

Mass Media and the Genocide of the Armenians

One Hundred Years of Uncertain Representation

Joceline Chabot, Richard Godin
Stefanie Kappler and Sylvia Kasparian



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Mass Media and the Genocide of the Armenians

One Hundred Years of Uncertain Representation

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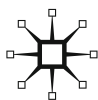
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To the victims of the Armenian Genocide

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Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	ix
<i>List of Tables</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xii
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	xiii
Introduction: Representations of the Armenian Genocide in the Mass Media	1
<i>Joceline Chabot, Richard Godin, Stefanie Kappler, Sylvia Kasparian</i>	
1 Genocide and the Arts: Creativity, Morality and the Representation of Traumatic Experience	16
<i>Adam Muller</i>	
2 <i>Ravished Armenia</i> (1919): Bearing Witness in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction. Some Thoughts on a Film-Ordeal	36
<i>Sévane Garibian</i>	
3 A Christian Harem: <i>Ravished Armenia</i> and the Representation of the Armenian Woman in the International Press	51
<i>Benedetta Guerzoni</i>	
4 From Silence to Re-remembrance: The Response of German Media to Massacres and Genocide against the Ottoman Armenians	85
<i>Tessa Hofmann</i>	
5 The Condition of Armenian Refugees and Orphans as Reported in <i>Armyanskiy Vestnik</i>	110
<i>Louisine Abrahamyan</i>	
6 The Polish Press and Armenian Genocide from 1895 to 1920	126
<i>Dominika Maria Macios</i>	
7 The 1915 Genocide in the Post-war Ottoman Press and in Parliamentary Records (1918–1919)	146
<i>Suzan Meryem Rosita AlJadeeah and Sait Çetinoğlu</i>	

8	Extreme Violence and Massacres during the First World War: A Comparative Study of the Armenian Genocide and German Atrocities in the Canadian Press (1914–1919) <i>Joceline Chabot, Richard Godin and Sylvia Kasparian</i>	180
9	A Case of Jewish Coverage of the Armenian Genocide in the United States: Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, “Champion of any Wronged People” <i>Claire Mouradian</i>	206
	Epilogue <i>Joceline Chabot, Richard Godin, Stefanie Kappler and Sylvia Kasparian</i>	233
	<i>Index</i>	237

List of Figures

- 3.1 An illustration from the French *Le Petit Parisien* of November 17, 1895 57
- 3.2 An illustration of the Adana massacres of 1909 from the cover of the Italian weekly magazine *La Domenica del Corriere*, May 16–23, 1909. The caption says: “The massacres in the Asian side of Turkey: Thousands of Armenians were burnt alive in a Catholic church in Adana” 58
- 3.3 Another illustration of the Adana massacres of 1909 from the cover page of the French magazine *Le Petit Journal*, May 2, 1909. The caption says “Massacre of Christians in Turkey” 59
- 3.4 An advertisement page on the *Saturday Evening Post* after the premiere in Los Angeles 63
- 3.5 *Ravished Armenia*. The crucifixion as a form of violence against women was a popular subject during the First World War 65
- 3.6 *Ravished Armenia*. As in previous accounts of Armenian suffering, the emphasis in *Ravished Armenia* had been on the rape and murder of women and young girls; nudity played a prominent part in the narrative. Sexual violence is the underlying theme throughout the movie 65
- 3.7 *Ravished Armenia*. An example of the sexual representation in the movie 66
- 3.8 From the *Pittsburgh Sun* of January 15, 1920, right in the period of *Ravished Armenia* promotion. Aurora Mardiganian provided testimonials for the movie until May 1920. Dossier de presse sur le génocide, Bibliothèque Nubar de l’UGAB, Paris 71
- 3.9 The *American*, Boston, January 27, 1919. Dossier de presse sur le génocide, Bibliothèque Nubar de l’UGAB, Paris 72

3.10	“Girl Refugee Tattooed on Face by Turk She Was Forced to Wed.” News about the girl in the picture, Nargis Avakian, was published in the USA in April 1920: in the <i>New York Times</i> of April 4, and by other local newspapers: like the <i>Lexington Herald</i> , <i>Coshocton Tribune</i> (April 7), <i>The Hutchinson News</i> (April 19). Dossier de presse sur le génocide, Bibliothèque Nubar de l’UGAB, Paris	73
3.11	Note how the woman crosses her arms to show the tattoos but also to protect the breast. Unknown newspaper, Dossier de presse sur le génocide, Bibliothèque Nubar de l’UGAB, Paris	74
3.12	Unknown French magazine, Dossier de presse sur le génocide, Bibliothèque Nubar de l’UGAB, Paris	75
5.1	“In the square, which was selected for the construction of Armenian theater in Erzindjan,” <i>Armyanskiy Vestnik</i> , N 9, February 26, 1917, Moscow, front page (AGMI collection)	118
5.2	“Destroyed and abandoned streets of Erzindjan,” <i>Armyanskiy Vestnik</i> , N 8, February 19, 1917, Moscow, front page (AGMI collection)	119
5.3	“The victims of Turkish violence,” <i>Armyanskiy Vestnik</i> , N 44, November 27, 1916, Moscow, front page (AGMI collection)	120
5.4	“Armenian orphans in the orphanage of Elizavetopol Committee for Relief to Armenians,” <i>Armyanskiy Vestnik</i> , N 42, November 13, 1916, Moscow, front page (AGMI collection)	121
6.1	“Disturbances in Constantinople,” <i>Tygodnik Ilustrowany</i> , October 28 (November 10), 1896	137
6.2	Franz Roubaud, “Attack of the Kurds on an Armenian village,” <i>Tygodnik Ilustrowany</i> 1898	138
6.3	A group of Armenian exiles, <i>Echo Polskie</i> , February 21 (March 5), 1916	139
7.1	Monument commemorating the Armenian Massacres, erected in Istanbul, 1919 (in the Archives of the Armenian Genocide Museum Institute)	170
8.1	Correspondence Analysis of the 632 words for German and Armenian corpses	188
8.2	Lexical distances between the two corpses	198
9.1	The founding committee of the American Committee on Armenian Atrocities	208

List of Tables

5.1	The number of refugees in Echmiatsin on August 1915	112
5.2	The number of refugees in the Caucasus	112
5.3	The number of the refugees in Western Armenia and Persia	112
8.1	Article distribution, by corpus and by newspaper	184
8.2	A list of words linked to crimes committed against civilians	187

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Introduction: Representations of the Armenian Genocide in the Mass Media

Joceline Chabot, Richard Godin, Stefanie Kappler, Sylvia Kasparian

In 1915, one of the first genocides in contemporary history was witnessed by representatives of powerful countries such as the United States of America, Italy, Germany, and Russia. Between April 15, 1915 and November 1916, at least 1.5 million Armenians were massacred on Turkish territory, as ordered by the government. When this news was made public in international newspapers, it was already too late to intervene. The Armenian population of Turkey was in the process of being exterminated. The process was put in place in March 1915 by order of the Turkish government itself, headed by the Young Turk Revolution Party and its main leaders Ismail Enver Pasha and Mehmed Talaat Pasha.

However, what the press reported at that time then must be seen as the continuation of a process that had been launched in the mid-19th century, when some European nations pressured the Ottoman government to improve minority rights. As a result of this, in 1876 the Ottoman Empire designed a reform program which affirmed the equality of all Ottoman subjects whatever their ethnicity or religion. According to Ternon (1989) and Dadrian (1995), this was partly rejected by the Muslim population.

The Armenians, mainly Christian at that time, were targeted largely by Muslims, Kurds, and Circassians (Sunni Muslims). The main motivation was to homogenize the Turkish nation. Two political facts explain this: firstly, the political nationalist program of the Young Turks had spread through the whole country and was being imposed on all other ethnic groups, such as Armenians, Greeks, and Assyrians; secondly, there was an attempt to dictate population development, to take control of demography and territorial management, through the seizure of land – the purification of territories.

As a result, two specific events need to be highlighted. The first, the Hamidian Massacres, took place between 1894 and 1896 during the reign of Sultan Abdul Hamid II, who ordered that an Armenian revolt be crushed. At least 200,000 are said to have been killed in this massacre (Surbezy, 1911). In 1908, the revolution that brought the Young Turks to power seemed to suggest that the new regime would be liberal, but a second massacre was carried out in Adana, from April 14 to 27, 1909, with over 3000 casualties (Akçam, 2006). Both events were early signs of the genocide that would follow.

At that time, the term “massacre” was used rather than “genocide.” The Armenian Massacre was commonly mentioned, and survivors used “*Medz Yeghern*” or “Great Calamity” (Great Crime) as labels. The world was then about to experience one of the worst conflicts in its history. The first stages of World War I were telling: never before had soldiers and civilians suffered so much from war, from so-called “extreme violence” on and around the battlefields (Audoin-Rouzeau, 2008). It is in this context that the extermination of the Armenian people in Turkey must be understood (Bloxham, 2011).

At the turn of the 19th century, the mass killings and massacres of the Armenian population were reported on the front pages of newspapers all over the world, and had an immediate impact on international public opinion (Duclert & Pécout, 1999; Kirakossian, 2004; Wilson, 2009).

When they took power in 1913, the Young Turks made quite clear their determination to reinforce the Muslim and Turkish character of the Ottoman Empire:

They were convinced that only their vision of saving the country by forcefully transforming it into an ethnically homogeneous core state with an ethnically homogeneous core population was the only acceptable model for the Ottoman Empire. (Üngör, 2011: 293)

Long before Turkey’s participation in the First World War, the Young Turks had put in place formal measures to enable them to pursue their nationalist political program. For example, ethnographic missions were sent to Anatolia to investigate the situation regarding non-Muslim populations in the empire (Dündar, 2006). As early as February 1914, the Central Committee of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) had laid out plans to expel Greeks living in Thrace and Anatolia and to move the Armenian populations into the interior of the Empire (Dündar, 2006: 190–220). The Great War contributed to the radicalization of the politics of the CUP, a key faction of the Young Turks that was

in government in Constantinople. By October 30, 1914, a CUP majority voted for the participation of Turkey in the war, alongside Germany and Austria-Hungary. Sporadic massacres of Armenian civilians occurred a few weeks later. The turning point, however, was the defeat of the Third Ottoman Army by the Russians at Sarikamish between December 1914 and January 1915. This defeat marked an important step in the radicalization of the Young Turks in power. The Armenian population was accused of betrayal and held responsible for the defeat.

From this point onward, thousands of people were killed in the eastern region of the Turkish Empire, and thousands more were driven through the Caucasus as refugees. On February 25, Enver Pasha ordered all military units to disarm and demobilize Armenian soldiers and to transfer them to labor battalions (Zürcher, 2002: 187). So it seems probable that the decision of the CUP to exterminate the Armenian population was taken around March 1915, and the responsibility of carrying out this policy was given to the Special Organization (SO), a secret paramilitary unit specializing in hunting down “enemies of the nation” (Akçam, 2004; Kévorkian, 2011). SO personnel were largely criminals released from prison in order to become paramilitaries (Kévorkian, 2011: 180–187). A few weeks after the disarmament order, the Young Turk media published articles that represented the Armenians as internal enemies. During the night of April 24, 1915, hundreds of the Armenian elite of Constantinople and other provincial cities were arrested in a massive operation by the Ottoman police authorities. Among them were archbishops, priests, politicians, teachers, journalists, writers, and intellectuals (Kévorkian, 2011).

The Armenian Genocide was perpetrated in two stages. During the first stage, from April 1915 to the end of the same year, it was mainly men of the eastern provinces of the Empire who were executed in large numbers by the squadrons of the Special Organization (SO). At the same time, women, children and the elderly were gathered and deported to the deserts of Syria and Mesopotamia. Most of them perished during the deportation as victims of atrocities perpetrated by the Kurds, the Turkish police and the SO staff. Recent analysis has shown that the ways that women and children were treated during the deportation reflect “gender ideology” (Derderian, 2005; Bjørnlund, 2009). Historians have underlined the specificity of the physical and psychological violence perpetrated against Armenian women. They have shown that the rape, kidnapping and sale of women and children as slaves were an essential part of the Armenian Genocide. At the same time, some categories of victims were left alive because they were seen as amenable to

turcicization, including young children and girls and women who were integrated into Turkish or Kurdish families after their forced conversion. While conversion to Islam saved their life, it eradicated their identity (Gül Altınay, 2013: 1–15). By early 1916, the Armenian provinces of Asia Minor were emptied of their inhabitants, all Armenians. In the western areas of Anatolia, a different mechanism was used against the population: Turkish authorities deported whole Armenian families into the desert by train (Dündar, 2011).

The second instalment of the massacre took place between February and December 1916. During this stage, the Ottoman Empire decided to eliminate all the survivors of the deportation living in Syrian and Mesopotamian camps. Research on this second phase of the genocide has analyzed the organization of 25 concentration camps dispersed throughout the region. It has enabled us to better understand the role of the Aleppo Sub-Directorate of Deportees. Approximately 800,000 deportees passed through the concentration camps; many died from hunger, thirst, and disease (Kévorkian, 1999: 187–221).

Casualties are estimated at more than a million people. In January 1919, following the Armistice of Mudros, a military tribunal was created to judge those responsible for crimes committed against the Armenians. The court found Talaat Pasha, Enver Pasha Cemal Pasha, and Dr. Nazim Efendi guilty of the extermination of the Armenians. They were condemned to death, *in absentia*. Research by Vahkan Dadrian and Taner Akçam (2011) on the trials of Young Turk criminals has highlighted the difficulties that the military tribunals experienced in trying to judge those responsible for the crimes.

Despite censorship and geographical distance, the disaster attracted the attention of international actors, such as the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief, la Société des Dames Arméniennes de France, the Vatican and Pope Benedict XV as well as the British Parliament. It was also the subject of worldwide media coverage, being reported in a number of newspapers including *The New York Times*, *L'Osservatore Romano*, *The Times*, the *London Daily News*, *Le Matin*, *Le Journal*, *The Globe*, the *Montreal Gazette*, and the *Toronto Daily Star*. Eventually, survivors, journalists, consuls, and missionaries took the floor to denounce an “extraordinary crime,” and their stories were relayed by the foreign press and publishers, who issued edited collections, reports and personal papers describing the horrific events that took place on the borders of Asia Minor (Leonard, 2003; Chabot & Godin, 2006; Becker & Winter, 2010).

But what stories are represented in these newspapers? Does representation embed the effects of the genocide in our minds and our subjective

realities? Is this a process which acknowledges and legitimizes particular events such as war, elections, human catastrophes, genocides, and so on? If so, how does it work?

Representation, the Media, and Popular Memory

Representations are essential to human beings: we need to know what we can grasp with regard to the surrounding world. Thus, as Jodelet argues, we constantly construct representations to understand and master objects, people, events, and ideas, both physically and intellectually: "Representations guide us in the way we name and define the different aspects of our everyday reality, in our way of judging them and, if the need arises, of taking a stand and defending them"¹ (1989: 47; author's translation).

Since the 1960s, research in social psychology on representation has been extensive. Generally, approaches emerging from cognitive psychology tend to argue that representation is a process of mental activity for an individual or a group that gives reality a specific meaning (Abric, 1987). According to Abric, while representation has a relatively stable and consistent core that resists change, it also has a peripheral system with its own dynamics. This peripheral system incorporates new information related to the social context, thus causing changes in the peripheral content of the representation. From this point of view, the reception of information is crucial. The pluralities of social representations are seen as a system of interpretations used to guide our relationships with the world. Jodelet suggests that systems organize our behavior and social communications through the internalization of our common experiences (Jodelet, 1989). From this perspective, social representations help us understand and explain reality. Jodelet adds that it is easy to observe representations for "they are found in our conversations, are carried by words, shared through messages and images in the media, crystalized in material and spatial behavior and activities"² (1989: 48; author's translation).

From a cultural studies perspective, it has been argued that:

[t]he common sense meaning of the concept of representation is a set of processes by which signifying practices appear to stand for or depict another object or practice in the "real" world. Representation is thus an act of symbolism that mirrors an independent object world. That is, representation does not involve correspondence between signs and objects but creates the "representational effect" of realism. (Baker, 2004)

The notion that representation is the symbolization of an object world that produces an effect suggests that someone or something acts as an intermediary between the object and the manufactured symbols and signs. Thus, the media do not offer a simple mirror of reality, but participate in its construction. Indeed, the media engage in complex processes of selection, composition, framing and dissemination of information (cf. Entman, 1993). Hence, while there is no direct convergence between journalistic reporting and reality, the connection between the journalist and reality remains necessary. In other words, the construction of events by the media results in multiple representations of the same event. Does this mean that the journalistic construction of a media event is independent of a given reality? Several researchers have answered this question by asserting that journalistic discourse should adopt an ethical standard of truth (Altheide, 1978; Bell & Garret, 1998; Gauthier, 2005).

When addressing the topic of representation, we need to be aware that this is a social and political process that is never neutral. The ways in which actors and events are “re-” presented is indeed informed by the ways in which we relate in a sociopolitical context. In this sense, an analysis of the representation of certain events is not so much about these events themselves, but primarily about how they are portrayed, framed, imagined and used in given sociopolitical circumstances. At the same time, an investigation of processes of representation can be indicators of power and control. Brown, for instance, argues that the labeling of things, people, or communities reflects power and control by ascribing rules and values to the object of representation (Brown, 1993: 658). The labeling of events can be read in a similar vein, in that any representation will always imply the creation of narrative coherence in order to make complex and potentially chaotic events manageable. This is particularly true in a context of genocide, which represents disruption and chaos on a particularly high level. In this context, O’Neill and Laban Hinton argue that:

[t]he “truth” of genocide (...) often becomes a power-laden tool over which politicians, activists, and the international community wrestle by asserting and contesting representations cobbled together from the often fragmented and clashing memories of survivors, perpetrators, witnesses, and bystanders. (2009: 5)

Against this background, a linguistic analysis of political discourses allows for an understanding of collective representations

of institutions (Cotteret, 1973). It helps us investigate the symbolic nature of communication, which is full of explicit and implicit signals. It therefore communicates not only the content and ontology of the event, but also the ways in which reality is modified, manipulated, embellished, or demonized.

In this respect, representations can be the grounds on which narratives flourish and history can be accessed in a variety of ways (cf. White, 1987). We are interested in the ways in which mass media have constructed narratives on the Armenian Genocide as well as how these narratives impact collective memory and forgetting. How can we read media representations to cast light on the rhetoric of memory (Boyarin, 1994: x)? Indeed, the role of mass media in genocidal phenomena is fundamental and multifaceted with respect to the disclosure and flow of information. Mass media provide both explanations and interpretations of events to the public in potentially controversial ways. Ambroise-Rendu (2005), Delage (2003), and Halen & Walter (2007) argue that genocide and other mass crimes represent issues of such importance that they impose social, moral, historical, and political responsibilities on the media.

The body of literature in the field of media anthropology offers insights into the question of media representation (Coman, 2003; Lardellier, 2003). A “representational reading” of media cases sheds light on the temporal and spatial structure of the ways in which media have an impact on and interfere with historical memory. It also allows us to identify interactions between memory mediators, such as journalists or columnists, and those subject to media representations, including victims, executioners and witnesses. The overlapping of those two different temporalities allows for the modification of perspectives and their relation to politics, identity, and philosophy or ideology.

In this context, we need to distinguish between different kinds of mass media, including the printed press, TV, movies, and, more recently, internet-based sources, including social media. Given that our edited volume largely investigates representations of the Armenian Genocide in a historical perspective, the main focus is the printed press in its diverse shapes and forms. We acknowledge that the media that we analyze did not exist in a vacuum, but rather in specific national and regional contexts. They reflect power relations and cast light on the politics of representation surrounding the Armenian Genocide. Cottle, for instance, suggests that “[t]he media occupy a key site and perform a crucial role in the public representation of unequal social relations and the play of cultural power.” (Cottle, 2000: 2). In this sense, we analyze

the media in relation to surrounding political and social conditions. This is not to argue that the media necessarily reflect a consensus of the masses, but our position serves to clarify the extent to which the media are shaped by powerful political actors and deploy the power of knowledge-dissemination. Foucault suggests that “[i]t is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power” (Foucault, 1980: 52). The knowledge that mass media disseminate about any genocide can be said to have an impact on both social relations and political action (cf. Fairclough, 1989).

Power relations also translate into the ways in which genocide is commemorated in society. Media discourses create a particular narrative of what happened and how it should be interpreted, which Boyarin (1994: x) refers to as the “rhetorics of memory” as outlined above. Our memories are based on representations, that is, how facts are “re-presented” to us through the narratives we know in any given socio-political context. Referring to monuments as objects of memory, Young suggests that “[b]oth a monument and its significance are constructed in particular times and places, contingent on the political, historical, and aesthetic realities of the moment” (Young, 1999: 3). In this sense, memory as constituted through representations not only tells us about how we relate to particular groups in the past, but also mirrors current political imaginations and thus social relations. Therefore, representations of the Armenian Genocide explain the ways in which the Armenians and the Turkish state related to one another during that genocide, and how other states and their media related to them *after* the genocide.

From this perspective, the genocide of the Armenians, the first of its kind in the modern era, continues to raise many questions. What impact did mass media have on related events as they occurred? Similarly, what direct and indirect impact did media coverage have on the international public space? What importance should be attributed to mass media iconography in the representation of mass violence? How was the media discourse expressed semantically? How does that lead to conflicts over the ways in which historical events are commemorated and remembered?

Representation of the Armenian Genocide in Mass Media

There are few scholarly analyses of the link between the Armenian Genocide and its representation in mass media. The academic literature is divided into four areas: 1) the history of the Armenian Genocide; 2) comparative genocide studies; 3) testimonies and memory in cultural