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ARARAT AGHASYAN
“THE LOSSES OF THE ARMENIAN FINE ARTS AND APPLIED
ARTS IN THE TERRITORY OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE”

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In their most tragic era Armenians suffered not only disastrous human losses but also irreparable spiritual blows which were equally insufferable. Centuries - old Armenian cultural heritage also became the victim of the atrocities masterminded by the Ottoman Turkish authorities – they perpetrated a cultural genocide. The renowned art critic, Doctor of Arts, Corresponding member of NAS RA, professor Ararat Aghasyan has dedicated his work **“The Losses of the Armenian Fine Arts and Applied Arts in the Territory of the Ottoman Empire”** to the comprehensive elucidation of the aforementioned issue. The book covers a period starting from the Hamidian massacres in 1895-1896 up to present day. The managing editor of the book is Doctor of Arts Anna Asatryan.

The work is structured as a historical essay and is based on numerous studies, articles, memoirs, letters, as well as the press coverage of the issue and other sources introduced by Armenian and foreign authors. The author is quite justified to make the observation according to which, Sultan Hamid along with the Neo-Turks set the objective of not only persecuting, forcibly dislocating Armenians from their cradle but also exterminating all the centuries-old material testimonies of Armenian civilization and culture.

The author propounds a well-grounded argumentation to prove that after the Hamidian massacres, especially during the years of genocide the Armenian medieval architecture, embodying exceptional cultural and spiritual value suffered irreparable losses. Driven by the instructions of Taleat Pasha, the Minister of Home Affairs and one of the greatest Neo-Turkish vandals who issued an order to "take any extreme measures to annihilate the denomination "Armenia" in Turkey", the slaughterers razed to the ground almost all the churches and monasteries and whatever they enclosed both in Western Armenia and in the Armenian-populated settlements of the Ottoman Empire. In this connection, it is worth mentioning that the number of the Armenian religious institutions existing on the eve of WWI is still being specified. Contrasting all those data, the author arrives at the conclusion that from 1914 up to 1918, 2050 Armenian churches and 203 monasteries were expropriated, robbed and ruined in Western Armenia and Ottoman Empire settlements populated by Armenians. The cultural genocide was not confined to the physical extermination of the buildings only. Medieval manuscripts, among them those with handmade miniatures that belonged to the churches, monasteries and Armenian families (who had inherited them from their ancestors) also became the victim of the cultural genocide. In this respect, the observation of the Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia, the renowned Armenologist and art critic Garegin Hovsepyan has been considered apt to be referred to. He states, "The inestimable treasures of Armenians were destroyed, treasures that could be destroyed by neither moths nor cockroaches. However, thousands of anthologies of manuscripts, embodying the Armenian art, culture, thought and spirit were irreparably destroyed by outrageous taleats and envers-the vandals and barbarians of the Turkish government." (p. 11)

The author presents the losses of the Armenian culture in chronological order, firstly analyzing the cultural genocide of 1895-96, in fact, the prelude to the Armenian Genocide, then highlighting all the losses that the Armenian culture suffered from WWI until now.

Province by province, region by region the cultural losses are illustrated, thus making a significant contribution to and spreading a new light on the clarification of the issue under study.

The pages of the book clearly reveal to the Armenian reader the amount of the irremediable losses of Armenian art and specimens of the art of writing the Armenian people suffered under the destructive rule of Ottoman Turkey. In the

clutches of the Turkish barbarians hundreds and thousands of manuscripts, illustrated books, unique ancient books, books with leather parchments, exceptional specimens of applied arts, expensive church sets, jugs, relics and other sacred objects were reduced to nothing.

This work under review testifies to numerous facts, highlighting the unprecedented crimes committed by the Turkish government allied with the Turkish and Kurdish mob. The innumerable facts evidence all the violence, torture, physical and psychological abuse that was perpetrated. Even the mere existence of such shocking facts testifies the accomplishment of cultural vandalism, as a matter of fact, the first cultural genocide in world history.

Innumerable instances referred to describe how the frenzied mob having destroyed everything on its way, burst into the Armenian monasteries and churches, robbed them and desecrated the relics with filth. The given facts testify that only illiterate and barbarian society having nothing in common with the art of writing could treat the ancient Armenian culture in that way. Even foreigners who witnessed the Turkish barbarity (for instance the Arab lawyer Fayeze al Ghoseynin) have spoken out for the sake of historical truth, stating that the Turkish grocers used the pages of Armenian manuscripts, ancient books and unique illustrations of miniatures as worthless wrapping paper for their products (p. 26).

Comparing different facts and sources the author makes an attempt to exact the number of the Armenian manuscripts that were either lost or destroyed during the massacres carried out in the 1890s of the 19th century and during the Armenian Genocide. Nevertheless, it is impossible to specify the number accurately as exact statistic data have never existed in this field. At a minimum estimate the number of the Armenian manuscripts that were either destroyed or lost in the 1890s of the 19th century and during the Genocide reaches 10000. According to other estimates, the number is 20000. In his study G. Ter-Vardanyan, the head of Manuscript Studies Department and Mayr Cucak at the Matenadaran named after M. Mashtots, comes to prove that 30000 Armenian manuscripts were destroyed or disappeared during the years of the Hamidian massacres and the Mets Yeghern (the Armenian Genocide). In other words, the given number is identical to the number of manuscripts existing worldwide at present.

According to the author's observations, the region of Vaspurakan abounding in famous monasteries and repositories of manuscripts suffered the greatest

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losses during the years of the Armenian Genocide. The Father Superior of Desert Lim vardapet Hjusyan in his study "Brief Description of Some Famous Monasteries in Vaspurakan" introduced the following accurate characterization, "Among the rich monasteries of Vaspurakan as well as village churches there was not a single one that did not possess 10, 20, 30 manuscripts. Hundreds of manuscripts wrapped in cloth as sacred relics were kept and treated with great respect in people's houses". (p. 34) It was in this chaos that the well-known Varagavank was attacked and destroyed.

With reference to this, the Venezuelan writer and military man Raphael de Nogales Mendes' testimony is cited who back in 1915, during the April battles was the military commander of the Turkish garrison and artillery that had besieged the Armenian districts of Van. The latter has described in cold blood how the Turks bombarded the main defensive points of the Armenians – the neighboring churches of St. Paul and St Peter built in the 10th century as well as Varagavank with its repository of numerous valuable manuscripts and ancient books. It is also stated that in 1915 from the Holy Mother (Surb Astvatsatsin) church of Alyur village, situated on the eastern shore of Lake Van the original handwritten "Book of Lamentations" in silver-plated parchment authored by the great poet, musician, philosopher and theologian of the 10th century Grigor Narkatsi was robbed and irretrievably lost. Other important facts and details are also reported on the Golgotha of the Armenian manuscripts.

It is noted that tens and hundreds of manuscripts that survived the destruction and robbery, particularly Gospels of great artistic value, with miniature illustrations and expensive covers were taken by some Turks to be sold abroad. After the end of WWI in the 1920s these unique treasures of arts and sciences appeared for sale in the markets of different Egyptian, European and American cities as well as in Constantinople. The majority of manuscripts having gone through fire and water, reached us "in an extremely damaged state, lacking the initial and final parts, with torn covers, spoiled by foreign hands" they were defective and partly destroyed (p. 56).

From the pages of the given work we also learn about efforts made by figures of the Armenian Apostolic Church as well as certain individuals to rescue the relics and works of the Armenian applied and fine arts. Thus, in March, 1916 the Catholicos Gevorg Ye. Surenyants issued an order to create a committee which was at once to leave for Mush set free at that time. The main objective of the

committee was “to find the church property and jewelry, clothes, jugs the remnants of archaeological, artistic, national value that the Armenians of Mush and the neighboring regions had either hidden or abandoned, and placing those items into boxes or sacks, transport them safely to the Mother See of Holy Echmiadzin”. (p. 42)

Due homage is paid to the renowned historian, orientalist, expert in the Caucasian studies Nicholas Marr, who during the years of the Genocide made many selfless efforts to rescue hundreds of valuable, ancient manuscripts in the city of Van and neighboring areas. In October, 1915 the eminent academician presented the disastrous situation to the general meeting of the Academy of Sciences of the Russian Empire in Saint Petersburg.

A passage taken from the renowned painter Panos Terlemezian’s memoirs evidences that in the summer of 1915 during the deportations of Van Armenians the manuscripts saved in Akhavank “were sailed to the port of Avants village in chests, where the three of them were sent to Echmiadzin and the two were thrown into the sea, for them not get into the hands of the Turks”.

The author of the book introducing the above mentioned with well-grounded data, concludes that the annihilation of the treasures of fine and applied arts created by Armenians in their historical motherland was a severe blow to human civilization, as the global fine arts at large suffered greatly and became impoverished. The work is distinguished by a high level of academic writing and competent, professional characteristics. The author’s style of writing, is pithy and comprehensive which enables him to convey a lot of essential information via a less bulky text.

To sum up, we would like to suggest that this useful work of paramount importance gets enriched with new sources, photos, and other materials as well as translated into a number of European languages, as it is the imperative of the time to offer the international community a more voluminous work on the cultural Genocide which constitutes part and parcel of the genocidal policy of Turkey.

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