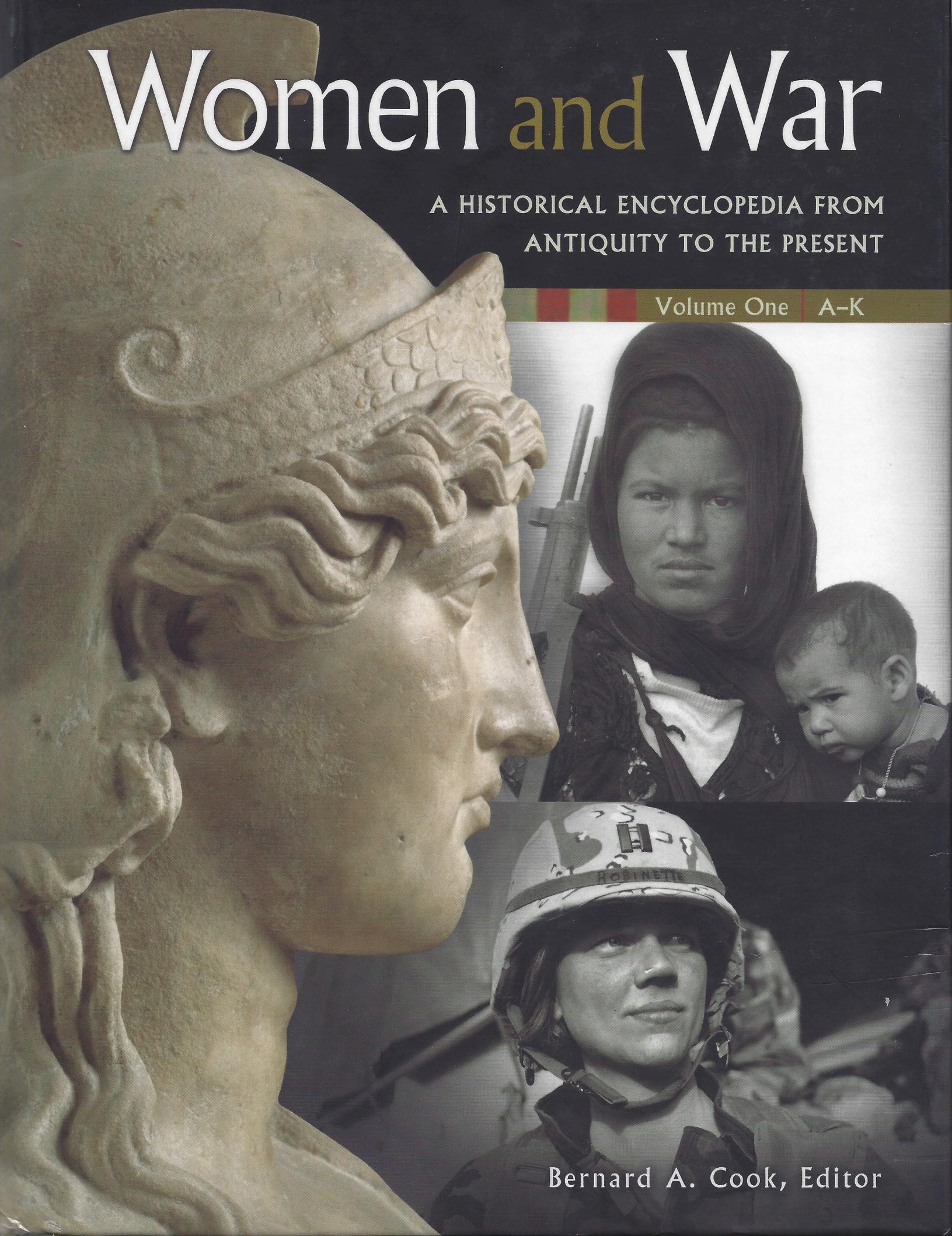


Women and War

A HISTORICAL ENCYCLOPEDIA FROM
ANTIQUITY TO THE PRESENT

Volume One | A-K



Bernard A. Cook, Editor

ARMENIAN WOMEN VICTIMS OF GENOCIDE

Female victims of the mass killing of Armenians by the Ottoman government (1915–1923) and their behavior in the killing fields. Armenian male leaders were arrested and killed; younger and able-bodied men were mostly rounded up and segregated in labor camps or murdered outright. As a result of this strategic approach, women, children, and the elderly were left unprotected and were easy targets. The women had to face tragic choices in their decision to live or die. Their ordeal in many cases was shaped by their gender because they endured sexual attacks, abduction, and dreadfully traumatic childbirth along deportation routes. The lot of women who were “rescued” (most of the time not with an altruistic motivation but for egotistic reasons) or abducted and forcibly converted to Islam was no better. Their experience as concubines in Moslem households was additionally burdened by their life-long compunction for the compromise they had made. Unfortunately, their life stories are not recorded, and their image as victims of genocide remains obscure.

Mayr Hayastan (Mother Armenia)—the homeland ravaged and ruined under the yoke of foreign rulers—and female martyrs of Christianity became revered archetypes in the collective memory of the Armenian people, influencing the image of female victims of national catastrophes throughout time. Another view stemmed from the secularist nineteenth-century emancipation movement. National liberation was the goal and armed struggle the means to achieve it. Patriotism, aspiration for freedom, and acts of self-defense and retaliation were encouraged. In this context, the response of the Armenian woman to the victimization of son or husband deviated from the traditional response. She did not console herself with the vision of her beloved rising to heaven and embracing immortality as a reward for his sacrifice. Her words of sorrow projected a rebellious spirit against the Turk and also against God, who allowed the atrocity to

happen. She did not expect God to avenge her son’s murder, but she entrusted it to the “valiant men of Armenia” (Damadian 1917, 277–278). She was encouraged by her dying son not to weep but to be proud because his deed is a sacrifice to the altar of freedom. Even lullabies were fashioned to encourage heroism for the sake of Armenia (Patkanian 1917, 75–76).

The massacres of Ottoman Armenians from 1894 through 1896 (a precursor to the 1915 genocide) were such a catastrophe that traditional concepts shaping outlooks and responses to trauma were put to the test. An unnamed old woman, the lyrical hero of Daniel Varuzhan’s *Hayhoyank* (Curse), stands above the crowd of wretched survivors of a mass slaughter and, raising her clenched fists toward the sky, curses God for what befell the Armenian nation. She questions God’s judgment, protesting His indifference toward the persecution of a people who faithfully worshipped Him and sacrificed their lives for Him. Varuzhan’s *Jarde* (The Carnage) remains closer to ancient archetypes. Mother Armenia weeps not over the ruined land, but because her friends, meaning the European powers, abandoned her. She does not lament the loss of her sons but their servitude. Siamanto’s *Pare* (The Dance) is the poet’s artistic rendering of a German missionary’s testimony. She had helplessly watched the Turks round up young women and force them to dance naked. Then they had poured kerosene on them and set them on fire.

The horrors of genocide permeate the entire literary legacy of Suren Partevian, who depicts the traumatic experience of the Armenian women victims of the massacres of 1894–1896 and praises their “unbelievable interfusing of patience, endurance, docility, and superhuman tolerance for pain and suffering” (Partevian, 1911). In many ways, however, their behavior displays the collapse of moral order, the irreversible impact of the catastrophe on the human psyche. If they miraculously survive, they will come out of their forced predicament demoralized and tainted, incapable of building a new, healthy, and normal life.

In Partevian's narratives of the massacres and deportations of 1915, women are more sophisticated and heroic. Siranush is an educated woman. She can realistically judge the Turkish-Armenian relationship and see the imminent catastrophe. She is entrapped in the cunning intrigues of her Turkish admirer who arranges the arrest of her husband to abduct her. She surrenders herself to him to save the life of her young son. Soon after she arranges her son's escape, however, she commits suicide to put an end to her defiled existence. Partevian's *Anmah botse* (The Undying Flame, 1917) and *Dzaine hnchets* (The Sound Echoed, 1916) were published jointly in a single volume in 1917. Princess Sonia Asaturof, a Russified Armenian woman, lives a lavish life in Tbilisi but is suddenly sensitized to the Armenian plight and joins the Armenian volunteers fighting the Turks. Zaruhı also joins the volunteers and fights the Turks disguised as a man. These heroines symbolize Partevian's perception of women's role in the Armenian armed struggle. Resistance does not necessarily connote taking arms and fighting the assailant. It is also the strong determination to survive against all odds to tell the world about Turkish inhumanity and unparalleled atrocities.

Zapel Esayan records the Armenian massacres in Cilicia in 1909. At times, she portrays female victims as embodiments of cowardice and self-centered drives, ready to sacrifice anything for the sake of mere survival. At other times, they appear as symbols of courage and endurance. "We survived, but we will soon die. That is all right. But will our sufferings serve a purpose? Is there hope of deliverance for our nation?" She suffers, but only her doleful eyes and occasional shivering betray the consuming pain in her mutilated body (Esayan 1957, 57). The traditional catharsis is rejected. The only solace is the hope for a better future for Armenians. Another woman, whose son was killed defending the city, tearfully vows, "If the Turks attack us again, our sons will be on the ramparts to fight and die on the ramparts" (Esayan 1957, 20).

Henry Morgenthau, the U.S. ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, records horrifying scenes

of pillage, rape, and murder and the brutalities of the gendarmes accompanying the caravans of the deportees. "They even prodded pregnant women with bayonets; if one, as frequently happened, gave birth along the road, she was immediately forced to get up and rejoin the marchers. . . . Kurds would sweep down from their mountain homes. Rushing up to the young girls, they would lift their veils and carry the pretty ones off to the hills. . . . Turkish roughs would fall upon the women, leaving them sometimes dead from their experiences or sometimes ravingly insane." Women often committed suicide to save their honor by jumping into the river, their children in their arms. Morgenthau writes, "There were women who held up their babies to strangers, begging them to save them from their tormentors, and failing this, they would throw them into wells or leave them behind bushes, that at least they might die undisturbed. Behind was left a small army of girls, who had been sold as slaves—frequently for a medjidie, or about eighty cents—and who, after serving the brutal purposes of their purchasers, were forced to live lives of prostitution" (Morgenthau 1919, 315–317).

The brutality led to the collapse of religious, cultural, and traditional values. Aram Antonian reports instances of cannibalism in the desert of Der-El-Zor. After months of dehumanizing, incapacitating suffering, the wretched deportees come face-to-face with a choice between death and survival. They must either starve to death or eat the corpses of their own children who had died of starvation. A famine-stricken girl is lying in the desert sand with her helpless mother at her side. The girl smells meat cooking nearby. "Mother, go ask some for me. I cannot go on anymore." The mother returns empty-handed. "They didn't give you a piece?" the girl asks. "When I die, mother, you eat my flesh alone; share it with no one" (Antonian 1977, 116–117).

Lusik's last son's body is pulled out of the raging waters of Euphrates. The scene of her gradual loss of sense and reason surpasses any description of motherly love. She showers the body

with warm kisses; then, in a violent fit of madness, she sinks her teeth deep into her son's neck and the dark blood gushes out, painting the woman's face with the deadly color. Then she collapses unconscious, her teeth still clenched on the boy's neck, the blood oozing from the wound drop by drop, running into the desert sand, and tracing sinister configurations as though to record this horrifying scene (Antonian 1921, 66).

Life was a prolonged agony in the Armenian concentration camp in Meskeneh, and Antonian, an inmate of that same camp, tried to record this agony as close to the incommunicable reality as he could. An old woman fought with another deportee. They grappled with each other in the mud, shouted, and cursed. The man grabbed the old woman's hair and knocked her down, rubbing her face in the mud. The skirmish continued for a while; then the man stood up victorious. But why had she started the ridiculous fight? The man was able to bribe the undertakers to remove the body of his daughter from his tent. The old woman had no money, and the undertakers refused to take her grandson's body away. "Leave your dead outside, like others do," they told her. She begged them to carry the corpse away to make room for her last grandchild burning with fever. He, too, the last survivor of the family, had come down with typhus. The old woman, left with a rotting corpse and a dying child, in a nearly maddened state, attacked the man, another victim of that same tragedy. Femininity, moral standards, human dignity, and normal patterns of behavior had long lost their meaning (Antonian 1921, 134).

These women are the collective embodiment of all victims in modern times, subjected to the most unthinkable human suffering. They were not always the typical heroines who transcended torture and pain. At times, in their prolonged agony, they suffered physical and moral exhaustion and gave in. At other times, they fell, like unknown soldiers, holding up the dignity of their gender and the pride of their nation.

—Rubina Peroomian

See also Armenian Holocaust; Smyrna Tragedy, Continuing Ordeal for Women Survivors of

References and Further Reading

Antonian, Aram. [1921] 1977. *Mets vochire* [The great crime]; 2nd ed. Reprint, Beirut: Ghukas Karapetian.

Dadrian, Vahagn N. 1995. *The History of the Armenian Genocide*. Providence, RI, and Oxford: Berghahn.

Damadian, Mihran. [1917] 1978. "The Lament of Martyred Smbat's Mother." In *Armenian Poems*, translated by Alice Stone Blackwell. Reprint, Delmar, NY: Caravan.

Esayan, Zapel. 1957. *Averaknerun mej* [Amid the ruins]. Beirut: Etvan.

Hovannisian, Richard G., ed. 2003. *Looking Backward, Moving Forward: Confronting the Armenian Genocide*. New Brunswick, NJ/London: Transaction.

Morgenthau, Henry. [1919] 1975. *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story*. Reprint, Plandome, NY: New Age.

Partevian, Suren. 1911. *Hayuhin* [The Armenian woman]. Constantinople: P. Palents.

—. 1917. *Anmah botse* [The undying flame]/*Dzaine hnchets* [The sound echoed]. Alexandria, Egypt: Aram Stepanian.

Patkalian, Rapael. [1917] 1978. "Lullaby." In *Armenian Poems*, edited by Alice Stone Blackwell. Reprint, Delmar, NY: Caravan.

Peroomian, Rubina. 1993. *Literary Responses to Catastrophe: A Comparison of the Armenian and The Jewish Experience*. Atlanta, GA: Scholars.