

Vartan Matiossian, *The Politics of Naming the Armenian Genocide: Language, History and “Medz Yeghern”*, London & New York, I.B. Tauris 2022, 279 p., \$26,95 (paperback)

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Vartan Matiossian's *The Politics of Naming the Armenian Genocide* fills a gap, as this is the only academic book aiming to study the way the massacres of the Ottoman Armenians in 1915-16 have been named in the public sphere. The first volume in a series edited by historian Bedross Der Matossian titled “Armenians in the Modern and Early Modern World”, it meticulously presents the different words and expressions used since the events to name the unnamable and the context in which they have been used. It discusses, in particular, the expression “Medz Yeghern,” used in Armenian to refer to the events of 1915-16, and whose initial meaning is (or can be, since other translations are possible) “Great Crime.” Matiossian shows how the term became dominant in Armenian and has also been used in other languages (English in particular) but without totally eclipsing other words or expressions (in Armenian in particular). The book, whose author has a strong interest in languages, Armenian literature, and philology, is erudite, mobilizing an impressive quantity of sources (from the media, literary works, dictionaries, religious texts, and official documents), predominantly in Armenian and English but also Spanish, Italian, and German. It is divided into two parts and seven chapters, in addition to an introduction whose main goal is to discuss the historical context, a short conclusion, two long and detailed appendixes, and numerous tables. The first part focuses mostly on the use of the word “yeghern” in Armenian and the different words and expressions to name the genocide of 1915 in this language and is organized chronologically. The second addresses the same issues but internationally and thematically, with a focus on the Vatican, Turkey, and the United States.

The study starts with a historical epistemology of the Armenian word “yeghern,” a term and concept central to the book. The author shows that until the late nineteenth century, in literature and dictionaries, “yeghern” mostly stood for or was closely associated with the word “evil,” and later, at

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the turn of the twentieth century, with the word “crime” or the expression “heinous crime.” This semantic evolution was “the product of a comparison between the original concept of moral transgression and the related one of legal transgression” (p. 27). Then, during and after the genocide, “yeghern” started to be used, primarily in the Armenian press, to refer to the massacres of 1915-16, probably reflecting the shock and the massive trouble that the catastrophe generated. Many other words were used too, such as “chart” (“massacre”), “godoradz” (“mass killing”), “vojir” (“crime”), or “yeghernakordzutium” (mostly in the sense of “criminal act” or “criminal action”), sometimes qualified by one or several adjectives. “Tseghasbanutium” (“race murder”) and “hayasbanutium” (“Armenocide”) also started to be used, as well as the expression “Medz Yeghern” (“Great Crime”), which progressively became dominant in Armenian to refer to the events of 1915. However, as explained by the author, the word “yeghern” was still very much used to refer to other events, such as the 1933 assassination of Archbishop Ghevont Tourian, primate of the Diocese of the Armenian Church, in New York, by members of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF, or Dashnaktsoutium), which was in opposition with the then Soviet-based Church of Armenia. However, although “yeghern” was used not referring to the genocide here, it “intended to make a tacit link with 1915” (p. 53).

After law scholar Raphael Lemkin coined the term genocide during the Second World War, it was soon paired with the word “tseghasbanutium” in Armenian (p. 58). Starting in the mid-twentieth century, the English-language Armenian press started to use the word “genocide” to refer to the events of 1915, but not in a systematic way. Expressions such as “Turkish genocide” (of the Armenian people) (p. 61) and “Armenian Holocaust” (p. 75) also appeared. Likewise, in the Armenian press, both in the Soviet Republic of Armenia and diasporic communities, the words used were still diverse.

This trend remained the same on the verge of and during the massive commemorations of the fiftieth anniversary of the genocide in 1965 in the diaspora and Soviet Armenia, which symbolized a cultural and political revival of the Armenian cause. The Armenians used “Medz Yeghern” and “genocide” in English in their publications relating to the preparation of the events and the events themselves, but not systematically, and many other terms were also used. Although the author does not expand on this point, it seems clear that the word genocide was not prominently used at that time when referring to 1915, even among Armenians, not because it was contested but because it was obvious that what happened was genocide, and that there was apparently no particular interest in systematizing its use.

It started to change in the 1970s. In both Armenian and other languages, the trend to use a multitude of expressions to refer to the 1915 genocide stopped. In Armenian, the terms “Medz Yeghern” and “tseghasbanutiun” (or “hayots tseghasbanutiun” or “haygagan tseghasbanutiun,” for “Genocide of the Armenians” and “Armenian Genocide”) gained dominance (most of the time in an interchangeable way). In contrast, in other languages, the expression “Armenian Genocide” became prevailing in the media in particular—except when emanating from people or publications that refused that the concept of genocide be applied to the Armenian case. The fact that the expression “Armenian Genocide” had difficulties fully imposing itself because of Turkey’s opposition is probably one of the reasons why, in the first years of the twenty-first century, “Medz Yeghern” started to be used beyond the Armenian language, in English in particular. It all started with Pope John Paul II’s use of it. For a long time, the Vatican refrained from using the term “genocide” to refer to the events of 1915. It changed after a visit to the Vatican of Karekin II, Catholicos of all Armenians, and a joint declaration that he and Pope John Paul II signed, explicitly mentioning the “Armenian genocide” (p. 90). Yet, afterward, the Pope opted instead for “Medz Yeghern” (which had also been used in a 1995 publication in Italian). The reactions in the Armenian press and among Armenian observers were mixed. Some appreciated the use, by the Pontificate, of a term in Armenian that equated to “genocide.” Others soon started to insist on the fact that “Medz Yeghern” did not mean “genocide” and, therefore, did not equate “genocide” politically and juridically speaking (p. 93). Meanwhile, in Turkey, where Armenian Genocide denial was a *doctrine d’État*, the popularization of the term “Medz Yeghern” was systematically criticized and rejected by political authorities. For example, “[f]ormer ambassador and deputy chairman of the CHP Önur Başaran Oymen criticized George W. Bush’s use of ‘Great Calamity’ in April 2005, claiming that it corresponded to ‘the word used by the Armenians with the meaning of genocide’” (p. 97). However, other circles in Turkey, intellectual and academic, considered it differently and viewed this term as an opportunity to take a step forward without using the “G Word.” But this was rejected by the Turkish authorities, which continued their national and international efforts to eliminate references to the 1915-16 events as genocide. These Turkish efforts proved particularly successful in the United States, where, for decades, the executive branch refused to refer to the “Armenian Genocide” until the formal recognition of this genocide by President Joseph Biden in 2021. President Ronald Reagan was the only president who used the term prior to 2021, but he did it only once in a 1981 proclamation and then refused to do it again and opposed any recognition of the genocide

by Congress. All other presidents, from Richard Nixon to Donald Trump, despite, most often, their presidential campaign promise to do otherwise, did not use the “G Word” once elected. Since Bill Clinton (p. 110), presidents got into the habit of publishing statements on April 24 to commemorate the Armenian Genocide, but statements in which they systematically avoided the word “genocide” (until President Biden’s statement of April 2021). They used a variety of empathic vocabulary and formulations to commiserate with the Armenian plight, such as “massacres,” “terrible massacres,” “crime against humanity,” “deportation,” “forced exile and annihilation,” “mass killings and forced exile,” “great calamity,” and, finally “Medz Yeghern” (with no further explanations or translations) that President Obama decided to use during his two mandates. He repeated this expression thirteen times during his time at the White House (p. 115). Yet he, like his predecessors, did not use the word genocide as expected by the Armenians and all those who had asked and fought for a better memorialization of the Armenian Genocide and combated Turkish denialism. Indeed, by using “Medz Yeghern,” President Obama contributed to popularizing this term, which, as “Shoah” for the Jews or “Holodomor” for the Ukrainians, equates to genocide. However, “Medz Yeghern” lost much of its weight when pronounced by President Obama, as he refrained from characterizing the events of 1915 as genocide (and he and his administration even blocked genocide recognition in Congress).

Vartan Matiossian’s useful book shows how difficult it has been, and still is, to name the events of 1915. It does not expand much on why it has been so difficult, and the role of Turkey and its supporters in these processes is not really discussed. Besides, and this is a regret that one may have after reading this book, it sometimes lacks causal analysis. But explaining each and every reason why these many different expressions were used (and sometimes stopped being used) was probably not the goal of this solid study, whose *raison d’être* is to give a detailed overview of how the Armenians and others have succeeded (or not) in naming the genocide of 1915.