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The Forty Years of Musa Dagh: The Film That Was Denied

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“After fifty years of waiting, dream of Armenians now a reality.” So stated the advertisements in the Los Angeles Armenian newspapers in April 1982, announcing the world premiere of the motion picture based on Franz Werfel’s novel, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*. The Hollywood newspaper *Variety* had at one time called it “possibly the most ‘on again, off again’ major literary property in the history of American motion pictures.”¹

Most of the premiere’s attendees were probably unaware of the crucible that Werfel’s novel had been subjected to since Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer had acquired the screen rights in 1934. It was among Hollywood’s most controversial and politicized projects. As a potential film it endured innumerable delays, false starts, cancellations, rewriting, foreign meddling, and governmental pressure. Figuratively, it traversed a corporate, cinematic, and diplomatic mine field, causing another paper, *The Hollywood Reporter*, to remark that “*Musa Dagh* was one of the film world’s lost projects.”²

It was during Franz Werfel’s second Near Eastern trip in 1929, and on his insistence, that his companion and future wife, Alma Mahler, consented to visit Damascus, Syria. According to her account, something compelled Werfel, like a driving force, to set forth on a journey that was to lead to a literary masterpiece.

In that ancient city the couple visited a carpet-weaving plant. The owner personally conducted a tour through the factory. Passing along the rows of looms, the two were visibly shaken by the sight of emaciated children with “El Greco faces and enormous eyes.” “What strange children are these?” Werfel

inquired. "These poor creatures? They're the children of Armenians killed off by the Turks," the owner explained.³ Leaving the factory in a daze, Werfel was unable to get the scrawny children out of his mind. The visit proved to be the catalyst that inspired his epic novel, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*. Upon his return home to Vienna, Werfel arranged to obtain the complete file on the Armenian massacres from the French Ministry of War in Paris. The official account was worse than all the horror stories he had heard.⁴

The compulsion to write about the Armenian tragedy of World War I had a secondary source of determination, namely the ascendancy of Adolph Hitler. In March 1933, Werfel completed his book. His wife noted: "It is a titanic achievement for a Jew to write a work like this at this time, exposed to such animosities."⁵ By September of that year Werfel had involuntarily joined an illustrious and unique group of authors whose books were being burned in Nazi Germany.

In his research Werfel had discovered the story of the Armenian villagers of the Musa Dagh region, an area along the gulf of Alexandretta. Rather than submit to the Turkish directives to abandon their homes and join relocation convoys to the Syrian Desert, these villagers had chosen to defend themselves atop Musa Dagh, the Mountain of Moses. After fifty-three days they were rescued by a French fleet and taken to sanctuary in Port Said, Egypt.⁶

Drawing on this event Werfel found his main theme and wove a story that, upon its publication in Vienna and New York, electrified the literary world and the public imagination. Werfel's American publishers called it "the most magnificent combination of great literature and heroic story written in our time."⁷ Louis Kronenberger, editor of the *New York Times Book Review*, prophetically noted that "if Hollywood does not mar and mishandle it, it should make a magnificent movie."⁸ Perhaps the most poignant comment was Werfel's personal note in the preface of the book explaining that he had been driven by "the final impulse to snatch from the hands of all that was, this incomprehensible destiny of the Armenian nation."⁹

While the literary world was in a flurry over Werfel's novel, another monumental story was unfolding in that never-never land of Hollywood. Reigning over Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), "the studio that had more stars than in heaven," were two moguls who were the epitome of high-rolling and successful moviemakers, Louis B. Mayer and Irving G. Thalberg. They were among the royalty of the mythical kingdom called Hollywood. Ten months before Werfel's novel was published in the United States, MGM had been sent a synopsis of the story. A perusal of the summary inspired Mayer to acquire what had been predicted to be a "hot property." Werfel's Viennese publisher convinced his client to accept MGM's offer of \$20,000 for the screen rights.¹⁰ A few weeks later J. Robert Rubin, an executive of Loew's, Inc., MGM's parent company, admonished Mayer that the theme of Werfel's novel was so delicate that it could be dangerous. Rubin advised that the film be approached with caution lest the Turks be offended.¹¹

Prior to the book's American publication, consideration had already been given to casting the movie and choosing the production team. David O. Selznick, Mayer's son-in-law and an MGM producer, conceived the idea of making one Turk the villain rather than fault an entire nation and people. His intention was to make it clear that by and large Turks opposed atrocities and in this manner to place MGM on safe ground. It was Selznick's recommendation to the New York corporate headquarters that Rubin ask Major Frederick L. Herron, the Foreign Manager of the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) in Washington, to contact the Turkish ambassador as a matter of courtesy.¹² Selznick's naivete proved to be the lid to Pandora's box. Unwittingly it gave the Kemalist government of Turkey a head start in obstructing the filming of *Musa Dagh*.

Within days of the book's availability to the American public in December 1934, it had become a sensation, selling 35,000 copies within two weeks. It was a record for 1934. Viking Press was soon deluged with suggestions for Metro to make *Musa Dagh* into a great movie.¹³

Just before the novel appeared in American book stores, Will Hays, President of the MPPDA (better known as the Hays Office) and Hollywood's in-house moralist and official censor, received a communique from Wallace Murphy, Chief of Near Eastern Affairs in the U.S. State Department. The gist of the message was to inform Hays of the concern expressed by Mahmet Munir Ertegun Bey, the Turkish ambassador to the United States, that Werfel's best-seller was to become a movie. Murphy had promised the State Department's cooperation in checking on the matter. Hays's response was immediate. He had read the scenario and saw no reference to the Armenian massacres but only an emphasis on the book's characters. He reassured Murphy of his confidence in MGM and his conviction that the finished product would contain "nothing that will offend the Turkish ambassador or his countrymen."¹⁴

The pressure began to build. Some time later Murphy advised Herron that the Turkish ambassador was upset about a report that Irving Thalberg had assigned Carey Wilson to write the *Musa Dagh* screenplay and that William Wellman was to direct the movie with William Powell in the lead.¹⁵ It was Murphy's opinion that Munir Bey's real concern was that the proposed film would accentuate Christian-Moslem animosity and especially the Armenian massacres. The Turkish diplomat had insisted that the production's timing was inopportune and that its theme might mislead the American public through erroneous features regarding Turkey's history. Herron was reminded by Murphy that the State Department had reiterated its promise of cooperation to the ambassador and that it expected the Hays Office to respond accordingly.¹⁶

Herron proved to be a veritable trouble-shooter. He immediately informed Hays's second-in-command, Joseph Breen, that he was cognizant of the Turkish concern and that MGM's production was being watched. He expressed his regrets that someone at the studio had leaked the news of Thalberg's plans. To placate the sensitive Turks he promised the State Department on his own

authority “that nothing along those lines will be further given out.”¹⁷ He urged Breen to warn Metro of the Turks’ interests so that the studio would not be surprised by the reaction of the Turkish government and that of her allies.

On the eve of the celebration of Armenian Martyrs Day on April 24, 1935, there was unbridled jubilation in the Armenian community over the MGM announcement that *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* would be among its top priority films for that year, in company with *The Great Ziegfeld* and *Mutiny on the Bounty*.¹⁸ Meanwhile, communications between the Turkish embassy, the State Department, the Hays Office, Loew’s in New York, and MOM in Culver City increased in number and in heat, resembling troop mobilization and deployment.

Previous veiled threats were translated into reality. J. R. Rubin was quick to relay to Thalberg the fact that he had “confidential information” that the Turkish government was so incensed with MGM’s recalcitrance that, if *Musa Dagh* was not cancelled, then all MGM films, and perhaps all American films as well, would be banned from Turkey. Rubin had been shown a document labeled “For Official Eyes” stating that “the Turkish authorities were prepared to expend every effort all over the world to prohibit the picture.”¹⁹ That a proposed movie could so enrage a government was something the MGM power brokers were too inexperienced to comprehend as yet.

The fact that within a few months Werfel’s book had become a best-seller in eighteen languages reinforced Turkey’s opposition to the movie. It became an obsession warranting top priority by the Ankara government. The Turks marshalled their forces. Friendly governments were alerted to the machinations of the MGM hierarchy and, by implication, of the United States government. Turkish professionals and businessmen wrote to their foreign counterparts expressing their concerns that *Musa Dagh* would create a bad impression of American films in eastern countries. The *Son Posta*, an Istanbul newspaper, had already launched a campaign suggesting that Turkey’s friends should advise America that such a film would only bring about hatred and misunderstanding.²⁰ The Turkish efforts were not in vain.

The State Department began to feel uneasy and apprehensive. Recognizing the serious nature of the Turkish anger and threats, additional pressure was applied to the Hays Office. The message was clear and concise: MGM was to be convinced that the filming of *Musa Dagh* would cause Turkey to do everything in its power to prevent its screening. Furthermore, Metro should realize that the revival of the Armenian question could serve no useful purpose.²¹

The word was out in the trade papers and the national press concerning the controversy engendered by Turkish objections to the filming of *Musa Dagh*. For the studio to back out now would involve not only the sacrifice of a financial investment and the waste of much favorable publicity, but also the loss of a public already primed by Werfel’s novel. For some of the journeymen at MGM there was a principle at stake: could a foreign government be allowed to suppress the making of an American motion picture? Would it not set a dangerous precedent?

No matter how the stakes were viewed individually, the studio heads collectively mobilized their forces and laid out their battle plans. Thalberg instructed Samuel Marx, an MGM story editor, to join Rubin in Washington and to see the Turkish ambassador with Carey Wilson's *Musa Dagh* script in hand.²² Mayer alerted all the interested parties that the issue was being considered at the highest level.²³

In an unprecedented act, Rubin met personally with the Turkish ambassador, Munir Bey, in Washington. And in another unique gesture, Rubin gave the ambassador a copy of Carey Wilson's screenplay. The ambassador agreed to give the script his attention and to respond with his comments.²⁴ Speaking for the Hays Office, Herron wrote to Murphy at the State Department that Rubin was hoping to elicit from the Turkish ambassador a degree of cooperation and understanding that would be satisfactory to all parties. Murphy was assured that *Musa Dagh* would have nothing in it suggesting the Armenian massacres. In Herron's opinion the paranoia expressed in Ankara and in the Turkish press was unwarranted.²⁵

To step up the pressure on MGM and give credence to the genuine concern of the Turkish government, Louis B. Mayer was sent a translation of an article appearing in the *Istanbul Press* entitled: "They Will Be the Losers." In essence the article was highly critical of the studio "for making a film against us."²⁶ The article's author insisted that the real culprits in stirring up the issue were Armenian propagandists whose intentions were to seize upon the movie as a tool to arouse world opinion against the government and the people of Turkey. The fact that MGM had purchased the rights to Werfel's book was just too bitter a pill for the Turks to swallow. Fanning the flames of Turkish outrage, the article falsely stated that production had already begun and that Clark Gable, MGM's number one box office star, was to play the leading role. The movie was viewed as a serious impediment to the maintenance and improvement of Turkish-American relations. MGM was promised a box office failure thanks to a boycott by Turkey, France, and the Balkan countries. In conclusion the article's author regretted the absence of a pro-Turkish organization in the United States that would counter anti-Turkish propaganda in the future.²⁷

The movie had become a cause célèbre. Communications between the parties involved mounted like a million-dollar production gone awry. MGM was bombarded with reminders from the State Department, the Hays Office, the Turkish embassy, the press, and its own studio executives that the production of *Musa Dagh* would have grave repercussions.²⁸

The controversy eventually focused on the man at the helm, Irving Thalberg, "the brain" behind the *Musa Dagh* project. Thalberg was strongly advised to consider the consequences resulting from the release of such a movie. Once again reassurances were given to the doubters that the production would be launched only after the Turkish authorities approved the script. And yet it was the general consensus at MGM that the Turks would disavow such approval once the film was distributed.

Unfortunately, one of the glaring weaknesses in the plan to film *Musa Dagh* was the ignorance of the MGM staff. For the most part they had not read Werfel's book. They were unaware both of its theme and its significance to Armenians as well as its potential for Turkish fury.²⁹ There is no question that the studio bosses were genuinely worried. They seriously considered sending "a well-established diplomatic person" to Turkey immediately, before its ambassador responded to the script. Rubin was afraid that a negative Turkish answer would make it extremely difficult to reopen the matter. Either because he gave in to the pressure exerted by the corporate heads or just to ward them off, Rubin became that "well-established diplomatic person." In August 1935, he decided to sail to Europe in order to deal first hand with a situation that had been overblown into an international affair.³⁰

From Paris Rubin wired Mayer and Thalberg of his difficulties with the Turkish envoys. In order to restore calm Rubin recommended that, in the interim, MGM refrain from any publicity about *Musa Dagh*. Indicative of his commitment he intended to send MGM's Paris representative to Turkey to obtain authorization for the production.³¹ This was another unusual accommodation on Rubin's part since governmental permission most often pertained to locating camera crews in foreign countries. *Musa Dagh* was scheduled to be shot in Culver City.

The energy, time, and money expended on *Musa Dagh* by MGM began to take its toll. Questions were raised as to the worth of the production. There were some who suggested backing off not so much to appease the Hays Office and the State Department, or even the Turks, but because other studio concerns had to be addressed. Joining the mounting opposition was Metro's man in Istanbul, Fahir Epekji. He emphatically advised his employer that MGM's business would be greatly harmed by the film. It was incomprehensible for the studio to think that Turkey would ever give approval to the movie, he asserted. It would be a contradiction, since Werfel's book was already banned in Turkey.³²

Epekji was determined to convince MGM that the studio was indulging in a futile exercise. Negotiations were useless. The Turkish government would never accept the script; and even if the lines were changed to satisfy the Turks, the title would always be unacceptable. The film should be abandoned.³³

The furor that ensued renewed ancient antagonisms between Turks and Armenians. In the 1930s the largest Armenian community remaining in Turkey was centered in Istanbul. That community too felt the pressures coming from the Turkish press and officialdom "to understand the Turkish position." There was no doubt about the intent of the message. It had its desired effect. Turkish Armenians joined the protest against *Musa Dagh* and communicated their concerns to MGM and their compatriots in the United States.³⁴

For the time being MGM was holding to its commitment. Rubin received a confidential letter from MGM's Paris office recommending script alterations to placate the Turks, who were then examining the screenplay in Ankara.³⁵ For a brief moment there was a sigh of relief when the Turkish ambassador informed

the New York office that with some script changes the Turkish government might revise its position. "Nothing definite. Nothing official." Just a "hopeful sign" while awaiting the official communique.³⁶ By September 1935 it was apparent that the so-called "hopeful sign" was a hoax from its inception, a delaying action. MGM was beginning to understand that foreign diplomacy could be just as misleading as the games played in Hollywood.

The anti-*Musa Dag* campaign escalated by the day in the Turkish press. It had become a front-page item in *Hurriyet* and *La Republique*. The newspapers demanded that MGM issue an official declaration terminating the production. The whole affair was now unraveling beyond expectation and comprehension. It even threatened Franco-Turkish relations vis-a-vis Muslims in North Africa.³⁷

The official Turkish decision finally reached Culver City on September 27, 1935. Ankara relayed its position via the Turkish ambassador, Munir Bey. There was no misunderstanding its thrust. "The script was so antagonistic to Turkey that she will do everything in her power to stop the movie. Alterations and/or deletions could never be made satisfactory. It rekindles the Armenian Question. The Armenian Question is settled. How else would you explain the presence of Armenians in the Turkish parliament?"³⁸ MGM was threatened with a world-wide campaign and was accused of "stirring up troubles about a situation that has been smoothed out and forgotten."³⁹

The Turkish response was very effective and claimed a major convert. J. Robert Rubin was the first to throw in the towel. As far as he was concerned the project had been denuded of its glamour and heroics. It was all aggravation now. Admitting the "wonderful possibilities" for *Musa Dagh*, he preferred that another studio make the picture.⁴⁰

Even the Greek government, the Turk's ancient enemy, through its Ministry of Interior, notified MGM's Athens office that production of the film in Greece would be prohibited. Furthermore, if the film were made, an exhibitor's license would not be granted.⁴¹ If Turkey's traditional foe supported her, could her friends do less?

"To hell with the Turks. I'm going to make the picture anyway" was Irving Thalberg's initial reaction to the Turkish protests.⁴² He had already sounded out Rouben Mamoulian to direct *Musa Dagh*.⁴³ But pragmatism would eventually rule. In the meantime Turkey had gained the agreement of France to join her in threatening to ban all MGM films unless the studio acceded to Turkish demands.⁴⁴ Relations between Thalberg and Mayer became strained partly due to *Musa Dagh*. "What can the Turks do if we make *Musa Dagh*?" Thalberg demanded. "Okay, let them keep us out of their thirty theatres."⁴⁵ Mayer replied that it was now more serious than that. The Turks had escalated their threat and were prepared to ask friendly nations not only to boycott MGM films but to ban all American movies." I can't fight that,"⁴⁶ Thalberg told Mamoulian upon shelving the production. The wunderkind had met his match.

When Mayer refused to carry the *Musa Dagh* fight to the State Department, the die had been cast. Thalberg was livid. "We've lost our guts, and when that

happens to a studio, you can kiss it good-bye.”⁴⁷ And so the mythical empire of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer was forced to capitulate to the real “empire” of Turkey.

Franz Werfel had been oblivious to the tempest his novel had created. His literary triumph so swept the country that he and his wife were encouraged to visit the United States in late 1935. Basking in the adulation accorded them, the Werfels took time to acknowledge the outpouring of admiration and gratitude expressed by the Armenians in America. The New York colony honored Werfel at an immense banquet where he heard “fiery speeches” and received six standing ovations. Among the speakers was Henry Morgenthau, Sr., the ambassador to Turkey during the holocaust of 1915.⁴⁸ So touched was Werfel by the reception that he attended Christmas services in the local Armenian church. “We were a nation” said the priest in his sermon, “but Franz Werfel gave us a soul.” After the services the entire congregation filed past to shake hands with the man who had revived their hopes⁴⁹ in reminding the world of the twentieth century’s first genocide.

Universally in the Armenian communities Werfel was the “man of the hour.” By virtue of writing one book he had implanted himself permanently in the Armenian pantheon. Thanks to this diminutive Austrian Jew, Armenians had been given another bridge in their age-old efforts toward ethnic and national unity. Everywhere Armenians had taken an intense interest in this book and its motion picture production because, in one generation, the governments and peoples of the world had forgotten the Armenian tragedy of World War I. Perhaps it was the intoxicating euphoria of the “Golden Twenties” that preoccupied them or the great Depression that followed, compounded by the isolationist attitude that had so permeated western society as to tolerate the appeasement of the totalitarians. By 1935 the world had sufficiently immunized itself to ignore the lessons of history.

In Turkey there was jubilation upon learning that its ambassador’s tenacity had brought about the intervention of the State Department. Munir Bey had thrown caution to the wind and had gone straight to the top. In a letter of appreciation addressed to the Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, he reviewed the entire Turkish position vis-a-vis *Musa Dagh*. The ambassador referred to Werfel’s book as fiction full of arbitrary calumnies and contempt for the Turkish people. He was convinced that plans for the movie production were obviously influenced by Armenian circles. Such a film, he said, would give an utterly false conception of Turkey to the American public and would not promote the existing friendly relations between the two nations and their peoples. As to MGM’s offer to make changes in the screenplay, this was out of the question. The book and screenplay had definite political purposes contrary to the interests of the Turkish government. Besides, Ankara was convinced that it would be impossible to change the character of the novel by any alteration. Despite MGM’s accommodation in submitting a rewritten draft including additional changes, Ankara was still adamant. The Turks were demanding that Washington exert its

influence on MGM to terminate the project once and for all. And there was that not so subtle threat: “The issue had become so volatile that it had the makings of a major diplomatic blunder.”⁵⁰

Ambassador Munir Bey’s epistle goaded Secretary Hull to contact Will Hays. Hays was requested to assist in the matter and “dispose of the issue.” In its official response to the ambassador the State Department, in the manner of a Pontius Pilate, absolved itself of any responsibility for either MGM’s actions or that of the Hays Office.⁵¹ It had merely performed its diplomatic duty by informing the parties of the Turkish concern. Once again the Hays Office assured the State Department that there would be no movie production without Turkish approval.⁵² William A. Orr (MGM/Loew’s executive) personally informed the Turkish embassy of his complete support for the Turkish position. He agreed that filming the novel would be harmful whatever the modifications. Preferably, it would be better for all parties to drop the scheme altogether.⁵³

Upon receiving the news, the Turkish ambassador expressed his elation and gratitude. In an effusive letter to Wallace Murphy at the State Department, Munir Bey stated: “It is an agreeable duty for me to extend to you my best thanks and hearty appreciation for the efforts you have been so kind to exert in this matter without which the happy conclusion which has created an excellent impression in my country could not possibly have been attained.”⁵⁴

Never in the history of Hollywood had there been such a reaction to a proposed film. It boggled the minds of *Musa Dagh*’s advocates. And it still does. To concerned Armenians the State Department’s intervention was contemptible. But the role played by the Hays Office was unprecedented. Its censorship powers had gone beyond evaluating the prurient content of movies to one of rendering judgement on a proposed film because of its diplomatic ramifications. It had cast itself in a supporting role as the conscience of the State Department and the Turkish government. There was no doubt of its awesome powers in the 1930s. Although its victories enhanced its prestige, the Hays Office simultaneously aroused an understandable trepidation in the movie colony.

To Armenians, ignorant of the process, the outcome was evidence of their individual and collective weakness. They simply lacked the political clout in the United States and abroad to counteract the might of the Turkish authorities. The Armenian community was factionalized. There were too many spokesmen whose nationalistic rhetoric, while appealing to their captive audiences, did little in presenting a united front. What semblance there was at the time of a national political entity was enveloped in the orbit of the Soviet Union, whose government remained silent on the question.

And so Werfel’s masterpiece with its accompanying Armenian dream was relegated to Hollywood’s dust bin. No matter, the desire to produce the film never diminished entirely and, conversely, neither did the controversy surrounding *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*. Unbeknownst to its advocates Werfel’s novel/movie was embarking on a long journey destined to become “the forty years of Musa Dagh.”

It was not until 1982 that an Armenian-American producer, John Kurkjian, was able to release a movie version of Werfel's famous novel. By that time the project had been reduced greatly in scope. It was no longer a major production featuring famous stars and calling for international distribution, but a much less ambitious undertaking filmed with unknown performers and mostly limited to screenings before Armenian-American audiences. Thus Werfel's classic was reproduced on film, not in the grand manner envisioned by the MGM movie tycoons of the 1930s, but as a modest memorial to the heroes of Musa Dagh and to the innocent victims of man's inhumanity to man.

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