

STRUGGLING AGAINST ALL ODDS: THE SCHOLAR WHO PUT THE BASIS OF INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES OF THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE IN MEMORIAM RICHARD G. HOVANNISIAN (1932-2023)

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On July 10, 2023, the fields of Armenian Studies, Armenian Genocide Studies, and the Armenian nation, both in the homeland and the Diaspora, lost one of its most prominent icons of the modern period: Prof. Richard G. Hovannisian (b. 1932). Hovannisian was a monumental figure in the field of Armenian Studies and Armenian Genocides Studies. Considered as the Dean of Modern Armenian History, he established the field of Modern Armenian History in the Western Hemisphere. He also supported the establishment of some of the most important chairs and programs of Armenian Studies in the United States.

Hovannisian was the child of Genocide survivors. His father, Kaspar Gavroian, was born in the village of Bazmashen near Kharpert in 1901. Unlike others, he survived the Genocide and arrived in the United States. He changed his last name from Gavroian to Hovannisian after his father Hovannes. In 1928 Kaspar married Siroon Nalbandian, the child of another Genocide survivor. They had four sons: John, Ralph, Richard, and Vernon. Richard was born in Tulare, California, on November 9, 1932. Being the son of Genocide survivors played an important role in his academic path. In 1957, he married Dr. Vartiter Kotcholosian in Fresno and had four children: Raffi, Armen, Ani, and Garo. Raffi would become the first Minister of Foreign Affairs (1991-1992) of the Modern Republic of Armenia.

Hovannisian began his academic life in 1954 by earning a B.A. in History, followed by an M.A. in History from the University of California, Berkley. In 1966, he earned his Ph.D. from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). His dissertation was published in 1967 with the title *Armenia on the Road to Independence*, which was the precursor to the four-volume magnum opus, *The Republic of Armenia*. Hovannisian played an important role in establishing the teaching of Armenian history at UCLA. In 1987, he became the first holder of the Armenian Education Foundation Chair in Modern Armenian History at UCLA, which after his retirement was named in his honor as the Richard Hovannisian Endowed Chair in Modern Armenian History, with Prof. Sebouh Aslanian a prominent scholar in the field as its first incumbent.

Hovannisian was a Guggenheim Fellow and received numerous prestigious national and international awards for his service to the field and civic activities. He served on the Board of Directors of multiple national and international educational institutions and was a member of the Armenian National Academy of Sciences. After finishing his four-volume *The Republic of Armenia*, he dedicated his research and career to battling the denial of Armenian Genocide, resurrecting the history of Armenian towns and villages of the Armenian Provinces of the Ottoman Empire, and writing textbooks on modern Armenian history. Although not a scholar of Armenian Genocide, he has contributed more to the discipline than many others in the field. He edited multiple volumes on different facets of the Armenian Genocide, including historical, literary, and artistic perspectives. What drove Hovannisian to dedicate his time and effort to exploring the field of Armenian Genocide? In one of his essays, he provides the answer:

It was the Turkish government's campaign of denial that pushed me into the arena of Armenian Genocide studies through what may be called the back door. I had not chosen this depressing subject. It was the reprehensible action of a government to wipe clean the slate of history, just as its predecessor had wiped clean an entire people, that aroused in me a sense of moral indignation and a commitment to engage in the struggle of memory against forgetting despite the highly unfavorable odds.¹

Thus, Hovannisian concentrated on exploring different facets of the Armenian Genocide. He and his peers were acting in a different time where denial of the Armenian Genocide was considered as the norm. Along with his colleagues, he resisted the stifling of Armenian voices within the fields of Middle Eastern and Ottoman Studies, which had relegated Armenian Studies to second-class status. He fought for the relevance of Armenian Studies within these fields and tirelessly fought against the efforts to marginalize Armenian issues and the denial of the Armenian Genocide. Hovannisian was not only fighting the denialist propaganda propagated by prominent figures in the field of Ottoman and Middle Eastern studies but also that of the Turkish state that poured millions of dollars into Western academia to obfuscate the historical veracity of the Armenian Genocide.

Hovannisian is considered as the pioneer scholar who put the basis of interdisciplinary approaches to the field of Armenian Genocide Studies. In the course of a half century, he was able to bring together more than 50 scholars to contribute to his edited volumes on the Armenian Genocide. These volumes demonstrated the multifaceted and interdisciplinary approaches to the Armenian Genocide that included but not limited to philosophy, literature, art, music, history, historiography, denial, education, politics, and law.

Hovannisian's first book on the Armenian Genocide, *The Armenian Holocaust: A Bibliography Relating to the Deportations, Massacres, and Dispersion of the Armenian People, 1915-1923* was published in 1980. It included a bibliography of books in Western languages relating to the Armenian Genocide: memoirs; eyewitness accounts, especially by non-Armenians; general studies; and archival materials. While literature on the

¹ Richard G. Hovannisian, "Confronting the Armenian Genocide," in *Pioneers of Genocide Studies*, edited by Samuel Totten and Steven Jacobs (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2002), 33.

Armenian Genocide was mostly published in Armenian and inaccessible to the Western academic audience, Hovannisian took upon himself the task of furnishing the history of the Armenian Genocide in English by adhering to the highest academic standards.

His first edited volume *The Armenian Genocide in Perspective* (1986) was the result of the 1982 International Conference on Genocide in Tel Aviv, where out of 200 papers only 10 were dedicated to the Armenian Genocide. Despite the extensive pressure and lobbying by the Turkish government, the conference still took place without official sponsorship and the absence of half of the participants.² To Hovannisian this was a “learning experience about the lengths to which perpetrator regimes and their successors are willing to go in order to avoid facing up to their deeds and their history.”³

Hovannisian’s second edited volume *The Armenian Genocide: History, Politics, Ethics* was published in 1992. The volume examined the investigation and interpretation of the Armenian Genocide from a multidisciplinary perspective by concentrating on comparative approaches to genocide, political analysis, archival research, and literary responses among others. With the development of the field of Armenian Genocide studies in the 90s, denialism of the Armenian Genocide also became more sophisticated. Hovannisian was relentless in fighting denialism in all its forms. His third edited volume *Remembrance and Denial: The Case of the Armenian Genocide* (1998) dealt specifically with the denial of the Armenian and its remembrance. Through bringing together fourteen leading scholars, Hovannisian aimed at demonstrating the denialists techniques, German complicity, victims and perpetrators responses among others. Hovannisian fourth volume *The Armenian Genocide: Cultural and Ethical Legacies* is considered as the lengthiest and the broadest edited volume to have ever been published on the Armenian Genocide in English. By bringing together 23 scholars, Hovannisian was able to provide a unique fusion of the literary, philosophical, historical, musical, art, and educational aspects of the Armenian experience. Furthermore, the volume highlighted the comparative dimensions of the Armenian Genocide in relation to the Holocaust as well as the Assyrian and Greek genocides.

Besides writing and publishing extensively on the Armenian Genocide, Hovannisian also spearheaded a monumental project to preserve the eyewitness accounts of the Armenian Genocide survivors. He considered the survivors of the Armenian Genocide as the last eyewitnesses to the crime and recording their testimonies as a cardinal duty. His aim was to eternalize the voices of the remnants of the Genocide both for the future generations and also for the field of oral history of the Armenian Genocide. For him, the Genocide survivors and their horrendous stories constituted the irrefutable proof of the macabre crime that befell the Armenians. Thus, in the 1970s, he launched the Armenian Genocide Oral History Project. He and his students interviewed more than 1,000 Armenian Genocide survivors in California. In 2018, Hovannisian donated the collection

2 Israel W. Charny, *Israel’s Failed Response to the Armenian Genocide: Denial, State Deception, Truth versus Politicization of History* (MA, Brookline: Academic Studies Press, Brookline, 2021).

3 Hovannisian, “Confronting the Armenian Genocide,” 36.

to the USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive to be available to scholars around the world.

In addition to the Armenian Genocide, Hovannisian also conceived a monumental project of publishing the history of the historic Armenian towns and provinces based on the latest research in the field. The aim was to rekindle the interest in the Armenian past and make the history accessible to Western academic and nonacademic audiences. In a period of two decades Hovannisian single-handedly edited and published 15 volumes with Mazda Press as part of the UCLA Armenian History & Culture Series. The 15 volumes, featuring more than one hundred scholars from around the globe, covered the history of Armenian communities of Van/Vasporakan (2000); Baghesh/Bitlis and Taron/Mush (2001); Tsopk/Kharpert (2002); Karin/Erzerum (2003); Sebastia/Sivas and Lesser Armenia (2004); Tigranakert/Diarbekir and Edessa/Urfa (2006); Cilicia (2008) (together with Simon Payaslian); Pontus: The Trebizond-Black Sea Communities (2009); Constantinople (2010) (together with Simon Payaslian); Kars and Ani (2011); Smyrna/Izmir (2012); Kesaria/Kayseri and Cappadocia (2013); Communities of Asia Minor (2014); Northeastern Mediterranean: Musa Dagh – Dört-Yol – Kessab (2016); and Persia/Iran (2021). By bringing together the most prominent scholars in the field of Armenian Studies, Hovannisian also edited *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times Volume I & II*, which is considered a classic Armenian History textbook.

Besides his contribution to the field, Hovannisian also mentored and educated multiple generations of scholars and thousands of students. He was a strict mentor who demanded that his students work to reach their full potential. He wanted to make sure that they would survive and thrive in the tough terrain of the academic job market. Many of his students went to occupy the Armenian studies chairs in the United States.

In his lifetime, Hovannisian was especially influenced by two people: his wife Vartiter and Simon Vratsian (the last Prime Minister of the First Republic of Armenia). Vartiter was his life's partner for more than half a century. Her dedication to Richard and the field of Armenian Studies played an important role in shaping who Richard became. Vartiter was an intellectual companion who read and reviewed every piece that he wrote. She was also a constant presence at every conference he planned or attended. In the early 1950s, Vratsian, the author of a major book on the First Republic, became Hovannisian's mentor when he studied Armenian language at the Hamazkayin Nishan Palanjian Jemaran in Beirut, Lebanon. To Hovannisian he was a fatherly figure and a standing testament to the perseverance and the resilience of the Armenians. Vratsian's influenced Hovannisian to write the first academic work on the First Republic of Armenia paving the path for a flourishing academic career.

Hovannisian was also involved in multiple academic organizations. In 1974, Hovannisian along with Dickran Kouymjian, Nina Garsoïan, Avedis Sanjian, and Robert Thomson spearheaded the project to establish a Society for Armenian Studies (SAS). Considered as the pillars of Armenian Studies, the main objective of this group was the development of Armenian Studies as an academic discipline. With access to very limited

resources, this group of scholars was able to establish the foundations of a Society that would play a dominant role in developing Armenian Studies in North America and beyond. From a handful of chairs and programs that supported the initiative at the time, today Armenian Studies as a discipline has flourished in the United States with more than thirteen chairs and programs providing their unconditional support to the Society. Hovannisian was the president of SAS for three terms (1977, 1991-1992, 2006-2009). During his tenure the Society flourished and achieved major accomplishments in the field. In 2019, the Society for Armenian Studies awarded Hovannisian with the *SAS Life-Time Achievement Award* in recognition and appreciation for his outstanding service and contribution to the field of Armenian Studies.

Besides his extensive participation in Armenian educational organizations in the Diaspora, Hovannisian was also very active in Armenia. He served on the Board of Trustees of the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute (AGMI) Foundation in Yerevan. On October 23, 2019, AGMI awarded him *The Henry Morgenthau Medal* for his significant contribution to the study and recognition of the Armenian Genocide.

While historical events and transformation in history play an important role in shaping the course of history, historical agents also shape the history of their own nations, communities, and states. Hovannisian himself became a historical agent who shaped the field of Armenian Studies and fought singlehandedly against denialism orchestrated by one of the strongest states in the globe. While he has physically passed away, his perseverance, contributions to the field, and scholarship should stand as an ultimate model to every young scholar who strives to walk in his footsteps.