

IN SEARCH OF HOME

The Armenian Diaspora: between Belonging and Alienation

by Arpine Maniero



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Ever since the Armenian genocide in the Ottoman Empire there have been two Armenias: that of the widely scattered diaspora, which formed new memories and identities in exile, and that of those who, at different times, sought refuge in the Republic of Armenia. The story of these two extremes is one of longing to return, on the one hand, and being determined to stay, on the other, but perhaps common to both is the disparity between idealized expectations and harsh realities.

The story of the Armenian communities that have arisen in different countries since the Middle Ages as a result of political upheavals is inseparable from the story of the Armenian people as a whole. But it was only the genocide in the Ottoman Empire that was carried out in the shadow of the First World War and the mass expulsions that followed that would, from that point on, be described as [Spjurq](#)

Spjurq

Derived from the verb *spjur*, meaning scattered or dispersed, the word *spjurq* is used to refer to all the places around the world inhabited by Armenians outside Armenia.

This was a new expression which had not been used in the context of Armenian communities before. In the Near East, across Europe and as far away as North and South America, new communities arose whose notions of identity were based not so much on the Armenian Soviet Republic as on an idealized past. This led to tensions that would influence relations between the diaspora and Soviet Armenia going forward.

The Diaspora and Immigration: the 1920s and 1930s

The genocide against the Armenians and the associated mass deportations that took place during the First World War led to the expulsion of the Armenian community from Eastern Anatolia and Cilicia. Many survivors briefly returned after the war, but a new wave of emigration soon began, leading in particular to the countries of the Near East, Europe, the US and Latin America.

The first phase of the diaspora was marked by precarious living conditions and discrimination. In this situation, a return to Soviet Armenia became a political matter. More than 40,000 Armenians returned between 1921 and 1936¹, supported by organizations such as the [Armenian General Benevolent Union \(AGBU\)](#)

Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU)

The Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) is a globally active non-profit organisation founded in Cairo in 1906. It works mainly within the Armenian diaspora, promoting the preservation of Armenian identity and cultural legacy through training programmes, cultural initiatives and humanitarian projects. The AGBU supports schools, cultural institutions and aid programs in numerous countries and is the largest Armenian non-profit organisation in the world.

and the [Hayastani Ognutian Komite \(HOK\)](#)

Hayastani Ognutian Komite (HOK)

The Hayastani Ognutian Komitee (Support Committee for Armenians) was founded in September 1921 in Jerewan with the objective of helping the starving population and supporting the regeneration of the country, as well as developing close relations with Armenian diaspora communities around the world and organising the return of its members to their homeland.

, founded in 1921. Both of them mobilized donations and organised housing as well as employment for returnees.

The AGBU, which was considered to be a non-political non-profit organisation, became an important partner of the Soviet Armenian authorities. It financed transport and infrastructure projects and enabled the repatriation of thousands of people. However, ideological tensions between the Soviet order and the diaspora that was anchored in the West and on which the nationalist party [Daschnakcutiun](#)

Armenian Revolutionary Federation

also: ARF

The Armenian Revolutionary Federation was founded in Tbilisi in 1890 as a social democratic party. As part of the socialist movement, it set itself the goal of liberating Armenians from Ottoman and Russian rule. Today, the party is active both in Armenia and in the diaspora.

exerted a heavy influence, led in 1937 to the end of the collaboration and thus to a cessation of the repatriations.



Şde=Armenische Waisenkinder auf dem Weg über Jaffa nach Sowjetarmenien, Jerusalem 1925. Bibliothèque Nubar de l'UGAB, Paris, [Free access - no reuse](#)

At Home

Although most of the returnees came back to Soviet Armenia to escape hardship, the living and employment conditions they found there turned out to be little better. Social disadvantages and bureaucratic restrictions led to growing dissatisfaction among the immigrants and strengthened the potential for social tensions. At the same time, the Soviet authorities harbored growing suspicion towards the new arrivals, believing them to include “anti-Soviet elements” who were allegedly disseminating antisocial propaganda and spreading provocative rumors.

From the mid-1930s onwards, the lives of those who had been repatriated were affected by two opposing developments: on the one hand, a decision was made at KPdSU level in 1936 regarding “measures for accommodating immigrants in the Armenian SSR”, which stipulated comprehensive rules on the provision of accommodation, employment positions and social services for returnees and on the administration of donations provided by the Armenian diaspora.

At the same time, the Stalinist terror began, which claimed as its victims not only high-ranking functionaries and intellectuals but also ordinary citizens, among them many immigrants accused of being connected to “anti-Soviet Armenian parties and organizations” abroad. This wave of violence strengthened the already existing tension between the political reality of the Soviet order and the diaspora’s idealized vision of what the Armenian homeland should be.

Repatriation 1946–47

The second wave of immigration took place after the Second World War. People who had never lived in Soviet Armenia before were “repatriated”. Following a governmental decision by the USSR to allow the immigration of diaspora Armenians on 21 November 1945, immigration committees were established among the diaspora. One political episode increased their willingness to return: the [Catholicos of all Armenians](#)

Catholicos of All Armenians

also: Catholicos, Patriarch of Armenia, Patriarch of Etchmiadzin, Armenian Patriarch, Patriarch of Echmiadzin, Armenian Pope, Armenian Pontiff, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians, His Holiness Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians

The Catholicos of All Armenians is the title of the patriarch of the Armenian Apostolic Church, which dates back to the 4th century. The Catholicos is also considered the spiritual leader of the worldwide Armenian diaspora.

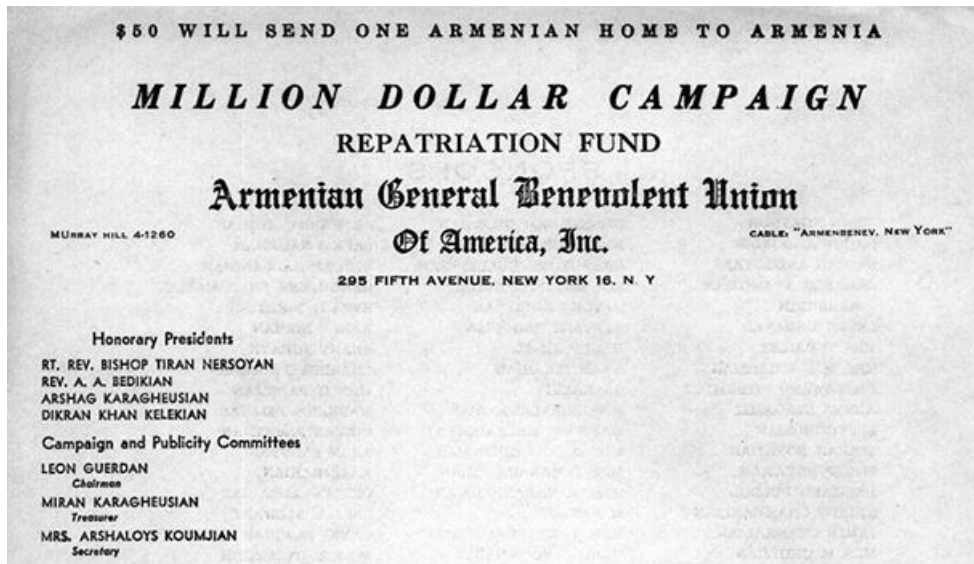
George VI asked Josef Stalin to reintegrate the regions of Kars and Ardahan into Armenia, which temporarily attracted international attention. Among the diaspora it also raised hopes that they would be able to recover the homeland that had been lost after the genocide.

Until its abrupt end in 1949, 89,637 people were repatriated through the program, mainly from the Near East and from Greece.² This was organised by the [Armenian Society for Cultural Relations \(AOKS\)](#)

Armenian Society for Cultural Relations (AOKS)

The Armenian Society for Cultural Relations (AOKS, after 1958, the Armenian Society for Friendship and Cultural Relations Abroad) was founded in 1944 in Jerewan. It promoted the development of contacts and cultural cooperation between citizens of the Armenian SSR and the peoples of other countries. It organised events such as exhibitions and film showings on national holidays and the anniversaries of different countries.

, the Armenian Apostolic Church and the AGBU, which together collection millions of dollars. The funds were intended primarily for the organisation of passages for those without financial means, but also for financing the construction of accommodation and infrastructure.



AGBU fundraising campaign. Bibliothèque Nubar de l'UGAB, Paris,
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Arrival and Disenchantment

The repatriation campaign was portrayed by the Soviet press in a predictably exaggerated fashion. It reported how the returnees were pleasantly surprised to discover that high school lessons were taught in Armenian, that Armenians sang at the opera and that an Armenian-language literature existed. According to the article, all of these were facts that would finally dispel the imperialistic, lie-filled fog that shrouded the reality of Soviet Armenia.³

But however great the enthusiasm of those returning home might have been, their arrival was accompanied by uncertainty and fear. Promises of a Soviet paradise were shattered by the precarious living conditions and the general indifference of the authorities that greeted them. Returnees frequently lost property en route due to damage, accidents while unloading and "unexplained" losses, and for many this represented a threat to their livelihood. One could not hope for compensation, and in an economy marked by a chronic shortage of consumer goods, lost items could not be replaced.⁴ Added to this were poor living conditions, food scarcity and social isolation. Even Western Armenian, the language spoken by most of the descendants of the victims of the genocide, was made into a key instrument for exclusion.⁵

The worst setback came with the post-war deportations. Any Armenians suspected of being disloyal on the grounds of their political views, party affiliations or origin, were deported. Of the estimated 80,000 who were deported in the late Stalin period, around 40,000 had previously been repatriated.⁶ In light of these circumstances many decided to leave the country following the death of Stalin, as soon as there was an opportunity to do so.



Şde=Armenische Repatrierte im Hafen von Alexandria 1947.
Bibliothèque Nubar de l'UGAB, Paris, [Free access - no reuse](#)

The diaspora and the DPs: the case of Stuttgart

In contrast to those diaspora Armenians who had been repatriated to Soviet Armenia following the Second World War, there was another group who did not wish to be repatriated under any circumstances: the Armenian DPs. As was the case with many other ethnic groups from the Soviet Union, after the end of the Second World War, refugee communities of Armenians grew up in various parts of Germany, and these were soon concentrated primarily in Stuttgart. The diaspora Armenians – especially those from the US – used all the resources at their disposal to enable the transfer of their homeless compatriots to safe countries.

In the final months of the war, many Armenians – prisoners of war and refugees from East and eastern Central Europe as well as the Soviet Union – managed to get to Vienna and Berlin and were then relocated to southern Germany due to a shortage of housing and work⁷, for example Rottweil, where there were already around 1,500 Armenian deportees by April 1945. ⁸ After the city was captured by French troops, the risk of repatriation became acute, since the French authorities cooperated with the Soviets in this matter. For this reason, many fled to the US-Zone and moved to places like Esslingen where they established their own camp and could even secure the support of the [United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration \(UNRRA\)](#)

United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration

also: International Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, UNRRA

The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) was an international organization founded in 1943 to provide humanitarian aid to victims of World War II. This included providing food and medicine, assisting in the reconstruction of the economy, and caring for displaced persons. After it ceased operations in 1947, the International Refugee Organization (IRO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) took over its remaining tasks.

Five Years in the Funkerkaserne (“radio barracks”)

In October 1945, the inhabitants of the refugee camp were able to move to the Stuttgart Funkerkaserne. By 1946 the population of the barracks, which had been swiftly renovated and repaired, had grown to 2,000 Armenians and around 150 Ukrainians.⁹ The camp contained a school, a kindergarten, workshops, culture and sports clubs and even a theatre group. Soon Armenian newspapers such as Taragir (“The Displaced”) and Banber (“The Messenger”) were being produced that served to preserve a national identity that deliberately distinct from that of Soviet Armenia.



Ա. ՏԱՐԻ № 9 ԵՐԵՎԱՆԻ 30-Ը ՆՈՅԵՄԲԵՐԻ

•ALICK• — •WELLE•

ARMENISCHE LITERARISCHE, GESCHICHTLICHE UND WISSENSCHAFTLICHE ZEITSCHRIFT

⁹de=„Die in der Funkerkaserne erschienenen Zeitschriften „Banber“, Taragir und Alik (Die Welle)“. [Free access - no reuse](#)

Within the camp, symbols of the First Republic of Armenia, such as the flag in the camp courtyard, were common, while portraits of leading functionaries of the Daschnakcutiun party decorated the walls.¹⁰ In contrast, Soviet Armenia was portrayed in somber colours: “Those who had ‘enjoyed’ the Soviet regime longed for this ‘paradise’.”¹¹



Şde=Die Flagge der Ersten Armenischen Republik (rot, blau, orange) im Hof der Funkerkaserne.. Carlson, John Roy: The Armenian Displaced Persons. In: Armenian. Affairs 1, 1 (1949-50). S. 25, [Free access - no reuse](#)

Final Stop, the United States

Life in the camp was marred by fear of repatriation. The visit by the US philanthropist George Mardikian in 1946 brought hope: in his address to the camp inhabitants, he assured them that he had “knocked on every door and turned over every stone” in order to enable the resettlement of the Armenians, and that he would not rest until “the last Armenian had been settled in a safe place”.¹²

[The American National Committee to Aid Homeless Armenians \(ANCHA\)](#)

The American National Committee to Aid Homeless Armenians (ANCHA)

The American National Committee to Aid Homeless Armenians (ANCHA) was founded in 1945 in the US, on the initiative of George Mardikian among others, with the primary objective of helping Armenian refugees in Europe to resettle after the Second World War. The ANCHA successfully supported thousands of displaced Armenians resettle in the United States and played a significant role in ensuring that they had housing and work and were able to begin new lives there.

, which organised the transfer of DPs to safe countries, was created at his initiative. The camp inhabitants were prepared for the selection procedure held by the US Congress, received training and instruction in English.¹³

As a result of the efforts of the ANCHA, the US government agreed to accept the Armenian DPs, so that by October 1949, 617 people were able to leave the Funkerkaserne for the US. By autumn 1951, intercessions by ANCHA had made it possible for more than 3,000 Armenians to relocate to the US as well as Brazil, France, Venezuela, Iran, Lebanon and other countries.¹⁴

Conclusion

The immigration of the diaspora Armenians in the 1920s and 1930, the repatriations following the Second World War and the fate of the Armenian DPs as a counterpart to the return movement were to have a lasting effect on relations between the Armenian diaspora and Soviet Armenia. While the return in the 1920s of those who had been expelled in many cases meant salvation from precarious living conditions, the second wave of repatriations following World War II was characterized by the idealized and romanticized notions of a shared homeland.

By contrast, in the DP camp in Stuttgart it was a sense of disillusionment with the reality of Soviet Armenia that prevailed. Ideas of "home" in the diaspora were thus formed by differing historical and political contexts: through the legacy of the genocide, through the loss of a historical homeland, however defined, through memories of the short-lived First Republic of Armenian, but also through deep mistrust of Soviet rule in Armenia.

English translation: [Gwen Clayton](#) ↗

Footnotes

1. Melkonyan, Eduard: Haikakan Beregorjakan Endhanur Miutian Patmutiun [Die Geschichte der Armenischen Allgemeinen Wohltätigen Vereinigung], Jerewan 2005, p. 203-217. [↑](#)

2. Lehmann, Maïke: A Different Kind of Brothers: Exclusion and Partial Integration: After Repatriation to a Soviet "Homeland". *Ab Imperio*, 3/2012. p. 179. [↑](#)
3. Pravda. 1946. 16 December, p. 2. [↑](#)
4. Laycock, Jo: Belongings: People and Possessions in the Armenian Repatriations 1945-49. In: *Exploration in Russian and Eurasian History*, 18 (3), 511-537. [↑](#)
5. See Lehmann, Maïke: A Different Kind of Brothers: Exclusion and Partial Integration: After Repatriation to a Soviet "Homeland". *Ab Imperio*, 3/2012. [↑](#)
6. See Lehmann, Maïke: A Different Kind of Brothers: Exclusion and Partial Integration: After Repatriation to a Soviet "Homeland". *Ab Imperio*, 3/2012, p. 205. [↑](#)
7. Gevorgian, Karo: Armenische Vertriebene in Deutschland während des Zweiten Weltkriegs und danach. In: *Amenun Teregirke (Almanach für alle)*. p. 139-140. [↑](#)
8. Gevorgian, Karo: Armenische Vertriebene in Deutschland während des Zweiten Weltkriegs und danach. In: *Amenun Teregirke (Almanach für alle)*. p. 139-140. [↑](#)
9. Gevorgian, Karo: Armenische Vertriebene in Deutschland während des Zweiten Weltkriegs und danach. In: *Amenun Teregirke (Almanach für alle)*. p. 149. [↑](#)
10. Carlson, John Roy: The Armenian Displaced Persons. In: *Armenian Affairs* 1, 1 (1949-50). p. 24-25. [↑](#)
11. Torlakian, Misak: *Oerus het [Mit meinen Tagen]*. Beirut 1963. p. 565. [↑](#)
12. Torlakian, Misak: *Oerus het [Mit meinen Tagen]*. Beirut 1963. p. 11. [↑](#)
13. Torlakian, Misak: *Oerus het [Mit meinen Tagen]*. Beirut 1963. p. 14. [↑](#)
14. Ordukhanyan, Azat: Die armenischen Displaced Persons in Deutschland nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg. In: *Drost-Abgarjan, Armenuhi: Armenologie in Deutschland*. Münster 2005. p. 232. [↑](#)