

ՀՈՒԲԵԼՅԱՆՆԵՐ JUBILEE



A 65-YEAR-OLD SCIENTIST AT THE CROSSROADS OF HISTORY

A prominent representative of modern Armenian historiography, Doctor of Historical Sciences, Professor, and academician of NAS RA, Ashot Melkonyan, is celebrating a jubilee year, marking the 65th anniversary of his birth.

The scholar was born on February 16, 1961, in the city of Akhalkalaki, Georgia, into the family of Aghasi Melkonyan, a well-known intellectual, journalist, and publicist within Armenian circles. He completed secondary school in 1977 and entered the Faculty of History at Yerevan State University, graduating in 1982. He began his academic career in 1982–1985 by completing postgraduate studies (aspirantura) at the same institution. In 1989, under the supervision of academician Suren Yeremyan, he defended his Candidate dissertation entitled “The Armenian Population of the Erzurum Province of Western Armenia in the First Third of the 19th Century,” for which he was awarded the degree of Candidate of Historical Sciences. In subsequent years, his research expanded significantly, encompassing broader aspects of this field and leading to fundamental contributions to Armenian historiography. His doctoral dissertation, titled “Javakhk in the 19th Century and the First Quarter of the 20th Century,” was defended in April 2002. His achievements in the field of academic and pedagogical activity earned him the title of Professor in 2005, followed by wide recognition in scholarly and intellectual circles. In December 2006, he was elected a Corresponding

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Member of NAS RA, and in December 2014, he was elected a full Academician.

A. Melkonyan began his professional career at the Institute of History of NAS RA, starting as a laboratory assistant and, by 2002, rising to the position of Director of the same institute, a post he held until February of this year. He currently continues his academic and organizational work as Head of a Department at the Institute.

A. Melkonyan has followed a distinguished professional path, to which he has devoted, and continues to devote, his full energy, enriching Armenian studies with the fruitful results of his work. It should also be noted that today the scholar transmits his decades of experience and knowledge to university students with remarkable enthusiasm and dedication.

A. Melkonyan's works are characterized by a broad and multifaceted historical scope, addressing the demography of Western Armenia, historical-political and cultural issues, national liberation movements and their leaders, the socio-economic condition of Armenians in Ottoman Turkey, as well as aspects of national life in the homeland and the diaspora, among others. As a rule, the historian relies on analyses grounded in contemporary theoretical approaches, facts, and realities – thereby valuing Armenian history both as a distinct field of scholarly inquiry, with its own characteristics, identity markers, and specific realities, and as an integral part of world history. He approaches these two fields of research as mutually interconnected domains, grounded in shared patterns and interrelations, through which his studies acquire a distinct degree of objectivity. From this perspective, his substantial scholarly contribution is often manifested in the formation and definition of new directions. Particularly noteworthy is A. Melkonyan's significant contribution to the establishment of the field of historical demography within Armenian scholarship.

Prior to his conceptualization of this new direction, it had appeared in the academic environment primarily within economic studies, framed in terms of purely economic issues and the identification of patterns, and therefore presented with an insufficiently developed historical dimension.

In A. Melkonyan's works, this boundary is overcome, and the methodological treatment of the issue is brought into the domain of historical scholarship, placing it on solid foundations. Its contemporary significance becomes even more pronounced in the context of Turkish-Azerbaijani

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distortions of the issue, where nationalistic and pan-Turkic interpretations of demographic questions tend to dominate.

By exposing these distortions, A. Melkonyan has entered Armenian historiography through the main gate, leaving his distinctive mark on the study and reinterpretation of the modern and contemporary periods of Armenian history.

Such is his first, yet, in both conception and execution, undeniably impressive, work: the revised and expanded version of his Candidate dissertation, titled "The Armenian Population of the Erzurum Province in the First Third of the 19th Century (A Historical-Demographic Study)" (Yerevan, 1994, "Gitutyun" Publishing House, 179 pp.).

The study is devoted to the distribution of the Armenian population of the province, ethnic movements, and other related issues. The author pays particular attention to clarifying his concluding arguments, noting that new political conditions emerged for the Armenians, who constituted the majority of the province's population-conditions that had negative consequences for their numbers and the dynamics of their movements.

In the province, the influx of Turkic-speaking and Iranian-speaking populations gradually intensified, emerging as a general phenomenon and constituting an important characteristic of the demographic transformations in Western Armenia.

The result of the historian's many years of research was his published lecture manual "History of the Armenians" (Yerevan, "Hayagitak" Publishing House, 1998, 277 pp.), which, alongside the relevance of the issues it addressed, testified not only to the internal coherence of his research but also to the importance of transmitting new perspectives to a new generation of historians – driven by the practical necessity of his own approaches and solutions. In terms of its chronological scope, the manual covers an outline of Armenian history from ancient times to the present day. It also incorporates the achievements of Armenian historiography, particularly with regard to a number of controversial issues.

Special attention is given to the assessment of new realities that have become historical facts, such as the new phase of the Artsakh movement and the proclamation of the independent statehood of Armenia, including an

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analysis of the legal and political foundations of the Declaration of Independence.

A. Melkonyan's studies are closely intertwined with his personal inclinations and biographical background, often serving as fertile ground for his scholarly vigor. Being genealogically connected to his ancestors and to the historical homeland of the Karin (Erzurum) region, he, as it were, responds to the call of blood by giving due attention to the demographic history of the Armenian population of the Erzurum province.

The relevance of this issue required further elaboration, prompting the need for new scholarly contributions. Such an intermediate link became the work prepared by him: the biography "Archbishop Karapet" by Senior Priest E. Geghamyants, presented with his introduction and annotations (this work had originally been published in the 1870s in the journal "Pordz"). The subject concerns Archbishop Karapet, the spiritual leader of Karin, whose name is associated with the organization of the migration of Armenians from Karin to Javakhk in Transcaucasia.

Finally, two subsequent works by A. Melkonyan are devoted to the same issue. The first of these, "Outlines of the History of Javakhk" (Yerevan, 1999, "Gitutyun" Publishing House, 104 pp.), is dedicated to the history of the Javakhk district of the Gugark province of Greater Armenia, as well as to the histories of the Akhalkalaki district and the adjacent regions of Akhaltsikhe and Tsalka, up to the Soviet period.

Particular attention is devoted to the history of the period spanning 1918–1921. This work is enriched with newly discovered documents and archival materials, which substantiate a renewed interpretation of the issue from a demographic perspective.

Finally, the issue reached a distinctive level of development with the publication of A. Melkonyan's work "Javakhk in the 19th Century and the First Quarter of the 20th Century" (Yerevan, 2003, Institute of History of NAS RA, 542 pp.). Here, the research material is employed within an expanded chronological framework, including the ancient and medieval periods of Javakhk's history, as well as new findings at various historical stages, particularly in those thematic areas that address the Turkish invasion of Akhalkalaki in 1918, the tragic condition of the local Armenian population, the far from benevolent policy pursued toward them by the Georgian authorities,

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and Armenian–Georgian interstate relations, among others. The work addresses a number of issues that have been scarcely or almost never examined in historiographical literature, such as the Armenian–Georgian war that began in early 1918 over Akhalkalaki and Lori, as well as the internal and external factors associated with it, which ultimately concluded with British intervention and its ensuing political consequences. Through convincing analyses, the author demonstrates the isolated position and underlying logic of Soviet Armenia in this matter, where nationalism appeared under the guise of internationalism. The historian calls things by their proper names in showing that the Georgian-Azerbaijani Bolshevik majority, acting in a coordinated and unified manner, achieved in July 1921 the annexation of Akhalkalaki and other Armenian territories to Georgia and Azerbaijan.

On November 6 of the same year, the author concludes, an Armenian–Georgian treaty was signed, which, with certain modifications, remains in effect to this day. Also noteworthy are the analyses of its repercussions, such as the demands raised in 1925 by the Armenians of Akhalkalaki for the incorporation of Akhalkalaki into Armenia, demands that were rejected by the Soviet authorities. Closely related to this is the documentary collection published by A. Melkonyan and Professor V. Ghazakhyantsyan, “Armenia in State Secret Documents, 1922–1929” (in Russian; Yerevan, 2008, “Gitutyun” Publishing House, 352 pp.), which addresses the activities of secret services that remained largely concealed in the background of Soviet history. The materials of this collection provide invaluable factual information about the attitude and policies of the Soviet authorities toward Armenia during that period.

Further deepening his research in the field of historical demography, A. Melkonyan published his next work, “Issues of Armenian History and Demography” (Yerevan, 2011, “Mitk” Analytical Center, 455 pp.). In this volume, familiar topics are revisited within a broader conceptual framework and with new methodological approaches, including the history of Javakhk, the Armenian Genocide, the Armenian Cause, and the methodological foundations of Turkish-Azerbaijani falsifications, among others.

Although his discussions of various issues are formally presented as distinct, they enable him to draw significant generalizations regarding the themes addressed in his work. Such is his conclusion concerning the

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movements of the Armenian population of the Erzurum province, which, in a broader sense, may be attributed to the oppressive and difficult historical environment faced by the Armenians. As he notes, Armenians addressed the problem of survival in two ways, through armed struggle and emigration, resulting in a sharp decline in the Armenian population and the depopulation of Armenian-inhabited areas.

The formulation “preferred topics” in relation to A. Melkonyan, used above, carries a rather conditional meaning, particularly in the context of his broad research scope, within which his factual interests are often synthesized. He traverses the vast space from history to reality, from the historical to the contemporary, with remarkable ease and natural continuity: under his pen, history is reinterpreted in terms of modern relevance, and the present is illuminated through instructive historical truths.

Indeed, Melkonyan’s numerous articles and speeches reflect not only pressing issues concerning present-day Armenia, its statehood, and the Armenian people, but also offer necessary proposals aimed at addressing them. From this perspective, particular attention should be given to his collection of articles, speeches, and interviews, “Lessons and Messages of Armenian History” (Yerevan, 2013, NAS RA “Gitutyun” Publishing House, 631 pp.).

Within this diversity of genres, he advances the necessity of a new strategic phase in the development of the issue of the Armenian Genocide, aimed at moving it beyond its current stagnation. As he observes, the phase of recognition of the Genocide “has long since passed, and we must emphasize reparation and, by no means, be satisfied with parliamentary-level recognition of the issue in any given country; rather, we must also reach the idea of reparation in our formulations” (p. 25).

A. Melkonyan thus raises the issue of material or tangible compensation for the loss of Western Armenia. In this regard, it should be recalled that, with well-grounded arguments, he adopted a negative stance toward the so-called Armenian–Turkish Reconciliation Commission, as well as toward proposals from the Turkish side to shift the issue from the political sphere to an academic one through debates among historians. Such an approach, in his view, would have meant consigning the matter to the realm of fruitless and endless debates between fundamentally opposing sides.

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He notes that Turkish society is not prepared to take even a single step toward the recognition of the Genocide, while, on the other hand, Armenian society maintains a rejecting stance toward such ineffective debates. From this principled position, A. Melkonyan substantiated his objections to the Zurich Armenian–Turkish protocols, viewing in them formulations that contradict the vital interests of the Armenian people.

In particular, he points out that these agreements contain a provision which effectively nullifies the Treaty of Sèvres by implying the *de facto* recognition of the border between Armenia and Turkey.

A. Melkonyan is deeply concerned with the fundamental issue of preserving and strengthening Armenia’s statehood, a theme that is evident throughout his works and in the coherence of his conceptual approaches. In this collection as well, he regards May 28, 1918, as a turning point in the history of the Armenian people, as it ensured “the continuity of Armenian statehood.”

A. Melkonyan approaches the topic of the Genocide from a legal and political perspective, as reflected in his collection “Genocide and Dispossession” (works, publications, and interviews given to the press; “Zangak” Publishing House, 438 pp.). In this volume, the issue of the inadmissibility of the Armenian–Turkish protocols is examined from new angles (a position he had also defended in the National Assembly on October 1, 2009).

He advances the need to substantiate a new phase following the recognition of the Genocide, formulating a number of key issues such as: “Demanding reparation is also a preventive measure,” “What occurred was not only genocide but also dispossession,” and “The necessity of legally defining the concept of dispossession,” among others.

In modern Armenian historiography, theoretical and substantive issues assume primary importance in A. Melkonyan’s work “Essays on Armenian History” (Yerevan, 2012, Institute of History of NAS RA, 411 pp.), which covers the entirety of Armenian history from ancient times to the end of the twentieth century.

The author places particular emphasis on the creation of unified pan-Armenian textbooks (in history, language and literature, and culture), with the aim of fostering an Armenia-centered mindset and a sense of statehood. Of

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notable historiographical value is A. Melkonyan's proposed periodization of Armenian history, ancient, medieval, early modern, and modern periods, which fully corresponds to internationally recognized chronological frameworks. It should also be noted that the chronological structure of this work (as reflected in its division into chapters) is likewise based on the same principles.

A. Melkonyan has compiled his articles and reports from the first decades of the 2000s in the volume "Historiographical Studies" (Yerevan, 2021, Institute of History of NAS RA, 488 pp.). In this work as well, the author addresses numerous issues related to Armenian history, politics, and related fields, unified by the internal logical interconnections of the problems and their contemporary relevance.

Among the products of his long-term research included in this volume, particular attention may be drawn to several works, such as "The Historical Stages of Armenian Statehood," "Problems of the New Periodization of Armenian History," "Artsakh in the Trajectory of Armenian Statehood," as well as articles and reports published in English and Russian.

At the end of the book is included the preface written by A. Melkonyan, as editor, to the work of the late talented historian Hamlet Harutyunyan, "The Demographic Profile, Crafts, and Trade of the Yerevan Province" (Yerevan, 2020, Institute of History of NAS RA), in which the scientific significance of reconstructing the demographic picture of the two parts of Armenia is highlighted.

In the aforementioned discussions on Armenian statehood, A. Melkonyan presents fundamental distinctions regarding historical periods. He thoroughly revises the unfounded view that the Armenian people experienced complete statelessness, proposing a new conceptual framework according to which, following the successive collapse of unified Armenian kingdoms, there emerged regional kingdoms, principalities, melikdoms, and other formations that "in almost all historical periods preserved the continuous chain of Armenian statehood" (p. 170).

During the entire period of A. Melkonyan's leadership of the Institute of History of NAS RA, historians of the Academy published numerous works in foreign languages both in Armenia and abroad, presenting contemporary historiographical thought. The scholarly results of these works would do credit

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to any country, as evidenced by the impartial assessments of many foreign scholars.

However, in our context, there exists a certain degree of dismissive attitude toward historical scholarship, which, in my view, stems from the tendency to mechanically attribute to contemporary historians the shortcomings of Soviet historiography (namely, the subordination of scholarship, especially the social sciences, to politics).


It must be acknowledged that the public remains highly insufficiently informed about the achievements of modern historiography. Is our society adequately aware that during A. Melkonyan's tenure as director the multi-volume *History of the Armenians*, a testament to the vitality of contemporary Armenian historiographical thought, was published? I would venture to doubt it.

I ask the jubilarian's indulgence for this brief digression from the main theme, sincerely believing that Academician Ashot Melkonyan will continue to place his impeccable abilities and experience at the service of Armenian historiography. To the distinguished sixty-five-year-old scholar, we extend our heartfelt wishes for good health, long life, and continued strength in his fruitful work.

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