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Letters from the Soviet 'Paradise': The Image of Russia among the Western Armenian Diaspora[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The paper deals with the complicated relationships between the Western Armenian Diaspora and Russians. These relations are mediated by the ambiguous attitude of Diaspora to the Eastern Armenians. The study examines two social contexts, the Soviet and Post-Soviet eras. To elaborate the topic the author draws from letters, jokes, and anecdotes taken from different kinds of international interlocutors, ranging from scholars to ordinary people.

I argue that the image of Russia is constructed of intertwined discourses of negative and positive meanings. Positive discourses are based around the Russian-(Eastern) Armenians' cultural connections and Russian involvement to the political movement for recognition of the 1915–1923 Armenian Genocide, while negative ones are extracted from (1) the bitter experience of Armenian repatriates to Soviet Armenia (totalitarianism, political reprisals, and harsh social censorship), (2) the low standard of living in the USSR as well as (3) the idiosyncrasies of Russian/Eastern Armenian everyday life in post-Soviet times. So the stereotyped image of Russia is formed at least by three aspects of social life such as political, cultural, and routine. These types of exoticization/stereotyping engender some social distance between the Western Armenian Diaspora and Russians as well as between the Western Armenian Diaspora and post-Soviet Armenians. I conclude that nevertheless a litmus test for the Western Armenian Diaspora attitude to USSR/Russia is the latter's official position regarding the 1915–1923 Armenian Genocide in the Ottoman Empire.

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[☆] This paper is translated from the Russian text, which was initially printed in *The Independent Journal of Diasporas* Ed. Kosmarskaya N. (Vol. 4, Moscow, 2009) under the title: "But what do we want with elephant meat...?: The Image of Russia among the Western Armenian Diaspora" («Да только к чему нам слонятина...? Образы русскоГо, советскоГо и российскоГо у армян диаспоры»).

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1. Introduction

The idea of this study started up in 2001, during my eight-month fieldwork in Nagorno-Karabakh, *de facto* Armenian state that was resulted the Azerbaijani-Armenian ethnic conflict. That was unique situation generated by Iron Curtain fall in the social context of Gorbachev's *perestroika* and *glasnost*. The society in Karabakh became multi-segmental during the Karabakh movement and war (1988–1994), when the area swiftly attracted the most heterogeneous groups including, let us call them natives, with their settled norms and ideas about the nation, honour, masculinity and femininity; Soviet army officers and

soldiers (including those of Armenian background) loyal to the Soviet as well as the Armenian state; volunteers from Armenia with distinctly nationalistic views; representatives of the foreign Armenian Diaspora from the USA and European countries and from Middle Eastern countries like Lebanon and Iran. Such a mixture of cultural backgrounds amidst the military confrontation created a context for various alliances and combinations of values and views. Karabakh swiftly became the axes of concentration of the most heterogeneous groups of Armenian patriots.¹ In Karabakh, the interests of all these groups, filled with suspicion and mistrust towards one another (along with a cordial joy and infinite gravity to each other), collided. Misunderstanding and certain emotional aversion could be found on the daily level, on the level of gender relations, as well as on the level of concepts and world views. Among the turbulent judgements of this nature the study's main questions arose. What are the scars and consequences of Cold War in the people's mind? How that long-term global socialism–capitalism resistance forms the image of the USSR assign, Russia?

This study has fairly modest aim:² to provide an empirically grounded views of image constructions as they are imagined by different layers of Western Armenian Diaspora representatives. The data for this study were collected during my observations and field research in the UK (London, 2003), the USA (California, Massachusetts, 2006–2007), Canada (Ontario, 2007, 2008), Switzerland (Zurich, 2008), Germany (Frankfurt-on-Main, Kaiserslautern, 2008), the Netherlands (Wassenaar, Amsterdam, 2008), Belgium (Brussels, St. Niklaas, 2008, 2010) and Turkey (Istanbul, 2009, 2010). The paper is based on numerous original interviews, conversations, talks and observations, conducted more pointedly mostly in California County, the USA (involving more than 48 research participants/interlocutors). The total numbers of talks and interviews conducted for this project was about 200, out of which at least seven interviews were with the principal research participants, marked with the longitudinal interaction.

In historical perspective the image of Armenians in the Russian empire was tersely described by Ronald Suny as that of Christians, as commercial, and as conspiratorial.³ In the eyes of their imperious and imperial masters, Armenians (and Georgians) were distinguished among the

otherwise monogenous Caucasian 'native' masses only by their religious affiliation.⁴

The image of Russia and Russians among Armenians is a vexed one, as is the sheer number and variety of sub-cultural and local groupings that make up the Armenian experience. This includes such criteria as class, gender and age, across various historical periods (the Imperial, Soviet and post-Soviet ages), geographical locations (Armenians in the Middle East, America, Western and Eastern Europe) and political attitudes encompassing the three main political parties (ranging from Dashnaks, or the National Socialists, through to Hnchaks, or the Social Democrats, to Ramkavars, or the Liberals), as well as those who proclaim no political allegiance. Also part of this experience are those who confess their faith and those who are atheist, and the wide divergence of social status, including academics, school teachers, lawyers, public service volunteers, service industry workers, and so on.⁵ For the purposes of this paper we will focus on the Armenian diaspora in Europe, the USA and Canada, endeavouring to convey how they see the USSR and Russia, based on the personal testimony of those interviewed. As I am of Armenian descent myself, I was accepted as one of their own and not as a Russian, although those interviewed accepted fully the obligations and advantages of foreign citizenship. The majority of interviews were carried out in an informal environment.

Armenians in the Western diaspora have both positive and negative views of Russia and the Russians. It is perhaps relevant to note here that the majority of my interviewees were residents of the state of California (Los Angeles, Glendale, Pasadena, Ensinio). These were Armenians who were able to form easy relationships not only with Armenians of the large-scale post-Soviet emigration from Armenia (regarded as embodying Soviet Russian values), but also Russians.⁶ It should be added that the reception of these emigres often is coloured by their unedifying attempts to secure material support and their capacity for wheeler-dealing, on both a minor and a large scale.⁷ In other words, it would be more accurate to say that we are dealing here with various projections of Homo Sovieticus. Thus, in the majority of cases diasporal Armenians who avoid holidaying in Russia because of the language barrier and/or the rumoured poor level of service construct an image of Russia not based on their own experience but on

¹ The similar processes, described by Ronald Suny, took place in the refugee camps after the 1915 Armenian Genocide (see: Suny, R. (1993) *Looking towards Ararat: Armenians in Modern History*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana U.P. pp. 217–221).

² The numerous international field researches were possible thanks to the financial support of Mary Murphy (researcher, Amnesty International), Fulbright Program (FBSSret 06-14. 2006–2007) and The Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies (NIAS) (visiting scholar grant, 2008). Let me also gratefully acknowledge the advice and help received from outstanding scholars from Yerevan, Armenia – Armenuhi Stepanian (Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography), Armen Grigoryan (Analytical Center on Globalisation and Regional Cooperation, Yerevan) and Hrach Bayadyan (a professor at the Yerevan State University, Department of Journalism and Cultural Studies, Armenia).

³ R. Suny, *Images of the Armenians in the Russian Empire: Looking towards Ararat: Armenians in Modern History*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana U.P., 1993, p. 31.

⁴ There are interesting parallels here with the collective European categorization of the many and disparate New World social groups as simply 'Indians'.

⁵ It is interesting that responses from those in the legal sphere were very critical of the crime-ridden image of Russia, accepting that stereotype while those from academia were less judgemental and more analytical.

⁶ It is also interesting to note that Jews from Russia were also called 'Russians', not, apparently, on ethnic grounds but more as representatives of a very particular way of life and thought.

⁷ Those residing in the country illegally, and the incredibly disingenuous lengths to which they will go to acquire American citizenship and integration into an American way of life fundamentally at odds with the socialist patterns of behaviour to which they are accustomed, are the subject of a different ethnographic study.

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