

Moscow's Armenian Community Marks 100th Anniversary of Genocide

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Armenians gather to lay flowers at a memorial to victims of massacres as they mark the centenary anniversary of the mass killings, Apr. 23.

Ahead of President Vladimir Putin's visit to Yerevan on Friday to attend the centennial commemorations of the Armenian genocide, an atrocity that molded family histories and continues to fuel contentious political debate, Moscow's Armenian community convened to remember its victims and thank those who selflessly saved their relatives' lives.

Friday marks 100 years since the Ottoman Empire embarked on a series of massacres and deportations of its ethnic Armenian community that resulted in the deaths of more than one million people. Ottoman leaders, according to some historical accounts, accused Armenians — a Christian community of some two million living in what is modern-day eastern Turkey — of sympathizing with Russia, the empire's World War I foe.

Russia was and remains a pivotal country for the Armenians who fled their homeland

to escape the genocide. The country is home to 1.18 million ethnic Armenians and 60,000 Armenian nationals, according to the 2010 census. According to Moscow's official statistics service, there are more than 100,000 ethnic Armenians in the capital alone.

Russia is also among the score of countries that have officially recognized the Armenian genocide. Turkey, the successor state of the Ottoman Empire, vehemently rejects the term "genocide" to describe what happened to its Armenian population during World War I.

The State Duma adopted a resolution in 1995 condemning the "perpetrators of the extermination of Armenians" and declaring April 24 a day of remembrance for the victims of the genocide. More than 2,000 events are being held across 640 Russian cities to mark its 100th anniversary, according to Russia's Union of Armenians.

The Duma's resolution on the genocide states that through Russia's leadership, the great European powers of the First World War had in 1915 labeled the Ottoman Empire's actions against its Armenian community a "crime against humanity."

Russia's assistance to Armenian refugees went far beyond ideological support or religious affinities, according to Yury Navoyan, president of the Russian-Armenian Association.

Navoyan claims that some 200,000 Armenian refugees had sought refuge in the Russian Empire's North Caucasus by the summer of 1915, and that in total, more than 300,000 Armenians, among whom were many women and children, fled to Russia to escape the genocide. The tsarist government, according to Navoyan, provided Armenian refugees with two million rubles in financial assistance and assisted in their resettlement.

Many of the Armenian refugees died as they fled, according to various scholarly accounts of the events. A local newspaper from the period quoted by the Russian-Armenian Association reported that out of the 70,000 refugees located near the city of Echmiadzin (the modern-day Armenian city of Vagharshapat), 700 were dying each day from exhaustion, hunger and disease.

"Thanks to the Russian soldiers from the tsar's army, many Armenians who would have otherwise perished were saved," Archbishop Ezras Nersisyan, head of the Nor-Nakhichevan and Russian diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church, told The Moscow Times earlier this week. "There is a famous picture from the time showing a Russian soldier cradling an Armenian baby. That baby is someone's grandparent today."

Museum of Memory

Just as nearly every Russian has a personal story about World War II, the family histories of Moscow's Armenian community are intrinsically tied to the events of 1915. At the opening of the Armenian Museum of Moscow and Culture of Nations on Wednesday, descendants of genocide survivors, with forget-me-not flower pins on their lapels, recalled the horrors of the past. The director of a Moscow publishing house, Artur Artenyan, said that his great-grandfather was the only survivor of an extended family of 46 who fled the Ottoman Empire. Artenyan's great-grandfather had bribed an Ottoman soldier, hoping that he would spare his life. The soldier obliged but killed the man's brother with one shot to the back.

Even those who did not necessarily lose relatives in the Armenian genocide — like 57-year-old shopkeeper Nazani Oganesyanyan, who moved to Russia from Yerevan in 1999 in search of work — are brought to tears by their people's historical baggage.

"We have a legend according to which Armenians used to have blue eyes but their sorrow turned them black," she said, her bloodshot chestnut eyes welling up.

But on Wednesday, as it inaugurated a new 2,000-square-meter high-tech museum equipped with a 3-D movie theater and interactive exhibitions to honor the victims of the genocide, Moscow's Armenian community did not mope or wallow in collective self-pity. Its message was clear: Armenians had benefitted from other nations' largesse, but they have returned the favor and will continue to do so.

Speakers at the opening ceremony recalled the role of Armenians in the Soviet armed forces during World War II. According to Yury Bulatov, a faculty dean at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, the Soviet Army's 89th Rifle Division, composed primarily of Armenians, played a key role in the Battle of Berlin, which gave the final blow to Nazi Germany in 1945. The Allied victory over Nazi Germany, whose 70th anniversary Russia will mark with great pomp and ceremony on May 9, is attributable in part to the Armenians who fully embraced the country that had accepted them in their time of need, Bulatov said.

"There are only something like 10 million Armenians on the planet. But it feels like there are many more," Stanislav Govorukhin, chairman of the State Duma's culture committee, said at the opening ceremony of the museum, enumerating world-renowned ethnic Armenians such as French chanson star Charles Aznavour and Soviet composer Aram Khachaturian.

Ruben Grigoryan, president of the Rutsog-Invest investment holding who initiated and financed the construction of the museum, declined to reveal how much the facility had cost. A price tag is irrelevant if the idea behind the project is priceless, he said.

Giving Thanks

Other Russian-Armenian philanthropists have spearheaded a series of initiatives to raise international awareness of the genocide, with the hope of preventing the past from repeating itself.

One of the founders of 100 Lives — an international initiative aimed at honoring those who helped save the lives of hundreds of thousands of Armenians and at documenting the stories of the genocide survivors — is Russian businessman Ruben Vardanyan, the founding partner of investment boutique Vardanyan, Broitman and Partners, who presided over Moscow's elite Skolkovo School of Management for six years.

Vardanyan, who Forbes ranked this year as Russia's 92nd richest businessman with assets worth \$950 million, has pledged to help his historical homeland and keep the spirit of the genocide victims alive. American missionaries saved his grandfather from the genocide.

Along with U.S. entrepreneur Nubar Afeyan and Vartan Gregoryan, the president of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Vardanyan launched the 100 Lives' Aurora Prize for Awakening Humanity, a \$1 million grant to be awarded annually to individuals who risk

their lives for "others to survive and thrive," according to the project's website.

The nine-person selection committee, which includes U.S. actor and philanthropist George Clooney, will reveal this year's recipient of the award on April 24, 2016.

Its initiators stress that 100 Lives is an apolitical project, which is not meant to shame, blame or take part in political point-scoring.

"The heart of our initiative does not lie in the desire to achieve the recognition of the Armenian genocide," the project's communications partnership director, Aren Apikyan, wrote in an e-mail to The Moscow Times. "The recognition of what happened 100 years ago and respect for the memory of those who died or lost loved ones should be encouraged, of course. But this is not the objective of the 100 Lives project."

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