

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46991/AFA/2025.SI-1.109>

**THE HISTORY OF THE FILM VERSIONS OF  
FRANZ WERFEL'S NOVEL *THE FORTY  
DAYS OF MUSA DAGH* AND THE DENIAL OF THE  
ARMENIAN GENOCIDE**

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Giving a thorough assessment to Franz Werfel's novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, its relevance and historical-political significance, the article presents the attempts of film adaptation of the given novel, which has a remarkable literary value. At the same time, we have focused on the obstacles, which have appeared in this process. It is known from the history of cinema that in 1935 our famous compatriot Ruben Mamoulian (1897-1987), who was considered the *heavy artillery* of Broadway and Hollywood in those days, received an offer to make a film based on this novel at the The Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) Studio. However, under the unprecedented Turkish pressure on the American government, the film adaptation process was suspended. Decades later, in 1982, the novel was adapted into a movie by the Armenian Diaspora. The producer of the film was John Kurkjian, and the director – Sarky (Sargy) Mouradian (1931-2022). Back in the Soviet years, in 1985, *Musa Dagh* was also staged in the Armenian TV Theater. The directors of the five-part performance were Grigor Chalikyan and Herbert Gasparyan. The historical event on Mount Musa that formed the basis of the novel about the heroic struggle of Armenians against the Turks was also included in one of the last episodes of *The Promise* (dir. Terry George, 2016). The article also emphasizes the problem of denial of the Armenian Genocide, which had its actual expression and consequences in cinema.

**Keywords:** *Franz Werfel, The Forty days of Musa Dagh, film version, Rouben Mamoulian, Sarky Mouradian, Armenian Genocide denial.*

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Received: 25.04.2025  
Revised: 10.06.2025  
Accepted: 16.06.2025



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## Introduction

Franz Werfel's *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* – a fictional evidence of historical events (banned in Nazi Germany and Turkey), became a bestseller when it was published in Europe and the USA. From the moment of its publication in the USA in 1934, it raised a great interest in the society, becoming, strange as it may seem, the occasion of various historical disputes. The MGM Studio, which was the most influential film production company not only in Hollywood but also in the world at the time, immediately acquired the screen rights. However, we can state that from the very beginning the Hollywood management of the studio faced unprecedented complications and obstacles, accompanied with the failure of the attempts to call this idea to life. The circumstances of the trials and tribulations of Franz Werfel's novel in MGM were thoroughly analyzed and researched by Edward Minasian (1924-2021), an active member of the American Armenian community. He is the author of the voluminous monography *They Came from Ararat: The Exodus of the Armenian People to the United States* (1961). Being also a member of the Parish Council at St. Vartan Church in Oakland, Ca, this eminent representative of the Armenian Diaspora for years consistently revealed the history of the failure of *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* film project by researching in the MGM archives and the US State Department, the Franz Werfel Papers at the UCLA (University of California) Special Collections Library, the American Film Institute, as well as via interviews with those who initiated the process and press coverages of the time.

Based on correct, reliable sources, archival documents and materials, E. Minasian first published the article *The Forty Years of Musa Dagh: The Film That Was Denied* in the *Journal of Armenian Studies* (1986-87) and then authored a monography *Musa Dagh*, which was published in 2007 by the American publisher Cold Tree Press. It is a unique, comprehensive study that systematically presents the entire history of the film's suspension, the Turkish government's complaints, as well as pressure on the US State Department, which in turn intervened to force the Hays Office (Hollywood's censor bureau) to make MGM cancel the production.

This article, according to the facts and arguments presented by E. Minasian, briefly presents the reasons for the failure of this initiative and the story of the subsequent ban in Hollywood. The reader can also find other facts about the Turkish side's obstruction, which, as a manifestation of their policy of denial of the Armenian Genocide, is reflected in various bans regarding film production on the topic of the Armenian Genocide until today.

### The history of the novel ban in Hollywood

Fairly considered a masterpiece, the American publishers of the Werfel's valuable epic novel in New York Times Book Review on December 2, 1934, have called it "the most magnificent combination of great literature and heroic story written in our time" (in Minasian, 1986-87, p. 121). Among the press publications regarding the film adaptation of Werfel's novel, first of all it is necessary to highlight the wording of the Hollywood newspaper Variety on April 16, 1969, (issue 3), which called the *odyssey* of this project "possibly the most 'on again, off again major literary property in the history of American motion pictures'" (in Minasian, 1986-87, p. 121). Edward Minasian, in his most important and valuable study, has unveiled the real reasons behind the film's ban, shedding light on the details of the most controversial suspension in the history of Hollywood to date. He wrote that 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 (Minasian, 1986-87, p. 121), causing another paper, The Hollywood Reporter, to mention on April 10, 1969 (issue 2) that "Musa Dagh was one of the film world's lost projects" (in Minasian, 1986-87, p. 121). Then, quoting Louis Kronenberger, editor of the New York Times Book Review, who prophetically noted on December 2, 1934 that "if Hollywood does not mar and mishandle it, it should make a magnificent movie." Minasian (1986-87, p. 122), referring to Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Archives (February 27, 1934), states, "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 Louis B. 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." However, 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 in his letter to Louis B. Mayer (MGM Archives, April 7, 1934) advised that the film be approached with caution lest the Turks be offended (in Minasian, 1986-87, p. 122).

As Minasian wrote, "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. He intended to make it clear that by and large, Turks opposed atrocities, and in this manner to place MGM on safe ground. Selznick's naiveté proved to be the lid to Pandora's box. Unwittingly it gave the Kemalist government of Turkey a start to

obstruct the filming of *Musa Dagh*” (Minasian, 1986-87, p. 123). Will Hays, Hollywood’s in-house moralist and official censor, received a communique from Wallace Murphy, Chief of Near Eastern Affairs in the US 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. During their correspondence Hays reassured Murphy of his confidence in MGM and his conviction (MGM Archives, November 19, 1934) that the finished product would contain “nothing that will offend the Turkish ambassador or his countrymen” (Ibid., p. 123).

But the pressure was gradually increasing. As Wallace Murphy wrote to Frederick Herron (MGM Archives, April 27, 1935), the Turkish diplomat, the script of the film had been assigned to Carey Wilson, that the director was William Wellman, and the protagonist – William Powell. He expressed his disappointment and insisted that “the production’s timing was inopportune and that its theme might mislead the American public through erroneous features regarding Turkey’s history” (Ibid., p. 123). In fact, even if very serious changes were made in the script, the title itself was a challenge to the Turkish side, as it raised the Armenian Question. Any negotiation of the studio employees with the Turkish side would be in vain. Ambassador Munir Bey wrote in a letter to the US Secretary of State Cordell Hull that Werfel’s book is a *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 (Minasian, 1986-87, p. 128). There was also a strong wave against *Musa Dagh* in the Turkish press, and the situation was getting worse day by day. The film was taken seriously as a crucial question on the way to maintain and improve Turkey-USA relations. Meantime, the film, which had not yet been produced, had become famous. As Jim Orr wrote to J. R. Rubin (MGM Archives, August 27, 1935), Metro-Goldwin-Mayer was threatened by the Turks with a worldwide campaign and accused of “stirring up troubles about a situation that has been smoothed out and forgotten” (Ibid., p. 122). They promised to boycott the film in France, Greece and the Balkan countries. The management of the MGM studio was being blackmailed and threatened that the release of *Musa Dagh* would have serious consequences.

Besides Louis Mayer, the other important magnate of the film studio, Irving Thalberg, who was more combative and managed to offer the production of the movie to a great American director of Armenian origin Ruben Mamoulian

(Minasian, 1986-87, p. 127), did not give in at first, but when learned from Louis Mayer 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, had nothing to do but stop the process. Upon shelving the production, Thalberg told Mamoulian he couldn't fight that (Thomas, 1969, p. 310). Thus, Werfel's masterpiece production was relegated to Hollywood's dust bin. However, 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* (Minasian, 1986-87, p. 129).

Never has there been such a reaction to a proposed film in Hollywood, and it is surprising that the Turkish government would ever initiate such a strong fight against a film production. The novel, however, was gaining more and more popularity. In 1934, 200.000 copies of the book were printed in the United States, and in 1965, the circulation exceeded one million.

### **Turkish interference as a continuing policy of the denial of Genocide**

In 2018 the British BBC 3 Radio Station prepared a special program dedicated to the resistance of Musa Dagh. The host Maria Margaronis noted that the book, first published in 1934, had been banned many times. Despite this fact the novel had been translated into 34 languages. She also informed the audience that the film-version was never created in Hollywood due to the efforts of the Turkish authorities (BBC 3 Armenian News).

The history of the ban for the filming of the adaptation of Werfel's novel was also thoroughly covered by American historian David Welky (2006) who presented both the history of the Turkish protest against Atom Egoyan's *Ararat* (2002), and Franz Werfel's novel.

In 2012, American-Armenian directors Edwin Avanes and Serge Minasian came up with the idea of making a full-length documentary film entitled *Epic Denied: Depriving the Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, based on the entire history of the trials and failures that plagued the screen adaptation of Werfel's novel, on facts and events related to the ban on the release of the film. The authors were also planning to include interviews with a number of individuals in their documentary. They began raising funds for the implementation of the film project. What happened is that a film covering the history of the rejection of the film has not been created so far. Only the campaign video (*Epic Denied: Depriving the Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, FCVideo News), which briefly presents a number of names of famous

directors and movie stars who were offered by Hollywood producers to be included in the exhausted project, is available on the Internet.

*The Genex*, the film by the Armenian-American filmmaker Artak (Art) Sevada had a similar fate. Talks about it started back in 2013, and the world premiere was planned for April 24, 2015. The director noted that contracts had been signed with Natalie Portman and Armand Assante (“The Genex”, 2013). Al Pacino’s name was also circulating in the press (“New Armenian Genocide film” 2013). A trailer with the latter’s participation appeared on the YouTube for a short while. Thus, the production of the film was delayed year after year, and even today, a website icon is unavailable. It is clear why the long-time desire of the famous Kirk Kerkorian, the blockbuster *The Promise* (2016) with a budget of 90 million USD, was shot secretly, in a hidden way. Moreover, the filming took place mainly in Malta, whose mountainous landscape is more or less similar to the nature of Western Armenia. Director Terry George wrote the screenplay with Robin Swicord. Of course, the episode of resistance of Musa Dagh presented in the last part of this drama had nothing to do with Werfel’s literary masterpiece. Intertwining with the plot of the film *The Promise*, it related how the heroes of the film, fleeing from the Turkish miscreants as the only hope of salvation, joined the struggle of Musa Dagh people.

Returning to E. Minasian, who presented Werfel’s epic and the sad fate of the film in Hollywood in detail, we should note that Minasian also addressed another question: what was Werfel’s reaction to the *hurricane raised by the novel*? According to Minasian (1986-87, p. 128), although the novel’s campaign was so powerful that it swept across America, Werfel did not pay much attention to it. Apparently, we can assume, he would feel the same way about the uproar his book caused in the cinema world.

At the end of 1935 the writer was invited to the United States with his wife Alma Mahler-Werfel. The couple enjoyed many words of admiration and gratitude at an immense reception organized by the Armenian community in New York. Apart from fiery speeches Werfel received standing ovations. Henry Morgenthau was present there and made a speech. Werfel was so touched by the warm attitude of the Armenians that he also visited the local Armenian Church and attended the Christmas service. The Armenian priest said during his sermon: “We were a nation, but Franz Werfel gave us a soul” (Mahler Werfel, 1958, p. 229). In the end, everyone came one by one to shake the hand of the man who had revived their hopes, the man who had reminded the world about the first Genocide of the XX century. “By virtue of writing one book he had implanted himself permanently in the Armenian pantheon” (Minasian, 1986-87, p. 128).

### **The half-a-century-awaited film**

As already mentioned, the story of making the movie based on Werfel's classic work was like a real battle with periodic enemy attacks. It was only in 1982 that the American-Armenian producer John Kurkjian and director Sarky (Sargy) Mouradian, again with great difficulty, managed to release the film version of the book. In April 1982 the LA Armenian newspapers, announcing the premiere of the motion picture based on the novel, stated that the dream of Armenians had become a reality. It was not a grand, large-scale, and ambitious initiative, a so-called blockbuster, with the participation of famous Hollywood stars. Only the actor of the main character Gabriel Bagratyan, Kabir Bedi, an Indian by origin, was internationally recognized. It was a film that did not receive international recognition, was not included in the international distribution, it was limited to screenings mainly for the American-Armenian audience. In this sense, it is difficult to disagree with Edward Minasian's discreet assessment that "Werfel's classic was reproduced on film as a modest memorial to the heroes of Musa Dagh and to the innocent victims of man's inhumanity to man" (Minasian, 1986-87, p. 130).

The film was modest, as John Kurkjian did not have the appropriate experience as a producer. It is true that he had acted as a producer of several films of Sarky (Sargy) Mouradian, among which the film *Sons of Sassoun* (1975) should be highlighted. But the film adaptation of Werfel's heroic novel required a completely different kind of experience, abilities, and funding. The budget of the film was originally planned to be 8 to 10 million USD; however, it was actually reduced to 4 million and then to 1,5 million. Besides Kurkjian, there were two other influential and well-off Armenian-American investors, who finally, as a result of pressure by the American State Department, refused to participate in the project. Thus, the film's budget was reduced to only 1.5 million USD. This circumstance radically changed the situation. Now the script had to be shortened scene by scene in addition to a number of technical complications. Thus, Franz Werfel's brilliant literary work did not have a chance to become a great movie. However, it is greatly appreciated that the producer and the director managed to face challenges.

Let us add that back in the Soviet years, in 1985, this significant novel was staged in Armenian TV Theater. The directors of the five-part performance (lasted for more than 3 hours) were Grigor Chalikyan and Herbert Gasparyan. Khoren Abrahamyan acted on behalf of the author, Levon Tukhikyan acted as Bagratyan. The rest of the roles were performed by such famous actors of the Armenian stage as Karen Janibekyan, Lorenz Arushanyan, Vladimir Msryan, Hrachya Ghazaryan, Lyusya Hovhannisyanyan, Alice Kaplanjyan, Karine Voskanyan, Alexander

Adamyan, Rudolph Ghevondyan, Alexander Khachatryan and others. A group of Musa Dagh residents were also included in the performance.

Highlighting the presentation of history in cinema, we consider it necessary to quote the passage by Ewa Mazierska (2011, p. 1-13): “Cinema is part of history, namely a discourse on the past. ... Not surprisingly, many historians regard history as a particular form of cultural memory (Burke 1989; Hutton 1993; Tamm 2008, etc.) In contemporary cinema we observe a strong tendency to present past events as filtered by somebody’s memory or as transformed by cultural representations, typically films or television. In non-mainstream/avant-garde filmmaking, the tendency of memorizing history is even stronger (Skoller 2005). ... Cinema not only bears witness to important events, but also transmits them in a manner which comes across as more attractive to the general public than any other form of historical discourse, such as an academic book or a historical novel.”

### Conclusion

From a cinematic viewpoint, it is necessary to state that F. Werfel’s literary masterpiece would have been very difficult to translate into the language of cinema, even for a most talented film director. It is known from the history of cinema that the higher the value of the literary work, the more difficult it is to transform it into a film. We are not talking about bona fide screen adaptations, which are like film illustrations, but full-fledged film works based on literary masterpieces, which really are not so many. At the same time, it should be noted that, in their turn, great films are inexpressible, that is, it is almost impossible to *translate* the language of the film image, to rewrite it with the means of speech. Therefore, it can be said: “Cinema to cinema, literature to literature.” However, without contrasting literature and cinema, history and cinema, we can only hope that, despite various difficulties, Werfel’s great book will one day have the film version worthy of the literary work.

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**ՖՐԱՆՑ ՎԵՐՖԵԼԻ «ՄՈՒՍԱ ԼԵՌԱՆ ՔԱՌԱՍՍՈՒՆ ՕՐԸ» ՎԵՊԻ  
ԿԻՆՈԱՆԴՐԱԴԱՐՁՆԵՐԻ ՊԱՏՍՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ ԵՎ  
ՀԱՅՈՑ ՑԵՂԱՍՊԱՆՈՒԹՅԱՆ ԺԽՏՈՒՄԸ**

**Սիրանուշ Գալստյան**

Արժևորելով Ֆրանց Վերֆելի «Մուսա լեռան քառասուն օրը» վեպը, որի արդիականությունը և պատմաքաղաքական նշանակությունը անհերքելի է, հողվածում ներկայացվում են գրական մեծ արժեք ունեցող այս վեպի էկրանավորման փորձերը և դրանց խոչընդոտման պատմությունը: 1935 թ. այս վեպի հիման վրա MGM կինոստուդիայում պատրաստվում էր ֆիլմ նկարահանել Բրոդվեյի և Հոլիվուդի «ծանր հրետանին» համարվող մեր մեծ հայրենակից Ռուբեն Մամուլյանը (1897-1987): Սակայն ամերիկյան կառավարության վրա թուրքական աննախադեպ ճնշումների ներքո նկարահանումները կասեցվեցին: Տասնամյակներ անց, 1982 թ. վեպն էկրանավորվեց Սփյուռքի ուժերով: Համանուն ֆիլմի պրոդյուսերն է Ջոն Քուրքջյանը, ռեժիսորն է Սարքի (Սարգի) Մուրադյանը (1931-2022): 1985 թ. հայկական հեռուստաթատրոնում նույնպես բեմադրվել է այս նշանակալի վեպը. հինգ մասանոց ներկայացման ռեժիսորներն են Գրիգոր Չալիկյանը և Հերբերտ Գասպարյանը: Հայության հերոսական պայքարի մասին պատմող այս վեպում ներկայացված պատմությունն ընդգրկվել է նաև Թերի Ջորջի «Խոստում» (*Promise*, Terry George, 2016) ֆիլմի վերջին դրվագներից մեկում: Հողվածում շեշտադրվում է Հայոց ցեղասպանության ժխտման խնդիրը, որն իր փաստացի արտահայտությունն ու հետևանքներն է ունեցել նաև կինոյում, մինչև անգամ այդ մասին խոսվել է վավերագրական կինոյում:

**Բանալի բառեր` Ֆրանց Վերֆելի, «Մուսա լեռան քառասուն օրը» ֆիլմը, թուրքական կառավարության ճնշումները, էկրանավորման կասեցումը MGM-ում, Ռուբեն Մամուլյան, Սարքի Մուրադյան, Հայոց ցեղասպանության ժխտում:**