

Armenian Press in Turin. 1915-18

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Abstract 1915 marked the start of a bloodier phase of the Armenian tragedy. 1915 was also the year in which Italy interrupted its diplomatic presence in Anatolia and entered the war against the Ottoman Empire. For the few Armenians then resident in Italy this coincidence of circumstances constituted a mobilising factor: being in many cases citizens of the Ottoman Empire, on the one hand, they had to demonstrate their diversity with respect to the Turks, and on the other hand, the assumption of active behaviour towards the host country aimed at enhancing their belonging and cultural prerogatives. With the aim to investigate how the Genocide was experienced by the Armenian community in Italy, the paper will focus on the magazine *Armenia. Eco delle rivendicazioni armene* (Armenia. Echo of Armenian Claims) born in Turin and published between 1915-18.

Keywords Armenia Magazine Torino. Armenian-Italian Community. Armenian Genocide. Armenian Press. Italian Press.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Press Coverage of the Armenian Genocide. – 3 Concluding Remarks.

1 Introduction

The Armenian population of Italy had a multilayered configuration over the centuries. Different sources testify the arrival of Armenians as pilgrims and merchants, priests or skilled financiers, students, literary men and artists.¹

¹ There is a large bibliography on the presence of Armenians in Italy. I shall note here only a few key works as a guide to further bibliography: Manoukian 2014; Commeno 2012; Zekiyani 1978, 1996, 2006; Zekiyani, Ferrari 2004; Hermet, Cogni Ratti di Desio 1993; Adalian 1992; Bardakjian 1976.



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In parallel to permanent settlements, there were numerous temporary Armenian presences who considered Italy as a first landing place to then leave for somewhere else, or the place where to perfect one's professional and religious formation, or the best country to move to trade (Manoukian 2014, 21). This composite structure of the Armenian diaspora in Italy can also be found in 1915. According to a note in the Milan-based Italian daily newspaper *Corriere della Sera* (Evening Courier), there were about 7,000 Ottoman subjects of non-Turkish nationality present in Italy. Most were

Armenians already residing here before the European war and, in part, refugees following Turkish persecutions. The largest number of Armenians in Italy live in Naples, Genoa, Milan, Turin and Rome, where there is also an Armenian college for religious propaganda.² The Armenians are mostly engaged in trade although, following the interruption of communications with the eastern ports, they have had to reduce their business considerably. Before, they imported cloth, tableware, rugs, drugs, dyeing materials, exporting cereals and grains in exchange. (*Corriere della Sera*, 13 March 1916, cited in Manoukian 2014, 22)

Strangely the note didn't mention Venice, with its sixteen centuries-long Armenian traces, with a number of Armenian families residing there and finally with the Mekhitarist Congregation on Saint Lazarus island and Armenian Moorat Raphael College in the Venetian Ca' Zenobio historical palazzo.³

The organized presence of Armenians in modern Italy began in 1912 with the establishment of the section of the international organization *The Armenian General Benevolent Union* (AGBU) in Milan and with the further birth in 1915 of the *Comitato armeno d'Italia* (Armenian Committee of Italy) and the *Unione degli Armeni d'Italia* (Union of Armenians of Italy), which acted as the *de facto* representative of the Armenian residents in this country (Manoukian 2014, 24).

With the aim to investigate how the Genocide was experienced by the Armenian community in Italy, the paper will focus on the magazine *Armenia. Eco delle rivendicazioni armene* (Armenia. Echo of Armenian Claims) born in Turin and published between 1915-18. It will first briefly analyse the presence of Armenians in Italy in the period of World War I. It will further consider how the Italian press reported

² The author intends *Pontificio Collegio Armeno*, the institution built in 1883 by the pope Leo XIII for the formation of Armenian Catholic religious.

³ On Mekhitar's life and work see Nurikhan 1914; Zekiyani 1977. On the order, its history and spirituality, see Sargisean 1905, 1936; Leo 1966-89; Bardakjian 1976; Adalian 1992; Zekiyani, Ferrari 2004. Some significant tokens of the general esteem among Armenians for Mekhitar and his work are quoted by Zekiyani 1993.

the massacres and deportation of the Armenians. Finally, the paper will focus on the Turin-based magazine *Armenia*. As it is not possible to consider all the issues of the magazine within the limits of a single article, this paper will mainly concentrate on the reports of 1915.

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2 Press Coverage of the Armenian Genocide

1915 was also the year which marked the start of a bloodier phase of the Armenian tragedy. On 12 February 1915 the Armenian conscripts in the Ottoman Army were forcibly disarmed by the order of the Minister of War of Ottoman Empire and were either killed outright or worked to death in labour and cargo transportation battalions. On 24 April another of the early phases of the Armenian deportations and massacres began with the mass arrest and later murder of several hundred Armenian leaders in Constantinople (now Istanbul). These included clergy, educators, authors, professionals and political figures.⁴

1915 was also the year in which Italy resigned from the Triple Alliance, declared war on Austria-Hungary, further interrupted its diplomatic presence in Anatolia and entered the war against the Ottoman Empire.

The almost contemporaneous superimposition of all these circumstances was a determining factor in creating a particular attention towards the Armenians in Italy: the massacres, the violence and the deportations of the Armenians was attributable to Ottomans who, at that time were the enemy of Italy and could be condemned without any diplomatic reticence, possibly using this circumstance as one of the arguments in support of their war's 'just cause'. The Italian press reported extensively on the massacres of the Armenians under the Young Turk dictatorship. Terms and phrases in Italian news articles describing the massacre and deportation included the following: "massacres", "slaughter", "unbelievable atrocities", "terrible tortures", "kidnapping of attractive young girls, "rape", "unparalleled savagery", "acts of horror", "great deportation", "completely depopulated", "wholesale deportations", "systematically uprooted",

⁴ For stages of Genocide consider among others Stanton 2009; Whitehorn 2010, for Armenian Genocide scholarship consider among others Dadrian 1993, 1995, 1996, 1999; Dadrian, Akçam 2011; Lewy 2007; De Waal 2015. Among multiple sources on Armenian Diaspora for a first approach see Hovannisian 1997; Myers, Hovannisian 1999; Libaridian 1999; Jendian 2008.

and the like.⁵ Italian journalists used words that conveyed the magnitude of heinous acts and deeds, comparable to the language used when discussing the death toll in Europe. However, as events were developing in Europe during the First World War, the international press, unfortunately, was trying to analyse the Armenian massacres in the light of the war. The tragic events were often interpreted according to criteria, influenced by the political direction of the newspaper and recurring stereotypes such as the “bloodthirsty Turk”. In various newspaper headlines, we read “Unprecedented Turkish Ferocity” (*L’Ora*, 26 July); “The Orgies of Turkish Ferocity. Thousands of Murdered Armenians” (*Il Secolo XIX*, 18 August); “New Turkish Tortures against the Armenian Population” (*Il Mattino*, 12 September); “The Appalling Turkish Atrocities against the Armenians” (*Il Secolo*, 26 September); “The Nefarious Atrocities against the Armenians” (*Il Giornale d’Italia*, 13 October), etc.

In the summer of 1915, public interest was particularly affected by direct reports and often eyewitness accounts that began to arrive in Europe. The Italian press became attentive to the Armenian crisis, often publishing news of the massacre on the front pages of Italian newspapers. This was the case of the interview of the consul Gorrini in *Il Messaggero*, a radical-democratic newspaper:

The Armenians were treated differently in the different vilayets. [...] From 24 June onwards, the Armenians were all ‘interned’ – that is, ejected by force from their various residences and dispatched under the guard of the gendarmerie to distant, unknown destinations, which for a few will mean the interior of Mesopotamia, but for four-fifths of them has meant already a death accompanied by unheard-of cruelties. It was a real massacre and carnage of innocent people, something unheard-of, black page, with the flagrant violation of the most sacrosanct rights of humanity, of Christianity and nationality.⁶

Statistically, the articles on Armenians quadrupled when the crisis of Italo-Turkish relations reached its peak with Italy’s declaration of war on the Ottoman Empire on 21 August 1915. The Armenian argument was an opportunity to discredit the opponent and to legitimize the intervention. According to public opinion, the 1915 massacres do not represent a novelty in the history of the Ottoman Empire. The re-

⁵ On Armenian Genocide in Italian press, see Aliprandi 2015; Martelli 2015a, 2015b; Haroutyunian 2018. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the Author.

⁶ “La tragica situazione interna della Turchia, orrendi episodi della ferocia musulmana contro gli armeni. Intervista al Console Generale Commendatore Gorrini” (*Il Messaggero*, 25 August 1915).



Figura 1
The first issue of Armenia, 15 October 1915

current persecutions of Christians have always characterized Turkish domestic affairs: this assumption in European knowledge constitutes a consolidated stereotype that sees the Turkish as a barbarous and bloody subject. This interpretative key presides over most of the analyses presented on the press of the time. Nothing has changed in the Ottoman Empire and as Martelli notes:

on this level undoubtedly some specific aspects of the genocide are not captured: among these is the modern imprint of a nationalistic homogenization project that can be grasped behind the design of the perpetrated extermination. (Martelli 2015a, 223)

In October 1915, only a couple of months after Italy's declaration of war on the Ottoman Empire, the first issue of the magazine *Armenia. Eco delle rivendicazioni armene* (hereinafter referred to as *Armenia*) was published in Turin.⁷ The protagonists were largely anonymous, but an important position was undoubtedly held by Nishan Der Stepanian, who probably was also the founder. Der Stepanian, born in Erzinçan in 1889, at the end of his higher education as a doctor, settled

⁷ The pages are usually 12, in respect of the maximum limit imposed by the Italian censorship, while in 1918 some numbers come together and the pages appear to be of a higher number, since it was possible to recover the pages not used in the previous months and therefore combine them into a single number (Longo 2017, 102).



Figura 2
Der Stepanian's yogurt laboratory poster

in Turin. He devoted himself to the study of the therapeutic merits of yogurt and became, perhaps, the first yogurt maker in Turin.

The magazine was completely in Italian and its aim was to defend Armenian interests in Italy during the First World War. Many editorial contributions are signed with pseudonyms, some of which are revealed in the course of publications, such as 'Doctor'. Of the other pseudonyms such as 'Suren', 'Careckin', 'Armenius', 'D.', 'Aramais', 'Kurren', instead, the identity is not known. These editorials not only commented on the events that took place in the Ottoman Empire, but were also an opportunity to expose the real desires and ambitions of the Armenian people. There was certainly no lack of ferocious accusations against the Young Turks, accompanied by reproaches against the Germans. For example, the article "An Organized Extermination. The Bloody Madness of the Turkish-Germans in Armenia" reads:

The tragic fate once again falls on the unhappy Armenia. Armenian blood flows again. The Turks who gorged themselves on the German culture, trained and instigated by German instructors, a few months ago started the execution of a frightening plan: the extermination of the Armenian race living in their homeland for forty centuries... Immediately after the European conflagration the Turks openly declared that the fate of the Armenians was already decided: the extermination of the Armenians was decided in the

Turkish-German programme. The Turks no longer needed to seek or invent pretexts. Germans' motion "Necessity knows no laws" was enough for them.⁸ (Doctor 1915, 9)

Some of the analytical articles of political content were written by Italian journalists, others were signed by pen names, as the mentioned article, published under the nickname Doctor. Generally, Italian newspapers also tended to emphasize the complicity of the German authorities. In an article in *Il Mattino* on 31 July 1915, we read:

Zurich, 29 [July], night - the news of new massacres of Armenians by the Turks arrives in Zurich only today and causes considerable impression. The news coming from Petrograd is confirmed in a Turkish release reported by the unofficial Wolff agency on 16 July. It is strange the fact that although the release bears the date of 16 July, it has not been published in any newspaper so far. We see Germany's intention to hide the new acts of cruelty and barbarism committed by its ally from the civilized world.

Some Italians collaborated with *Armenia*, such as the director, Corrado Corradino, professor of letters at the University of Turin, Carlo Margaria, Terenzio Grandi, professor of geography of the University of Turin, Ettore Cozzani, head of the magazine *L'Eroica*, Domenico Cimapoli, professor of Italian and Slavic language and Adriano Gimorri, poet and professor, whose several essays will be published in the magazine.

The front page of all issues includes the Italian translation of British Prime Minister William Gladstone's words: "To serve Armenia is to serve civilization".⁹ The first issue opens with an editorial, which is not signed but it is probably the work of Der Stepanian himself. The editorial presents the aims and reasons for which it has been decided to start publishing the magazine and concludes with an appeal to the king of Italy, Vittorio Emanuele III:

We have faith that such a crime will not be committed. Italy's declaration of war on Turkey has strengthened our faith because Italy has always been that generous and noble homeland that has felt and supported all the holy causes of the oppressed peoples. Italy [...] will not be able to forget Armenia on the day of the su-

⁸ The principle of necessity was already known in Roman law, and was expressed in the brocard *Necessitas non habet legem, sed ipsa sibi facit legem* (necessity knows no laws, but becomes itself law) (Publius Syrus).

⁹ Payaslian 2010, 117. For further details on British policy and politics on the Armenian massacres see, among others, Kirakossian 2004, 2008; Tusan 2017.

preme decisions. Its heroic and noble King is the descendant of those Savoys, who bore the title of King of Armenia. They went up to the throne of Italy and abandoned it. But the Armenians continue to praise the Savoys in their songs and would like to say if their voice – suffocated by the infernal iron and Turkish-German fire – could reach Vittorio Emanuele III: *Majesty, remember us...*¹⁰

The second piece that appears on this issue and which will be present in almost all editions, is the column called “The Armenian Tragedy”. It includes news on the Genocide taken from the Italian and foreign newspapers and news agencies, especially that of the Stefani agency. The magazine also devoted ample space to the testimonies of Italians, such as the aforementioned interview of the consul Gorini, or the interview with N. Lemi, director of the Van branch of the French tobacco company Régie:

Until 4 April, I knew nothing about what was going to happen, says Lemi in his interview. That day, the governor of Van, Cevdet Bey called me and the Ottoman Bank manager. In disguised words he made us understand not to spend the night in our apartments in the Armenian neighbourhood, but to stay in our offices adjacent to government buildings. He did not want to explain the meaning of what he was saying, being content to say he had done his duty, warning us as Europeans in a timely manner, and if we thought not to obey, he would disclaim all responsibility. The situation was tense, it felt like a storm was about to start [...]. It is not possible to predict the future, but one thing is clear: those who caused this tragedy of the Armenians will not go unpunished, concluded Lemi his interview.¹¹

In the December 1915 issue, *Armenia* published the appeal-letter of an Italian lady entitled “What Can the Italian Woman do for Her Armenian Sisters”:

At this fateful moment, women of almost all European nations are grieving for their sons, husbands, brothers fallen in the bloody fields for the Homeland. But it is sublime, magnificent and sacred to sacrifice existence for one’s own land. The woman who mourns her relative in the Valley of Honour has a deep sense of sacred pride in her soul, which eases her bitter sadness. But at this fatal moment there is a creature of God that sheds a tear of sorrow for quite another suffering. There is a poor creature who has become a victim of the ferocious hatred of the beast, a suffering, demor-

10 “Il diritto dell’Armenia attraverso le vicende della sua storia”. *Armenia*, 1, 1915, 3.

11 “L’insurrezione di Van: una testimonianza italiana”. *Armenia*, 1, 1915, 6.

alized one, whom no consolation is capable of releasing from the clutches of her terrible nightmare. This is the Armenian woman.

This innocent victim has been subjected to horrific atrocities for many years, only to have her people claim the sacred right to exist. It is impossible to remain indifferent to such a constant martyrdom. Any woman who has a sense of humanity and principles of justice must rebel against such a massacre. It would be quite selfish to say “now we have to think about ourselves, we cannot waste our energy on someone who does not belong to us”. If there is a human being who is suffering, everyone, who has a slightly better condition is obliged to reach out. This is what I say to my sisters in Italy. Countries like France and England, which are currently at war and are bravely fighting, are setting up committees to help Armenia. Italy should not be insensitive. The homeland of freedom knights Garibaldi and Mazzini cannot ignore Armenia’s sacred problem. I received a letter from a woman from this oppressed and bleeding nation. The letter was delayed by the current difficulties of international mail. Unfortunately, the letter repeats what we learned from the press. It is not easy to advise in case of such great misfortune. We have nothing else to do but complain, shout against barbarism, and join the sister states in uniting the whole of European civilization in this wartime moment for the sake of the noble cause of justice. (Piccini 1915, 8)

As it is clear from the content of the message, this appeal, written on 4 November 1915, has a prehistory. Vanna Piccini receives a letter from her Armenian friend named N. Vartian: “Dear friend”, begins Mrs. Vartian’s letter, “the grief has made me mad. I lost my head in misery. You, who are at peace, be kind to offer me healing. For the sake of God, please advise me” (Vartian 1916, 9). Then Mrs. Vartian goes on detailing the difficult situation of the Armenian people:

It is a satanic slaughter, a long organized hellish extermination, which has been consistently carried out against my unhappy compatriots. The Turk fears the valiant. Its secular system is to attack women, the old and children. The helpless, in short, the defenceless. He makes war as a ferocious coward, there is no other word: 10,000 women thrown into the Euphrates River... 5,000 children gathered in boats and thrown on the high seas. (Vartian 1916, 9)

Continuing the letter, Vartian seeks to answer the question of why these barbaric persecutions of the Turks are actually against the Armenians:

Do you know the fairy tale of the firefly? A firefly that glowed quietly at night was bitten by a snake. The firefly naively asks its per-

secutor the reason for the punishment inflicted on it; the snake simply replied “because you shone”. I can’t find any other reason for the persecutions inflicted on my people [...]. Please give me some advice; suggest me an immediate remedy. The hours of the Armenian population of Turkey are counted! Later it will be too late. (Vartian 1916, 9)

Deeply influenced by the letter, Vanna Piccini decides to come up with a message. Because of insufficient space to publish both letters, *Armenia* chooses Piccini’s message for the December issue while Mrs. Vartian’s letter will be included in the issue of January 1916, thus allowing a chronological change.

From an announcement in the magazine we learn that:

When Italy declared war on Austria, the Armenian community of Paris immediately collected 3,000 liras from its members for the Italian Red Cross. The money was handed over to the Italian Ambassador to Paris.¹²

Another announcement underlines that “The most effective manifestation of your interest in the Armenian cause will be subscribing to *Armenia Magazine*”¹³

The magazine also placed a great deal of pedagogical and cultural material in order to present Armenian culture in the most complete way. In fact, “The Literary Page” is always present in all the numbers except in the first, as announced in the October 1915 issue:

Armenia will also have a literary page. Our readers will be better able to feel the cause of Armenia by loving it also through the manifestations of his thought and feelings. We are sorry to have been forced to give up almost completely this page for this first issue, due to the inexuberance of writings of another kind. (*Armenia*, 1915, 1, 5)

In fact, in subsequent numbers, *Armenia* will have references to the Armenian culture by publishing materials on Armenian history, art and architecture. The literary page is usually very rich and extensive and has an important propagandistic role within *Armenia*. It deals with many Armenian authors, presenting different extracts of their works. Almost all the issues include Armenian writers or literary critics, including Siamanto, Aharonyan, Alishan, Abovyan, Duryan, Zardaryan, Chopanyan, Varuzhan, etc.

¹² “Tre mila lire della colonia armena di Parigi alla Croce Rossa Italiana”. *Armenia*, 1, 1915, 9.

¹³ *Armenia*, 1, 1915, 6.

In October 1918, the publication of the magazine *Armenia* ceased. The reasons why Nishan Der Stepanian stopped the publication of *Armenia* is not known. The encyclopedic volume *I periodici di Torino*, dedicated to the periodicals of Turin published in 1860-1915, in the paragraph on *Armenia* merely indicates the names of the publisher (Tipografia Centrale Eynard Edoardo di Torino), the honorary editor (Corrado Corradino), the director and editor (N. Der Stepanian), the responsible (Carlo Margaria), the format (39 × 29cm) and the price (2.5 liras per year, 0.25 cents per issue). It also mentions that *Armenia* was a monthly magazine. The note finishes with the following statement:

The magazine was created to support the cause of the Armenian people during the war against Turkey. Alongside articles on the situation of Armenians, it contained historical notes, short stories, verses of protagonists of the Armenian Risorgimento and news on solidarity initiatives in favour of Armenia. (Manunta 1995, 52-3, nota 152)

Most probably Der Stepanian had to cease his activity because of his appointment as Secretary General of the Central Armenian Committee of Italy. In this role he took part at the Paris Peace Conference as a member of Armenian National Delegation, chaired by Boghos Nubar Pasha.¹⁴ Months later, in September 1919 he was in Armenia “to try to relieve the misery” of his people (Yeretzian 1963, cited in Longo 2017, 74). In that mission he was together with the writer Vahan Tekeyan and Samson Harutyunian who later became the Minister of Justice of the First Republic of Armenia (Hovannisian 1974, 470; Ghazarian 2016; Longo 2017, 90).

3 Concluding Remarks

Armenia magazine became an ideal vehicle for showing how, in the state of suffering imposed by the Ottoman Empire, Armenians had always been able to reaffirm their civilization, rising to the level of

¹⁴ The Republic of Armenia was not officially invited to this conference, although the Armenian people had suffered more casualties during the First World War than many of the major warring states. However, in February 1919 the two Armenian delegations in Paris (the National Delegation headed by Poghos Nubar and the Delegation of the Republic of Armenia headed by Avetis Aharonyan) presented their allies with a request to recognize the national demands of the Armenians. See the text of the statement in “Papers relating to the foreign relations of the United States, the Paris Peace Conference”, vol. IV, 1919, 139 (<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1919Parisv04/d8>).

the most advanced nations. *Armenia* created a link between the Armenian authorities, the political world and even the Italian press, which sometimes took some articles that *Armenia* reported into its columns. With the main aim to demonstrate to Italians, but above all to the Italian political class, that Armenia was morally and administratively capable to be autonomous, the Magazine presented the propaganda work that the Armenians, individually or in connection with the Italians, carried out during the massacres. It also showed how the Genocide was experienced by the Armenian community in Italy.

Armenia not only represented a reference point for the Armenian community of Italy, but it also aroused various appreciations both in the Italian political and literary world. Antonio Gramsci published an article on the Armenian massacres in the Italian political weekly *Il grido del popolo* where he stated that

[s]omething has been done in Turin. A review entitled *Armenia* has just been published for a few months. With serious intentions and variety of collaboration it says what it is, what it wants and what the Armenian people would like to become. From the magazine should start the initiative of a series of books that with more effective persuasion and demonstration would give Italy a picture of what the language, the history, the culture, the poetry of the Armenian people is. (Gramsci 1916, 607)

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