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Memory, Conflict and Space



**The “memory war”. Public debates and conflicts  
surrounding a monument to commemorate the  
Armenian genocide (1995-1998)**

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## Introduction

In Canada, over the last few years, various levels of government have been repeatedly receiving requests for recognition by groups representing victims of injustice and of discrimination (Pâquet, 2006). The most recent case concerns the First Nations People in Canada and the creation of The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) in 2009. Its mandate was to shed light on the crimes committed in residential schools between 1870 and 1996.

Another example is the agreement signed in 1988 between Canadians of Japanese descent and the Canadian government, seeking to correct the injustices committed against Japanese Canadians when many of them were interned in camps across Canada during World War II. Such initiatives demonstrate the recent willingness of Canadian society, like so many other Western societies, to recognize, redress, and forgive.

Within this context, our article concentrates specifically on the 1998 controversy surrounding the erection of a monument in Montreal - *La Réparation* – to commemorate the Armenian genocide.

Our socio-historical analysis of the facts seeks to highlight the political and symbolic aspects surrounding the Montreal Armenian community's request that the genocide be recognized. To this end, we have combed through a large body of press reports that appeared between 1996 and 1998 in two prominent daily newspapers in Quebec, *La Presse* and *Le Devoir*. We have also analyzed the archives of contracts between the City of Montreal, the Armenian National Committee, and Francine Larivée, the sculptor who created the monument.

This article will be divided into three parts.

First, we will take a brief look at the history of the Armenian community in Montreal, with its demands for recognition and for the right to claim its historical past.

Second, based on the analysis of our corpus of press reports, we will examine the controversy surrounding the 1998 construction of a monument to commemorate the victims of the 1915 genocide, a controversy that pitted the Montreal Armenian and Turkish communities against each other.

Third, we will examine the bitter divisions and attacks reflected in the newspaper articles, letters to the editor and official reports submitted by each side following the decision to build a commemorative monument for the victims of all genocides, including the 1915 Armenian genocide.

### **1- The Armenian community in Montreal: organization, identity, and collective memory**

It is important to note the recent origins of the Armenian community in Canada. Nearly a thousand refugees settled in Ontario and Quebec after the 1915 genocide (Kaprelian-Churchill, 1990: 87-93). This number increased considerably toward the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to an influx of immigrants from the Mediterranean region, especially Greece and Lebanon. According to various sources, the Armenian community in Montreal was made up of between 19,000 and 35,000 members in 2001 (Lenoir-Achdjian, 2001: 128-129).

The community developed and produced influential organizations and institutions, including churches and cultural associations. Today there are dozens of organizations and newspapers that demonstrate the community's vitality. Beyond their differences, these organizations share the same objective to maintain and promote Armenian culture and history. Researchers interested in the question of the Armenian identity have shown that this culture was transmitted and maintained through perpetuating the historical memory of the Armenian people and particularly of the 1915 genocide (Hovanessian, 2007. Altounian, 2000).

For the majority of the Armenian diaspora, Turkey should recognize and redress the wrongs it committed during the genocide. In Quebec, the request for the recognition of the Armenian genocide emerged in 1965 with the anniversary of the 1915 commemoration (Attarian, 1999: 263-265). But, it was in the 1960s and particularly in the 1980s—when the Armenian community was enjoying a boom—that the intensity of the request increased. During this period, on April 24 of each year, the community organized public protests to commemorate the crimes that remained unpunished. On this occasion, politicians in Quebec, intellectuals of diverse backgrounds, and advocates of the Armenian cause participated in these events (Chabot, Godin, 2006).

At the same time, community representatives did not hesitate to speak out through letters to the editor and articles that appeared in major Quebec newspapers denouncing the Turkish denial. These letters, articles, and annual protests brought the recognition of the genocide to the fore in the public sphere in Quebec (Chabot, Kasparian, Thériault, 2008).

However, it was only in the 1990s that the Armenian community, now well integrated into Quebec society, began to direct requests toward Quebec authorities instead of toward the Turkish representatives. It wanted to have April 24<sup>th</sup> officially recognized as the commemorative day for the Armenian genocide in Montreal and in the province of Quebec. The Montreal City Council officially accepted this request in April 1999 and the Quebec National Assembly did so in December 2003. It is in this context that the controversy broke out surrounding the construction of a commemorative monument *La Réparation*, a monument the Armenian community offered to the City of Montreal.

## **2- Origin and development of the “memory war”**

The controversy around the construction of the monument unfolded in six acts over a period of approximately three years. The twists and turns of this situation are too numerous to mention here, so we have chosen to focus on the highlights of the acrimonious debate over the project between the two opposing sides. The first act transpired on April 22<sup>th</sup>, 1995, in a public park in the neighbourhood where the Armenian community traditionally settled. The newly elected mayor of Montreal, Pierre Bourque, announced the future construction of a monument commemorating the Armenian genocide to be built conjointly by the City and by the Montreal Armenian community centre. However, in January 1996, without giving any explanation, the City Council decided to postpone the project.

The second act followed on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1996. Montreal newspapers announced that the municipal administration had postponed the construction of the commemorative monument because of pressure from the Turkish Consulate General located in Montreal. Thus, the controversy broke out again. The opposition in the City Council denounced the mayor and declared that the postponing had been “a terrible setback for the Armenian community in Montreal.” (*La Presse*, March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1996: A5). In an interview with *La Presse*, a municipal councillor of Armenian descent and a member of the party in power, Hasmig Belleli, recalled that “the Turkish government has tried everything, everywhere, since the beginning, to keep my community from remembering [it’s past].” (*La Presse*: March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1996: A5).

As the commemorative date approached, the members of the Armenian community organized a protest in the park Marcellin-Wilson where the monument was to have been built. The objective of the protest was to commemorate the genocide, but also to denounce the postponing of the monument.

The third act brought in new participants. When questioned about the administration’s decision, the mayor Bourque implied that not only the Turkish authorities, but also the

Canadian government had reportedly intervened to postpone the construction of the monument (*Le Devoir*, March 11<sup>th</sup>, 1996: A3). The Turkish Consulate General in Canada quickly denied having threatened the City of Montreal to cancel certain major contracts awarded to Quebec firms (*La Presse*, March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1996: A5). At the same time, it admitted to having talked with the mayor about these contracts, but in another context. Canada's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Pierre Pettigrew, claimed that the mayor of Montreal's allegations of lobbying by the federal government were ridiculous (*Le Devoir*, March 11<sup>th</sup>, 1996: A3), noting however that he had reminded the mayor of the Canadian government's position, that it considered the Armenian case a "tragedy" and not a "genocide."

A few days later, on April 29, 1996, the main leaders of the Turkish community in Montreal published a letter to the editor of *La Presse*. It called Montrealers' attention to "the bitterness and indignation of their community regarding the pressure tactics used by some Armenians to build a monument commemorating the so-called Armenian genocide." (*La Presse*, April 29<sup>th</sup>, 1996: B3) The authors declared that the Turkish community wondered if "elected officials in the city have the right to resolve a historical controversy that is not connected to their own country, [...], in favour of one [immigrant] community at the expense of another." (*La Presse*, April 29<sup>th</sup>, 1996: B3) According to the authors, this debate concerned specialists and historians, not the citizens of a newly adopted country. Furthermore, the leaders of the Turkish community viewed the construction of this monument as an insult to them and to their ancestors.

A few days later, a Quebec association of artists for peace also took a stand regarding this debate. In a May 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to *Le Devoir*, the authors expressed their deep concern in the face of the postponement and possible cancellation of the monument commemorating the Armenian genocide. They believed that the Armenians' chief weapon against the denial of

the Turkish authorities remained their cultural expression and, thus, the memory of the Armenian massacre would be best transmitted through the construction of the monument. The fourth act revolved around several unexpected outcomes. On August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1996, Charles Grandmont, a journalist with *La Presse*, announced that 7,000 Montrealers of Turkish descent had given the city a garden of tulips imported from Turkey named the Turkish Peace Garden. Contacted by *La Presse*, the representative of the Armenian National Committee reported that he viewed the City of Montreal's acceptance of the garden project to be an offense against Armenians. The municipal councillor, Hasmig Belleli, who had reacted the previous year to the postponement of the monument, announced that she would oppose the Peace Garden if there had been political implications behind the gift. The mayor Pierre Bourque replied that there had been no political motives behind the Turkish community's initiative. To the contrary, he even wanted the Turkish Peace Garden to be planted within Montreal's Botanical Garden, "a non-political [public] location that already contains a Chinese Garden." (*La Presse*, August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1997: A21) However, as the journalist Grandmont added, Turkish Tulips and an Armenian monument are incompatible in the same city.

Nevertheless, *La Presse* announced on October 23<sup>rd</sup> that the City of Montreal was on the verge of accepting the monument project as planned. On this occasion, the City's representative, Louise Sansregret, said: "It will be a monument dedicated to all genocide victims and make a plea for tolerance and humanism." (*La Presse*, October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1997: A7) The *Devoir* quoted an article by the representative of Montreal's department of culture (Service de la culture), Pierre G. Laporte: "Let's say that the initial project has been generalized." (*Le Devoir*, January 7<sup>th</sup>, 1998: B8) Contacted by a journalist from *La Presse*, the president of the Armenian National Committee, Raffi Donabedian, remained prudent

regarding this “generalization” saying he was afraid that the text accompanying the monument would not specify the “Armenian genocide.” (*La Presse*, October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1997: A7)

The fifth act concerned the “generalization” of the project. On April 24<sup>th</sup>, 1998, a short newspaper article announced the unveiling of the model for the commemorative monument entitled *La Réparation*. It also confirmed that the monument would be dedicated to all genocide victims in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but a plaque at the entrance of the park would remind people of the Armenian genocide (*La Presse*, April 24<sup>th</sup>, 1998: A7).

The final act occurred at the monument’s inauguration on October 4<sup>th</sup>, 1998. Six days later, on October 10<sup>th</sup>, *La Presse* reported that the Montreal Turkish community had been irritated at the monument’s construction. Five days after, on October 15<sup>th</sup>, 1998, a well-known editorial writer for *La Presse*, Lysiane Gagnon, expressed her opinion in an article entitled “The trivialization of genocide” (*La banalisation du génocide, La Presse*, October 15<sup>th</sup>, 1998: B3). She strongly denounced the fact that the monument was dedicated to all genocide victims of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, indiscriminately combining events that, in her opinion, did trivialize the only two genocides internationally recognized, that of the Jews and of the Gypsies. She considered that the City should have dedicated the monument to the Holocaust victims who were still numerous in Montreal’s Jewish community. Despite all the debates, controversies, diplomatic conflicts, competition among victims, and the “memory war,” the history of the *Réparation* monument leads us to question the difficulties of managing the request for the recognition of the historical memory held by victims of traumatic events in the public arena of their new society.

### **3- The “memory war”: Management difficulties in Montreal’s public sphere**



The monument *La Réparation* was the fruit of a political compromise that reflected the difficulties experienced when memory and identity conflicts between two irreconcilable representations of the past (Armenian and Turkish) are played out in the public arena. In this respect, we can make two observations.

First, the public debates regarding the monument clearly underline the elements related to memory and identity in the 1915 event, elements that mobilize resources in both communities, but to opposite ends.

On the Turkish side, the mobilization against the construction of *La Réparation* is consistent with the sociologist Sirma Bilge's called: "struggle against anti-Turk lobbying," which has become a characteristic of the Turkish community's identity (Bilge, 2003: 129). Indeed, this mobilization, which has taken on the appearance of a "patriotic mission," defends the image of the Turkish State as well as of the Turkish community in Montreal.

On the Armenian side, constant efforts to make sure that the historical memory of the genocide be recorded in the public arena is a strategy waged against Turkish denial. These efforts also reflect the conditions that the Armenian community wanted to transmit in order to share its identity and memory within a new society. It is clear that these conditions involve Quebecers in a difficult process of recognition and symbolic reparation.

Second, for municipal authorities, managing this issue was arduous and strewn with obstacles. A cosmopolitan city, Montreal sought to smoothly integrate diverse communities into a political initiative based on the respect of all cultures. But, municipal authorities were seemingly unprepared to assume the role of arbitrator between exclusive and hostile community memories.

Confronted with two communities seeking to promote contradictory visions of history, it was impossible to negotiate a middle ground to represent the past that would have satisfied

both parties. This is why the City's mandate regarding the commemorative monument clearly established artistic criteria for this recognition based above all on tolerance (Ville de Montréal, 1998). By widening the range to all genocide victims in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the monument sought to reflect "the reconciliation and harmony among Montrealers of diverse ethnic origins." (Ville de Montréal, 1997) The "generalization" of the *La Réparation* monument, according to the terms of municipal authorities, should be seen as the new symbolic location for the commemoration of the Armenian genocide. It was a question of modulating the initial goal of the monument through which the Armenian community sought to preserve the memory of the traumatic 1915 event and transmit it to the present.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude this article, it is clear that the request for recognition by the Armenian community contributed to change the public sphere and the collective memory of Montreal. By accepting this enlarged project, the city's authorities recognized *de facto* the 1915 event. The Armenian genocide found its meaning in the universality of the historical memory. However, the intercultural and political tensions that arose during the process forced the City to be diplomatic and to seek a compromise to redefine the way to attain this inclusion, that is, how to recognize a type of crime, and at the same time to promote reconciliation and tolerance. This compromise was both political and symbolic. On the one hand, the monument dedicated to all genocide victims was to mention the 1915 genocide without naming those responsible for it. On the other hand, the Botanical Garden would welcome the Turkish Peace Garden.

The initial objective aiming to recognize the Armenian genocide by building a commemorative monument was certainly not attained; it was a victim of the internal wars between politicians and participants. In the end, the request for a symbolic recognition by the Armenian community was diluted and associated with other causes. Today, another monument project is under way in Laval, a satellite town of Montreal, where the Armenian community is growing and asserting itself more and more. This will be another monument on the long list of those constructed since 1915 in the different countries inhabited by the Armenian diaspora. These monuments are symbolic places for the commemoration of a grieving nation; a grief that impacts Armenian communities around the world, in the face of the radical denial of the genocide by the Turkish government.

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