizes the Armenians strictly as the first Christian nation. That is to say, Armenians national identity is presented and viewed only within the context of Christianity, whereas other Christian nations — such as France, Italy, Greece, and Spain — are recognized by their national, not religious, identity. Similarly, Muslim peoples including Iran and those of many Arab and African countries are recognized mainly by their cultural identities, and not necessarily their religion.

Religion would have us believe that all peoples are the children of God, with no cultural distinction. Yet the indisputable fact is that national identity does exist and is a fundamental aspect of every nation. Therefore national identity is a concept above and beyond religion.

The development of national identity is the result of an incomparably longer process, carried out through the unified efforts of a people, rather than a consequence of the influence exerted by a particular religious institution or cultural or political organization. Millennium before Christianity, there was a distinct Armenian civilization, with its own belief system. No matter how extensively Christianity has destroyed the legacy of that ancient civilization, its culture and traditions have survived and been transmitted through our genes, and our collective memory has preserved core aspects of it, through which our national history and identity were shaped.

Today a new, non-Christian, religious tide is entering Armenian national identity. There is a return to our deep cultural roots through those who profess an

alternate faith, further pointing to the fact that religion cannot have a defining role in national identity.

National Identity is not a commodity for serving the interests of great powers. It is the result of centuries of work, and I believe every conference such as the one we're having today has a duty to raise awareness of the crucial importance of respecting and helping preserve the national identity of every single nation. Only by peace will the world civilization be preserved and only by preserving national identity will world be at peace.

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