

ANTI-SEMITISM AND THE LIFE OF JEWS IN ARMENIA

In Armenia, there is a discriminatory attitude towards ethnic and religious minorities. Among such minorities are Jews who experience problems in various spheres of life.

Jews settled in the South Caucasus in different historical periods. According to 2017 statistics, there are 7,800 Jews in Azerbaijan and 1,600 in Georgia (1). **As**

for Armenia, sources indicate different numbers of the Jewish population in this country - from 100 (2) to 500 people, and Ashkenazic and Mizrahi Jews prevail among them. Currently, the Jews of Armenia, along with the capital Yerevan, also live in the cities of Vanadzor and Sevan (3). Before the devastating Spitak earthquake on 7 December 1988, small groups of Jews also

The Holocaust monument in Yerevan desecrated by vandals



Poster of the Armenian Legion of Hitlerite Germany which took part in the extermination of Jews



lived in the city of Gyumri (at that time Leninakan; 4).

It should be noted that during the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945), there was an influx of Jewish migrants in Soviet Armenia, seeking refuge from persecution. In the postwar years, the number of Jews in

the republic reached 5,000, and according to 1959 statistics, this figure was 10,000 (5). Later, in connection with the economic recovery of 1965-1972, the influx of Jewish migrants from Russia and Ukraine increased even more.



With the collapse of the USSR and the emergence of independent Armenia, not only did the influx of Jewish migrants stop, **there was a tendency for the outflow of Jews from the country. The main reason for this, in addition to the deep socioeconomic crisis, was the growth of anti-Semitism**, which in fact became an integral part of state policy. It is significant that if in 1989 1,246 Jews emigrated from Armenia to Israel, in 1992-1994. - more than 6,000 (6).

Today in Armenia, whose government is taking steps to improve relations with Israel, open calls of an anti-Semitic nature are being heard. Article 41 of the Constitution of the Republic of Armenia states: *"Everyone has the right to defend their national and ethnic identity. People belonging to national minorities have the right to preserve and develop their traditions, religion, languages and culture"* (7). However, this constitutional norm, alas, remains on paper. Israeli political scientist Arye Gut has published an article entitled "Anti-Semitism in Armenia: A Clear and Present Danger" in the American Jewish newspaper The Algemeiner, which notes: *"The end of Soviet rule removed constraint, and anti-Semitic attacks rose dramatically. In just 20 years, Armenian Jewish population has shrunk from more than 5,000 to just a few hundred."* (8).

The question arises: what is the reason for hostile-

*Poster of the Armenian Legion of Hitlerite Germany
which took part in the extermination of Jews*

ity towards Jews in Armenian society? Along with the peculiarities of the Armenian ethnic consciousness, ideological factors play a role too. The fact is that, **according to the thesis adopted in Armenia about the so-called "Armenian genocide" in the Ottoman Empire in 1915, devoid of real historical arguments, Jews allegedly participated in the massacres of the Armenian population.** In this context, any exaltation in Armenia of such Nazi criminals as the former general of the fascist army **Garegin Nzhdeh**, or the general of the armed forces of the Dashnak Ararat Republic in 1918-1921 (having stained his hands in the blood of Azerbaijani civilians), the commander of the Armenian Legion during World War II, Drastamat Kanayan, known by the nickname Dro, looks logical (10). As Arye Gut points out in his article, *"the purpose of the Armenian Legion, headed by the military leader Dro, who personally participated in the murders of thousands of Jews, was the extermination of Jews and other peoples undesirable for the German army"* (20). Another factor in the strengthening of anti-Semitism in Armenia is also the development of fruitful cooperation between Israel and Azerbaijan.

Anti-Semitism in Armenia exists on three levels: 1) everyday anti-Semitism; 2) anti-Semitism in political circles, including in government agencies; 3) anti-Semitism in the information space - in the media.

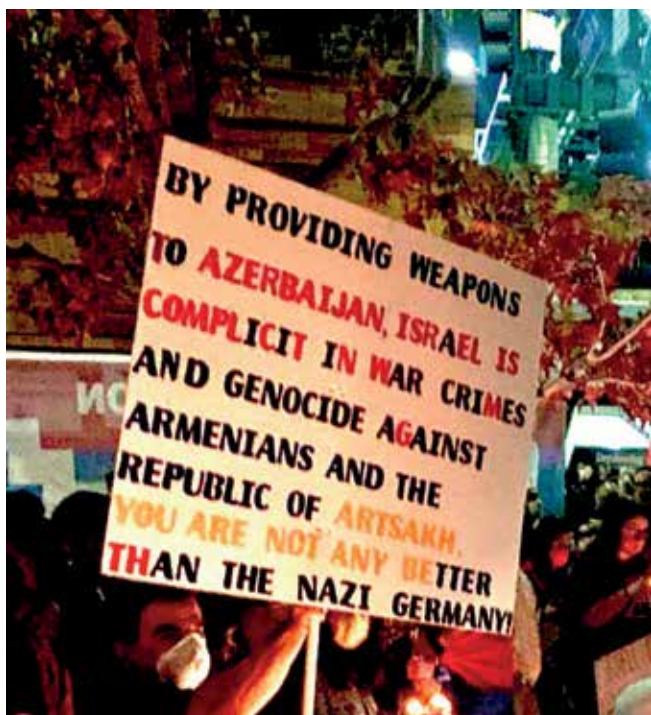
A vivid example of anti-Semitic sentiments in Armenia is the story of the memorial to the victims of the Holocaust in Yerevan. In 2003, under the pretext of building a building at this site, it was decided to move the memorial. **The real motive was the desire of the authorities to hide the deplorable state of this monument as a result of numerous cases of damage and even desecration.** Through the efforts of the Jewish community, the memorial was moved to another part of the capital, but very soon damage appeared on it again: unknown persons clearly tried to remove Jewish symbols from the monument with the help of a hammer and nails (11). In 2004, on the last day of the Jewish New Year, unknown persons engraved the "satanic" number 666 on the memorial, and on 26 January 2005, a swastika was painted on the monument in black. This symbol was quickly washed away, but the desecration itself received wide publicity (12). Finally, after some time, the monument was overturned. Representatives of the Jewish community contacted the police, but the investigation was carried out on a purely formal basis,



and the complainants did not receive comprehensive information. In the end, the authorities announced that the cause of the collapse was damage to one of the pillars of the monument. Not content with this explanation, members of the Jewish community conducted a survey in the park where the monument stood, and one of the respondents said that since the erection of the monument at this place, 6-7 attacks had been carried out on it in one form or another, and that the supports were strong enough (13).

Over the past years, several anti-Semitic comments have appeared in the Armenian media. For example, the former leader of the Aryan Union of Armenia party, Armen Avetisyan, known for his chauvinistic speeches, **urged Israeli Ambassador Rivka Cohen to be declared "persona non grata", arguing that Israel does not recognize the notorious "Armenian genocide"** (14). In addition, Avetisyan published an anti-Semitic article in Yerevan newspaper, which notes: *"In every country with a Jewish minority, there is a great threat to stability"* (15). Being the most covered person by the Armenian media in 2003-2004, the ex-leader of the Armenian "Aryans" stated on one of the TV programmes that there were *"50,000 hidden Jews"* in the country, who *"must be identified and deported abroad"* (16).

According to the same Arye Gut, *"Armenia recognizes the Holocaust in order to show off, but at the same time, fascist ideology and racial discrimination are being promoted in Armenia at the state level, monuments to Armenian nationalists, who worked closely with fascist Germany, are being erected, their names are assigned to streets, squares, educational institutions, strategic centres and other facilities"* (17).



An anti-Semitic poster at a march in Yerevan. 2020

Today there is every reason to conclude that in modern Armenia, **the nationalist groups that came to power immediately after the restoration of independence have created a kind of “Armenian model of fascism”**. The country’s Jewish community was seriously outraged by an interview with Hranush Kharatyan, head of the government committee for ethnic and religious minorities, in Golos Armenii newspaper. In the interview, Kharatyan claimed that the festive rituals associated with the Jewish Shabbat day were supposedly hostile to non-Jews and anti-Christian in nature. The leaders of the Jewish community sent a letter to President Robert Kocharyan, in which this excerpt of the interview was described as “lies, slander and ignorance”, and a demand was made to take measures against manifestations of anti-Semitism. However, this appeal remained unanswered, and Kharatyan herself stated that she was not going to apologize for what she had said (18).

Another clear confirmation of the hothouse conditions for anti-Semitism in Armenia is **the participation of President Serzh Sargsyan in the solemn ceremony to unveil a monument to Nazi criminal, General of Nazi Germany Garegin Nzhdeh**, which was erected in Yerevan in May 2016. Today Armenia is promoting so-called “Nzhdehism” - the ideology of chauvinism and intolerance towards non-Armenians, which is even included in the curricula to clog the minds of the younger generation.

It is notable that none of the invited officials, political and public figures, except for MP Mkrtich Minasyan, attended the Holocaust memorial ceremony held by the Jewish community on 27 January 2006 (19). Among those who did not respond to the invitation was the same S. Sargsyan, who held the post of defence minister at that time.

Modern Armenia publishes books and articles, and broadcasts television programmes of anti-Semitic content. In 1998, an article by Igor Muradyan was published, which claimed that Jews create ethnic shifts and that **Jews are involved in the emergence of the Karabakh problem. The author states that Jews who have close relations with the Turks pose a threat to Armenia** (21). The owner of ALM Media, Tigran Karapetyan, stated in his speech that Jews are a flawed race that rules the world and that they pose a danger to Armenia. The speaker went as far as asserting that the Talmud carries an “aggressive ideology” (22). In Yerevan, a book by Romen Yepiskopyan was published in Armenian and Russian under the title “The National System”, in which Jews were declared to be the culprits of all the troubles that befell the Armenian people. The author calls the Turks a “nation of conspirators” and the Jews “a destroying nation”. **Declaring the Holocaust a myth, the author of this opus accused the Jews of the notorious “Armenian genocide”**. This book was criticized in another newspaper, however, in essence, this criticism is nothing more than an attempt to mask the fact that it is close to the official point of view. As real processes show, modern Armenia takes no real measures at the state level against the spread of anti-Semitism (23).

Contrary to the statement by the chairman of the Jewish community of Armenia, Rima Varzhapetyan, that “*there is no anti-Semitism in Armenia. There are no problems with Jews*” (24), the reality shows the opposite. On 28 March 2018, the PEW Research Centre circulated a message that the level of anti-Semitism in Armenia is 32 per cent, and that this country is the least tolerant of Jews among 18 countries in Eastern Europe.

The aforesaid shows that in Armenia, which has officially recognized the Holocaust, hostility towards Jews is widespread, and at the same time, open apologetics of historical figures who aided Nazi Germany in the extermination of Jews is carried out at the official level. 🌟

Modern Armenian youth are brought up in the spirit of worship of the Armenian Legion. The inscription on the flag: "Armenian Legion"

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