

# COMMEMORATION FOR THE 40TH YEAR OF THE FIRST VICTIMS OF ASALA

(ASALA'NIN İLK KURBANLARI İÇİN 40NCI YIL ANMA TÖRENİ)

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## **Where do the murders of Mehmet Baydar and Bahadır Demir fit into the larger picture of modern Armenian terrorism?**

Typically, the assassinations of General Consul Mehmet Baydar and Consul Bahadır Demir, on January 27, 1973, are treated as merely one of three events in a timeline, spread over ten years, that bring us inevitably to the radicalization of the Armenian diaspora, and in particular its youth, and the violent terrorist campaign against the Turkish Government, Turkish citizens, Turkish business interests and, eventually, anyone in their way, that began in 1975.

The first event was the organized, worldwide commemorations and anti-Turkish demonstrations that took place in the spring of 1965 to mark the 50th anniversary of the events of 1915. This reawakened the dormant and suppressed Armenian nationalism and their grievances against the Turkish government.

The second event was the assassinations of Mr. Baydar and Mr. Demir by Gourgen Yanikian. The act itself, and his challenge to other Armenians to “wage war on representatives of the Turkish government,” not only served to emboldened those in the diaspora who had become frustrated with political and other non-violent methods, but stimulated and strengthened the resolve of the entire international diaspora as well.

The third and final event took place in the United Nations in the spring of 1974. A paragraph, specifically labeling the events of 1915 as the “first case of genocide in the twentieth century,” was deleted from a report on the prevention of genocide that was submitted to the UN Commission on

Human Rights. This was a paragraph that many Armenians had spent months advocating and lobbying for.

And so, the story goes, the extreme frustration this deletion caused within the Armenian community, the rising assertiveness of the Armenian diaspora since 1965, and the relatively well publicized murders of the Turkish diplomats in 1973, all came together at some point in late 1974 to produce Armenian terrorism.

I have been working on the subject of Armenian terrorism for close to three years now, and I can tell you that there are number of things wrong with the story that I have just laid out, too many, in fact, to cover in 15 minutes.

### **The “Re-Emergence of the Armenian Question: April 1965 – January 1973**

It is certainly true that the Armenian question re-appears from out of nowhere in early 1965.

The demonstrations on April 24 in Beirut drew nearly 85,00, and close to 100,000 participated in Yerevan. In Armenia, these demonstrations led to Soviet permission to hold annual public commemorations of April 24th, and to construct a memorial to the victims and territories lost to Turkey in 1915.

Here, in the United States, there were large demonstrations in New York, Washington and Los Angeles, and the major news organizations provided substantial coverage to the Armenian question for the first time in decades.

Although they would attract less and less national attention in the following years, these protest demonstrations by Armenian-Americans continued, and became increasingly more aggressive and anti-Turkish in nature.

In April 1971, for example, 2,000 Armenians protested outside the Turkish consulate in Los Angeles. In April 1972, they actually managed to confront General Consul Mehmet Baydar directly with a list of demands.

And in November 1972, over 50 Armenians were arrested after they disrupted and harassed the guests at a Turkish-American Society function at a Beverly Hills Hotel.

Book and pamphlet publishing also increased. In the decade prior to 1965, 15 items were published or republished in English on the Armenian question. 25 were published by Armenians in 1965 and by the end of 1972, that figure had reached close to 70, not including reprints of Ambassador’s Morgenthau’ Story and The Forty Days of Musa Dagh.

There was also a marked increase in the attention being paid to the events of 1915 in the U.S. Congress. Although it had rarely been mentioned during the 1950s, the coverage in the spring of 1965 was extensive: over 22 instances between April 4th and May 6th, involving over 40 U.S. Congressmen.

Finally, in addition to these demonstrations, publications and congressional speeches, in 1967 the Armenian-Americans in California successfully obtained permission to build a monument to the Armenian Martyrs of 1915.

However, even considering the prevailing atmosphere and environment, especially in California, the “re-surgence” or “re-emergence” of the Armenian question does not explain why Gourgen Yanikian sought justice by murdering two innocent two men. Or, by extension, the murders that would follow in 1975 and beyond.

### **A Much Longer History of Violence**

There is, however, a much deeper and darker side to this re-awakening of Armenian nationalism and the re-emergence of the Armenian Question that is often overlooked.

And I would argue that the deaths of Mr. Baydar and Mr. Demir were not only, or merely, the first two of the thirty-one Turkish diplomats who would be assassinated because of the frustrations of the Armenian diaspora but also a link between 10 murders in the early 1920s and the 29 in the late 1970s and 1980s that illustrates a sustained culture of violence within the Armenian diaspora. A culture that has glorified and venerated individuals who carried out attacks on ethnic Turks and which is visibly evident in the years leading up to the Yanikian murders and the assassinations in Vienna and Paris in October 1975.

This culture of violence has two components. The first is simply the honoring of any Armenian who avenges the Armenian people through the murder.

The second is the practice of dehumanizing the Turkish people through either racial or religious hate speech and holding all Turks, past, present and future, collectively and individually responsible for the events of 1915.

The second component is well known: the constant repetition of the language and terms used in the 19th century, and earlier, to negatively stereotype Turks: barbarians, savages, horde, rapists, etc., and the attributing of all the positive aspects and achievements of the Ottoman Empire to its Christian (i.e., Armenian and Greek) subjects.

That many of the Armenian publications in this period also endeavored to prove the guilt and responsibility to all Turks for the events of 1915 may not be as well known, but certainly would not surprise.

It is the first aspect, however, the practice of honoring and venerating violence within the diaspora, which is less well known, but extremely critical in explaining both the Yanikian murders and the many more that would follow. In order to analyze this in more detail we have to go back to the end of World War I.

### **The ARF, Nemesis and Tehlirian**

Between March 1921 and April 1922, Armenians operating Europe and the Caucasus assassinated Talat Pasha, Cemal Pasha and other prominent Ottoman officials and Armenian traitors. Known as Nemesis, this operation was orchestrated by members of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation in the United States and operated for 13 months, killing at least 10 individuals: 7 Turks, 1 Azeri and at least two Armenian traitors.

The most famous of the Nemesis agents was Soghomon Tehlirian, the young man who shot and killed Talaat Pasha in broad daylight on a busy street in Berlin (March 15, 1921) and who would later be found not guilty by the German jury who heard his case.

The key to his acquittal was in convincing the jury that he was so traumatized from witnessing the massacre of his entire family and village in Erzincan in 1915, that he was compelled to obey a vision of his dead mother who commanded him to avenge her, and his families' honor, by murdering Talaat.

While it certainly swayed the opinion of the court in 1921, we now know that Tehlirian's entire defense, his entire life story from 1915 to 1921, was deliberately fabricated by the ARF's lawyers in order to secure an acquittal from the court.

Regardless, Tehlirian instantly became a national hero and a revered figure within the Armenian diaspora, and was the honored guest of the diaspora throughout the world in 1922.

In the press and the literature, Tehlirian disappeared for the next 38 years, but re-emerged at the time of his death in May 1960 in California. Under the name of Saro Melikian, his obituary appeared in both the New York Times and The Times of London, and both articles reaffirmed his heroic status as the avenger of the Armenian people for the crimes of 1915.

Shortly thereafter, a multi-part series on the life of Soghomon Tehlirian appeared in the *Armenian Review*, and was followed by another in 1962. In 1965, to coincide with the 50th anniversary of 1915, the first book detailing and glorifying Tehlirian's role in the assassination of Talaat, and the indisputable righteousness of his cause, was published.

The book, at best, was an attempt at historical fiction, but was written and packaged as if it were Tehlirian's autobiography. Filled with crusade-like language and innuendos, it situates the Armenian question at the center of an epic struggle between good and evil.

Four years later, in 1969, a monument was erected in a Fresno, California cemetery to commemorate his life and the contributions and sacrifices he made to the Armenian nation.

In the 40 years since Yanikian's assassination of Mr. Baydar and Mr. Demir, it has become clear that the mythical status and reverence allotted to Soghomon Tehlirian within the Armenian community had a much more profound impact on Yanikian than simply the re-emergence of the Armenian question.

Poor, alone and disgraced, Yanikian wanted to secure his place in Armenian legend while he still could. And he had not only read the book on Tehlirian, he had even written to its author to applaud the quality of its content, and had met with him on at least one occasion.

### **January 27, 1973**

On January 27, 1973, Gourgen Yanikian, after months of careful planning and preparation, invited Mehmet Baydar and Bahadir Demir to lunch at a Santa Barbara hotel.

Instead of giving them the painting and currency he had promised, Yanikian shot and killed them both at point-blank range. He then called the police, reported the murders, and sat down calmly to wait for the police to arrive.

Yanikian had every intention of being caught and, like the trial in Berlin, turn his legal proceedings into a means through which to both publicize the Armenian version of the events in eastern Anatolia in 1915 and to indict the Turkish government for these alleged crimes.

What unfolded was essentially an almost flawless theatrical re-enactment of Tehlirian's 1921 trial, right down to the fabricated testimony.

Yanikian plead “not guilty” to murder, arguing that he did not kill two men, but that he “destroyed two evils,” and never exhibited any remorse for the taking of innocent lives.

Like Tehlirian, Yanikian claimed he was tormented by memories of an early twentieth century childhood in Eastern Anatolia. Born in Erzurum in 1895, his family barely escaped the massacres of Abdul Hamid II by fleeing to Kars.

He watched his brother murdered by two Turks in 1903, lost over 20 family members during World War I and its aftermath, and witnessed, firsthand, thousands of victims of the deportations while he was a member of one of the Armenian Volunteer Units in the Russian Army.

In the days preceding the double murder, he claimed that he was visited by apparitions of his murdered brother, and had promised this ghost that he would avenge him.

Like Tehlirian, the defense strategy employed by his lawyers attempted to show that the horrific scenes that Yanikian had witnessed as a child had caused “lasting trauma,” which, when combined with the pain caused by Turkey’s continued denial of the atrocities, left him mentally impaired.

The whole act was carefully constructed so Yanikian could portray himself as yet another victim, turned war hero, turned Armenian Avenger, like Soghomon Tehlirian.

The final FBI report on Yanikian, a comprehensive and thorough 600-page document, however, tells a much different story.

It shows a deranged, broke, and humiliated individual desperately looking for attention, redemption and a chance at glory at the end of his life.

To make sure that both he and the incident received the attention he believed it deserved, Yanikian mailed a 120-page manifesto to a numerous politicians, leaders, and news agencies, and mailed out over 400 letters to Armenians around the world, calling on them to wage war on Turkey and all representatives of the Turkish government.

Almost every pertinent aspect of his life that came out in the Santa Barbara courtroom was either refuted or made questionable, by the FBI report.

There is absolutely no evidence that Yanikian was ever concerned with the Armenian question before 1967 (the year he read the book on Tehlirian), that he was born Erzurum, visited Kars, or even volunteered in an Armenian

regiment. The records show he was born in Tabriz, Iran, and was in Moscow for the duration of the war.

But having studied the Tehlirian case, Yanikian would have known that this didn't necessarily matter. He would have known that his story, his justification for the murders, would be unquestionably accepted by the diaspora. A point proved by the funds donated to Yanikian's legal defense fund by Armenians from around the world.

Unlike the Armenian diaspora, however, the jury in California was either not convinced of Yanikian's story or felt that the events at the turn of the century had no bearing on a murder case in 1973, and the jury found him guilty of two counts of First Degree Murder.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, therefore, Gourgen Yanikian was much more than simply the first assassin of many during the 1970s and 1980s, or the inspiration for modern Armenian terrorism. He was a vital link between the ARF's assassins of the early 20th century and the generation of Armenian terrorists that emerged in 1975.

Yanikian proved that 60 years removed from the events of 1915, the diaspora would now support, both morally and financially, the assassination of any Turk and that carrying out these death sentences made one an instant hero, whether or not the victim was a diplomat, spouse or even a child. This was the end result of the cult of violence that had been nourished and encouraged within the Armenian communities around the world.

Less than a week after the murders, an article in the New York Times stated that it would be "an act of insanity" for Yanikian to hold Mr. Baydar or Bahadir Demir responsible for any alleged crimes that occurred in 1915.

Tragically, what the author of that article did not know was that the situation was much worse. In reality, thousands of Armenians had been conditioned to hold all Turks responsible for the alleged crimes of 1915, and many would soon follow Yanikian in his "act of insanity."

