The origin of the Armenian diaspora can be traced back more than 1500 years. The original Armenian homeland, where Armenian culture and identity were first forged, is situated to the East of Anatolia and to the South of the Caucasus. Its population has been consistently dispersed over the centuries to neighbouring areas, and in particular to the rest of the European continent.

Dispersion has had different causes, including military service, trade, the attraction of imperial or trade centres such as Constantinople, deportations, wars and genocide. The Armenian homeland, furthermore, has only intermittently experienced full sovereignty. The durability of the phenomenon of dispersion over the centuries has caused the creation of one of the ancient European diasporas.

Indeed, this consistent process of dispersion and circulation, over the last 1500 years, has been so persistent as to appear organic. According to historian Vladimir Bakhudaryan, "for centuries not only did the large Armenian masses find themselves outside of Armenia, but so did their cultural, public and political centres. In the Armenian colonies, Armenian culture was not only preserved but it also developed. It is significant that the first printed Armenian book and the first Armenian periodical originated in Armenian communities in foreign countries (respectively in Venice and Madras). Therefore these communities, also part of the history of their host country, were an inseparable part of the history of the Armenian nation.". The sociologist of diasporas J.M. Bruneau coined a phrase, "les peuples-monde la longue durée" to designate groups, such as the Armenians, that have experienced dispersion and yet preserved their identities over the centuries.

Today, the Armenian population worldwide can be estimated very roughly at 10,000,000. About 7,000,000 of them live in Europe including Armenia (2.9 mln) and Mountainous Karabakh (146.000). The largest concentrations of Armenians in Europe outside the homeland are in Russia (2.5 mln), France (0.6 mln), Ukraine (400.000), Georgia (250.000), Spain (80.000), Greece (70.000), Germany (60.000), Bulgaria (50.000), Poland (50.000), Hungary (20.000), the United Kingdom (20.000), the Netherlands (15.000), Belgium (20.000) and other countries.

The institutions of the Armenian diaspora have naturally evolved over time and from one country to another. Its durability is linked to the existence and autonomy of such institutions as the Armenian church and to the distinctiveness of the Armenian language, that has its own alphabet and litterature. The diaspora has also arguably been fostered by the unique position of the Armenians, straddling as they did the Christian and Muslim worlds: this has allowed the Armenians to establish extensive trade networks and contribute to the circulation of ideas and of technology over the centuries.

Armenian communities today are typically composed of a diversity of associations, based on cultural, educational, charitable and religious activities. The Church and teaching of the Armenian language and culture are often central to the community. Donating to good causes play an important role in Armenian communities, whether for the benefitt of community institutions or for people in need, most recently Armenians from Syria. Mobilization for political causes is also a focus of

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community activities, particularly for the recognition of the Armenian genocide. Traditional Armenian political parties are marginal in numbers, but remain influential.

Typical Armenian communities in Europe today are very diverse. The old communities were often overwhelmed by the large numbers of survivors of the genocide of 1915 that arrived in the early 1920's. They have been joined in the 1970's and 1980's by smaller numbers of refugees from Iran, Lebanon and Turkey. Starting in 1990, the collapse of the Soviet Union and economic hardship caused a new large wave of immigrants, this time from the newly independent Republic of Armenia and from the Russian-speaking world. The geographical origin of individuals can differ significantly from one community to the next: in some countries, such as Georgia, Bulgaria and Romania, the ancient communities are still vibrant. Others are dominated by the descendants of refugees from the 1920s (e.g. France); others are now composed largely of Armenians from Armenia and Russia (e.g. Spain and Germany); others still are very diverse, with no dominant component, attracting individuals of all origins (the UK, the Netherlands).

Armenian communities are connected furthermore. Family and friendship, first of all, create strong bonds between countries. Books, newspapers and idea, musical productions, paintings and films, musical and dance performances, priests and activists circulate through the “Armenian transnation.”

A number of institutions, furthermore, also help connect or mobilize the diaspora internationally in the 20th Century. Traditionally, the Armenian General Benevolent Union as well as a number of organizations affiliated to the Dashnak party have played an important role in this respect. In the last 15 years, the embassies of the Republic of Armenia, too, have played an increasing role in mobilizing the diaspora.

**1500 years of dispersion**

Armenia is in what might be termed the cradle of European civilization, an area ranging from the Italian Peninsula to the Armenian Highland, first united culturally in the Hellenistic period, then again under the Roman Empire.

Next to Hellenistic and Roman heritage, the adoption of Christianity as a state religion in 301 AD is the third essential component of historic Armenia's European identity. The Armenians, alongside the Greeks, were one of the core nations of the Byzantine Empire. They represented a significant part of the Byzantine economic, cultural, intellectual, political and military elite. More than twenty emperors of Armenian origin ruled the Empire. The second rise of Byzantium that is also known as the “Byzantine Renaissance” was achieved under an Armenian dynasty (867–1057). Among the many outstanding Armenian figures that played an important role in the “Byzantine Renaissance” were the Ecumenical Patriarchs of Constantinople St. Photios the Great (858-867; 877-886) and John the Grammarian (837-843), Caesar Bardas and Emperor Leo VI the Philosopher (886-912).

In early Christian times, many Armenians in mainland Europe served as high-ranking representatives of Roman or Byzantine imperial authority. Prominent Byzantine general Nares Kamsarakan (c. 478–573) became the last Roman general, in 554, to enjoy an official Roman triumph in the city of Rome and became the Exarch (vicerey) of Italy. The Armenians served also as Byzantine exarchs of Ravenna or governors of Lombardy, Sicily, Thessalonica, Peloponnese, Philippopolis or other territories. Besides high-ranking officials there were also many ecclesiastical missionaries and settlers in other Western European countries during this and subsequent periods, such as Bishop Simon in Tours, France (6th century), St. Gregory of Pithiviers in France (11th century), St. Macarius in Ghent, Flanders (11th century), and even the three Armenian bishops Petros, Abraham and Stephannos in Iceland (11th century).
The first major period of Armenian dispersion occurred in the 5-6\textsuperscript{th} centuries as a result of Byzantine-Persian wars and the partitions of Armenia between the two empires. Occasionally, Byzantine emperors themselves deported Armenians to other parts of the Empire. In 578 for instance, around 10,000 Armenians were forcibly resettled to the island of Cyprus. The policy of resettlement of the Armenians in the Byzantine Empire continued into the later centuries, and tens of thousands of Armenians were resettled in Smyrna, Crete, Cyprus, Thrace, Macedonia, the Peloponnese, Sparta, Sicily and Italy.

A second wave of Armenian emigration followed the Arab conquest of Armenia (645): in the 7\textsuperscript{th} century, about 700 feudal lords (nakharars) abandoned their possessions in Armenia and with their families, military, people and clergy, they migrated to the Byzantine Empire (Greece, Italy and Bulgaria); in the 8\textsuperscript{th} century, another 2,000 Armenian nakharars fled to the Byzantine Empire, where they were welcomed by the emperors and were granted lands for settlement.

A third, particularly large wave of Armenian emigration was caused by the collapse of the Bagratid Kingdom of Armenia, in 1045. After the conquest of the Armenian capital Ani by the Seljuk Turks in 1064, many Armenians left to establish thriving colonies in the Genoese cities of Crimea, such as Kaffa and Tana. From Crimea, furthermore, Armenian settlers then travelled inland to other parts of Eastern Europe, particularly to territories controlled by the Polish crown and to Transylvania. In these lands Armenians constituted key merchant communities on the East-West and South-North trade routes. The Armenian trade network and expatriate communities with churches as well as economic and cultural institutions also expanded to Central and Western European cities such as Vienna and Amsterdam.

After the Seljuk Turk invasions in Anatolia and the decline of Byzantium, an independent Armenian state was established in Cilicia (1080-1375), a territory to the South of previous Armenian Kingdoms. This is the time of the crusades, and the Kingdom of Cilician Armenia developed very close political, cultural and trade relationships with Western European countries, was influenced by Western European culture and government of the time and was perceived as a bastion of Christendom in the East.

The conquest of Cilician Armenia by the (Egyptian) Mamluks in 1375 marked the end of Armenian sovereignty and led to more Armenian emigration to the rest of Europe. Many of the Armenians from Cilicia, first and foremost the merchants and aristocrats, sailed to Cyprus, France, Italy, Poland, Spain, the Netherlands or other countries. This Cilician emigration made a decisive contribution to the creation of a structured and lasting Armenian diaspora in Europe.

Mongol and Turkic conquests and raids devastated much of Armenia in the centuries that followed and transformed the human geography of the Armenian nation. The Ottoman-Persian wars of the 16th and 17\textsuperscript{th} centuries generated new waves of emigration. By this time, Armenian refugees were joining already existing and well-established diaspora communities in Europe.

During the late Middle Ages and early modern times a network of well-organized Armenian merchant colonies with considerable commercial capital developed in cities from Eastern India to Western Europe. Large and prosperous Armenian communities developed in Venice, Genoa, Livorno, Amsterdam, Marseille, Saint Petersburg, Moscow, Lvov, Kamianets-Podilskyi, Krakow, Bucharest, Armenopolis, Suceava, Chernovtsy and elsewhere.

The Armenians were exclusively urban dwellers, and in the towns they formed separate communities in which they had been granted limited religious and administrative autonomy by the Polish crown.” In 1726 and in 1733 the Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI (1711-1740) granted privileges of autonomy and the status of free royal cities to the Armenian populated Armenopolis.
and Elisabethstadt. Part of this area gradually came under Austrian, then Austro-Hungarian domination. Between 1818 to 1914 around 68 Armenians became Members of Parliament in Budapest, four became ministers and one Armenian, Laszlo Lukaes, (1850-1932) became prime minister.

In pre-modern and modern times the Armenian commercial networks played an important role within different economies throughout Europe as well as in the Eurasian world economy. By the mid-17th century the Armenians already controlled the lion’s share of the raw silk import to Europe, for instance. They controlled a significant part of the trade in precious stones.

A 1699 book by an Armenian scholar by the name of Luke Vanandetzi provides an idea of the remarkably extensive network of Armenian trade: in addition to Western Europe, the Caucasus, Iran and the Levant, the book provides detailed information about Moscow, Astrakhan, Novgorod, Mumbai, Manila, on the markets of Java, Sulawesi, Ceylon, Egypt, Angola, Zanzibar, Monomotapa... The Armenians equally with the Western European nations were perfectly aware of the vast sprawling World System and were indeed contributing to shaping it, at least in the commercial sphere. There was a period when the Armenian merchants imported to France almost as much Indian cottons as the French East India Company itself. Moreover, the Armenians helped the French to learn the Indian calico printing technology.

In 1654 an Armenian, Pascal Harutyun opened the first coffee houses in France, first in Marseille, and 18 years later in Paris. Others brought coffee to the other capitals of Europe, such as Vienna, Prague or London. The development of coffee houses was to have an important impact on the social and intellectual life of these cities.

The accumulated commercial capital of the Armenians at the time helped fund the construction and maintenance of churches, schools and other community buildings, thus contributing to a durable Armenian presence in Europe. This also contributed to the progress of Armenian intellectual life.

The use of printing, in turn, promoted the emergence of an imagined transnational community with a common language and common discourse, a phenomenon that Benedict Anderson called “Print capitalism.” Armenian printing served as a preliminary stimulus for the Armenian transnationalism. In 1773 Shahamir Shahamirian published the first work of Armenian political philosophy with revolutionary ideas of the European Enlightenment, Vorogayt parats (Snare of Glory). The Mkhitarist Armenian Catholic fathers - based in Venice and later also in Vienna - were particularly influential and carried out considerable research on Armenian history, geography, language and literature. The Mkhitarist monks were in close contact with the European intellectual world and carried out an enlightenment project on behalf of the Armenian nation.

The Armenians and Armenian heritage in this period were common knowledge in Europe. German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) expressed a commonly held view in his famous work, “Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View” (1798), when he discussed the anthropological characteristics of the peoples of Eastern Europe: “Among another Christian people, the Armenians, a certain commercial spirit of a special kind prevails; they wander on foot from the borders of China all the way to Cape Corso on the coast of Guinea to carry on commerce. This indicates a separate origin of this reasonable and industrious people who, in a line from North-East to South-West, travel through almost the whole extent of the ancient continent and who know how to secure a
peaceful reception by all the peoples they encounter.”

However, while the Armenians were a familiar presence in Europe until the 19th Century, the appearance of the “Armenian question” came to dominate the representations of the Armenians after the Berlin Congress of 1878.

Paradoxically, the Armenian Diaspora lost its place in the consciousness of the European public as its numbers swelled with the arrival in Europe of hundreds of thousands of refugees from the Ottoman Empire. The transformation of the memory of the Armenians from Kant's representation of prosperous, cultivated and cosmopolitan communities to impoverished refugees and embattled nation is the legacy of the Armenian genocide and of a persistent, century-long campaign by Turkish authorities.

Today, the sheer historical significance of the Armenian diaspora in Europe, as in the Middle-East, combined with the significance of the Armenian genocide in the political and social development of Turkish society, are now leading to a gradual resurgence of Armenian memory and renewed interest for recovering this part of Europe's heritage, in spite of one hundred years of suppression.

The emergence of diasporic identity

Through many centuries of statelessness and dispersion, Armenians have continued to recognize themselves as such and were recognized as Armenians by others in the old world: their identity remained. Armenians were furthermore recognized as one of the old world's civilizations, a civilization that had left its mark throughout Europe and Asia.

By necessity as much as by tradition, Armenian minorities and the diaspora have had a relationship to identity which did not involve a state. Panossian, and other scholars agree that the formation of the nation in the modern sense, which for others was made possible by the state, happened in multiple locations in the case of the Armenians.

Panossian explains: “from the 17th C. onwards, based on [ancient cultural markers], Armenian identity was transformed into a modern sense of national belonging. This evolution – usually referred to as “the awakening” - was carried out mostly in diasporan communities by intellectuals who were supported by merchants. Hence it was a multilocal process with various centres of identity construction. [...] The organizational dimension of the renaissance was carried out by various community (including religious) institutions [...] which played the same rôle as a “national” state since Armenians did not have a state of their own.”

Understandably, if statelessness, dispersion and a durable sense of identity have been lasting characteristics of the Armenians as a group, this very experience has in turn come to form an integral part of their identity. Scholar Boghos Levon Zekiyan insists that “it is impossible to conceive of both Armenian history and identity without taking into consideration the essential role played by the colonies and the diaspora and their development”. According to Zekiyan, the Diaspora has played a key role in the circulation of information and ideas, bringing to the rest of the nation not only the prosperity that comes from trade but also many institutional, cultural and technical innovations that helped them thrive.

After 1915, this cultural heritage provided an invaluable resource to help the hundreds of thousands of refugees arriving in Europe and America to integrate well into their new social environment. For Martine Hovhannisian "cette construction d'un mode de vie en diaspora [after 1915] se ressource à un mode traditionnel de dispersion des élites plus prestigieux (les colonies marchandes du XVIIème siècle, les élites intellectuelles du XIXème siècle) permettant de conférer une historicité à
l’expérience présente de la dispersion.” Armenians refugees could refer to a long history of displacement and resettlement and to a host of prestigious and successful artists, industrialists and even statesmen that came before them.

The key to the durable character of Armenian identity lies therefore not only the significance of heritage, attachment to their identity or in the resources invested by past generations to pass them on to subsequent generations, but also in a specific diasporic culture that thrives in dispersion and draws strength from the dialogue of cultures.