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The Armenian Model (The Epic Narrative of Franz Werfel and Armenian Identity)

Abstract: This essay analyses the novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* by Franz Werfel through the lens of rediscovering the Armenian identity, both individually and collectively. Does a people have the right, through its political (and religious) leaders, to decide to exterminate another people? This is the acute problem raised by Franz Werfel's novel, which is simultaneously a political, sociological, psychohistorical, anthropological and ethical novel.

Keywords: Franz Werfel; Armenianness; Musa Dagh; Genocide; Armenocide; Holocaust; Resistance; Identity; Quest; Moses; Christ; Christianity; Judaism; Religious Syncretism.

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When I read Franz Werfel's three-volume novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, belatedly, fifty years after the publication of the Romanian translation, plenty of the pages of the book I had borrowed from a public specialised library were still stuck together. This saddened me and it was probably this reaction that compelled me to write about Werfel's admirable novel. An Austrian Jew, a poet, playwright, and novelist, Werfel was interested in writing about the resistance of the Armenians on Mount Musa Dagh. The actual historical events had taken place in 1915. Publishing his novel in 1933, Werfel prophesied the creation of the Nazi extermination camps.

In the Romanian preface to the novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, the essayist Nicolae Balotă describes Werfel's novel as an epic narrative¹ that focuses not only on the systematic persecution of Armenians by the Turkish authorities (from the end of the nineteenth century into the second decade of the twentieth century), but also on the Armenians' resistance in the villages at the foot of Mount Musa Dagh (especially in the village of Yoghonoluk) when

the 1915 Armenian Armenicide began in the Ottoman Empire.

The history of this Armenian resistance has fascinated many researchers. One of these is Vahram L. Shemmassian, who has approached the structure and relevance of the Armenian villages at the foot of Mount Musa Dagh from several viewpoints, discussing their structures and importance in terms of the mentality patterns, but also from an anthropological (religious, social, economic, political) perspective. Moreover, he analyses how a rustically isolated community in the Ottoman Empire came to represent an ethnic community that was emblematic of the idea of national identity and destiny.²

From a literary point of view, Werfel's novel provoked mostly admiring reactions, but it was not exempted from some critical opinions. Louis Kronenberger, one of the first reviewers of the novel, considered – as early as 1934, one year after the novel's publication – that Werfel's novel was a “dramatic narrative” compared to the philosophical parables of other impressive and famous novels, such as *The Enchanted Mountain* by Thomas Mann or *Ulysses* by James Joyce or *In Search of Lost Time* by Marcel Proust. Kronenberger emphasised that in terms of grandeur, Werfel's novel and the three masterpieces mentioned above were on a par (although he also brought some reproaches to the book, related to the erotic dimension of the main characters, which he found irrelevant). Kronenberger especially appreciated the “heroic proportion” of Werfel's text, “for it is a story of men accepting the fate of heroes and the task of supermen” and the novel itself is “a social document”.³

Werfel's masterpiece aroused interest especially from an ethical, political,

and historical perspective. Yicheng Zhang had pinpointed some essential aspects in this regard: 1. “The successful resistance at Musa Dagh was an atypical chapter of the Armenian Genocide; but precisely because of that, the event held a significant position in Armenian national history.”; 2. “It reminds the readers that the genocide is more than just a casualty number or a historical event.”; 3. “Throughout Musa Dagh, Werfel posed his readers many perceptive questions and explored the various topics and themes of state violence. One of the most conspicuous themes examined by the novel was the issue of morality in politics.”; 4. “Before genocide became conceptualized by post-war academics, Werfel first captured the essences of modern state violence with his penetrating perception, and he was able to put his keen observation in the novel.”⁴ Yicheng Zhang regards at Werfel's masterpiece from a seemingly political angle and turns the novel into a case study.

Another analyst of the novel, Oliver Kohns, examines the book from the perspective of the disrespect for human rights and approaches this topic as the central stake of the novel. Kohns justifies it in this way, highlighting the fact that this phenomenon has developed political ramifications to this day: 1. “it is not just as a novel about systematic violations of human rights, but above all as a political intervention, in the form of a novel, on behalf of the fundamental rights of a certain group of human beings – in this case, the Armenians.”; 2. “The Armenian genocide was not only ‘successful’ in that there are almost no Armenians left in Turkey today; its ‘success’ has been underscored by the fact that the mass murder has been

consistently denied by all Turkish governments from 1919 to this day and only received little attention abroad.”; 3. “/.../ a reading of *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* will lead to the thesis that Werfel’s novel is structured by an aesthetics of human rights. This means that the Armenians are represented here not only as victims of a genocide, but at the same time as subjects of a ‘Bildungsroman’ in which they develop into ‘citizens’ and thus to legitimate holder of human rights.”⁵

Many scholars who have written about the novel have focused on the kinship between the persecutions that Jews have been subjected to throughout history (it should be noted that Werfel was an Austrian Jew) and the Armenians. Yaïr Auron sheds light on the similarities between the painful destinies of the Jews and the Armenians, but also on the differences between them. In the Armenian problem – states Yaïr Auron – the Jewish problem is contained, symbolically or metaphorically. We must not lose sight of the fact that many young Jews read Werfel’s novel with bated breath, during the Second World War, as a moral bestseller, being considered a model of resistance.⁶

Neil Ascherson even draws a parallel between Musa Dagh and the battle of the Jews (against the Romans) for the defence of the Masada: “Inevitably some readers suggested that Werfel had Masada in mind (the peak where, in 73 ad, Jewish rebels held out against Roman legions and committed mass suicide rather than surrender). That’s possible, but so are parallels from the Hussite risings in the Czech lands where Werfel was born.” However, Ascherson, in turn, focuses mainly on how Werfel’s novel inspired fighters in various ghettos (during

The Second World War) to revolt against the anti-Semitic Nazi regime: “The novel had its most intense impact in two worldwide communities that knew what it was to be threatened with extinction. For Armenians, it remains unique and precious: for all its minor inaccuracies, it’s the one work whose urgency and passion keeps the truth of their genocide before the eyes of a world that would prefer to forget about it. For Jewish readers, and not only in Israel, Werfel’s epic about the choice between submitting to the killers or dying on the barricade is still poignant. In several ghettos where the Nazis held Jewish populations before murdering them, Bialystok and Vilnius among others, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* was passed from hand to hand and became the inspiration – almost the manual – for the sacrificial ghetto risings that followed.”⁷

The similarity between the unjust and, in fact, unqualifiable arguments of the deniers of the Armenian genocide and the deniers of the Holocaust is not of direct concern in this essay, because this topic alone would occupy a large space of ideational development.⁸ Therefore, it should be noted that the central point of this essay is the Armenian resistance and the rediscovery (reassumption) of the Armenian identity through a military revolt (albeit a rudimentary one, due to the *de facto* context and conditions).

The title of the novel focuses numerically on 40 days and not on 53 days, which is how long the anti-Turkish revolt of the Armenians who had withdrawn to Musa Dagh actually lasted, until their rescue by the French warships. There are a number of references in the novel to seminal events described in the Bible, related to the

number 40, the most important referring to Moses and Jesus. The number 40 has a special symbolism in the Bible. Noah's flood lasted 40 days and nights. The people of Israel were made to wander through the wilderness for 40 days before entering God's promised land. Moses fasted for 40 days and nights on Mount Sinai, before receiving the tablets with the 10 commandments from God. Christmas fasting and Easter fasting also last 40 days. Jesus, after his baptism in the Jordan, fasted for 40 days in the wilderness. Werfel therefore relied on this particular number, which has an intense symbolic stake, both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. It was as if the author wished, albeit only metaphorically, to construct a unique, miniature biblical narrative focused on the destiny of the Armenians in 1915. Werfel's novel displays, thus, religious syncretism.

The central character of the novel, Gabriel Bagradian (the one who will become the military commander of the rebellious Armenians),⁹ senses the Armenians' need to build an epic destiny, going from enduring persecution, humiliation and mockery (the hatred of other peoples) to resistance. In several sequences of the novel, the Armenian identity and the right to have such an identity are questioned, in spite of the obstructions raised by the historical contexts and by various persecution rituals. One of the characters in the novel (the doctor Antaram Altouni) is overwhelmed by the burden of the collective persecution of Armenians and realises that the very existence of the Armenian people is marred by history in the twentieth century: "You can be Russian, and Turkish, and Hottentot and whatever else, but you can't be Armenian. Being Armenian is impossible."¹⁰

The Armenian identity is researched between two extremes: humiliation in front of other peoples (obedience) or, on the contrary, the pride of being Armenian and of representing a great culture, as well as one of the first Christian nations.¹¹ Against this background, Franz Werfel builds the character of Gabriel Bagradian, who will recognise, within himself, a similar messianic energy of being an Armenian and a leader of the Armenian rebels, who is actually initiated in the sufferings of the Armenians. Bagradian feels inspired and guided (almost divinely) to represent the Armenian people in their active, anti-passive form.¹² Oliver Kohns draws a comparison between Moses and Gabriel Bagradian, pointing out the similarities whereby the two rediscovering their identity. Gabriel Bagradian goes through a (beneficial) process of re-Armenianisation, *i.e.*, re-nationalisation.¹³ According to other opinions, Gabriel Bagradian is not designed after the model of Moses, but after that of Christ during the Passion and the Transfiguration.¹⁴ In my opinion, Bagradian goes through a form of *metanoia*, because his rediscovered and resumed Armenianness has a sacred, almost religious character (in the Christian sense). From a French-like European, Bagradian gradually, but radically, turns into an Armenian through-and-through, symbolically rebirthing himself and returning to his origins in a sacred and national sense.

This quest for identity on an individual and collective level takes place against the background of the division of Europe and the world during the First World War – when the Turks become allies of Germany and the Western Powers are vulnerable and wage an anti-German war. There is thus a

Europe that thinks strictly of alliances and ploys (regardless of whether the allies are immoral historically and politically) and an impotent, fragile Europe that, despite the democratic principles on which it was built, is incapable of helping any peoples threatened by massacres, ethnic cleansing, and persecution.

That is why Gabriel Bagradian's destiny is built like an initiation, step by step, by the author.¹⁵ At the beginning, Bagradian was the "stranger, a Parisian, a worldly citizen who has exceedingly overcome his station"¹⁶ because, since he was married to a Frenchwoman, Bagradian lived in Paris and had become demonstratively French. However, he gradually renationalises himself by assuming a collective identity that was constantly boycotted - or even massacred (he returns to the village of Yoghonoluk in Antioch, where his family has roots). The lament of this persecution at a national level re-Armenianises him, and determines him to initiate a quest, to seek his centre (for himself, but also for others). This identity has an ethical, historical and ontic function. Gabriel Bagradian represents the rediscovered Armenianness, assumed not only as mourning and despair, but especially as resistance. G. Balgian accurately notes that Gabriel Bagradian is transformed by an "unconscious organic memory."¹⁷

It is also striking how Bagradian learns to speak Armenian fluently again: at first, he stumbles, but gradually the Armenian language finds its way into him and re-roots him. After the linguistic rooting, we then reach the existential one and the collective one, that of the people. Not only does the father (Gabriel Bagradian) become re-Armenianised, but so does his son (Stephane), finally sacrificing himself for

the Armenian cause. The two characters, the father and the son, will both perish, in various stages of the Armenians' resistance against the Turks, just to re-sanctify the land of Yoghonoluk, to re-Christianize it in a (Christian) sacrificial sense. Gabriel Bagradian even has an epic conscience, aware of the genocide to which his people are subjected and which it opposes: his goal is to turn the living corpses of (persecuted) Armenians and their humiliated ghostly creatures into warriors.

G. Balgian offers a special interpretation of Gabriel Bagradian's character, attributing a unique Faustian tinge to him (and amazing, by reference to the other interpretations of the character through the filter of Moses or Christ): "He is a Faustian Armenian character. Giving himself to a community, he finds the meaning of life in the service of this community, dissolving his 'self' in the communal 'self,' he finds his supreme happiness in the collective happiness of that community; abstracted, and separated from earthly life, his soul finds its salvation in giving its life to the multitude."¹⁸ Like Faust, Werfel's protagonist changes his destiny not only on the ontic level, but also on the gnoseological level. It is clear that G. Balgian perceives Bagradian as a philosophical and ethical creature, not a Faustian character in the sense of one who makes a pact with the devil: "And just like Faust, in order to reach his goal, Bagradian no longer submits to destiny but fights against it, and change the 'normal' course of things. Building another destiny."¹⁹

The village of Yoghonoluk revolts and retreats to Musa Dagh, due to the way in which the deportation, envisaged by the Turks to work as punishment against the

Armenians, acquires a sense of extermination. The case of the town of Zeitun is emblematic. Under the pretext of being insubordinate and rebellious, the Armenians and their families are deported. However, deportation is actually a form of a wandering concentration camp – as the author explains: “the wandering concentration camp where no one can even defecate without asking for permission.”²⁰ The deportees form literal (not metaphorical) convoys of death. Their forcibly abandoned houses are looted by the Turks in a systematic organisation to establish chaos and to destroy the idea of the centre. The character of the priest Ter Haigasun accurately describes this horror, making a comparison and, at the same time, a distinction between massacre and deportation. The massacre is chaotic and short-lived (so surviving is possible), while the deportation is meticulous and aims to completely exterminate the Armenian people (survival is only possible very rarely).²¹

Does a people have the right to decide, through its political (and religious) leaders, to exterminate another people? This is the acute problem raised by Franz Werfel’s novel, which is simultaneously a political, sociological, psychohistorical, anthropological and ethical novel.

Armenians are often marked by the fatality of destiny, and their fatalism is one of ancient tragedy (against the background of many dialogues, in the novel, about determinism and Christianity). The ancient Greek gods (capricious, tyrannical, cruel) are replaced by Turkish military commanders and political leaders who organise a mass assassination of Armenians in 1915, with the aim of resurrecting the Ottoman Empire. Gabriel Bagradian is a

central figure and as he wishes to defy the Armenian predestination, he builds up the narrative of the Armenians’ proud resistance. Lucid in the face of the Armenocide, Bagradian is aware that resistance needs (self) mythologisation. Hence, the obvious symbolism of Mount Musa Dagh as a cornerstone of Christ, as a place of asceticism, pride, and Promethean courage. The mountain is mentally mapped as a sacred territory of resistance for the collective identity. There is an entire religious syncretism in the very name of the Musa Dagh, which means the Mount of Moses, thus containing an iconic and demonstrative biblical symbolism.

The structure of the resistance on Mount Musa Dagh is elaborate and nuanced. Specialised committees are formed regarding defence, internal organisation, justice, health. Trenches are dug and a huge wooden altar is erected in the middle of the camp. Specifically, a hut village is built (using branches), and so are a shed-hospital and various fortifications. The resistance on Musa Dagh aims to resolve, in fact, a controversy at the level of peoples: Armenians are generally known as merchants and traders (bankers, etc.), Turks are eminently known as warriors. On Musa Dagh, the Armenians want to prove not only that they can be warriors, but also that they can be triumphant in the fight against the Turks. Dignity and honour make warriors out of the Armenians.

The structure of the civil-military organisation on Musa Dagh also has an adjacent religious connotation: the insurgents bring piles of earth from the Armenian cemetery (from Yoghonoluk village) to the mountain, and this actually consecrates the Musa Dagh space. This is a symbolic

sanctification of the place in a double sense, because the mountain, which is already sacred by its name (Mount of Moses), becomes sacred once again. If the Armenians had been killed on Musa Dagh, they would have been laid to rest on hallowed ground, in a makeshift, but authentic and legitimate cemetery. Werfel thus suggests that Musa Dagh becomes a city of the Crusaders, a new Jerusalem (even if these references do not appear directly). Allusions to a biblical sanctity (either that of the Old Testament, or the evangelical and Christian one) are contrapuntally inserted. Thus, after its arrangement, the refuge and resistance camp is perceived as “a colony that undoubtedly resembled a settlement from the time of Abraham and the other patriarchs.”²² In this way, what occurs is a mythologisation of the Armenian resistance on Musa Dagh in relation to the resistance and religious revelations of the Jews. The Armenian colony on the mountain is made legendary by its comparison with various prophetic scenes and sequences in the Bible. In addition, the refugee and resistance camp is based on equality and fraternity, resembling a phalanstery: the reference is, openly, to the French Revolution (especially since the Armenian insurgents on the mountain will eventually be rescued by French warships).

There is also a pagan-magical dimension assumed by Werfel’s novel: the Armenian community also includes three magicians specialised mainly in mortuary matters (the three women are, however, repudiated by the community): Numik, Vartuk and Manuşak. They look like ancient chorus characters, as the author himself points out.²³ The three are mourners, but also rustic magicians. They are, however, also midwives at birth, that is, symbolic cursers

and Moirae. A whole cycle of life and death takes place on Musa Dagh, and the whole world is concentrated, in the ontic sense, here. Armenia means primarily Christianity, but also magic (rustic paganism).

The battles won by the insurgent Armenians against the Turks on Musa Dagh are perceived by the latter as an incarnation of the Last Judgment (rustic Muslims have this grid of interpretation). The figure of Christ is credited with the military battles won by the Armenians (despite the small amount of ammunition and the negligible number of former Armenian soldiers once enlisted in the Ottoman army): “Jesus Christ, the prophet of unbelievers, had let the sun of His might rise behind the mountain; the Armenian jinn of Musa Dagh, in alliance with Peter, Paul, Thomas, and the other worthies of the Evangel, were protecting this people.”²⁴ When the Armenians set fire to the mountainside to protect themselves from Turkish soldiers storming Musa Dagh, the fire was projected as a divine, defensive fire. The narrative of the Musa Dagh resistance recounts the initiation of the entire Armenian people because, after going through a form of descent into hell (through persecution, massacres, deportations, robberies, various punishments to which they were subjected by the Turks), most Armenians who retreated to Musa Dagh would be saved.

Today, Werfel’s novel is somewhat forgotten; but in my list of (worthy) twentieth-century prose, this is a book that deserves not only to be read, but also to be reread. I recommend it to anyone wishing to learn about persecution and resistance, courage and impetuosity, obstinacy and mystical healing, about a *quest* for identity, both collective and individual.

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NOTES

1. Franz Werfel, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, vol. I, II, III, translated by Horia Matei, preface by Nicolae Balotă, Bucharest, Univers Publishing House, 1970; vol. I, pp. 4.
2. Vahram L Shemmassian, *The Armenians of Musa Dagh: From Obscurity to Genocide Resistance and Fame. 1840-1915*, Fresno, The Press at California State University, 2020.
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9. According to some analysts, Gabriel Bagradian's model was Moses Der Kalousdian, a former officer in the Turkish army, who organized the military resistance on Musa Dagh and survived (unlike Werfel's character); Moses Der Kaousdian lived in Lebanon and was a member of the Lebanese parliament for many years. Born in 1895, he died in 1984 at the age of 99.
- By contrast, according to a direct witness, Charles-Diran Tékéian (*Quatre ans de guerre en Orient. L'Action Franco-Arménienne pendant la guerre. Pages et souvenirs. Le sauvetage des Arméniens du Mont Moussa par l'escadre française. La Légion Arménienne*, Paris, éditions Ernest Leroux, 1919. p. 17), who was the mediating officer (a Frenchman of Armenian origin) for the rescue and evacuation of the Armenians from Musa Dagh, the commander of the Armenians from Musa Dagh was Esaïe Yacoubian.
10. Werfel, *op. cit.*, vol. I, pp. 65.
11. Christianity was implemented in Armenia by the apostles Thaddeus and Bartholomew, who preached here in the 1st century AD and who were martyred. Officially, Christianity was adopted in Armenia in 301 AD, when St. Gregory the Illuminator (after being kept in a punishment pit on the plain at the foot of Mount Ararat for 12 years) converted King Tiridates III. Armenians were one of the first nations to officially accept Christianity. Later, at the Council of Chalcedon (from 451 d. H.) a schism took place as a result of which the Armenian Church separated from the other Christian churches (due to divergences related to the nature of Christ), becoming an Independent Eastern Orthodox Church. For the understanding of Armenian Christianity, including iconic, imagistic, is emblematic the film directed by Sergei Paradjanov - *Sayat Nova* or *The Color of the Rhodians* (1969).
12. Werfel, *op. cit.*, vol. I, pp. 83.
13. Oliver Kohns, *op. cit.* pp. 167: "By becoming increasingly aware of his Armenian roots, that is, his ethnic, biological and cultural background, Gabriel is able to experience, in a completely harmonious way, the formation of his new but at the same time 'real' self as part, and as consequence, of his relationship with the Armenians as a collective people."
14. Jean-Marc Lafon, "Franz Werfel and the Armenian Genocide. Relevance of a look, prophecy of a speech?", In Patrick Louvier, Annick Asso, Hélène Demirdjian, *Expressing the Armenian Genocide. Knowledge, arts and commitment*, Rennes, Rennes University Press, 2016, page 105, <https://books.openedition.org/pur/46064>.
15. Werfel, *op. cit.*, vol. I, pp. 101.
16. *Ibidem*.
17. Կ. ՊԱԼՃԵԱՆ / G. Balgian, ՍՈՒՍԱ ԼԵՐԱՆ ՀԱՅԵՐԸ ՖՐԱՆՑ ՎԵՐՖԷԼԻ ՎԷՊԻՆ ՄԷՋ (ՎԵՐԼՈՒԾԱԿԱՆ ՓՈՐՁ) / *Armenii de pe Musa Dagh in romanul lui Franz Werfel (Eseu)*, București, 1940 / Manuscript translated in Romanian by Arpiar Sahaghian /, p. 15.
18. *Ibidem*, pp. 36.
19. *Ibidem*.
20. Werfel, *op. cit.*, vol. I, pp. 115.
21. *Ibidem*, vol. I, pp. 232.
22. *Ibidem*, vol. II, pp. 89.
23. *Ibidem*, vol. II, pp. 137.
24. *Ibidem*, vol. II, pp. 236.