

In Praise of Murder

Armenia's Unresolved Glorification of Terrorism

Maxime Gauin

Troubling support for Armenian terrorism has been ongoing since the end of nineteenth century. Since 1991, it has enjoyed various forms of justification and glorification by the Armenian state itself, including in two noteworthy but contradictory instances that have taken place very recently (April and May 2023)—i.e., in the midst of the active phase in the peace negotiations between Yerevan and Baku.

The Nemesis Monument in Yerevan

On 25 April 2023, Armenpress announced: “On April 25, the ‘Nemesis’ monument dedicated to the heroes who organized and carried out the ‘Nemesis’ operation in 1919 was opened with great pomp in Yerevan’s Ring Park.” The background is as follows: Nemesis was a terrorist network established at the end of 1919 by the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), to assassinate former Ottoman officials, former Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) officials, and loyal Ottoman ethnic-Armenians. Among other victims, Nemesis assassinated Vahe Ihsan (who worked for the Ottoman police during the First World War, then for the Kemalist intelligence service from 1919 to his death), Fatali Khan Khoyski (a former ADR prime minister) and Hasan-bey Aghayev (a former vice-president of the ADR parliament) in 1920; Talat Pasha (Ottoman interior minister, 1913-1917; Grand Vizir 1917-1918), Sait Halim Pasha (Ottoman Grand Vizir, 1917-1918), Behbud Khan Javanshir (former ADR interior minister) in 1921; and Cemal Pasha (a former Ottoman navy minister) in 1922.

The name of Javanshir’s assassin, an ethnic-Armenian named Misak Torlakian, is inscribed on the Nemesis monument unveiled in Yerevan. Torlakian was arrested by the British authorities in July 1921 (the assassination had taken place in Istanbul during its occupation), but the judges received death threats from the ARF: as a result, the criminal

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was judged to be mentally insane and then released in November of the same year. Torlakian later worked as an agent of the Nazi Germany military intelligence service, from 1942 to 1945, as he explains himself in his posthumously published memoirs, printed in Tehran in 1982. In the same book, Torlakian indicates he discussed operations involving Türkiye and the Caucasus in 1942 with Alfred Rosenberg, Reich Minister for the Eastern Occupied Territories who was later tried and found guilty at the Nuremberg Trials on all four counts, including war crimes and crimes against humanity. Rosenberg, who had converted to Armenophilia around 1930, successfully convinced Hitler (in 1942, too), to endorse his project of a Georgian-Armenian federation under German protectorate.

Another name inscribed on the Nemesis monument unveiled in Yerevan in late April 2023 is that of Hratch Papazian. He, too, collaborated with the Nazis during the Second World War, after having participated in the Nemesis operation. Such a tribute is only too reminiscent of the statues of Drastamat “Dro” Kanayan and Garegin Nzhdeh, two ARF leaders who also actively collaborated with the Third Reich.

Tigran Avinyan, (currently the Deputy Mayor of Yerevan and formerly Deputy Prime Minister of Armenia who co-founded Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s Civil Contract Party), took part to the ceremony and stated:

The courage shown by the people whose names are on the monument has three main meanings. First of all, it was the act of deciding and carrying out the punishment of the criminals, the second was to give positive charges to the depressed people, and the act is a record of the fact that throughout history, crimes do not go unpunished regardless of how the international community treats it. What Nemesis did was understandable for everyone, it was fair for everyone, but our goal should be to prevent possible crimes, to create mechanisms to bring criminals to justice. That should be our main message.

“Courage” is not the first word that rises to the mind to describe the action of killing an unarmed man in the back. Concerning the allegation of a “crime” committed by the three Azerbaijani victims, there is no evidence that they had anything to do with what happened in the Ottoman Empire in 1915 or subsequently—revenge for which was the purported justification of the Nemesis terrorist operation.

And there is more. Even Johannes Lepsius, founding president of the Germany-Armenia Society in 1914 who took part to the preparation of the assassination of Talat in 1921 (according to the data collected by Yeşen Dursun), explicitly wrote that both Sait Halim and Cemal were innocent. In other words, the terrorists of Nemesis who killed them were perfectly aware of their innocence.

Last but not least, both the memoirs of Talat’s assassin, Soghomon Tehlirian (published in 1953), and his obituary published by the *Armenian Review* (owned by the ARF) in 1960 proves that he lied about many aspects of his biography during his trial. For example, he claimed he had been deported in 1915, yet he was in Belgrade in 1914 and directly joined the Russian army from there; he also claimed having seen his sister raped in front of him, yet he never had a sister; and so on. In other words, the Nemesis monument unveiled in late April 2023 in Yerevan with the overt participation of senior Civil Contract Party

officials who held and still hold formal positions in Armenia celebrates murder, death threats on the judiciary systems, and lies.

Not surprisingly, the reaction of the Turkish Foreign Ministry was swift. The last paragraph of its press release reads as follows:

Such provocative steps, which are incompatible with the spirit of the normalization process between Türkiye and Armenia, will in no way contribute to the efforts for [the] establishment of lasting and sustainable peace and stability in the region. On the contrary, they will negatively affect the normalization process.

Similarly, Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry also issued a statement, which concludes thusly: "[T]he path to peace and reconciliation does not lie in the further glorification of crimes and mistakes but in the recognition of them."

The fact that Yerevan's deputy mayor is a member of the ruling party is even more embarrassing for the Armenian government, which could have easily blocked the unveiling of a monument dedicated the glorification of terrorism. It may be added that, in allowing the monument to be unveiled, Pashinyan endangered himself. In the eyes of the ARF and other nationalists, he is hardly better than Vahe Ihsan and the other Armenians assassinated during the Nemesis operation.

Yet, precisely, a statue of Tehlirian (who also killed an ethnic-Armenian who remained loyal to the Ottoman Empire) had been inaugurated in April 2015 in Maralik, Armenia. The statue shows Tehlirian with the head of Talat under one of his feet, something that, of course, never happened, but is deeply significant on the level of hatred that animates the author of this monument. The individual who made this statue stated in January 2022: "We should not be guided by the Turks' wish, should we? Can the Armenian Genocide or the Karabakh conflict be ignored at the request of the Turks? How is it possible?"

The glorification of Nemesis is even more negative, as this group had a sustainable legacy. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was on the Nemesis list and, even after the group was inactivated, he was the target of six ARF attempted assassinations in 1924-1927. Nemesis also inspired the Justice Commandos for the Armenian Genocide (JCAG), established by the ARF in 1972 and renamed the Armenian Revolutionary Army in 1983, whose members engaged in terrorist assassinations in 1975-1986; and the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA), established in 1971, whose members perpetrated attacks until 1997 (at least). The ARF and the members of the "political" wing of ASALA compared the trials of their terrorist members to the Tehlirian trial, explicitly presenting the attacks that took place during the 1970s and 1980s as the continuity of those during 1920-1922. The lesson of the efficiency of the threats sent during the Torlakian trial were learned, too.

As late as October 2022, a certain Shant Zahourian (previously in charge of the communication of a French TV channel, now a wine seller in Paris) threatened on Twitter to kill Ali Onaner, the Turkish ambassador in Paris, referring to Nemesis as a precedent.

His tweet was deleted by Twitter and his account has been suspended. It seems that a complaint has been filed.

The Reburial of Pierre Gulumian

Pierre Gulumian was an ethnic-Armenian from Lebanon and the chief of the European branch of ASALA until his accidental death on 30 July 1982. A mediocre terrorist, he killed himself in the course of manipulating explosives near Paris. The official investigation into his fatal error led to the discovery of ASALA's logistic network in France; its members (including Pierre Gulumian's own brother, Katchadur) were arrested during the following days and eventually found guilty in 1985 for conspiracy, illegal possession of guns, and illegal possession of weapons. It is known since the beginning of the investigation on this affair that Pierre Gulumian organized two bomb attacks in Paris in July 1982 (against non-Turkish targets) and was preparing a third one. According to a communiqué by the Armenian Popular Movement (ASALA's "political" wing, still active in Armenia) dated 21 May 2023 and published by Tert.am, Gulumian personally took part in the assassination of two Turkish diplomats in March 1981. Officially, the perpetrators were never found. The "commando" who had killed them had previously received from the ASALA leadership the name of Shahan Natalie (né Hagop Derhagopian), one of the two main leaders of Nemesis. Natalie was expelled from the ARF in 1929 because his terrorist ambitions becoming too embarrassing, even for the Dashnak leadership. That is why he was a fundamental reference for modern-day ASALA.

Gulumian was buried near Paris. At the end of 2022, ASALA "sympathizers" organized his exhumation for a reburial in Yerevan. Indeed, the Yerablur Military Pantheon, opened in 1988 for the ethnic-Armenians who died in their secessionist struggle with Azerbaijan in the conflict over Karabakh has, since 2000, a section reserved for ASALA terrorists. The connection between ASALA terror and the separatist movement in Karabakh was made even more obvious as Monte Melkonian—the deputy leader of ASALA from 1980 to 1983 who became the leader of the dissident ASALA-Revolutionary Movement from 1983 up to his arrest in 1985 (he was incarcerated in France until his expulsion in 1989)—also took part in the Armenian invasion of Karabakh from 1992 to his death in 1993 (he was killed in a clash by Azerbaijani soldiers). Moreover, in May 2019, namely during the premiership of Nikol Pashinyan, Gourgen Yanikian, sentenced by a Californian justice to life-long imprisonment for the assassination of two Turkish diplomats in 1973 (he died in jail in 1984), was reburied in Yerablur, despite months of warnings and protests from Türkiye.

This brings us to discuss the second recent instance, as noted at the beginning of this IDD Analytical Policy Brief. In the foregoing conditions, it was perfectly logical, from the perspective of Gulumian's surviving friends, to expect a similar scenario (permission, public glorification) and to act accordingly. Yet, on 19 May 2023, the Armenian Ministry of Defense informed them that their hero's reburial would not be permitted, due to the

process of normalizing Armenia-Türkiye relations. This represents the very first time that the Pashinyan government opposed the glorification of Armenian terrorism. It remains to be seen whether such an unprecedented action will become a new policy foundation for the Armenian government after the Turkish electoral contest comes to an end.

One Lark, One Horse

That being said, this remarkable, (for now) singular action by Yerevan cannot make magically disappear all what this same government did and allowed for five years—as late as April 2023. There is a French expression about the “lark and horse pâté” (*pâté d'alouette et de cheval*): fifty-fifty—one lark, one horse. Until now, we have one lark of opposition and one horse of toleration and active support. This lark, regardless, can become a first step to reduce the share of horse meat—to demonstrate a commitment not only to state-to-state normalization but to the process of nation-to-nation reconciliation.

Another welcome step would be the removal of the Tehlirian statue, as the Turkish government has been requesting in vain since late 2021. A third step would be to publicly acknowledge the obvious about the Azerbaijani victims of Nemesis—and preferably about Sait Halim and Cemal as well. On Talat, it is surely too soon.

Anyway, even if the Armenian government were to choose to act in the manner prescribed above, which is something far from being granted, another problem would still remain. The Catholicos of the Armenian Apostolic Church, Karekin II, personally led the religious ceremony of Gulumian's reburial, in another cemetery of Yerevan (it is reported that Pashinyan and Karekin II are bitter rivals). This should not have come as a surprise: in January 2021, an Armenian archbishop, Voskan Galpakyán, celebrated a memorial service for the killed terrorists of ASALA on the occasion of the forty-sixth anniversary of this organization. There was another religious ceremony in January 2022, apparently led by the same archbishop.

This is not merely of digressive interest: the Armenian Apostolic Church and its prelates enjoys in Armenia (and in the diaspora) a political and educational importance enjoyed by no religious organization in any EU member state (including the Catholic Church in Poland). In particular, the Armenian Apostolic Church controls the writing of a part of the textbooks in state schools and has imposed sentences such as “Armenians are Christian by faith and Apostolic by belief” (grade eleven textbook). In other words, the Armenian educational system teaches an exclusivist understanding of Armenian identity to its children. This, perhaps, helps to explain why Armenia is presently one of the most mono-ethnic countries in the world—a demographic reality that has never been the case in the history of that country's territory. It speaks also to the strength of the forces that, in Armenia, oppose peace between Armenia, on the one hand, and Türkiye and Azerbaijan, on the other.