

Between Empire and Independence: Armenia and the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic

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Abstract

The period of the short-lived Transcaucasian Federation was from the Armenian perspective a traumatic one, defined by the military threat coming from the Ottomans and by the complicated relations with the other major ethnic groups of the region. The Armenian political elite and “common Armenians” were caught off-guard by the Russian revolution. The Turkish advance of the Caucasus Front was seen by Armenian political forces as an existential threat, while this assessment was not shared by their Georgian and Muslim (Azerbaijani) counterparts, leading to bitter divisions within the emerging Transcaucasian institutions. These two factors determined the Armenian perspective on the Transcaucasian Federation. The Armenian political entities (first and foremost the Dashnaksutyun) were opposed to the creation of the Transcaucasian Federation, as they saw its emergence as the result of Turkish pressure. Yet they were equally reluctant when it came to the transition from the Transcaucasian Federation to independent nation-states. It was a reflection of this attitude that the Armenian National Council lagged behind its Georgian and Azerbaijani counterparts when it declared itself to be the central body of power in the Armenian-inhabited lands.

Key Words: Armenia, Independence, Transcaucasian Federation, Turkey.

Introduction: The Forgotten Federation

It is common for national historiographies to construct narratives in which the focal point is the creation of the nation-state, usually presented as the “achievement”, or more often as the “restoration”, of independence. In Armenian historical narratives the creation of the independent Armenian nation-state is treated as an outcome of a centuries-long struggle for independence. Obviously, the short-lived First Republic of Armenia of 1918-1920 has a special place in the narrative of national history of Armenia, promoted through school textbooks, government rhetoric,

state rituals, and holidays, and it is also commonly featured in the media (for a discussion of 20th century Armenian history narratives and the place of the first republic in them see Panossian 2006, 242-262; Libaridian 1999, 149-161; Libaridian 2007, 13-50; Suny 1993, 119-133). Meanwhile, the short-lived Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic gets much less attention within this narrative, if any. Most history textbooks mention it only in passing, and when the Transcaucasian Republic does enter the narrative, it is perceived as a mere passing stage through which the Armenians had to pass in order to realize their “age-old dream” of independent statehood (on Armenian history textbooks, see Zolyan, Zakaryan 2009).

In fact, the creation of the independent Republic of Armenia in May 1918 was not so much the result of a concerted effort for a “struggle for national liberation”, as it was the outcome of the complicated geopolitical setting. Moreover, neither the Armenian population at large nor the Armenian political elites were actively campaigning for independence, and they were arguably ill-prepared for independence when it came about. Prior to the World War, the national project among the political and intellectual elite focused on the so-called “Western (or Turkish) Armenia”, the Armenian-inhabited regions within the Ottoman Empire. “Eastern (or Russian) Armenia” was considered to be better-off under within the Russian Empire, and even the most radical nationalist demands (e.g. those of the Dashnaktsutyun Party) went no further than seeking a certain level of autonomy. Similarly, the idea of an independent Transcaucasia had little appeal for the Armenian political class (on the Armenian political project prior to the years of independence, see Panossian 2006, 200-214).

Hence, as this article will argue, even the Armenian political elite, not to mention the “common Armenians,” was little prepared for the demise of Russian imperial power that began with the October 1917 events. The Turkish advance in the Caucasus Front was seen by the Armenians as an existential threat, yet this assessment was not shared by the Georgians and the Muslims (Azerbaijanis), leading to bitter divisions within the emerging Transcaucasian power institutions. These two factors determined the Armenian perspective on the Transcaucasian Federation. The Armenian political leaders (first and foremost the Dashnaktsutyun) were opposed to creating a Transcaucasian Federation, as they saw its emergence as the result of Turkish pressure (i.e. that Turkey was interested in separating Transcaucasus from Russia in order to advance its own expansionist agenda). Hence, the resistance of the Armenian political leaders to the proclamation of the Transcaucasian Federation as an independent entity.

Yet it is particularly interesting to observe that the Armenian political leaders were equally reluctant when it came to the transition from the Transcaucasian Federation to becoming independent nation-states. This is partly related to the idea that the Transcaucasian Federation would be capable of resisting Turkey more effectively, even though in fact, as reality showed, the Armenian forces were able to mount a more or less successful resistance to Turkish forces only when the Transcaucasian Federation had virtually collapsed. There were also fears that the ethno-demographic situation in Transcaucasia at the time would make Armenians the biggest losers from separation. There were potential territorial disputes on the borders of the future Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan, and also the most numerous and wealthy Armenian communities were centered in the cities of Tiflis and Baku. It was a reflection of this attitude that not only did the Armenian National Council lagged behind its Georgian and Azerbaijani counterparts, but even when it finally declared itself to be locus of power in the Armenian inhabited lands, it used ambiguous language that fell short of an actual declaration of independence.

Reluctant Participation: The Armenian Political Leaders and their Positions vis-a-vis the Transcaucasian Federation

The Russian Revolution took Armenian society, and particularly the Armenian political class, by surprise, and to a large extent they were unprepared to deal with its consequences. The generally chaotic situation which engulfed the entire region in the wake of the Russian revolution was also reflected in the political structures that sought to reflect the voice of the Armenian population of the region. The body that claimed to represent Armenians politically was the National Council of Armenians, which rather typically for that time was based in Tiflis. It was established on the bases of the Congress of “Russian Armenians” that was convened in October 1917, and it consisted of about 200 deputies from various regions with Armenian populations (Hovannisian 2005, 17; Hovannisian 1967, 86-90) The Congress formed the executive body, The Armenian National Council, where places were assigned according to political party membership, consisted of 15 members, and it acted as a quasi-government of Armenia, or rather of the Armenians, in various parts of Transcaucasia, until the Republic of Armenia was formed (Hovannisian 2005, 19). The degree of its actual influence on the state of affairs, however, and the readiness of Armenians around the region to follow the orders of the National Council remained under question.

There were several influential Armenian parties, though the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, or as it is known by its Armenian name “Dashnaktsutyun”, or the “Dashnaks”, was particularly influential compared to all of the others. By 1918 Dashnaktsutyun had come to be seen as the symbol of armed resistance and the fight for the national cause, which contributed to its popularity among Armenians. This, coupled with its well-organized structure and experience of armed struggle, made Dashnaktsutyun the obvious leader among the Armenian parties (for more on Dashnaktsutyun see Panossian 2006, 205-210; Donabedian 1981). In the Constituent Assembly elections in November 1917 Dashnaktsutyun received 558,440 votes, third only to the mostly Georgian-dominated Social-Democrat (Menshevik) party and the Azerbaijani Musavat party. Together these three parties received about 75% of all of the votes in Transcaucasia (Vratsyan 1958, 30).

Yet it would be wrong to ignore other political forces that existed among the Armenians at the time. While Dashnaktsutyun was indeed the largest and best organized political organization, there were others as well, and at certain times Dashnaktsutyun was willing to share the spotlight with them. Thus, when the Armenian National Council was formed, Dashnaktsutyun agreed that several parties should be represented in it: out of 15 places Dashnaktsutyun took only six, while three other parties, the Popular Party, the Social-Revolutionaries and the Social-Democrats, received three places each, and three further places went to people without party affiliation (Hovannisian 2005, 19). The only party that was not represented in the National Council, as well as in the Congress that had elected it, was the Bolsheviks. Historians disagree as to whether the Bolsheviks refused to take part from the beginning, claiming that the Congress was a “bourgeois-clerical gathering”, or if they had been present at the first session and then decided to boycott the congress after the presentation of their program ended in a scandal (Hovannisian 2005, 17).

Of these parties the Socialist Revolutionaries and Social Democrats were offshoots of larger Russian parties, and they criticized Dashnaktsutyun for its focus on Armenian nationalism. The Popular Party was more focused on Armenian issues, even though it was close in its ideology and class base to the Russian liberal parties, and was formed by the Armenian members of the Constitutional Democrat party. In 1918 and subsequent years, the Popular Party was the second largest Armenian party, with a base among the urban intelligentsia and bourgeoisie of Tbilisi and Baku (Hovannisian 2005, 17-18). Of all these parties it was Dashnaktsutyun that would have become the obvious flag-bearer of the Armenian national independence. But Dashnaktsutyun was

far from being an advocate of an independent Armenian statehood: it had earlier proclaimed the demand for autonomy rather than full independence for Eastern Armenia, and even for Western Armenia (Panossian 2006, 207-208).

Ultimately, due to the divisions between the Armenians and the Muslims, it fell to the Georgians to decide whether Transcaucasia would formally remain a part of Russia or would declare independence. This is how Alexander Khatissian (Khatisov), one of the prominent leaders of the Dashnaktsutyun and former Tbilisi mayor, described the situation:

As we said, there were two streams among the Georgians. One, led by Jordania and Gegechkori, wanted to continue the war and opposed the isolation of the Transcaucasus from Russia. The second, under the leadership of Chhenkeli and Ramishvili, was for independence and concluding peace [with Turkey]. The struggle for these two currents was fierce, and the voices were divided almost equally. After a couple of days of heated dispute, the Central Committee of the Georgian ruling party finally made a decision, by a vote of nine against seven, to declare Transcaucasia an independent republic, to appoint Chkhenkeli as head of government, and to resume reconciliation talks with the Turks (Khatissian 1968, 54).

As Khatissian explained, the Dashnaktsutyun had little choice but to accept the Georgians' decision and support the independence of the Transcaucasia. "There was no such fierce debate in the ARF. Everyone's wish was to maintain solidarity with the South Caucasian neighbors and, in particular, the Georgians, in order not to find ourselves left alone to face the Turks. The ARF could not take on the sole responsibility for the war with the Turks, and that would have been the outcome if [we had voted] against the Georgians. The mood of the Dashnaktsutyun leadership was then well expressed by the Seim member Hovhannes Kajaznoui, who made the following declaration in the Seim: 'Citizens, members of the Seim. The Dashnaktsutyun Party faction, fully aware of the great responsibility that it takes on this historic moment, joins in declaring Transcaucasia as independent republic'. Karjikyán expressed these sentiments among the Dashnaktsutyun in a lengthy and eloquent speech in the Seim a few days later" (Khatissian 1968, 55-56).

Military Defeat: The Trauma of Spring 1918

The experience of the Federation was a largely traumatic one for Armenia, combining military defeat and a refugee crisis with political chaos and the inability of the Armenian elite of the time to take control of the matter. Some episodes of the history of these two months are particularly traumatic, as they involve not just the military defeat and the suffering of the local population, but they are generally seen as “shameful” within the Armenian historical narrative. Initially, it seemed that the February revolution would not spell trouble for the Armenians, as the Russian Provisional Government declared that it would continue the war “to a victorious end”. Interestingly, the position of the Bolsheviks was quite acceptable for the Armenians, in theory even more so than that of the Tsarist or Provisional governments. The Bolshevik decree on Turkish Armenia, signed on December 29, 1917, spelled out a demand of independence for “Turkish Armenia” in accordance with the principle of “self-determination” that the Bolsheviks championed (Hovannisian 2005, 21). Yet what really mattered for Armenians was the Bolshevik “Decree on Peace”, which effectively meant the collapse of the Russian armed forces on all fronts. Obviously, the remote Caucasus Front was one of the first to feel the effects of this mass desertion. By the winter of 1917, the majority of the Russian soldiers had gone. Against this backdrop the Bolsheviks’ decree “On Turkish Armenia” was more of a propaganda effort that aimed to show a progressive approach to foreign policy, that they were rejecting the imperialist policies of Tsarism (Boryan 1928-1929, 262).

The events of spring 1918 have become one of the most traumatic episodes in Armenian collective memory, and the most disturbing of these events coincided with the period when Armenia was part of the short-lived Transcaucasian Federation. The trauma of this period was not only due to the military defeats, the loss of civilian lives and the mass flight of the population from the territories occupied by Turkish forces, but it was also the result of the inability of the Armenian forces to mount effective resistance to the Ottoman armies, and in certain cases they were forced to surrender important positions. The Brest-Litovsk Treaty, signed on March 3, 1918, provided the diplomatic pretext for the Ottoman offensive, even though, as became obvious later, the aims of the Ottoman command went far beyond establishing control over the territories awarded to Turkey by the Treaty (Hovannisian 1967).

The Turkish offensive that began in early 1918 led to a series of military defeats of the Armenian and Georgian forces. Of these, the fall of Kars occupies an especially traumatic place in

the Armenian collective memory, often considered one of the most shameful moments in Armenian history. The trauma of Kars was intensified because the scenario of the shameful capitulation of the city in 1918 repeated itself in an almost identical form two years later in 1920 during the Armenian-Turkish war of 1920 (on these events see Hovannisian 1996, Sasouni 1930, Zohrabyan 1979, 1997).

The causes for the loss of Kars in 1918 became a matter of a heated debate even at the time, and the arguments continue to this day. The arguments surrounding the defeat are part of a larger debate about why the Ottoman forces advancing on Transcaucasia in the spring of 1918 were met with little effective resistance. Part of this was the inability of the Transcaucasian Federation to form an efficient state structure that might have been able to organize a coordinated military effort, both on the front and on the home front. This is how the situation was described by Gevorg Melik-Gharagyozyan (Georgi Melik-Karakozov), a prominent member of the Popular party, and a future minister in one of Armenia's governments:

Frankly, the Transcaucasian Seim . . . and the national councils presented a miserable picture. Confused and stumbling at every turn, trembling before the approaching danger and fearing the vengeance of the "Northern Colossus" [i.e. Russia], the Transcaucasian government failed to organize the defense of the region, despite the considerable military supplies left behind by the Russian Army and, as it turned out, the inadequacies of the Turkish military forces. But while the latter were organized, united and guided by a single will... the Transcaucasian "democracy" personified by the Seim, the government, the national councils and the parties, was busy with endless talk, mutual reproaches, persuading each other and issuing ineffectual appeals (Melik-Gharagyozyan 2018, 8).

The most importance cause of the defeat was the irreconcilable differences in the interests and strategies of the three main ethnic groups, as they were articulated by the institutions that claimed to represent them. The Ottoman threat was perceived as an existential danger by the Armenians, who feared a repetition of the genocide on the territory of Russian Armenia. At the same time, they had the feeling that the backing of Georgians in the fight against the Turks could not be counted upon, since Georgia was not threatened to the same extent as Armenia. While Georgia stood to lose Batumi, which had been promised to Germany under the Brest-Litovsk

Treaty, the Ottomans made no claim to most of the other regions of Georgia, and there was no history of ethnic violence between the Turks and the Georgians comparable to that between the Turks and the Armenians. The Armenian leadership suspected the Georgian politicians of desiring to cut a backroom deal with the Ottomans at the Armenians' expense. As for the Muslim population of Transcaucasia and the Musavat Party that sought to represent them in the Seim, the Armenians viewed them as natural allies of the Ottomans and feared that they might instead give assistance of the advancing Ottoman armies (Suny 1993, 124-125).

This is how Melik-Gharagyozyan describes the sense of crisis that engulfed the Armenian population of Transcaucasia and its leaders:

The more successfully the events on the Caucasian Front developed for the Turks... and the more obvious the nominal nature of the power of the Transcaucasian Seim and the government became, the more the heterogeneity and even sharp contradictions of the national-political orientation of the main Transcaucasian nationalities was revealed. The Transcaucasian Tatars [i.e. Azerbaijanis] unequivocally longed for the arrival of the Turks. The Georgians hesitated, choosing between diplomacy and war. The Armenians, knowing that there could be no reconciliation and peace between themselves and the Turks, were in a state of a feverish agitation as they realized they were completely alone in the face of mortal danger... (Melik-Gharagyozyan 2018, 9).

One of the reasons that the front collapsed with such ease was that the Ottoman Army were not facing a well-organized military force. The Armenian detachments, united in the so-called "Armenian Corps", were inferior to the Ottoman troops in many respects. The Ottoman Army was not the most efficient military force among the countries participating in the First World War, but nevertheless it was a regular army. The Armenian Corps were hastily assembled out of Armenians serving in the Russian Army, as well as members of volunteer detachments from Turkish Armenia. The relationship between the military personnel who had previously served in the Russian Army and the volunteer detachments was complex (Melik-Gharagyozyan, 11).

This is how Melik-Gharagyozyan described the mood in the Armenian Corps:

After four years of world war, the Armenian soldiers of the all-Russian Army, as well as the members of the volunteer detachments, were naturally in state of fatigue. The withdrawal of the Russian army from the front in the wake of revolution and the decay of the fighting spirit could not but affect them as well. The destruction of the entire Armenian population in Turkey, which had already become an indisputable and well-known fact, completely undermined the whole moral sense of the old volunteer detachments. In addition to this sense of purposelessness and loneliness, there was a recognition, shared by the entire Armenian population, that the approaching Turkish troops would launch a merciless, life and death struggle, as the previous clashes with them on the front lines had already shown. The Turks had executed all of the Armenians who had been taken captive, while sparing the lives of the non-Armenian prisoners of war. Such a psychology could not but affect the mobilization of the Armenian army (Melik-Gharagyozyan 2018, 10-11).

One of the advantages of the Armenian Corps was the presence of a highly qualified officer staff, comprised of Armenian officers who had served in the Russian Army. Back in 1917 the Armenian political parties, in agreement with the Russian Provisional government, had organized the transfer of ethnic Armenians officers and soldiers from the Russian Army to the Caucasus Front, but this process was cut short due to the October Revolution (Hovannisian 2005, 23). This circumstance facilitated the organization of the Armenian corps, but the former Russian Army officers were not always well-qualified for the particularities of the existing conditions.

This duality applied also to the commander of the Armenian Corps, Tovmas Nazarbekyan (Foma Nazarbekov), a former General in the Russian army. Melik-Gharagyozyan, while praising Nazarbekyan as a military officer, nevertheless lamented his lack of the qualities required for the moment:

For that turbulent and fatal period, a military commander of a different caliber, temperament, character and even perhaps age, was required. Nazarbekov was an experienced general of the regular and already well-organized old Russian Army. But in order to hastily organize a new national army on the ruins of a lost world war and to lead it against the battle-tried and tested Turkish forces that were terrifying the Armenian population ... there should have been a leader who would have been more expansive and

resourceful and with tremendous energy, determined to follow solely the dictates of his sound instinct, even if this had meant going contrary to the top Transcaucasian leadership. One might ask from where such a person might be found, was there a person more suitable than Nazarbekov among the leading Armenian officers? I do not know. Perhaps there was not . . . (Melik-Gharagyozyan 2018, 13).

All these factors were among those that led to the fall of Kars. This tragedy was made even more acute because of the fact that Kars was considered to be an impenetrable fortress, and because at the time the fortress had huge reserves of arms and ammunition left behind by the Russian Army (11,000 rifles, 2 million bullets, 67 artillery pieces and 19 machine guns). From a military perspective, the fortress should have been able to hold out for at least two months (Hovannisian 1967, 162-166). However, the combination of the Ottoman military and diplomatic pressure, together with the disagreements among the factions in the Transcaucasian Federation, resulted in the fortress capitulating without firing a shot.

As the Ottoman troops occupied Batumi they offered a ceasefire, on the condition that Kars be surrendered. The head of the government of the Transcaucasian Republic, Alexander Chkhenkeli, agreed to this demand and telegraphed an order to the commander of the Armenian corps, Nazarbekyan, to surrender the fortress. Nazarbekov was reluctant to obey, this demand for capitulation from the government undermined his soldiers' will to fight. According to Khatissian, Nazarbekyan gave the order to surrender the fortress, and Armenian forces and population withdraw in the direction of Aleksandrapol (currently Gyumri). Khatissian described the withdrawal from Kars:

There was a heartbreaking announcement that Kars would be evacuated. On April 14, Kars Province Commissar Dzamoyan officially reported the following: "As the result of the surprising and unplanned capitulation [of the city] issued by Tiflis, the population, which had been ready to defend this greatest fortress of Transcaucasia, was forced to abandon everything and leave Kars on April 12 by 5 pm, setting everything in the city on fire. The best buildings were burning. The image of the population's retreat is indescribable (Khatissian 1968, 58).

The fall of Kars led to a political crisis in the Transcaucasian Federation. According to Khatissian, Chkhenkeli had no right to give the orders to surrender Kars, since Chkhenkeli, in his view, had at the time not yet been confirmed as the leader of the Transcaucasian government by the Seim. In protest to Chkhenkeli's decision, the Armenians whom Chkhenkeli had invited to become ministers in his government turned down the offer (Khatissian 1968, 56-57). The Armenian faction in the Seim demanded that Chkhenkeli resign as the head of government. The Georgians agreed, and suggested that the Dashnaktsutyun member Hovhannes Kajaznoui become prime-minister. Upon further reflection, however, the Dashnaktsutyun turned down the offer, as an Armenian at the helm of the Transcaucasian Federation could have alienated the Muslim population, which would lead, Khatissian explained, to the breakup of the Federation as a whole. Thus, eventually, realizing that Kars was lost and nothing could have been done to return it, the Dashnaktsutyun reluctantly agreed to the premiership of Chkhenkeli and delegated its members to participate in the new cabinet (Khatissian 1968, 56-57).

While the credibility of the Transcaucasian federation had been fragile even before these events, the fall of Kars dealt an irreparable blow to the image of the Federation in the eyes of the Armenians. Many Armenians believed that the surrender of Kars had been the result of a conscious sellout of their interests by the Federation's Georgian-dominated government. Whether the order to surrender Kars was indeed the result of backroom deal with the Turks, or just an honest mistake, the outcome was disastrous not only for the course of the war, but also for the future of the Federation. It demonstrated that the interests of the three main nationalities of the region, as conceived by their political leaders, were irreconcilable. In the context of the Armenian historical narrative, the fall of Kars, together with the other developments of the spring 1918, contributed to the conditioning of the Armenian political and intellectual elites' skepticism towards the very idea of a united Transcaucasia.

The “Victories of May” and the Reluctant Independence

While the negotiations continued in Batumi, their course showed that there was already no longer a united Transcaucasian front, if there had ever been one. According to Khatissian, who took part in the negotiations, the situation was “increasingly turning into a Turkish-Armenian war”, as it was becoming obvious that Georgia would enjoy the protection of Germany and the Muslims were

increasingly acting as allies of Turkey. Khatissian describes in particular the contradictions that emerged between the Armenian and Azerbaijani delegates at the talks:

We explained that the Muslim members of the Transcaucasian Seim delegation were not helping us, they only did us harm. They rejected our most basic requirements. Thus, for example, when we demanded that the Turks leave the Armenian parts of Alexandrapol province, Azerbaijan's Tatars insisted that the capital of the Republic of Armenia should be the village of Vagharshapat (Echmiadzin) and demanded that Yerevan be ceded to Azerbaijan. Usubbekov and Khan Khoyski claimed that Yerevan was a Tatar city, so the Muslims would not accept that Yerevan be yielded to the Armenians. Representatives of Gandzak [now Ganja] and the Akhaltskha [Akhaltsikhe] Muslims, Sultanov, Rafibekov and others, who gathered behind the Azerbaijani delegation were simply inviting by the Turks to occupy the Caucasus. A special note from the Akhaltsikhe and Akhalkalaki Turks, which had 40 signatures, was issued to the Turks, demanding that these provinces be attached to Turkey (Khatissian 1968, 74-75).

After the fall of Kars peace negotiations began in Batumi on May 11. However, the Ottomans were no longer content with the conditions of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, and they put forward new demands. Thus, the Ottoman forces continued their offensive, entering Alexandrapol on May 15 (Hovannisian 2005, 30). The road to Yerevan and the Ararat valley was opened. It seemed that military defeat was imminent, and fears of new massacres proliferated. Yet this sense of being cornered gave new motivation to the Armenian forces, which changed the course of the military campaign and resulted in what in Armenian historiography is called “the victories of May”, a series of battles in the last ten days of May in which the Ottoman forces were halted and in some cases defeated.

This new found determination to resist the advancing enemy was reflected in the words of the Armenian Catholicos (Patriarch) Gevorg V:

The Turk, our bloodthirsty enemy, captured Alexandrapol and moves towards the heart of our country, our history, our faith, to Echmiadzin [the seat of the Catholicos]. Our commanders offer to leave the Holy See of Echmiadzin to our enemy, to abandon our holy

places, to abandon the Armenian people and take refuge in Byurakan [a village in the mountains north-east of Yerevan]. No, no, a thousand times no, I will not abandon the Holy See entrusted to me by our holy ancestors. If our soldiers cannot stop the enemy's advance themselves, if they cannot save our holy places, then let me die right here" (Azdak, 1918).

Melik-Gharagyozyan wrote in his memoir that "the Armenian public organizations, in particular the Dashnaktsutyun Party, made extreme efforts to raise the spirit of the masses, to raise recruits, to find money and equipment, and to form proper military units" (Melik-Gharagyozyan 2018, 11).

The crucial battles took place around Sardarapat, a village in the Ararat Valley not far from Yerevan, where at that time there was an important railway junction. The battle began on the night of May 22. After two days of hard fighting, the Turkish troops abandoned Sardarapat. The Armenians continued on the offensive, and by May 27 the Turkish forces withdrew to Alexandropol. At the same time, fierce fighting took place in the vicinity of the city of Karakilis (now Vanadzor). Eventually the Armenians were forced to leave the city, but they managed to disrupt the Turkish offensive and to relieve the Armenian forces fighting in Sardarapat. Finally, in the Bash-Aparan area (now Aparan), the Turkish troops were stopped and were forced to retreat (Hovannisian 2005, 35-37). For the first time since the start of the fighting, the Armenian troops not only mounted a successful defense, but also went on the offensive and forced the enemy to flee.

While the outcome of these battles certainly gave Armenians some breathing room, they could not alter the larger situation. The Turkish delegation in Batumi insisted that the Transcaucasian Federation should be dissolved and that separate peace treaties be negotiated between Turkey and the three newly independent countries. The Armenians, who were the most reluctant to declare the independence of the Transcaucasian Republic from Russia, were now the most reluctant to accept the imminent dissolution of the Transcaucasian Federation. Khatissian describes the feelings of the Armenian delegation faced with these demands in Batumi, when the German general von Lossov, acting as mediator, told the Armenian delegation that, according to his information, the Transcaucasian Federation was to be dissolved so therefore he was preparing to leave. Here is how Khatissian describes the mood of the Armenian leaders:

May 25 was a tragic day for us in Batumi. We had fallen into a desperate situation after the failure of the German military mediation. The Tatars and the Georgians did not want to fight. The Tatars demanded a peace treaty at any cost, and the Georgians achieved security for themselves with German backing. We were the only ones left fighting in Sardarapat and Gharakilisa. Our paths had parted and we were absolutely incapable of finding a common language. There was a feeling in the air that the Transcaucasian Republic would collapse, but as people do not talk about death in the house of the deceased, so to we avoided any mention of the destruction and dismemberment of the Transcaucasian Republic and its amputation (Khatissian 1968, 81).

In a meeting with the Armenian delegation on the evening of May 25, the future head of the Georgian government, Noe Jordania, said, according to Khatissian, that "We cannot drown with you... our people want to save what they can; you also must find a way to make a deal with the Turks, you have no other way out" (Khatissian 1968, 82).

On the next day, May 26, the Georgian National Council declared Georgia an independent country. On May 27 the Transcaucasian Seim adopted a statement that declared effectively that the Federation ceased to exist, and there were rumors that the Azerbaijani National Council was going to declare independence on the following day (Khatissian 1968, 84). Thus, on May 28, on what is now considered to be the Day of Armenia's First Republic, the Armenian National Council gathered to decide what was to be done in the existing situation. At 12 noon the Armenian National Council in Tbilisi adopted a declaration of Armenia's independence, even though the word "independence" was not even mentioned in it anywhere in the document. Here is the full text of the declaration:

With the dissolution of the political integrity of the Transcaucasia and the new situation created by the declarations of independence of Georgia and Azerbaijan, the Armenian National Council declares itself the supreme and sole government of the Armenian provinces. Leaving aside the task of the formation of the Armenian National Government for the time being due to certain weighty reasons, the National Council temporarily assumes all governmental functions in order to perform the political and administrative leadership of the Armenian provinces (Khatissian 1968, 84)

After this declaration was adopted, the Armenian delegation returned to Batumi for peace talks, thus accepting the majority of the Turkish conditions. The ensuing Batumi Treaty, signed on June 4, became the first international treaty signed by Armenia. It envisaged Armenia as a small state, consisting of the eastern half of the former Yerevan *gubernia*, with a territory of comprising roughly 10,000 square km. There were other humiliating conditions, as such commitments to reduce the size of the army and to deport all citizens of nations that fought against the Central Powers in the war (Hovannisian 2005, 37). Nevertheless, this was the first time for several hundred years that an independent state called “Armenia” had emerged on the world map.

Conclusion

The commonly accepted view in Armenian historiography is that the battles of Sardarapat, Karakilis and Bash-Aparan were instrumental in allowing Armenia to become an independent state. Yet it seems that at the time there was no agreement within the Ottoman leadership about how to deal with the Armenians. According to Khatissian, who cited his conversations with Talaat Pasha, there were two approaches within the Turkish leadership: that of Enver Pasha, who believed that even a small Armenian state would present a danger to Turkey, and that of Talaat Pasha, who believed that the existence of a small and weak Armenian republic would not only not be dangerous for Turkey, but it could also be useful. In Khatissian’s interpretation, the Turks feared how the Armenian Question might have been raised at future international conferences, and preferred to agree to the creation of a small Armenian state as a concession to international public opinion. That, according to Khatissian, would show that Turkey had helped to solve the Armenian question. In addition, Khatissian continued, the Turks realized that it would be difficult to exterminate the approximately two million Armenians residing in the Caucasus, and the small Armenian state would serve as a place for Armenian refugees from Turkey to gather (Khatissian 1968, 88-89). Whether it was the battle of Sardarapat or the fear of the international reaction that led the Ottomans to accept the existence of an independent Armenia, today it is difficult to say. Most probably it was a combination of both military and diplomatic considerations. Turkey’s primary goal was obtaining the Baku oil, which at the time was under the control of the Bolsheviks, who were cooperating tactically with the city’s Armenian forces. Having to wage a battle in the Ararat Valley would have derailed the Turkish army from its main objective, so making peace with the Armenians made sense.

Independence for Armenia came not as a choice, but as a necessity. Effectively, the Armenian National Council was left with no other option in the situation when the Transcaucasian Federation was disintegrating, as the Russian Empire had before it. However, the traumatic nature of the events that accompanied the dissolution of the Federation and the contradictions and mistrust that poisoned the relations among the political forces claiming to represent the various nationalities left a deep mark in Armenian national historiography, and through this, on Armenian collective memory more generally.

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