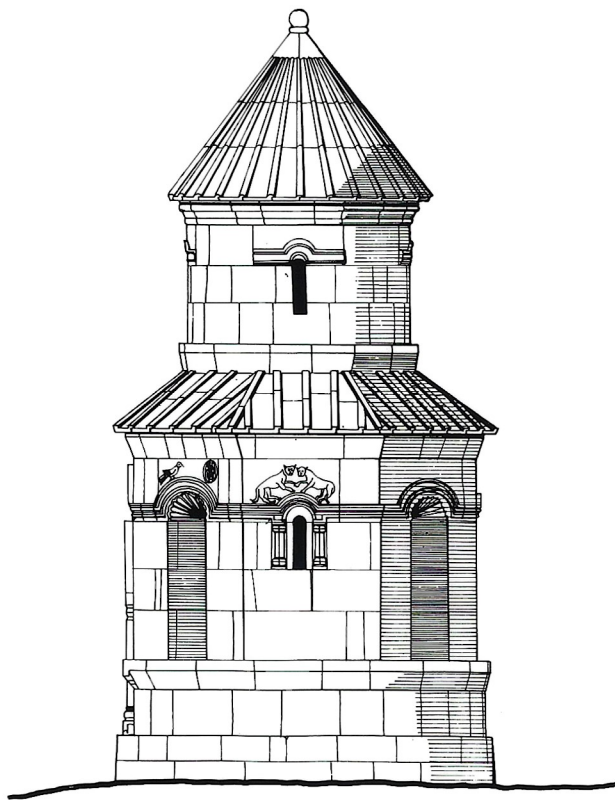


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## LITERARY MANIFESTATIONS OF RESISTANCE TO THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE JEWISH AND ARMENIAN CASES

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Decades after the Armenian Genocide, there is such an abundance of material that Armenian Genocide literature has become a genre of its own. Critical writings have amounted to works of value with different literary approaches and methodologies, each working toward a better understanding of the catastrophe of Genocide. To enrich this body of critical literature, in which I have also had my share, I advocate the division of the material into sub-genres in order to treat each set with tools appropriate to it.

In this article, I will discuss the manifestations in literature of the resistance to atrocity, which I regard as a fascinating sub-genre of genocide literature, as well as a leitmotif interwoven in a variety of texts. My methodology is eclectic, since I do not believe that any one school of criticism can provide the tools to explain the spirit which impelled a prospective victim to rise up in a desperate fight against the oppressor, nor can any one theory of human behavior fully explain its manifestations in literature. My approach is comparative, since this particular sub-genre of genocide literature, or this specific response to atrocity, is not unique to Armenians. Parallels and contrasts in Armenian and Jewish uprisings elucidate the etiology of responses to catastrophe.

The long history of subjugation, slavery, pogroms, and ghettos of the Armenian and the Jewish peoples had benumbed national aspirations and taken away the urge for and the capability of self-defense. National catastrophes or the plight of the nation were attributed to supernatural preordination, to the will of God to punish the sinful people or to bestow upon His chosen ones the glory of martyrdom—for Christ or for the name of God, in the Armenian and Jewish traditions respectively. A complex process would be required to change this collective psyche which in its time was regarded as a sign of piety, righteousness, and devotion to God. I would interpret this mind-set as an effective tool for survival. It is abundantly manifested in ancient and medieval Armenian and Jewish literature, a comparative study of which has been conducted by this author in *Literary Responses to Catastrophe: A Comparison of the Armenian and the Jewish Experience*.<sup>1</sup>

The “Enlightenment” era of the two peoples, almost coinciding in time and ideology, resonated with the first reverberations of that change in the mind-set and collective psyche. An increasingly secularized worldview resulted in a new inter-

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<sup>1</sup> Rubina Perroomian, *Literary Responses to Catastrophe: A Comparison of the Armenian and the Jewish Experience* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1993).

pretation of catastrophe and saw the old way of thinking as slavish and subservient. The secularized and politicized intellectual of the Renaissance era reinterpreted the concept of glorious martyrdom as meek sheep going to the slaughterhouse and rather called for self-defense. "*Vardani Ergē*" ("Vardan's Song" [1863]) is an example. Rap'ayēl Patkanian (1830-1892), the poet, reinterprets Vardan Mamikonian's famous speech to his troops before embarking on a desperate campaign of self-defense against the Persian king in A.D. 541. Casting his work in a historic mold to elude censorship, Patkanian calls the present day Armenians to rise against the enemy:

Even now, shall we still be silent when our enemy,  
Unmoved by all the deaths he's made,  
Reaches out his cruel, cursed hand  
And tears at the last shred of our nation—  
We have almost lost Armenia: what shall we do?  
Shall we still be silent?

.....  
Let the mute be silent, or the maimed,  
Or those who find the enemy's burden light;  
But we, who have strong hearts and our souls,  
Let us rise now, go fearless against our enemy,  
At least we may reclaim glory by our death,  
And so be silent in that way.<sup>2</sup>

Khachatur Abovian (1805-1848) gives another example in *Verk Hayastani* (*Wounds of Armenia* [1840-1841]). In this first novel in Eastern Armenian vernacular, the author juxtaposes contrasting examples of armed resistance and sheepish abasement to servitude.

Armenian Renaissance literature reverberates with such calls for action against the enemy. The goal is Freedom: freedom from centuries of slavery and servitude, no matter what the price. In a poem titled "*Azatut'iwn*" ("Freedom" [1859]), Mik'ayēl Nalbandian (1829-1866) yearns for freedom even if the "path will be rock-strewn," even if the gallows await him:

"Freedom!" I called out,  
"Let lightning, fire, flares, and iron  
Burst over my head,  
Let the enemy plot—

"Until death, until the gallows,  
Until dropped from the scaffold of death,

<sup>2</sup> Aram Tolegian, tr., *Armenian Poetry Old and New* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979) pp. 119-121.



I will shout out over and over,  
Endlessly, Freedom!"<sup>3</sup>

Because of the tight grip of the traditional scholars, or Hasidim, the Jewish progressive intellectuals, or Maskilim, were somewhat slower to arrive at this point; also, their secularization took a different path, one that was not necessarily politicized or irredentist. I have discussed in more detail the commonalities and contrasts in the paths, themes, and ideologies of Armenian and Jewish Enlightenment in another article.<sup>4</sup> The Jewish progressive writers began by deriding the traditional responses to catastrophe. The response of Sholem Yenkev Abramowitch (1836-1917) to the 1881 Jewish pogroms is the first manifestation of this approach. He considers the pogroms strictly as a Jewish drama, revealing Jewish backwardness and the dire need for reforms. In *Hanisrafim* (1897), he ridicules the exaggerated lamentations of Jewish survivors and the mythification of the pogroms. He admonishes that such a transmutation of historical catastrophe into sanctified myth prevents the survivors from rallying forces for change. A straightforward and undisguised call for armed resistance comes from Chaim Nachman Bialik (1873-1934), in response to the 1903 Jewish massacres of Kishinev. In a long poem titled "*Bair haharegah*" ("In the City of Slaughter" [1903]), Bialik reveals the Jews' inability to defend themselves and the hiding of their cowardice behind outdated explanations of catastrophe. He intentionally overlooks sporadic acts of self-defense during the pogroms in order to stress Jewish passiveness. In Bialik's poem God is the speaker, challenging the Jews to rise up and defend their rights:

Let them against me raise their outraged hand;—  
Let them demand!  
.....  
Let fists be flung like stone  
Against the heavens and the heavenly Throne!<sup>5</sup>

It was the pogroms of Kishinev in 1903 that brought about a turning point in Jewish responses to catastrophe. Politically-motivated literature was produced by Jewish socialists and Zionists calling for self-defense. As David Roskies puts it, "the Bund threw in its lot with the 'workers of the world,' whereas the Union of Hebrew Writers saw national self-determination as the only way to secure Jewish life."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>4</sup> Rubina Perroomian, "A Comparative Approach to the Circumstances, Aspects, Manifestations, and Elements of the Jewish and Armenian Enlightenment and Modernization," a commentary presented at the Conference on Enlightenment and Diaspora, UCLA, November 12-13, 1995. See *Enlightenment and Diaspora: The Armenian and Jewish Case*, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian and David N. Myers (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1999), pp. 209-221.

<sup>5</sup> David G. Roskies, ed., *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe* (Philadelphia, New York, Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1988) pp. 160-168.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 169.



The forerunners were the confessions of powerlessness, the inability to defend themselves, and their vulnerability to destruction. Then, the path of ideology led Renaissance intellectuals to challenge the Armenian and the Jewish peoples to take their destinies into their own hands. Individual endeavors through artistic literature preceded organized action. The role of literature was indispensable. Alexis de Tocqueville, discussing the French Revolution, regards it, among other things, as the result of the extension of "literature" into direct politics: "Our men of letters [*hommes de lettres*] did not merely impart their revolutionary ideas . . . ; they also shaped the national temperament and outlook on life . . . the instincts, the turn of mind . . . [a]nd when the time came for action, these literary propensities were imported into the political arena."<sup>7</sup> The analysis is applicable to both the Armenian and the Jewish cases. Furthermore, as imaginative literature prompted action, actual deeds of armed resistance in turn influenced the literature to echo national aspirations and create artistic representations of incidents of armed struggle. In both cases, the political parties were in the center of action organizing armed resistance and inspiring and, at the same time, promoting the literature of resistance.

Armenian and Jewish responses to catastrophe in these different circumstances and different times radically altered the paradigm of responses with calls for armed resistance. Writers such as Mkrtich Peshiktashlian, Dzerents, Khachatur Abovian, and Raffi in Armenian literature, and Saul Tchernichowsky, Lamed Shapiro, and Sholem Aleichem in Jewish literature all strove to create a Nietzschean man, an idealized hero who lives only to die in battle with the enemy. In both literatures, however, the fine line between the idealized hero and the wretched victim was effaced, recrossed again and again, the definition blurred and the line disappeared. In an era of uncertainty and confusion between adherence to traditional values and frame of mind and the appeals and impositions of new liberal ideologies, psychological fiction was the arena where the old and the new collided and the hero arose. Examples of this phenomenon are to be found in "*Ēl mi aghōt'ir*" ("Don't Pray Anymore" [1899])<sup>8</sup> and "The Rabbi's Son" (1925)<sup>9</sup>. In these stories, by Awetis Aharonian (1866-1948) and Isaac Babel (1894-1939) respectively, Tatul and Elijah are both traditionally obedient sons of pious men, a priest and a rabbi, and they both leave the house of God to join the resistance forces. The Armenian fights the Turks in defense of the Armenian villages during the massacres of 1894-1896; the Jew becomes a devoted Communist and joins the Red Army to fight against Tsarist repression. The conflict is between religious piety, which forbids taking up arms and fighting back, and political emancipation, which leads to yearning for freedom and fighting for it. In Aharonian's tale, the wounded and dying priest admits that

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<sup>7</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (1856), tr. Stuard Gilbert (Garden City, New York, Doubleday, 1955) cited in *Interrelations of Literature*, ed. Jean-Pierre Barricelli and Joseph Gibaldi (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1982), p. 143.

<sup>8</sup> Awetis Aharonian, *Azatut'ean chanaparhin* (*On the Road To Freedom*) (Tehran, Iran: Alik Press, 1956), pp. 25-38.

<sup>9</sup> Roskies, *The Literature of Destruction*, pp. 277-278.

his son was right after all to choose fighting against the enemy instead of praying to God. In another tale, titled "A Shtetl," by I.M. Weissenberg (1881-1938), the protagonist Yekl shouts at the rabbi, "No psalms! . . . Only arms, real arms!"<sup>10</sup> There are many examples where this type of conflict unfolds and out of which the modern hero emerges.

These fictional heroes took shape in the literature of the Armenian national struggle while real heroes engaged in the uneven battle against Turkish and Kurdish assailants. Heroes took shape in the Jewish literature committed to and the Bund, Communist internationalism or Zionist nationalism, as well as resistance to anti-Semitic pogroms, on battle fields of the Red Revolution.

These literary heroes were the prototype of those who took up arms in response to the Armenian massacres spanning from 1894 to "the final solution" in 1915 (in the defense of Sasun and Van, down to the heroic resistance of Musa Dagħ, Kara Hisar, Urfa, and Van for the second time) and in the resistance to the Jewish Holocaust in the uprisings of the Vilna and Warsaw ghettos.

Parenthetically, as you see, I consider the time span of the Armenian Genocide to have extended over a period of twenty years, from 1894 to 1915. The reason for this view is twofold. First, Turkish genocidal policies were initiated with the massacres of 1894-1896, which never ceased even with the change of governments, encompassing the 1909 massacres of Cilicia down to the continuous anti-Armenian campaign and the harassment of Armenian villages even before the War. The second reason for this view is more directly related to the present research and serves its comparative dimension. The representations of Armenian armed resistance in literature predominantly resonated in the pre-1915 era, and much less so as a response to the massacres and deportations of 1915, while, in the Jewish case, it was the resistance to the Nazi massacres and deportations of 1943-44, that spurred this theme as a literary response. The fact is that the carefully planned genocide of the Armenians during 1915-1923 (usually considered to be the period of the Armenian Genocide) made resistance almost impossible. After the compulsory draft and massacre of Armenian soldiers, only a few young men were left to react and if, after the decree disarming the Armenian population, there were still any arms and ammunition remaining. Furthermore, with the mass arrest and execution of Armenian leaders and intellectuals at the outset, and the outright massacres and deportations, leaving only a handful of women, children, and old men, there were no scribes to record the heroic actions of resistance, there were no poets to sing the power of arms. Except for Musa Dagħ and Van, resistance ended in the complete extermination of the entire town or village. Almost no trace of the survivors, no record of their heroic defense and ordeal was left. Thus, with the exception of Aram Haykaz's story of the defense of Shapin Kara-Hisar and Franz Werfel's *The Forty Days of Musa Dagħ*, there were no major works of art to immortalize the memory of the acts of self-defense during the Genocide.



In view of the wholesale massacres and destruction, one is moved to contemplate what was the use of desperate Armenian and Jewish resistance? Deliverance? Hardly. Victory over the enemy? Not likely. Those few who fought back against a fierce army of Turkish soldiers and those who resisted the German deportation orders were utterly bereft of hope. They knew that their attempt might even instigate a harsher reaction of the enemy, a collective punishment from which no soul could escape. As Yisrael Gutman puts it in *Fighters Among the Ruins*: “[T]he Jews knew that, as a people, an ethnic group, they could not achieve anything by armed uprising. Their fighting power could not seriously harm the great and powerful Nazi enemy.”<sup>11</sup> The same was true for the Armenians. However, these acts of self defense left an indelible mark, not on the course of history—in that regard nothing was changed—but on the collective psyche of future generations.

Today, after decades of struggle to comprehend the catastrophe, we still look back and ask ourselves “Why?” Our pride offended, our dignity injured, our soul in revolt, we ask: Why were they killed so mercilessly? Why did these wretched victims follow their executioners like sheep to the slaughter? Why all these morbid scenes of rape, plunder, and murder? Why this “humiliation of human dignity that extends to the generations of survivors.” Albert Camus, rationalizing the initial French defeat during World War II, writes about “humiliation and silences.” I am using his well-wrought words to ask the same questions in both the Armenian and Jewish cases. Why these “humiliations and silences, with bitter experiences, with prison sentences, with executions at dawn, with desertions and separations, with daily pangs of hunger, with emaciated children, and above all, with humiliation of our human dignity?”<sup>12</sup> These questions are excruciating, and humanity has found no answers to them. In such a situation, there is nothing to remember with any relief or solace; there are only painful memories of destruction. But at least we have examples of heroic resistance of which to boast. This is the knowledge we carry in our souls as an antidote to that lingering sense of humiliation.

In the course of my research for this article, I naturally referred to the UCLA Research Library and when I typed “Jewish resistance to the Holocaust” into the computer for a listing of materials on this topic, there were 175 entries. Is this significant? I do not want to use the Armenian example. There can be no comparison. However, there is one aspect that I would like to point out: I have not come across one single line of criticism of the Jewish resistance, there is nothing but adulation for those brave, determined men. That is not the case for the Armenian resistance. It is easy to look back today and find shortcomings and mistakes. The constant Turkish accusations and labeling of the Armenian resistance as rebellion, treachery, and conspiracy against the Turkish government, as well as the Turkish criticism of the Armenian political parties and their activities as subversive and as

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<sup>11</sup> Yisrael Gutman, *Fighters Among the Ruins: The Story of Jewish Heroism During World War II* (Washington, D.C.: B’nai B’rith Books, 1988), p. 96.

<sup>12</sup> Albert Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, tr. Justin O’Brien (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), p. 8.



the cause of all calamities have, unfortunately, spread the seeds of doubt in some. It has made people stop and think: Were these political parties responsible for the Turkish atrocities because they urged people to take up arms and fight back against grinding oppression and periodic massacre? Resistance to persecution cannot be rightly labeled as conspiracy or revenge. Neither the Armenians nor the Jews harbored a spirit of revenge or spite when they took up arms in self-defense.

In the Jewish case, as Yisrael Gutman attests, up until the beginning of mass murder, the Jews did not resort to armed resistance. The turning point was the recognition of the fact that a "final solution" for the Jews was underway, that the murders were not sporadic or localized but followed a definite plan of "cleansing" the German-occupied territories of their Jewish population. The first place where a Jewish resistance was organized was in the Vilna ghetto.<sup>13</sup>

Abba Kovner, a noted poet and a leader of Vilna Jewry, explains the situation. With the murder of thousands underway, as the tidings of the destruction of millions and as a manifestation of a well-considered method, Kovner concludes that "[f]or the nation, for the millions of Jews under the Nazi yoke—there is no rescue! Is there a way out? There is a way out: *the way of armed resistance*."<sup>14</sup> The idea of armed resistance spread in other places as well. It was necessary to warn other Jewish communities that what they were facing was not a local pogrom but a general scheme threatening the whole of European Jewry. Warsaw was the most reluctant to heed the warning.<sup>15</sup> The Jews of the Warsaw ghetto took up armed resistance only when the great deportations began, and even then there was no consensus among the leaders to act. Besides, there was a strong sense of disbelief that in a country with such an advanced culture and civilization, such a thing could happen to the Jews and that the mass murders could ply their trade in Warsaw. This attitude on the part of the Warsaw leaders, besides its political considerations and analysis, was also a mechanization of human instinct during extreme moments of trauma, a natural drive that reveals itself when all other means fail.

This disbelief in the capability of the enemy to commit such atrocities was also a reality and a literary theme in the Armenian and the Jewish literature. One factual example of such incredulity regarding the government's evil intentions occurred in Musa Dagh, where a large section of the population, believing that the deportations were only a temporary measure, took to the road and perished during the death march. The rest, some 4,200 people, climbed the mountain and put up armed resistance against the besieging enemy for 40 days (53 days in reality) until they were miraculously rescued by a passing French warship. A literary representation of the theme of belief in the goodwill of the Young Turk government and the possibility of Armeno-Turkish coexistence also occurred in *Anmah bots'ë* (*The Undying*

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<sup>13</sup> For details about the life of the Jewish community in Vilna, the importance of Vilna among the East European Jewish settlements, and how the concept of resistance was adopted by the political party leaders, see Gutman, *Fighters Among the Ruins*, pp. 96-102.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>15</sup> For details about the life of the Jewish community in Warsaw, and the Warsaw ghetto, the deportation and resistance, see Gutman, *Fighters Among the Ruins*, pp. 102-140.



*Flame* [1915]). The author, Surēn Partevian (1876-1921), provides one more example of the juxtaposition of the two outlooks: the trust in the goodwill of the government and faith in the incapability of the Turks or their German allies to commit such inhuman acts on the one hand, and on the other, the resort to self-defense no matter how hopeless the situation. In Partevian's tale, the proponents of the second position interpret the deportations as "the most infallible system for collective death conceived in an evil copulation of German intricacy and Turkish barbarity."<sup>16</sup>

It should be noted here that acts of resistance are not always smooth and beautiful. History has recorded many instances of treachery and cowardice, sabotage within the resistance force, and attempts to rescue one's own neck at the price of others' lives, both in the Armenian and the Jewish cases. Aram Antonian's accounts of the Armenian concentration camp and Emmanuel Ringleblum's meticulous record of life and struggle in the Warsaw ghetto are studded with such incidents. In the poetry and fiction written years after the genocide, these incidents are forgotten; those who committed them have been forgiven. The victims are purified and appear in literature as innocents. This is characteristic of the artistic representation of atrocities. The internal villains are forgotten. The heroes are idolized.

Exaltation of armed resistance is the most frequent theme in prose and poetry. In the Armenian case, as was briefly mentioned, the idealization of self-defense begins with contrasting armed resistance with absolute obedience to fate and to the Christian tenet of God's preordination of man's disposition. The most remarkable treatment of this theme comes from Awetis Aharonian. The rebellious soul *Hayē* (*The Armenian* [1898]) defies destiny and fights to regain his freedom from his Kurdish captor who is armed to the teeth. This is a departure from the mind-set that responded to calamity with blind obedience to fate and God's will. It clearly calls for change. Aharonian's "Don't Pray Anymore" treats the same theme with more emphasis on the over-exaggerated and misinterpreted obedience to the Christian tenet of forgiveness: turn the other cheek, don't fight back. Arp'iar Arp'iarian (1852-1908), too, highlights this attitude in the image of a modern clergyman, the character of Tēr Husik, who challenges traditional conformism and the blunting of the nation's dignity and spirit of self-defense. In *Karmir zhamuts* (*Red Offering* [1902]), Tēr Husik advocates armed struggle instead and, with arms in hand, actually participates in the defense of Armenian villages. Similarly, Zapel Esayan (1878-1943), in her description of the 1909 massacres of Cilicia in *Averaknerun mej* (*Amid the Ruins* [1911]), enthusiastically portrays clergymen "who smelled more like gunpowder than incense, and from whose mouth flowed words of encouragement to fight back rather than prayers and calls for submission."<sup>17</sup>

Partevian's response to the 1894-96 massacres is epitomized in the eulogy of armed resistance. In various episodes in a collection of stories titled *Ariwni ma-*

<sup>16</sup> For an analysis of this piece and a discussion of incredulity as a response to trauma, see Perroomian, *Literary Responses to Catastrophe*, pp. 146-150.

<sup>17</sup> Zapēl Esayean, *Aweraknerun mēj* (*Amid the Ruins*) (Beirut: Tparan Ētvan, 1957), p. 148.



teaně (*The Book of Blood*), he views arms as “the tools of destruction for building freedom.” He takes the contrast between religious obedience and armed self-defense to the extreme. However, he does not deny the value of religious beliefs, but rather tries to transform them into pillars of the new religion: the religion of armed struggle. In the story “*Khorann u patnēshē*” (“The Altar and the Bulwark”), resistance fighters decide to tear down the altar of an old monastery and use the materials to build a bulwark against the enemy. Partevian’s treatment of the sacred relics parallels Abraham Sutzkever’s endeavor to reverse Jewish consciousness, that is, to build a symbol of Jewish resistance that takes its strength from the most venerable sources of Jewish tradition. Sutzkever’s poem, “The lead plates at the Rom Press” (September 12, 1943), portrays Jewish fighters breaking into that revered Jewish institution in the Vilna ghetto and melting the sacred letters down into bullets.<sup>18</sup> Both writers tend to connect the past with the present and draw new meanings from old values. Partevian goes even further to suggest that “the supernatural ideal of the past has to give way to the new faith.” The aged monk, the embodiment of tradition, horrified by the act of sacrilege, collapses and dies. His body, a symbol of the past, or as Partevian puts it, “the cadaver of religious submissiveness,” is abandoned in the church of old beliefs. The nation today, Partevian suggests, needs a new deity, a new covenant, and the disciples of this new prophecy are the freedom fighters, the followers of the “religion of rebellion.” Significantly, however, before the fight, the young priest blesses the freedom fighters and offers them communion. The mystic ceremony is cast in the mold of the blessing of Vardan Mamikonian’s army, the fifth-century martyrs. This recourse to religious spirituality softens Partevian’s stance against the ancient values and puts his work, once again, parallel to Sutzkever’s attempt to bring the past into the forefront of Jewish armed resistance by alluding to the struggle of the Maccabees and the destruction of the Temple.

Abba Kovner writes about a similar experience during the Vilna uprising. This famous poet and leader of resistance forces tells about using “the great volumes of the Talmud in their brown leather bindings,” which were taken from the Jewish library, in place of sandbags when the Germans surrounded the Vilna ghetto (September 1, 1943) in order to remove the last Jews and send them to the death camps. Kovner continues, “I propped up my rifle on the back of the books. Were the books a support for the rifle with its ten bullets? Or, at that hour, were they a support for something else?”<sup>19</sup>

Edward Alexander maintains that:

The event has remained with Kovner as a revelation of complex possibilities of renewal in the interactions between matter and spirit, life and literature. From one point of view, the Talmud was degraded here from a spiritual to

<sup>18</sup> See David Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Literature* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 250-252.

<sup>19</sup> See Edward Alexander, *The Resonance of Dust: Essays on Holocaust Literature and Jewish Fate* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1979), pp. 55-56.



a physical role; yet in the process it enabled a preservation of Jewish life through a transformation of the traditional Jewish passivity in the face of violent threat.<sup>20</sup>

Contrasting armed struggle with the passivity of sheep to the slaughter, a most common theme, Esayan lauds the survivors who viewed the catastrophe not as the Turkish slaughter of Armenians or as the days of "misery, murder and hardship," but rather as a battle, a battle "against the enemy."<sup>21</sup> These men had fought back instead of "meekly succumbing to the enemy's sword" or "acting prudently." Courage is inherited in the Armenian race, Esayan believes, and if Armenians have become docile, it is because of external factors beyond their control, which in the course of history have stained their noble origin. Passivity is sometimes interpreted as cowardice and failure to stand up against the enemy: "I was base and cowardly; this is why I am being punished," utters a man on the gallows. Another man exclaims, "Listen to me. I am telling you the truth. From now on the only possession of an Armenian should be a gun."<sup>22</sup> Esayan's response to the Cilician massacres resounds with her rebellious spirit and quest for justice; the only means to achieve that justice is through armed struggle. A similar response comes from Alexander Donat in his description of the liberation of the Jews of Dachau in *The Holocaust Kingdom*. The newly liberated Jews are unable to take up arms and punish their executioners. Donat writes:

We had the souls of slaves, of cowards; we were crippled by two thousand years of pogroms and ghettos; two thousand years of the Six Commandments had tamed and blunted in us that natural virile impulse of revenge. The sublime words, "Thou shalt not kill," which had been our shield against murder and persecution became the shield and protector of a nation of murderers and our alibi for our own cowardice and weakness.<sup>23</sup>

The praise of armed self-defense occurs especially in poetry and stands alone as a leitmotif. In response to the massacres of 1894-1896, Siamant'ō (1878-1915) wrote a series of poems which he later grouped and published in 1902 under the title *Diwts'aznrēn (Heroically)*. Significantly, the thread passing through all the poems is the fetishization of the power of arms. He brings all the past Armenian archetypes of heroic martyrs onto the battlefield; he builds a pantheon of mythic gods and heroes of the centuries-old Armenian national struggle for freedom. He transmutes them to the present and makes them speak to today's warriors, the dedicated, selfless Armenian youth who fall, rifle in hand, in an unjust and unequal battle against the tyrannical Turk:

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Esayean, *Aweraknerun mēj*, p. 204.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Cited in Alexander, *The Resonance of Dust*, p. 43.

Take the lightning sword bravely in your hand,  
 And with your sword, under the bright stars,  
 After taking the Oath of oaths,  
 Cross our swords,  
 And at least for once in your life, get out of yourself.  
 If you can, walk with us, Here is the way.<sup>24</sup>

The epigraph of Siamant'ō's second volume of poems, *Hayordiner* (*Sons of Armenians* [1902]), is a quote from Nietzsche, "The most beautiful life for a hero is to mature for death in struggle." This epigraph characterizes the author's intention to create that hero, the modern Armenian freedom fighter who knows that "Justice must be created and freedom fiercely seized."

Daniel Varuzhan (1884-1915), too, composed powerful poems in response to the massacres of 1894-1896. The long poem titled "*Jardē*" ("The Carnage") is the embodiment of the author's anger and frustration against Turkish atrocities, the conspiracy of the Great Powers, and the inability of Armenians to defend themselves. Toward the end of the poem, the narrator takes a prophetic stance and with a vision of a splendid tomorrow, he promises "the coming/ Of a Dawn, whose footsteps/ (Believe me, mothers)/ I hear."<sup>25</sup> The poetry of Siamant'ō and Varuzhan reads like a powerful hymn, intending to have a great impact, inspire determination and the courage to act, to fight, and to achieve the deliverance of the nation.

"Poetry was a primary means of public communication in the Nazi ghettos," as Roskies states, and many of these poets were supporters or participants in armed resistance.<sup>26</sup> Hirsh Glik's "Silence, and the Starry Night" commemorates a brave woman, a member of the United Partisans Organization, who ambushes a German cavalcade:

Aim, fire, shoot—and hit!  
 She, with her pistol small,  
 Halts an autiful,  
 Arms and all!

Morning, emerging from the wood,  
 In her hair a snow carnation.  
 Proud of her small victory  
 For the new, free generation!<sup>27</sup>

"Never Say" (Vilna, 1943), another poem from Glik, was sung as the unofficial hymn of the Jewish partisans in the Vilna ghetto. Its final stanza is as follows:

<sup>24</sup> Siamant'ō, *Amboghjakan Erker* (*Complete Works*) (Beirut: Sevan Press, 1974), p. 15.

<sup>25</sup> Daniël Varuzhan, *Banasteghtsakan Erker* (*Poetic Works*) (Antelias: Tp. Kilikioy Kat'oghi-kosut'ean, 1986), pp. 141-149.

<sup>26</sup> Roskies, *Literature of Destruction*, p. 465.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 484-485.



This song was written with our blood and not with lead,  
 This is no song of free birds flying overhead,  
 But a people amid crumbling walls did stand,  
 They stood and sang this song with rifles held in hand.<sup>28</sup>

Popular songs eulogizing courageous acts of self-defense or dedicated to a popular hero, a freedom fighter, are an important component of the legacy of Armenian armed resistance against Turkish atrocities. These songs, which embody the dreams and ideals of the Armenian nation as well as their response to repression, constitute a separate sub-genre worth examining. In parallel to Glik's ghetto hymn cited above, I will quote an excerpt from a song that was dedicated to the first armed uprising against the Turkish government, which occurred in June 1890 in Erzerum:

A sound echoed in the Armenian mountains of Erzerum,  
 The hearts were roused by the clanking of the arms.

The Armenian peasant for centuries has seen neither sword nor gun,  
 He left the fields, the spade, and took up sword and rifle instead.

.....  
 Education and the light of freedom are your friends now,  
 Sword and rifle and zeal in battle your fearless defenders.  
 .....

There is a plethora of literature describing the victimization of the Armenians and the Jews, delving into the depths of the physical and psychological trauma the two peoples were subjected to, revering their sufferings and solemnifying their memory. The memory of those who resisted is no less worthy of celebration and respect.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 485-486.