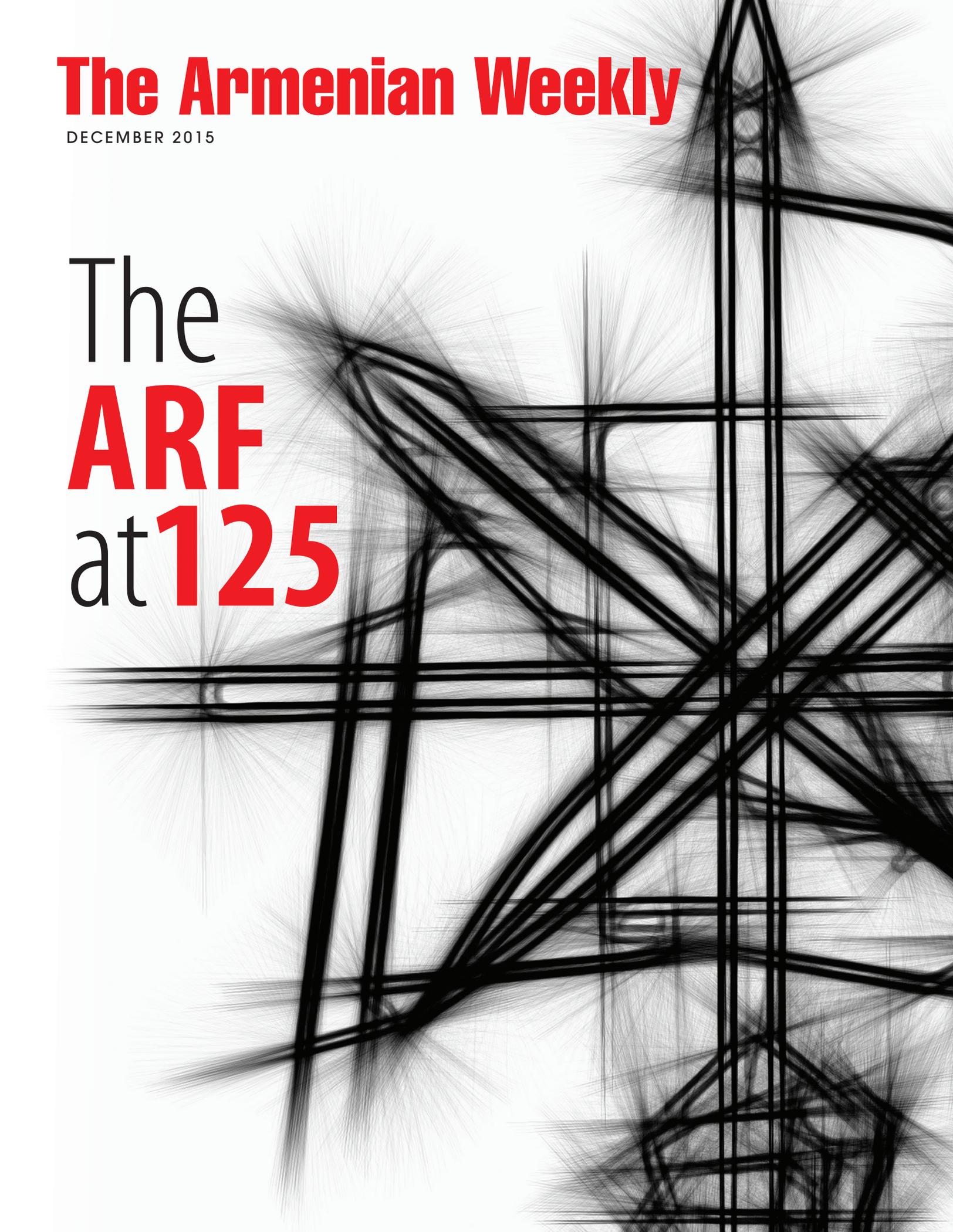


# The Armenian Weekly

DECEMBER 2015

The  
**ARF**  
at **125**



# The Armenian Weekly

DECEMBER 2015



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**Meruzhan Khachatryan** is a graduate of Yerevan’s Terlemezyan College of Fine Arts. His paintings have been featured in exhibitions across Armenia, Russia, the U.S., and Canada, and can be found in private collections across the world. He has been a member of Armenia’s Union of Artists since 2004. To learn more about Meruzhan’s work, visit [www.meruzhankhachatryan.com](http://www.meruzhankhachatryan.com).



**Houry Mayissian** is a communications professional with journalism and public relations experience in Dubai, Beirut, and Sydney. She has studied European politics and society at the University of Oxford, specializing on the democratic reform process in Armenia as part of its European integration. Since December 2012, she has been regularly contributing to the Armenian Weekly.



**Murad A. Meneshian**, born in Baghdad, Iraq, has lived in the United States since 1957. In 2010, he published a biography of Raffi titled, *Raffi: The Prophet from Payajuk*. Meneshian has translated Vahan Hambartsumian’s *Giughashkharh*, published under the title of *Village World*. He has contributed a chapter to *Armenian Sebastia/Sivas and Lesser Armenia* and a translated chapter to *Khodorchur: Lost Paradise*. Over the years, he has contributed to the Armenian Weekly. He and his wife, Knarik, live in Glenview, Ill.



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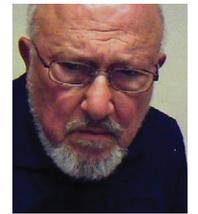


**Daniel Ohanian** is originally from Toronto. He received his B.A. and M.A. in history from York University, Canada, and is now a research assistant and M.A. candidate in history at Istanbul Bilgi University, in Turkey.



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## Editor’s Desk

## The Fool’s Eden

BY NANORE BARSOUMIAN

Raffi’s “Fool” once dreamt of an Eden—“a different Eden”—where knowledge replaced ignorance, a progressive society did away with the simple patriarchal lifestyle, and the people faced no existential threats. In that Eden, economic justice reigned, and one’s earnings were not snatched by cruel oppressors. Raffi published *The Fool* (*Khente*) in 1880. Inspired by the Russo-Turkish War (1877) and centered on a doomed romance, *The Fool* describes the hardships facing Armenians at the time; the novel would plant seeds of a nationalist revolutionary fever in generations of readers.

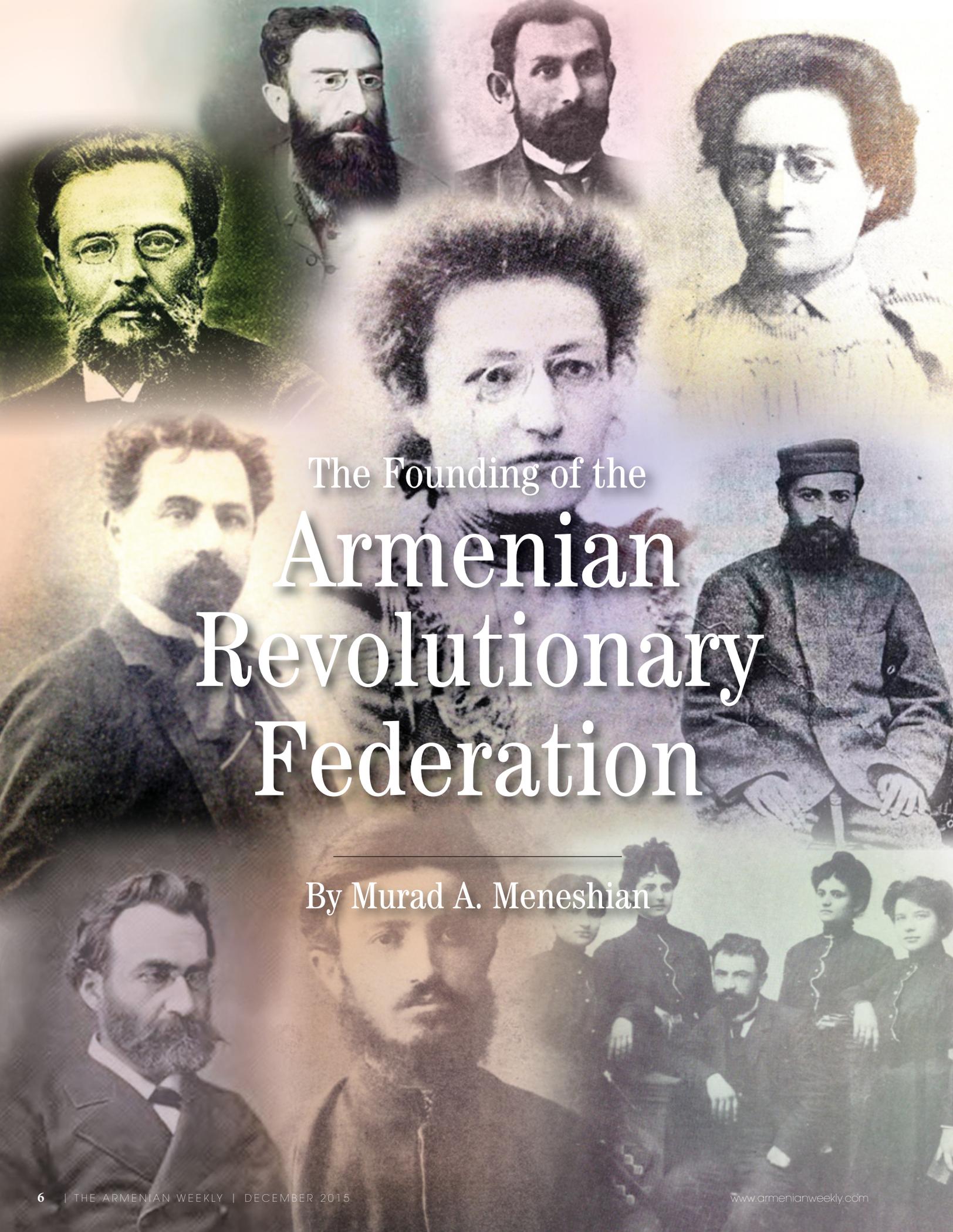
The “fools” who would later shape the course of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) were driven by that same vision of Eden—a world that was founded on economic and political liberation (see the “History” section in this issue, particularly Meneshian). That vision propelled thousands forward, often with a disregard for one’s own wellbeing.

From the outset, sacrifice has been a core component of the ARF. Sometimes that has taken a too literal and dark turn, as with the life and death of early ARF member Mariam (Maro) Magarian. Maro, a teacher and community activist, had been deeply involved in the liberation movement, helped transport

weapons to Western Armenia, and turned her home into a hideout for fellow revolutionaries. Engaged to Aristakes (Karo) Zorian, the younger brother of ARF founder Rostom, Maro believed that Karo’s love for her interfered with his resolve ahead of the Khanasor expedition. She shot herself on Dec. 2, 1896. On July 25, 1897, Karo took part in the expedition and gave his life.

More than 130 years have lapsed since Raffi wrote down the “Fool’s” dream, and nearly 120 years since Maro pointed her revolver at her own heart, but the challenges facing Armenians remain: the persistent assaults of relentless, hostile neighbors; the state of Armenian education and awareness in the diaspora, marked by the alarming trend of school closures; social injustices and patriarchal mindsets that persist in Armenia and the diaspora (see Mayissian); economic and environmental exploitation; and the general information warfare and advocacy work carried out in the international arena and within adoptive countries.

One-hundred-and-twenty-five years after its birth, the ARF cannot afford to pause and catch a breath. Its work must continue. We hope this special magazine issue dedicated to the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the party will serve as a humble attempt to remind readers of some of the sacrifices made along the way, the work that lies ahead, and the *Dashnaksakan*’s calling in an ever-changing reality.

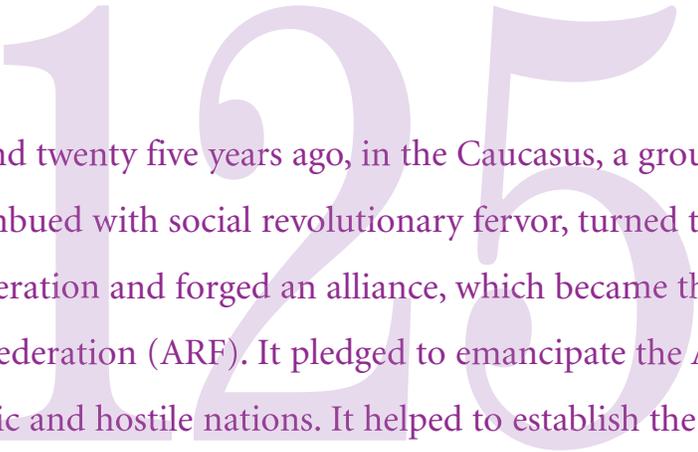


The Founding of the  
**Armenian  
Revolutionary  
Federation**

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By Murad A. Meneshian

## HISTORY



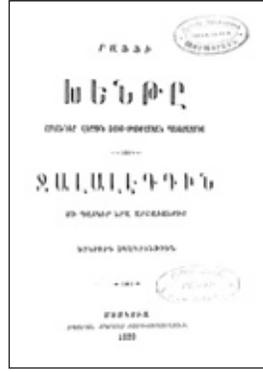
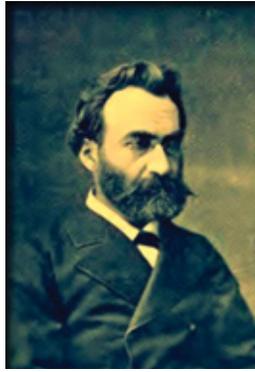
One hundred and twenty five years ago, in the Caucasus, a group of young men and women, imbued with social revolutionary fervor, turned their site toward national liberation and forged an alliance, which became the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF). It pledged to emancipate the Armenian people from despotic and hostile nations. It helped to establish the independent Republic of Armenia and continues to defend the Armenian people during critical and peaceful times, from Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabagh) to Lebanon and Syria. The Armenian Revolutionary Federation is the party of the people, the largest and the most representative. It took upon itself the defense of the Armenian people in Western Armenia (Eastern Anatolia/Turkish Armenia) against Turkish and Kurdish truculence and tyranny, despoliation and desecration. It was the Armenian Revolutionary Federation that led the Armenian resistance against Turkey during World War I. It was through the perseverance of this organization that the Allied Powers of World War I officially recognized the Armenians as their “Little Ally.” It was the organized Armenian Revolutionary Federation volunteers who fought the Turks long enough in Baku and prevented the Germans from reaching the oil fields, contributing to the decisive Allied victory. It was this organization that saved thousands of children left orphaned in the bloody fields of Western Armenia. It was this organization that produced the victories at Sardarabad, Bash-Abaran, and Karakilisa on May 28, 1918, and declared the independence of Armenia. And it was the Armenian Revolutionary Federation members of the Armenian government who signed the Treaty of Sèvres.

How did this national political organization form and grow from disparate and disorganized Armenian groups having Russian social revolutionary orientation in the last decade of the 19th century? A closer look reveals that the ARF had its seeds sown earlier in Western Armenia by secret organizations that could no longer bear the suffering of the Armenians at the hands of the abusive Turkish government. The Zeytun uprising of 1862 against intolerable taxation signaled the nascent Armenian liberation movement and found its response in the far-away Caucasus.

In 1872, *Miutiun I Perkutium* (Union of Salvation) in Van became the first organized revolutionary society in Western Armenia. It had 46 members from all classes, including clergy; they dedicated themselves to liberate the Armenians in the region. They applied to the Russian government to send a consul to Van, and later they asked to become Russian subjects.

**T**he *Sev Khach Kasmakerbutiun* (Black Cross Society) was formed during the Berlin Congress, in 1878, in Van, when the Kurdish atrocities were continuing with Britain's encouragement. Organized to alleviate the suffering of the Armenians from terror and famine, the members were sworn to secrecy and those who broke their oath were marked with a black cross and put to death.

In 1880, *Pashtpan Hayreniats* (Protectors of the Fatherland) was formed in Erzerum (Garin) and led by Khachatur Kereksian and Karapet Nshikian. Its purpose was to arm the inhabitants for defense against any future attacks by Turks, Kurds, and Circassians. It was thought that the society was directed by Dr. Bagrat Navasardian from headquarters in Tiflis (Tbilisi). There was evidence that Raffi cooperated with them. It had a 7-member central committee, with decentralized groups of 10, each with a leader. Hundreds joined the society, which distributed guns to the people. Bishop Ormanian, the prelate of Erzerum, had been informed of the group, and in 1881 he notified Patriarch Nerses



Raffi and his *Jelaleddin* and *Khente*

Varzhabedian, who approved the society's existence. Kereksian went to Van and conferred with Khrimian *Hayrig*; then he made contact with Grigor Artsruni, the publisher of "*Mshak*," and Raffi. The society printed certificates with its emblem, oath, and the words, "Azatutiun Gam Mah" (Liberty or Death). In 1882, the Turkish government found a copy of the certificate and arrested 67 people, 40 of whom were found guilty and given 5- to 15-year prison terms. Patriarch Nerses's and Bishop Ormanian's efforts convinced the sultan to pardon the prisoners in 1886 to avoid European pressure. The London Times reported that 400 persons were arrested in Erzerum and the leaders were believed to be in Tiflis. The Russian consul in Erzerum notified the Russian government, which arrested Artsruni and Raffi and searched their homes and the "*Mshak*" office. The events in Erzerum served as the inspiration for the revolutionary song, "*Dzayne Hnchets Erzerumi Hayots Lernereri.*"

The secret organization *Barenepatak Enkerutiun* (Goodwill Society; 1868-1876) was formed in April 1868, in Alexandropol, under the guise of a cultural and philosophical organization. It managed to avoid detection by police until it was exposed by an unpatriotic bishop.

The secret organization *Kontora Hayreniats Siro* (Devotion to the Fatherland Bureau; 1874-1875) was formed in Karakilisa (now Vanadzor). It was a sister organization of *Barenepatak Enkerutiun*, disguised as a cultural organization but with political objectives.

Due to the 1877-78 Russo-Turkish War, emigrants from Mush, working as laborers in Tiflis, formed a society to self educate and acquire training in the use of arms to

prepare for liberation activities in their homeland. They were taught the use of arms by Gabriel (Gabo) Mirzoian, Aleksander Simonian, and Ghazakhetsi Mekhak until 1884 when Kristapor Mikaelian—at that time a member of the Russian social revolutionary group *Narodnaya Volya* (People's Will)—assumed the leadership.

In Yerevan in the early 1880's, V. Yeghiazarian, T. Vardanian, and T. Meherian formed the secret *Azkaser Usutsichner* organization (Patriotic Teachers). They were suspected of having ties with Tiflis and Erzerum. The government discovered and imprisoned them.

In Shushi, Karabagh, the *Uzh* (Strength) secret organization formed to help the liberation cause through money and arms. The members read banned books and encouraged the use of the Armenian language and culture.

Starting in 1885, brigand bands formed in Western Armenia and attacked Kurdish feudal lords and Turkish government forces. In the Daron region there were the Arapo, Mkho, and Markar Varzhabed groups; in Alashkert, Huno; in Erzerum, Shamil (Dikran Okonian); in Yerzinga, Kalust Arkhanian; in Shadakh, Chato and Shero; and in Dersim, Dersimi Keri.

Influenced by the writings of Khachatur Abovian, Mikael Nalbandian, Rafael Patkanian, Raffi's novels, and the outcome of two world events—the Russo-Turkish War and Bulgaria's independence—raised the hopes of the Armenian intellectuals in Russia for Western Armenia's emancipation. The university-educated class followed two separate ideologies. One segment included students from the wealthy class and advocated pure nationalism; the other had social revolutionary tendencies similar to that of *Narodnaya Volya*. The young men and women began to form various secret groups to help liberate the Armenians from Turkish tyranny. In 1878, Raffi published *Jelaleddin*, and in 1880 *Khente*, which shocked readers and aroused the youth's desire to liberate Western Armenia.

Young people of various nationalities in Transcaucasia worked together in the Russian revolutionary organizations *Zemly i Volya* (Land and Freedom) and *Narodnaya Volya*. Kristapor Mikaelian had joined *Narodnaya Volya* during his student days at the Pedagogical Institute in Tiflis in the late 1870's. He graduated in 1880 and went to Verin Agulis, his hometown, to teach in the Armenian schools. The school board had funded his education with the condition that he would go back and teach for four years. He was already a seasoned political activist. His reformation came about during the years he spent in his hometown, where he became closely acquainted with the condition of the peasantry. He saw how the Russian government officials oppressed and subjugated the people to myriad injustices.

**D**uring his time in Verin Agulis, the committee of *Narodnaya Volya* in Tiflis was comprised of three Georgians and three Armenians—Grigor Ter Grigorian, Abraham Dastakian, and Tamara Adamian. In the summer of 1881, Kristapor returned to Tiflis and met with Abraham Dastakian and one of the Georgians. He suggested that the members, as separate national groups, go to the regions and work among the people. His suggestion was met with strong opposition.

In 1882, the Armenians separated from the *Narodnaya Volya* committee based on national aspiration. Dastakian wrote to Kristapor: "Our group will entirely dedicate its activities to the unprotected rights of the unfortunate Armenian people." Dastakian attracted Simeon and Srapion Ter Grigorian, Aleksandr Petrosian, Davit Nersesian, Arisdages Tokhmakhian, Tigran Pirumian, Simon Zavarian, and Grigor Aghababian, among others. The group held meetings, during which the members presented lectures on national history and culture. They published two secret papers called "*Munetik*" (Crier), edited by Simon Zavarian, Martiros Markarian, and Grigor Aghababian, and "*Hairennaser Dzain*" (Patriotic Voice), edited by Simeon and



Kristapor Mikaelian

Srabion Ter Grigorian. The former had a revolutionary tone and declared resistance to the Russian government's oppression; the latter suggested a passive reaction and stressed speaking Armenian outside the home as well. The group sent observers Aleksandr Petrosian and Tigran Pirumian to Western Armenia in 1883 to gather information for their future operations. That same year Haik Dadaian and Zakar Tavakalian were sent by the secret organization in Yerevan. In the fall of 1883, Abraham Dastakian, Tamara Adamian, Simeon and Srapion Ter Grigorian left Tiflis to study in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Thus, the activities of the group discontinued in Tiflis.

The St. Petersburg Armenian students in the early 1880's had formed a group and followed the events in Western Armenia and the political independence of the Balkan people from the Ottoman Empire. The students printed 15 brochures on the Greek and Bulgarian revolutionaries and distributed them among the Armenians,



Simon Zavarian in his youth

hoping to inspire them for action against the Turkish government.

In the spring of 1882, the Armenian students in Moscow were similarly influenced by the Balkan events. They formed an organization called *Hayrenaserneri Miutiun* (Union of Patriots), and published revolutionary literature calling Armenians to liberate their compatriots in Western Armenia. Some of the members were Simon Zavarian, Martin Shatirian, Harutiun Pirabian, Nerses Abelian, Vardges Kachaznuni (Hovhannes Kachaznuni's brother), Margar Artemian, Mikael Zalian, Davit Nersesian, Karapet Ter Khachaturina, and Martin Vekilian. They produced a pamphlet declaring their objectives, a copy of which was brought to Tiflis by Davit Nersesian in the summer of 1882. On New Year's Day, 1884, the St. Petersburg students Abraham Dastakian, Simeon and Srapion Ter Grigorian, and Tamara Adamian met with the Moscow students and formed a single organization. *Hayrenaserneri Miutiun* decided to publish their organ "*Azatutian Avetaber*" (Herald of Freedom) and set up the first Armenian secret printing press in 1884, in Russia. The group had the ideology of *Narodnaya Volya*. The organ declared that the Turkish government was the greatest oppressor of the Armenian people, and it proclaimed to achieve political and economic independence from Turkey by revolutionary means. The organization and the press were discovered by the Russian government in 1886, forcing the group to disband.

Russian revolutionaries assassinated Tsar Alexander II in 1881. His son Alexander III ascended the throne and pursued a policy of severe persecutions against minorities, especially the Armenians. In 1884, Kristapor Mikaelian completed his teaching responsibilities and returned to Tiflis, and found only a few of Abraham Dastakian's *Hayrenaserneri Miutiun* members. Many had left for Europe and Russia to attend universities, and others were occupied with family and professional responsibilities. The only ones left were the *Mushetsi* laborers, being trained by Gabriel Mirzoian and assisted by Aleksander Simonian (Santro) and Ghazakhetsi Mekhak (Bidza). Kristapor

joined Mirzoian and assumed the leadership of the *Mushetsi* group. In 1884, the Russian government eliminated Armenians from civil and military positions and banned participation in cultural activities. This policy was formalized by the “Ukaz” Law of 1884. The restrictions imposed on the Armenians reached its peak in 1885 when the government closed all 600 of the Armenian diocesan schools in an attempt to assimilate the Armenians. In defiance of the law, Gabriel Mirzoian and Kristapor Mikaelian printed and distributed three anti-Tsarist pamphlets protesting the closing of the schools. The anti-Armenian cam-

(Northern Numbers). All, experienced as members of secret organizations, continued their discussions on how to help their compatriots in Western Armenia. Others joined and formed the nucleus of the future Armenian Revolutionary Federation. Some of the members were Nikol Matinian, Natalia Matinian, Satenik Matinian, Maro Zakarian, Anna Sahakian, Hovhannes Yusufian, Hakob Kocharian, Martin Shatirian, Hovsep Arghutian, Arshak Tadeosian, Tigran Stepanian, Aleksandr Petrosian (Peto/Bedo). The group held meetings mostly at *Iuzhniya Nomera* to form a united organization and to formulate an

In 1887, Kristapor returned to Tiflis due to a lack of funding. Although he knew Nikol Matinian, Martin Shatirian, Hakob Kocharian, and Hovsep Arghutian, he did not get involved with the *Iuzhniya* group. Shatirian knew Kristapor because Zavarian had told Shatirian in Moscow to go and see Kristapor in Tiflis. Shatirian visited Kristapor almost daily at his apartment where he worked as a proofreader for the Russian paper “*Novoye Obozrenie*” (New Review). The *Iuzhniya* group asked Shatirian to convince Kristapor to join the discussions at *Iuzhniya Nomera*. At first, Kristapor was reluctant, but when he realized that the



Khachatur Malumian (E. Agnuni)



Satenig Matinian (Arghoutian), also known as Dzaghig



Natalia Matinian

campaign drove away Armenians from Russian revolutionary circles. On the advice of Raffi, the Armenian secret organizations opened schools in homes and distributed anti-government leaflets written by Kristapor Mikaelian. Kristapor left for Moscow in the fall of 1885 to further his studies.

In 1886, the graduating students from Moscow and St. Petersburg returned to Tiflis and brought the printing types with them. Those mostly from Moscow resided in the middle-class hostel named *Iuzhniya Nomera* (Southern Numbers); those of the bourgeoisie class from St. Petersburg universities lived in the better hostel named *Severnii Nomera*

operations program. The main disagreement was about the different ideologies of the two groups. Those having Russian social revolutionary orientation, the *Iuzhniya* group, insisted on founding a socialist organization, whereas the *Severnii* group—Dr. Hovhannes Loris-Melikian, Kostantin Khatisian, Gabriel Mirzoian, Levon Sarkisian, Tadeos Zakarian—had purely nationalistic and capitalistic inclinations, stressing that the laws of the future Armenia had to protect financial institutions, like those in Western Europe. Khachatur Malumian (E. Agnuni) was associated with Grigor Artsruni, who operated independently. They were all concerned with the liberation of Western Armenia.

group was serious, he began to attend the meetings. He noticed that the different groups were disorganized and espoused different ideas and plans to unify for revolutionary activities. Kristapor worked on forming a new group and movement. Stepan Zorian (Rostom) arrived in Tiflis in 1887 from his village Dzhghna and met Kristapor. They wanted to establish a secret printing press using the types Kristapor had acquired from the members of *Azatutian Avetaber*, but they lacked the funds. Both began to rally all of the Armenian revolutionary groups for armed struggle for the political and economic liberation of Western Armenia.

At the end of July 1889, Ruben Khan-Azat (Nshan Karapetian), one of the

founders of the *Hnchak* Party (Paris, 1887), came to Tiflis to recruit members. Khachatur Malumian invited Khan-Azat to stay at his home, where young men gathered to socialize. He met the young men, but was disappointed that their discussions were about matters of entertainment rather than serious national issues. He informed them that he had come to discuss issues that were crucial to the Armenians of Western Armenia. Those present were skeptical about his proposals. He wanted to meet Kristapor and Zavarian, but both had left Tiflis on private business. He asked Malumian to call a meeting with the leadership of the different groups so that he could explain to them the Hnchak ideology. Khan-Azat had three meetings with several members of the various groups and proposed to form a revolutionary organization that would have a socialist program and that its members were obliged to go to Western Armenia and engage in revolutionary activities. The attendees were receptive to the idea of forming a revolutionary group based on purely national issues. They disagreed on the mandatory requirement of members going to Western Armenia. Disappointed, he returned to Batum.

**I**n the winter of 1889, under the leadership of Kristapor Mikaelian, the *Iuzhniya* and *Severnii* groups met at the *Iuzhniya Nomera* and formed a united organization named *Yeritasard Hayastan* (Young Armenia). The nucleus of this organization was the “*Droshak*” group. Members of the organization were Kristapor Mikaelian, Simon Zavarian, Avetis Sahakian, Hovhannes Yusufian, Nikol Matinian, Hovsep Arghutian, Abraham Dastakian, Martin Shatirian, Tigran Okonian, Aram Nazaretian, Hakob Kocharian, Martiros Markarian, Arshak Tadeosian, Satenik Matinian, Natalia Matinian, Daria Goloshian, Maro Zavarian, Zhenia Adamian, Tigran Stepanian, Arshak Paronian, Tadeos Zakarian, Aram Aramian, Vardges Kachaznuni, and others. The purpose of the organization was to send men across the border into Western Armenia for punitive missions against the Kurds hoping

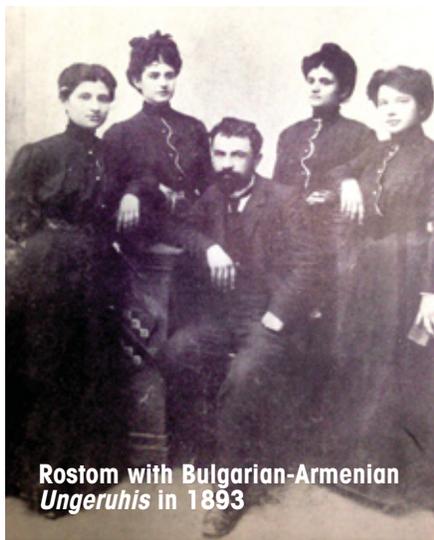
to attract the attention of the European powers to enforce the reforms stated in Article 61 of the Berlin Treaty, coordinate with the activities of the other secret groups, send observers into Turkish territory to collect information, prepare men in Transcaucasia for possible future armed combat, and smuggle arms into Western Armenia through Persia. Branches of the organization formed in other cities and villages in Russia, Turkey, and Persia. Investigators Hovsep Arghutian, M. Markarian, and Ardashes Barkhudarian went to Western Armenia to evaluate the conditions and assess the people’s disposition for revolutionary work. Martin Shatirian went to Alexandropol and formed *Droshak* committees in the surrounding villages. *Yeritasard Hayastan* set up a printing press in the basement of Zhenia Adamian’s home and published propaganda literature.

In 1890, Russia changed its tolerance toward the Armenians and pursued a policy of expansionism in the Far East and warmed its relations with Turkey. In the following year, Turkey formed the Kurdish Hamidiye force, giving them military authority to secure the territory near the Russian border. Both these developments presented serious hardships for the Armenian freedom fighters.

In the late spring of 1890, members of *Yeritasard Hayastan* and teachers who had come from the regions for their summer break held numerous meetings to form a united organization. Deep-rooted ideological differences existed between two major factions—the social revolutionaries and ultra-nationalists. Two major events in 1890 in Turkey—the disturbances in Erzerum on June 20, and the Hnchakian demonstrations at Kum Kapu in Constantinople on July 15—spurred the groups to urgently develop a more comprehensive program than that of *Yeritasard Hayastan*. These events galvanized the members to immediately form a strong organization and plan for a revolutionary movement in Turkey. Several constituent meetings took place between the various groups in an effort to consolidate into one powerful federation. Rostom was not present at these meetings because he had left Tiflis in the

autumn of 1889 and entered the Petrovski Agricultural College in Moscow. Kristapor helped to bring the two major groups closer to compromise and achieve unity. A final agreement had not yet been reached when the meeting heard that Ruben Khan-Azat, the representative of the Hnchak Party, was in Batum. He had escaped from Constantinople the day before the Kum Kapu demonstration on July 15. The meeting agreed to invite Khan-Azat to participate in the meetings. They sent Arshak Ter Grigorian to Batum. Ter Grigorian met Khan-Azat and informed him of the meeting’s intentions. Two weeks later, Khan-Azat arrived in Tiflis and was greeted at the train station by Kristapor, Zavarian, Arshak Ter Grigorian, Hovhannes Yusufian, Nikol Matinian, Khachatur Malumian, Kostantin Khatisian, and a few female members (unnamed by Khan-Azat, but likely Satenik and Natalia Matinian, Daria Goloshian, Maro Zavarian, and Zhenia Adamian). The next day, Kristapor and Zavarian met with Khan-Azat and asked him to wait a few days before joining the meetings because an agreement was imminent and his presence might agitate some members and prevent achieving an agreement. Khan-Azat emphasized that socialism had to be the objective of the new organization. Kristapor and Zavarian assured him that they would incorporate his ideology into the agreement in such a way that it would be acceptable to him, and that his party would be part of the unified organization. Khan-Azat agreed. Kristapor and Zavarian, socialists themselves but pragmatic and realists, were careful to avoid alienating the anti-socialists by carefully wording the economic and political objectives without using the word “socialism.” Kristapor with his charismatic and persuasive personality was able to unify the participants around the idea of liberating Western Armenia. The delegates reconciled their differences and arrived at a compromise. Kristapor suggested that the party objective be “the economic and political” freedom of Western Armenia, thereby incorporating the social-economic system into the agreement without using the word

“socialism.” A few days later Kristapor and Zavarian informed Khan-Azat that the group had resolved its differences and the anti-socialists had accepted the statement; he was asked to come to the next meeting and announce the Hnchak Party’s integration into the new organization. Khan-Azat went to the meeting held at Gabriel Mirzoian’s home. Present were Gabriel Mirzoian, Simon Zavarian, Kristapor Mikaelian, Khachatur Malumian, Arshak Ter Grigorian, Abraham Dastakian, Kostantin Khatisian, and Hovhannes Loris-Melikian. They presented the new organization’s plans to Khan-Azat, who pointed out that the words “socialism” and “democracy” were not in the plan. He told the meeting: “The revolutionary organization must have a simple and defined program . . . when you desire that the Hnchak Party join your organization, your program has to be based on socialism.” He feared falling under the control of the ultra-nationalist elements of the organization, and that his comrades in Geneva would disagree with the new organization’s direction. After the meeting Kristapor and Zavarian met alone with Khan-Azat, and Kristapor told him, “You have lived in a free society and you want to call every item by its actual name. Here it is not like that. We have learned to speak secretly about everything. We do not pay much attention to the word; the important thing is the work. It seems strange to you that the word ‘socialism’ is not in the plan. What is the meaning of the words ‘economic and political,’ if not ‘socialism?’” Khan-Azat was not convinced, but he did not doubt their sincerity. The nationalist elements asked Khan-Azat to inform his party to cease the “*Hnchak*” publication. He was against it and Kristapor and Zavarian sided with him. When he informed his party leaders, they sent a telegraph telling him to cease negotiations until Hakob Meghavorian arrived with specific instructions. After long discussions with the Hnchak Party representatives, the delegates signed a document stating that the Hnchak Party was to dissolve and become an integral part of the new organization with its headquarters in Trabzon as suggested by Khan-Azat as a compromise. In effect, however, the functioning center was Tiflis, where most of the leaders lived. Thus in



Rostom with Bulgarian-Armenian Ungeruhis in 1893

August 1890, the *Hay Heghapokhakanneri Dashnaktsutiun* (Federation of Armenian Revolutionaries) was formed. It was agreed that the “*Hnchak*” in Geneva would be the federation’s theoretical organ and “*Droshak*” in Tiflis its revolutionary struggle. A five-member central committee (Center/Kentron/Bureau) was elected consisting of Kristapor Mikaelian, Simon Zavarian, Abraham Dastakian, Hovhannes Loris-Melikian, and Levon Sargisian. The daily operations were to be centrally directed by the executive. Many Hnchak committees in Russia joined the federation. Because the situation in Western Armenia was of utmost importance, the federation did not have time to prepare a program and operational rules.

In September 1890, Rostom was expelled from college and returned to Tiflis when the federation had already formed. Regardless, Rostom immersed himself in the cause and activities of the federation. The federation announced its formation in a secret flier named *Droshaki Trutsik Tert* (Droshak flier), dubbed “Manifesto,” issued in September 1890 and addressed to the public, wherein it declared that the Armenian Question would be the central purpose of the party; that no longer would it beg European governments for assistance, for such reliance had proved useless; that it would fight for the political and economic freedom of Western Armenia; that the Armenians had resolved to defend their rights, property, honor, and family with their own hands; and that all true patriots should join forces with the new organization. The flier was not dated; there is, how-

ever, anecdotal evidence as to when it was published. Tigran Stepanian had taken a number of copies and gone to Yerevan to distribute them and recruit new members. He met Grigor Artsruni there and gave him a copy of the flier. Artsruni was in Yerevan in September 1890; it is certain that the flier was published in September. Unfortunately, not a single copy of the flier has survived. Available financial documents indicate that the fiscal year started on Nov. 1, 1890.

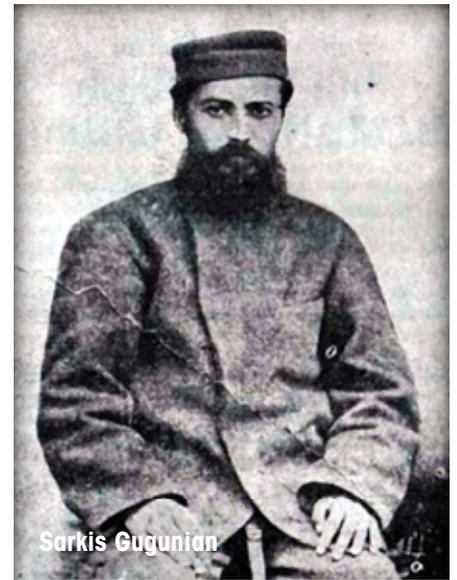
Meanwhile, Sarkis Gugunian, a central figure in a group of nationalist Armenian students in St. Petersburg, left and went to Tiflis to form an expeditionary group, enter Western Armenia, and defend the terrorized Armenians. He gathered 125 volunteers and trained them in the Kars region along the Turkish border. The Tiflis delegates were interested in Gugunian’s mission, so they sent a representative to inform him about the formation of the federation. He was advised to enter Turkey without delay for fear of being discovered by the Russian government. Gugunian refused to recognize the new organization. He also was not ready to cross the border. The federation received word from its carriers that the Mush prelate had asked to delay sending freedom fighters until a more propitious time. The organization sent Kostantin Khatisian and later Zavarian to convince Gugunian to disperse his men, but neither could convince him.

Unfortunately, when he did cross the border, the group fell under fire from both the Turkish and Russian border guards. Those who survived were arrested by the Russian border guards, and after trials they were imprisoned.

The executive immediately sent field workers—organizers and propagandists—to Western Armenia, Trabzon, Constantinople, the northern Caucasus, Baku, Persia, and other towns and villages. Kristapor went to Baku to organize committees and raise funds. Zavarian and Hovsep Arghutian went to Trabzon; Zavarian became the principal of the Armenian school, and Arghutian became a field worker. Kristapor was arrested and sent into exile to Bessarabia. Zavarian and Arghutian were arrested by the Turkish government and, after trials and imprisonment, were handed over to the Russian government, which also exiled them to Bessarabia.

Field workers Tigran Stepanian, Galust Aloian, and Hovnan Davitian were the first who went to Persia in January 1891. Davitian was invited by the board of the Lilava Armenian School in Tavriz. Soon Nikoghayos Ter Hovhannisian (Nikol-Duman) and several teachers joined him. Gunsmiths Aleksandr Katanian, Aristakes Zorian (Garo), and Yervant Ter Avedikian arrived and set up an arms factory in the *Chabakhana* market where other gunsmith shops operated. Other field workers renovated and occupied the Derik Monastery, from where they launched expeditions into Vaspurakan and repelled the Kurdish attacks on the Armenian villages along the Persian-Turkish border. Kostantin Khatisian's ultra-nationalist group, unhappy with the executive, formed a "Fraktsia" (separate group), and in November 1890, Kostantin went to Baku to raise funds and recruit members. He came back with several volunteers and went to Bulgaria to make bombs. The Bulgarian government arrested and exiled them; they returned to Tiflis.

When Khan-Azat returned to Geneva in early 1891, he found that his comrades were far less willing to compromise on the issue of socialism. They complained that the federation was not in the hands of Kristapor and Zavarian, because of their absence, but of the anti-socialist liberals in the executive. The executive informed Avetis Nazarbekian (one of the founders of the Hnchak Party) to stop publishing the "*Hnchak*" because "*Droshak*" was going to be published soon. Nazarbekian was extremely critical of the federation's recent flier and was concerned about complaints from former Hnchakians who had joined the federation. Based on the Hnchaks' objections, the Geneva headquarters decided to nullify the agreement made in Tiflis. In the May 18 and June 5, 1891 "*Hnchak*" issues, the Hnchak Party official declared its withdrawal from the federation, claiming that a union had never taken place with the Tiflis groups. The Hnchak Central Committee informed the federation executive in Tiflis of their deci-



Sarkis Gugunian

sion, but the latter did not respond. The second "*Droshak*" flier appeared in early 1891, wherein it was announced that the federation was going to publish "*Droshak*" soon. In May 1891, the first official issue of "*Droshak*" appeared, containing the following excerpt: "*Droshak*' cannot have solidarity with those who want to reach their goal

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Sarkis and Mari Ohanessian  
congratulate the  
**Armenian  
Revolutionary  
Federation**  
on its  
**125th Anniversary**

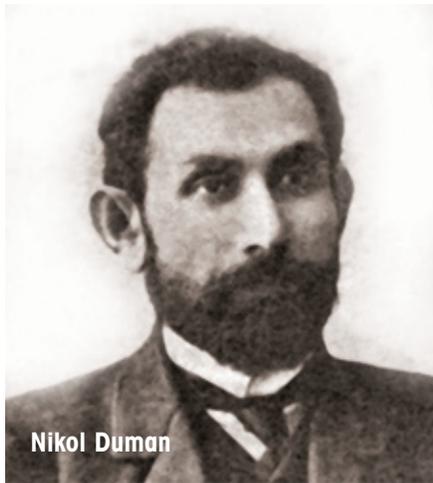


diplomatically because diplomacy as an exception will not do anything that is affected just by philanthropy. In our material world, the diplomats rule according to their self-interests and the rights of the powerful... On the other hand, 'Droshak' cannot agree with those who want to form such an organization which wants to struggle only in Western Europe..."

Khachatur Malumian, representing "Mshak," had left the federation before the executive's election. The ultra-nationalists Kostantine Khatisian, Levon Sarkisian, and Gabriel Mirzoian also left. Upon the departure of the Hnchak Party and Khatisian's group, the organization changed its name to **Hay Heghapokhakan Dashnaksutiun** (Armenian Revolutionary Federation). The bulk of the work was thrust upon Kristapor (1859–1905), Rostom (1867–1919), and Zavarian (1866–1913), who became the triumvirate that was instrumental in achieving political unification and sustaining the momentum for the organization to survive and grow.

The executive lost its effectiveness when in 1891 Kristapor and Zavarian were arrested and exiled to Bessarabia. The remaining members did not show revolutionary abilities. Martin Shatirian and Arshak Tadeosian filled the positions left open by Kristapor and Zavarian. Rostom took upon himself the burden of all major tasks of the organization. The centralized system was ineffective in directing activities in distant places, where contact was difficult between the various groups operating within three hostile nations.

In early 1892, the federation was in danger of dissolution. Internal dissensions and



Nikol Duman

desertions had weakened the party and made it ineffective. It was criticized by the members and the public, which had expected great results for the salvation of Western Armenia. In April 1892, a group in Tavriz, Persia, demanded to hold a congress to clarify the objectives of the party, revise its structure and methods of operation, and develop a comprehensive strategy for the revolutionary struggle. They issued an announcement under the heading, "Invitation to the first general meeting of Armenian Revolutionaries," signed by "A Group of the Federation of Armenian Revolutionaries," criticizing the executive and their poor performance. The organization further weakened when the bourgeois executive members, Hovhannes Loris-Melikian and Levon Sarkisian, left the organization. The federation members agreed with the circular and planned the first General (World) Congress in Tiflis in the summer of 1892. In May, both Kristapor and Zavarian returned from exile. Representatives came from Russia, Persia, and Western Armenia. Invitations were sent to the Hnchak and *Armenakan* parties, but

neither responded. In effect, this gathering was the founding congress of a new consolidated party—**Hay Heghapokhakan Dashnaksutiun**. Until the First General Meeting the organization had operated centrally, creating confusion within the field workers in various regions. For that reason, and at the urging of Hovnan Davitian, the Congress decentralized the party operations and produced its *Tsragir yev Kanonagir* (Program and Rules). The official organ of the ARF remained the "Droshak." (Note: Nos. 1 & 2 were published in Tiflis; Nos. 3 & 4 in Romania; and No. 5 and on in Geneva, until it moved to several other locations.) The General Meeting allowed a second Bureau to form in Persia to work jointly, but independently, with the Tiflis Bureau. The program did not specify the formation of an independent Armenia but stated that the Armenian people wanted autonomy and freedom from oppression and exploitation under Turkish rule in Western Armenia.

The program regarding Western Armenia was further explained in a series of articles under the title "Ayb u Ben" (A and B) in "Droshak" Nos. 5–8, from November 1893 to May 1894, written by Kristapor, Rostom, and Zavarian. They wrote that political independence was not the same as freedom, and that the Armenian people did not demand national independence, but only political and economic freedom to live in peace and freedom from atrocities and tyranny. It was not until the Ninth General Meeting in 1919, when the ARF had already achieved a united and independent Armenia, that the ARF proclaimed that Western Armenia and Eastern Armenia shall be "United and Independent." □

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'Yereq himq yev ankyunaqar' ('The three pillars and the cornerstone')  
Oil on canvas by Meruzhan Khachatryan, featuring ARF founders  
Stepan Zorian, Kristapor Mikaelian, and Simon Zavarian

2013  
Արշակունի

# RECOUNTING A JOURNEY THAT BEGAN IN 1890

By Michael G. Mensoian

**W**hat better way to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) than by recounting its illustrious journey that began in Tiflis (Tbilisi) in 1890. When the ARF was founded, none could have foreseen the nation-shattering events that would soon engulf the Armenian people. Neither was it possible to have anticipated the vital role the ARF would have from that day forward in the life of our people and our nation. In retrospect, what may have seemed like idyllic days with family, friends, and community was in reality an environment with political undercurrents that would spawn the Hamidian (1894–96) and Adana (1909) Massacres. And yet, there still was little to foretell that these savage outbreaks could be a prelude to an Armenian Genocide that would take place a few years later. Without autonomy for some six centuries, the Armenians were now ruled by Czarist Russia in the east and the Ottoman Turks in the west; as minorities on lands that they had settled for millennia, they were now subjected to the capricious policies of foreign rulers sitting in Moscow and Constantinople.

During these early years, the ARF had wanted constitutional reforms to ameliorate the conditions under which the Armenians lived. At the same time, members of the Turkish Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) sought reforms to prevent the continuing dissolution of the empire, which they blamed on the autocratic nature of the government in Constantinople. Neither the ARF nor the CUP achieved their desired objectives. For the reformers, the loss of the Balkan provinces swung the political pendulum toward an ultra-nationalist stance. The CUP shifted from saving the empire to protecting their core area (the Anatolian Heartland), where Turks from the lost Balkan provinces were seeking refuge. Within the empire, the Armenians became the ethnic group that evoked the most hatred from these ultra-nationalists: The Armenians represented the principal threat to maintaining control





**General Antranik, a hero of the Armenian national liberation movement, with his group of volunteers**



**Volunteers who partook in the Khanasor Expedition (July 25–27, 1897)**

of Anatolia. Exacerbating the situation was the fact that much of Anatolia was historic Armenian land that was still inhabited by Armenians, and they were generally more prosperous and better educated than their Turkish and Kurdish neighbors.

When World War I was declared (July 1914), the Ottoman-Turkish Empire became an ally of Germany a few months later. With Czarist Russia opposing Germany, the loss of Eastern Anatolia (Western Armenia) to Czarist Russia or to a Russian-sponsored independent Armenia became a distinct possibility. To protect their Anatolian heartland, the decision was made to eliminate the Armenian population. With that objective in mind, during the autumn of 1914 Armenian soldiers in the Ottoman-Turkish Army were disarmed and placed in labor battalions to be executed. The following year, on April 24, leaders within the Armenian communities and members of the intelligentsia were detained and summarily executed. Before the Armistice (October 1918) ended World War I, the Ottoman Turks and their Kurdish allies had slaughtered some 1.5 million Armenians. Between 300,000 to 400,000 Armenians had managed to make their way to the South Caucasus, while tens of

thousands of children and young women were abducted, enslaved, or forced into marriage by Turkish and Kurdish villagers.

The situation for the Armenians in the South Caucasus including what remained of Historic Armenia was dire. Left to its own devices, the ARF tried to meet the needs of the refugees, but was overwhelmed by the severe shortage of food, clothing, shelter, and medicine that were required. The region was in political chaos, which served to intensify the humanitarian crisis. The Bolsheviks had seized control of the Czarist government (October 1917) and ended the war with Germany (Brest-Litovsk, March 1918). In the course of realigning their troops to Moscow, they abandoned the South Caucasus. The Ottoman Turks saw in this chaotic situation an opportunity to apply the *coup de grace* that would complete the annihilation of the Armenian people and the destruction of what remained of Armenia. The ARF immediately participated in organizing a fighting force to confront the much larger Turkish army. Sustaining some losses to the Turkish advance, the determined Armenian soldiers defeated the Turks in the epic battle of Sardarabad (May 1918). Within the month, under the leadership of the ARF, the first free and independent Armenian Republic (May 28, 1918) was established. The Treaty of Sèvres (Aug. 10, 1920) recognized an Independent Armenia on lands included in Historic Western Armenia, whose final boundaries were determined by President Woodrow Wilson.

The Turkish nationalists rejected the partitioning of Anatolia agreed to by the Ottoman-Turkish government in Constantinople. Before the Treaty of Sèvres was ratified, Ataturk had successfully unified Anatolia under Turkish control. His success was due in large part to the apathy of Great Britain, the principal author of the Treaty of Lausanne (July 24, 1923), and France since they had already secured the Ottoman-Turkish territories that met their geostrategic interests.

The Treaty of Lausanne signed by Kemal Ataturk fixed the boundaries of present-day Turkey. It completely ignored an Independent Armenia delimited by President Wilson and contained in the Treaty of Sèvres. The treaty also ignored the horrific loss of life from the Armenian Genocide and the wealth that was stolen from its nearly 2 million victims. The treaty welcomed Turkey into the community of nations guilt-free. Is it no wonder that the succession of Turkish political leaders refuse to acknowledge the genocide?

During the turbulent decades from its founding in 1890 to the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, the men and women of the ARF had willingly placed themselves in danger or given their lives as *fedayees*, confronting the petty officials and the Turkish and Kurdish overlords who preyed upon the Armenians in the interior regions or during the Hamidian and Adana Massacres. They represented the Armenian Cause before the major European governments, which were more intent on protecting their national interests than on providing justice to a devastated people. And the United States, whose president had been entrusted with the task of delimiting the boundaries of an Independent Armenia, abandoned her and retreated to its North American bastion across the Atlantic Ocean. The ARF were the soldiers who participated in the series of

battles that led to the ultimate victory at Sardarabad, which saved the nation from extinction. And they were the state builders who established the first free and independent Armenian Republic.

With the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne, the ARF faced a vastly different world. When the First Republic was subverted by the Bolsheviks and their Armenian sympathizers in 1920, the ARF was banned in Armenia. After their exile, its leaders established the ARF in Lebanon and Syria, where many of the survivors of the genocide had settled. The ARF embarked on the Herculean task of creating the social, cultural, and political environment beneficial to the survivors intent on rebuilding their lives. As the refugee communities proliferated, creating an ever expanding Armenian Diaspora, the ARF became that vital link connecting these communities to one another and to their heritage. How important psychologically and emotionally for the survivors to know that they were not alone as they adjusted to the different cultural and political environments of their host countries. During these darkest hours, the spirit and optimism of the ARF was inspirational. The members of the ARF, hurting from their own personal losses, remained steadfast in their duty to serve the Armenian people. The panoply of ARF sister organizations and its publications became a significant component of the diasporan communities' fabric of life, through its sponsored cultural, political, social, educational, and athletic events and activities. The Armenian Relief Society (ARS), founded in 1910, provided humanitarian assistance wherever there was a need. During the 70 years of the Bolshevik interregnum, the ARF and its sister organizations and the communities they served proudly recognized the tricolor and "*Mer Hairenik*." Within these communities there was never any doubt that the second free and independent Armenian Republic would one day replace the ersatz Bolshevik Armenian Republic.

By the 1960's, following the end of World War II, the Diasporan Armenians were coming into their own within the countries where they had settled after the genocide. The diaspora continued to expand and so did the ARF. It had become the largest and most influential political organization within the diaspora. Not only was it influential within its communities, but influential based on its participation in the political life of the host countries or by representing issues important to the rapidly developing diasporan communities. It was at this time that the ARF began to confront the Turkish leadership over its denial of the Armenian Genocide. Through its efforts over the years, many countries; the legislatures



**Left: Volunteers in the Artsakh War holding an ARF flag**

**As the largest and most influential political organization in the diaspora, the ARF with its sponsored lobbying entities is *the* principal advocate of issues critical to newly independent Armenia and the de facto state of Artsakh.**

of first order administrative units (the first or largest political unit in which a country is divided for administrative purposes), such as states, provinces, or departments; and municipalities have supported Armenian Genocide recognition.

The unexpected implosion of the Soviet Union began the third and present period for the ARF. Armenia and the other ethnic republics seized the opportunity to declare their independence. On Sept. 21, 1991, the second free and independent Armenian Republic replaced the Soviet Armenian Republic. At the same time as the Artsakh Armenians moved closer to declaring their independence, the cities of Sumgait and Baku (1988) were the scene of mob violence that took more than a hundred Armenian lives and forced thousands to seek safety in Armenian-dominated Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabagh) or in Armenia. When the Artsakh Armenians finally declared their independence, ending 70 years of economic, political, and cultural discrimination, the Azeri military immediately countered by launching

vicious attacks against the civilian population. The ARF quickly responded by forming units that fought alongside the Artsakh Armenians. It was an ARF unit that participated in the capture of the ancient Armenian fortress city of Shushi (May 9, 1991), which proved to be the turning point in the war. Again, as it had done so many times in the past, the ARF supported the Armenian people in their hour of need. Since the ceasefire signed by Armenia, Artsakh, and Azerbaijan (1994) that created the de facto state of Artsakh, the ARF and its sister organizations have participated in Artsakh's development. As a result of the May 2015 elections, 7 ARF members now serve in Artsakh's 33-member parliament.

With the creation of the second free and independent republic, the ARF became part of the Armenian political scene after a 70-year hiatus. For much of its existence, it had been a foreign-based political organization intimately associated with the development that was taking place throughout the diaspora. Within a short time after its return, it became an influential voice in Armenian politics. It denounced the pro-Turkish protocols that were supported by the United States, and that would have compromised Armenia's relationship with Artsakh and the demand for genocide recognition. The ARF also supported the constitutional change to a parliamentary system put forward by President Serge Sarkisian that was recently passed. This should open a new era in Armenian political life.

*This page is sponsored by Vahe Habeshian*

As the largest and most influential political organization in the diaspora, the ARF with its sponsored lobbying entities is *the* principal advocate of issues critical to newly independent Armenia and the de facto state of Artsakh. It also continues, aided by the Armenian Youth Federation (AYF), to successfully confront the world-wide, well-financed, anti-Armenian agenda of Turkey and Azerbaijan.

It is very instructive to note that almost a century later the ARF is again responding to a crisis situation that has engulfed the Armenian people. This time it is not the South Caucasus, or the survivors of the Armenian Genocide, or the civil war that afflicted Lebanon, but our brothers and sisters who are innocent victims caught up in a civil war raging in Syria. Calling upon its human and financial resources spread throughout the diaspora, the ARF has enabled the Syrian-Armenian communities to maintain a semblance of normalcy in their daily lives. Once again the ARF is ministering to the humanitarian and security needs of their people. In a war-ravaged environment, the presence of the ARF has been a significant factor in bolstering morale.

The participation of the ARF in the Armenian political system is a work in progress. The dominance of the ruling Republican Party, the recent passage of the constitutional change to a parliamentary system, the control of the country's infrastructure by Russia, the ever-increasing cooperation between the Armenian and Russian military, and the country's membership in the Russian-sponsored Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) are a few of the factors that the party must contend with as it seeks to implement its socioeconomic, political, and cultural agenda.

In Armenia, the ARF is dedicated to the economic liberation of the worker that will unleash his innate talents, which is *sine qua non* to creating a vibrant and viable nation. The party espouses a system where opportunity, equality, justice, and freedom are the bedrock upon which governance rests. This is the antithesis of the practice of governing that has been responsible for the economic malaise that has gripped Armenia since its independence in 1991.

The second leg of its mission is *Hai Tahd* or the Dashnaktsutiun Manifesto that recounts the injustices that our people and nation have endured over the past century. *Hai Tahd* eschews force, but seeks through time and an evolving political environment to regain by peaceful means our historic lands, which were denied to us by the Treaty of Lausanne or taken by the perverse policies of the



AYF Eastern Region members held a 40-foot long #NeverForget1915 banner in New York on April 25.



A child at a playground in Shushi, Artsakh (Photo: Arevik Daniellian)

Bolsheviks when they unilaterally redrew the boundaries of the Soviet Armenian Republic. *Hai Tahd* also demands recognition of the genocide by the Turkish government, as well as reparations either through restitution, where applicable, or compensation.

As the ARF endeavors to achieve these economic and political objectives, it also stresses to our incoming generations the unique culture that identifies us as a nation as well as our heritage—a product of several thousands of years as an identifiable group. Through their participation in sister organizations such as the AYF, the Homenetmen, and the ARS, members develop a love and appreciation of what it is to be Armenian and to be part of a distinct subgroup dedicated to serving their people and country.

This is an important part of the ARF educational program that seeks to empower its young members to become politically knowledgeable and committed to a system of governance that respects the individual and unleashes his innate talents, and encourages self-development. Members are expected to be practitioners of their culture and appreciative of their heritage. As part of their development, our young men and women members benefit from having mentors; role models; valuable internship opportunities; and a multitude of service options throughout the Armenian Diaspora, in Armenia, Artsakh, and Javakhk that utilize their interests, skills, and knowledge. The *camaraderie* that develops through these varied experiences creates bonds that last a lifetime. These young men and women—our *ungers* and *ungerouhis*—will be the leaders who will guide the ARF on its never-ending journey selflessly serving our people and our nation. □





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# The Artsakh Struggle and the ARF

By Antranig Kasbarian

The Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) has enjoyed a long and varied history, one filled with achievements as well as setbacks, joys as well as frustrations. Amidst this history, the party has played many roles: revolutionary force, social movement, state-builder, community-builder, lobbyist, and much more. Here I'd like to explore one of its more remarkable roles—driving force in liberating Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabagh)—which often receives only passing mention, rather than the comprehensive treatment it deserves. I do not pretend to offer comprehensive treatment here. Rather, I offer a narrative and critical celebration that can point the way toward fuller discussions, which may be pursued by others possessing the requisite background and knowledge.

To assess properly the ARF's role in the Artsakh struggle, we must view two loci of activity that emerged in the USSR of the 1980's: 1) budding activism inside Artsakh; and 2) solidarity movements in Armenia, organized *in the name of* (or on behalf of) Artsakh. While both loci are vitally important, my main interest here is the relationship of the party to the first of these loci: How it navigated its way, tendered support, fostered dialogue, and eventually recruited cadres among the activists found within Artsakh. (Here we must recall that the ARF had to inject itself into this milieu, for while it may have held symbolic or moral value among *Artsakhtsi* nationalists, it had practically no organizational presence—officially, unofficially, or underground—at the movement's outset.)

Let us look at the matter more closely.

## PROLOGUE

The contemporary Artsakh struggle actually went through a substantial gestation period before emerging fully clothed in 1988. On the surface, it was “business-as-usual” during the first half of the 1980's, as Artsakh's Armenians displayed a largely defensive, even quiescent posture amidst Azerbaijan's tightening control over the region. Baku's authorities were actively promoting “Azerbaijanization”—resettlement of Azeris inside Artsakh, accompanied by heightened cultural, political, and economic discrimination toward the native majority. Resistance to these trends was weak and scattered among microsites of activity, while popular attitudes—so far as they could be traced—appeared extremely cautious and muted regarding the reassertion of self-determination claims.<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, Armenian emigration continued to grow: By 1988, the enclave's Armenian population—once a 95 percent majority—had dipped below 80 percent.

Beneath the surface, however, a culture of resistance and organizational mobilization was taking shape. A prime mover in this regard was one Igor Muradyan: Born in Baku to a family hailing from Artsakh, Muradyan settled in Yerevan soon after completing his doctorate in economics, and in the 1980's became a catalyst in re-energizing the self-determination movement. As he shuttled between Yerevan, Baku, Moscow, and various points inside Artsakh, Muradyan cultivated support among well-placed Armenians and arranged meetings with Soviet officials, in an attempt to generate a favorable climate of opinion. He was also instrumental in forging working links among Armenians—both established elements as well as budding activists—in order to generate organized pressure from below.

Things proceeded rather quietly until 1986, when the landmark 27th CPSU Congress<sup>2</sup> installed a young reformer, Mikhail

Gorbachev, as General Secretary. Gorbachev ushered in the era of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring), as he called for the revival of citizens' initiatives, announced the release of political prisoners, and spoke of the need to fill in the "blank pages" of history.<sup>4</sup> It is in this milieu that Muradyan and company—basically taking Gorbachev at his word—began their remarkable efforts to organize a referendum amongst Artsakh's entire population, in the process establishing an activist network that linked local concerns with a broader understanding of the workings of Soviet power. In Artsakh, this network relied on a small group of "no-name" activists—mainly organic intellectuals with strong peasant ties—who were coordinated by Muradyan, his associates Gagik Safaryan, Manvel Sargsyan, Arkadii Karapetyan, and a few others. These activists took to the streets, fields, and factories with a plan that was conceived in late 1986 and carried out throughout 1987. The plan's centerpiece was a petition directed to Moscow, calling for unification of the Nagorno-Karabagh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) with Soviet Armenia.<sup>5</sup> The petition eventually garnered more than 75,000 signatures from throughout Artsakh and Armenia. During this time, more than 40 deputies of the Oblast Soviet (legislative power) also signed the petition and openly declared the need to convene a special legislative session.

The above activity arose in decentralized fashion, with contacts in each of Artsakh's districts operating separately and largely through Muradyan's orchestration.<sup>6</sup> And while much planning and discussion took place in Stepanakert, a key center of gravity turned out to be remote Hadrut, where activists tied self-determination demands to the district's severe state of repression and dependency.<sup>7</sup> Throughout 1987, fledgling activists such as Emil Abrahamyan and Artur Mkrtchyan circulated from village to village, obtaining signatures while identifying cultural and economic issues that gave voice to popular grievances.<sup>8</sup> This effort, while both painstaking and risky, afforded broad experience among the people—something that served these activists well when they later emerged as rebel leaders during the struggle's partisan phase. According to Abrahamyan, their aim went beyond simply gaining reforms; it was to galvanize Artsakh's workers, intelligentsia, and peasantry-at-large into the makings of a movement. By presenting concrete issues in an open and lawful manner, they sought to instill belief in direct action and self-empowerment over inertia, cynicism, or conspiracy theories that had abounded among the people. Such "coming out" also featured the convening of informational meetings where villagers received updates on recent activities and progress. Gone, it seemed, was the age of clandestine *samizdats*<sup>9</sup> activists now openly acknowledged their identity, whereabouts, and the risks involved, relying on the freedoms ostensibly guaranteed by Moscow. In turn, Moscow refrained from any crackdowns or negative pronouncements, apparently viewing such activity—within limits—as good publicity for the emerging *glasnost* campaign.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, Azerbaijani authorities, although hardly pleased, were well aware of these activities and grudgingly tolerated them... until the end of 1987. At that time, Artsakh's atmosphere became irrevocably charged, beginning with October incidents in the small Armenian village of Chardakhlu, located just outside the oblast's borders. When the native inhabitants opposed the nomination of an Azeri for the position of *kolkhoz* chairman, the party's

First Secretary organized a response in the form of a punitive raid, in which children, the elderly, and even injured war veterans were beaten up.<sup>11</sup> The news spread quickly among Artsakh Armenians, fuelling a mood of unrest. Seizing the moment, Muradyan organized the first unofficial NKAO delegation to Moscow in late November. That delegation included representatives of Artsakh's various districts, who arrived with signed petitions in hand.<sup>12</sup> Although unable to gain an audience at the Supreme Soviet, the delegation did meet with CPSU nationalities official Vyacheslav Mikhailov, who was welcoming in demeanor, conciliatory in approach, and who suggested further discussions. These suggestions bore fruit in January 1988, when a second delegation was received by USSR Politburo candidate member Pyotr Demichev.

These visits appeared to offer significant prospects: Upon returning to Artsakh, delegation members printed and distributed leaflets reporting that negotiations were making headway. Then, as if to confirm this, Gorbachev himself issued a statement on Feb. 6 regarding the situation. Although warning against "the power of spontaneity and emotion," the general secretary acknowledged that "not a few shortcomings and difficulties have accumulated in the Nagorno Karabagh Autonomous Oblast." Gorbachev concluded by urging that Artsakh's problems be solved in the spirit of *perestroika*.<sup>12</sup>

Unfortunately, in the ensuing months Gorbachev proved to be an ineffective broker, giving conflicting signals and ultimately ruling against Artsakh's self-determination, while Armenians would suffer violent crackdowns in Azerbaijan, Armenia, and of course Artsakh itself. But at this early stage, these hints of progress aroused popular enthusiasm, as *Artsakhtsi* activists pressed forward during the course of that winter. More signatures were gathered. Worker collectives passed resolutions calling for unification, often sending these directly to Moscow.<sup>14</sup> Even Communist Party meetings were given over to the self-determination issue. Quickly, nationalism had ceased to be an abstraction; instead, it had begun snaking through a whole host of social relations, with no-name activists assuming roles soon rivaling those of more established Soviet politicians and bureaucrats.

Led by Muradyan's peripatetic team, these efforts finally brought activists from various districts into direct contact with each other, as they discovered that their activities had been conducted not in isolation, but as part of a larger regional scheme. Indeed, as the movement grew in scope, local parochialisms began to fade as activists emerged in ever-larger numbers and in heightened coordination. This involved not simply a spatial but a *cultural* transformation: The surge of activism had converted local populations from sunken, passive inertia, into thinking, feeling agents of change.<sup>15</sup> In the process of seeking to *restore* its integrity, Artsakh had become a different place.

(Remarkably, these efforts were not once directed against Moscow or even Soviet authority *per se*. Indeed, demonstrators usually affirmed their solidarity with the Soviet center, e.g. carrying placards with pro-*glasnost* slogans, even holding up pictures of Gorbachev. Certainly, much of this was tactical in nature: Activists did not wish to pose as a threat to the USSR's stability, nor did they wish to cast doubt on their own loyalty as Soviet citizens. But tactics aside, there were also deeper reasons for the pro-Moscow tilt: These included the innate Russophilia and anti-Turkism found among much of Artsakh's populace; a widespread, naïve belief in the integrity of Gorbachev's

pronouncements; as well as a deeply ingrained restorationist bent to the movement: Most activists did not seek the transformation of society so much as its *reorientation* along national lines.<sup>16</sup>)

Space does not permit a fuller discussion of the struggle that ensued. Suffice it to say that winter 1988 was marked by weeks of tense confrontation between public protesters who grew in size and boldness, and recalcitrant authorities, who sought various means to disperse the gatherings. Eventually, on Feb. 17, shortly before midnight, the NKAO Regional Soviet, in a tense special session, voted for unification with Soviet Armenia by an overwhelming margin of 110 to 17, with 13 abstentions (30 Azeri deputies did not attend). Although authorities had made sure that the official party seal was not available to validate the resolution, the deputies went home satisfied that their historic decision had met the necessary legal requirements.

### ESCALATION AND REGIONALIZATION

**N**eedless to say, the Artsakh struggle was greatly impacted by parallel developments outside the oblast, especially in neighboring Armenia, Azerbaijan, as well as Moscow. While detailed treatment is not possible here, we should acknowledge the winding chain of events that within a few years converted Artsakh into a veritable battlefield.

In Armenia, solidarity rallies grew to nearly 1 million by late February 1988. These rallies, while peaceful and largely optimistic, sent shock waves through officialdom in Moscow and Baku, eventually blowing back upon the Armenians. The Soviet center, at first discreetly, later more brusquely and violently, dismissed any possibility of reunifying Artsakh with Armenia. Meanwhile, in Azerbaijan, with seeming impunity Azeri mobs organized brutal pogroms—first in Sumgait, later elsewhere—that eventually drove most Armenians from the country, thereby refashioning the struggle from a constitutional reform effort into a bloody, ethno-national conflict with regional implications.

Amidst these developments, we may return to the main scene of combat in Artsakh itself. On Feb. 22, shortly after the Oblast Soviet's ruling, several thousand Azeris crossed into Artsakh from nearby Aghdam, heading down the railroad toward Stepanakert. Along the way, offices, equipment, and factory vehicles were destroyed. After ransacking two other factories and demolishing a militia post, the crowd collided with local (mainly Armenian) residents. While Soviet troops were ultimately called in to restore order, 25 people were injured in the clash. More importantly, 2 Azeris—one only 16 years old—were killed. Later investigations revealed that at least one of them had been shot by a Soviet soldier.<sup>17</sup>

These deaths changed the mood considerably. Until Feb. 22, *Artsakhtsi* activism had proceeded in a spirited, often contentious environment, but had remained largely peaceful and directed at authorities. Now, *Artsakhtsis* faced new forces that threatened to shift their focus toward a popular struggle against the Azerbaijani people.<sup>18</sup> What had begun as a campaign for self-determination through

constitutional means had been suddenly recast in the context of an ethnic feud. Indeed, even as Armenian leaders sought to make distinctions between the lynch mobs and the Azerbaijani people as a whole, the overall momentum moved decisively toward nationalist warfare. Increasingly, Armenians viewed Azeris once again as threatening, implacable foes: For many, the Sumgait pogroms represented a resurrection of the specter of genocide at the hands of Turks. For others, it brought back distant memories of the bloody Armeno-Tatar clashes.

### TEMPORARY STABILITY

**T**he events of 1988 continued to move at a rapid, heady pace that most participants could not have expected. Indeed, activists have commented that history seemingly was compressed into the frame of that one year, contributing to a sense of vertigo that see-sawed between euphoria and battle-fatigue. But after the massive Dec. 7 earthquake, both Armenia and Artsakh moved into a phase that was more grinding and protracted—although no less brutal. That phase began more or less on Jan. 12, 1989, when the USSR Supreme Soviet issued a decree endowing the NKAO with a special status. While remaining formally attached to Azerbaijan, the enclave was to be administered by a special board (five Russians, three Armenians, one Azerbaijani) under the aegis of Moscow's plenipotentiary representative, Arkadii Volskii. The functions of local authorities were either suspended or subordinated to Volskii's supervision.

Designed as a palliative measure, the Volskii Commission did manage to contain the violence in and around Artsakh. However, the NKAO's new special status ultimately satisfied no one: Baku viewed it as an infringement on its sovereignty, while Artsakh's Armenians resented that many of their leaders had been forced to step down or accept lesser positions. Stymied by the recalcitrance of both sides, Moscow decided in late 1989 to disband the Volskii Commission. This ushered in a decisive phase of struggle, one marked by escalating armed conflict and ethnic polarization throughout 1990–91. A digest would include the following developments:

1) Upon reclaiming authority, Baku immediately formed a Special Organizing Committee for Artsakh, headed by Major General V. Polianichko. Ostensibly, the committee's mandate was to supervise Artsakh's return to normalcy; however, it quickly revealed strong military dimensions that included heightened security, surveillance, and counterinsurgency apparatuses. In December 1989, the committee invited local Armenians to participate in its activities, but nearly all elements rejected the overture. Instead, Armenian activists organized a resistance network that involved for the first time irregular armed detachments, which sought and received assistance from Armenia as well from the Armenian Diaspora.<sup>19</sup> This move was accompanied by the development of organic, village-based structures that forged durable bonds between Artsakh's activist leadership and civilian population.

2) Beginning in January 1990 and extending through the year, intermittent clashes mushroomed into ongoing warfare on a regional scale, featuring the use of automatic weapons and medium artillery. This stage commenced when Azerbaijani units—bolstered by helicopters and armored vehicles—attacked the Armenian-populated towns of Shahumyan and Khanlar, located in the north, just outside the oblast. In the ensuing months, Azerbaijan began employing Alazan rockets<sup>21</sup> to inflict damage on targeted Armenian villages, using elevated sites—notably the heights of Shushi and Khojali—as launching points. The Armenian response, although still largely defensive, began to rely on guerrilla tactics—raids, ambushes, assassinations—aimed at disorienting authorities while restoring popular confidence in the movement.

3) In parallel with these efforts, Baku declared a state of emergency that enabled it to reassert control on the ground. In January, nearly 1/5th of the oblast's population was detained in a house-to-house search that netted more than 3,000 weapons. Shortly thereafter, authorities conducted several deportation raids against villages suspected of housing or supplying rebel leaders. In the months that followed, authorities began to pursue Armenian militias with the intent of disarming and imprisoning them: These activities crested in April, when Soviet Major General V. Safonov initiated a region-wide manhunt seeking to apprehend key rebel leaders. While partly successful, the manhunt met with swift retaliation, as Armenian guerrillas captured several Red Army soldiers while mounting an assassination attempt on Safonov himself.

4) The state of emergency also enabled Baku to tighten its grip on the oblast's physical infrastructure. Backed by Soviet security force, authorities occupied all highways leading to Stepanakert and commandeered the regional airport, virtually severing Artsakh's helicopter links with Yerevan. Toward year's end, Azerbaijan imposed additional restrictions including the severing of all television and telegraphic connections to points other than Baku.

5) Escalation reached a watershed beginning in winter 1991, when Azerbaijani Special Function Militia Troops (the OMON,<sup>21</sup> or Black Beret units), accompanied by Red Army troops, conducted passport and arms checks throughout the NKAO and bordering districts.<sup>22</sup> Operating under the code name "Operation Ring," the mission's official aim was to "prevent massive armed action and get rid of bandits."<sup>23</sup> In reality, Operation Ring represented a campaign of intimidation, deportation, plunder, and killing that amounted to nothing short of ethnic cleansing. The operation's name comes from its *modus operandi*: Soviet troops would surround targeted Armenian villages, upon which OMON forces would enter the villages and force inhabitants to leave. Upon entering, OMON troops would search for weapons and guerrillas, check the passports of inhabitants (in the process often beating them), round up the male heads of households, and often engage in or allow the looting and burning of homes. One observer noted the following, after speaking with eyewitnesses:

Most of the witnesses told us that the beatings and killings were carried out by the Azerbaijani OMON... [T]he Soviet Army organized the surrounding of the villages and taunted the villagers, 'Why have you not left

already?' Then they stood aside while the OMON terrorized the villagers. The villagers were left on the Armenian side of the border with only the clothes they were wearing.<sup>24</sup>

Armenian men suspected of weapons possession, or of violating passport regulations, were routinely arrested and imprisoned. Deported families were usually forced to sign statements that they were leaving of their own accord. And in some localities, the process was drawn out over several weeks, during which villages were often left without vital supplies and completely cut off from the outside world. By August, the campaign had resulted in hundreds of arrests, thousands of deportations, and the emptying of between 22 and 24 Armenian villages.

More than any prior operation, Operation Ring posed a viable threat to the self-determination movement. For in its combined forces and sweeping descent upon the countryside, it forced both rebels and civilians into a reactive, often desperate position in which sheer survival became the highest priority. Operation Ring was cut short, however, by the failed August coup in Moscow, which signaled the imminent demise of the Soviet Union. This development would rescale the balance of power so as to allow Armenian insurgents to regain momentum.

## INTERLUDE: ARTSAKH'S ORGANIC LEADERSHIP EMERGES

Escalating conflict also brought on a reorganization of social space, as *Artsakhtsi* nationalism became radicalized and redefined along class lines. Specifically, as the Armenian and Azerbaijani sides began to polarize and harden their positions, there came a steady evaporation of the "third space" that had existed in the form of limited dialogue and constitutional means of addressing the problem. This left little room for conventional *Artsakhtsi* figures such as Henrik Poghosyan, Arkadii Manucharov, and others who had replaced the old guard in Stepanakert but whose political reflexes had likewise been conditioned by Soviet Azerbaijani rule.<sup>25</sup> While these men sought to lead the movement through a combination of resistance, accommodation, and bureaucratic maneuvers, they held an uneasy relationship with—and steadily lost ground to—a new breed of organic leadership that advanced the armed struggle. This organic leadership included, but was not limited to, the activists of 1987-88, now featuring a mixture of 1) petty-bourgeois elements (artists, intellectuals, managers) who were in the process of committing "class suicide"; and 2) peasants who possessed little professional training but whose practical knowledge and adaptability was considerable. In contrast, Artsakh's conventional politicians—with backgrounds in established positions of power—were poorly equipped to deal with the new situation. Indeed, they had much to lose by the turn of events, and as matters got out of hand in 1990-91, many either left Artsakh, retired from active political life, or in rare cases retooled themselves toward new forms of activism.

This shift did not occur without a struggle, however. Especially during Operation Ring, there was active contestation between local Armenians—accommodationists vs. insurgents—who not only grappled with Azerbaijani authorities, but with each other, as they vied for the hearts and minds of their own people. Indeed, the armed struggle had to overcome a period of extreme vulnerability, as Armenian villagers were faced with the choice between backing down in order to secure sheer survival or moving forward at the risk of incurring heavy losses. In the words of Artur Mkrtchyan:

Psychologically, many people had already reconciled themselves to the idea that they would be deported, and did not doubt that the wave [of deportations] would reach the district center in a day or two... These events were exploited by certain leading elements, who propagandized even more vigorously on the necessity of negotiating with the Azerbaijanis, as things hadn't yet gotten out of hand... In those difficult days, many people were concerned not with finding ways to come out of that state, but in finding people to blame over it. It is no coincidence that many were cursing the movement, unification, the activists, as well as Armenia, which had brought them such trouble.<sup>26</sup>

As the summer wore on, however, Artsakh's insurgents gained momentum and eventual preeminence due to a combination of superior organizational skills, responsiveness to popular needs, as well as bold displays of resistance. Indeed, as Operation Ring met with increased retaliation, the armed struggle won over much of the once-reluctant peasantry, who began to believe in the partisans and their message: There was no turning back.

Artsakh's early organic leadership thus led a new "war of position" that converted once-muted aspirations into symbolic and material acts of contestation. This operated at two levels simultaneously: 1) acts of rebellion, sabotage, and intimidation directed at officials and occupation forces; 2) seizure of strategic roads, factories, and transport facilities. Through these efforts, insurgents sought not only tactical advantage on the ground, but *ideological* advantage in mobilizing their own people, shifting them from a culture of complaint to one of active resistance and self-reliance. This shift crucially involved a new attitude toward violence. As one activist put it,

Over 70 years, an *Artsakhtsi* generation arose under Azerbaijani rule that was satisfied being simply afraid for its own skin. Now these Armenians have transformed into people who have become capable of burning homes, killing women and children, etc. Soon after the [armed] struggle began, an Azeri *mullah* announced over television: 'Fear the Armenian who has begun burning houses and killing children.' Armenians had never done such things before, and indeed, from that moment forward many Azeris began to fear the Armenians—it was a new and strange Armenian they were facing now.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, the importance of violence in "breaking out" and achieving new states of consciousness cannot be overstated. And

yet, violence in itself would have meant little without the presence of other practices that wove a practical unity among insurgents and the larger peasantry. This was based on a popular mobilization that not only *armed* peasants but tended to their social needs, relying wherever possible on the securing of broad consent over coercion. This insurgency was not "parachuted from above,"<sup>28</sup> but rather drew numerous peasants to its ranks while remaining village-based in operation. This ensured an ongoing mixing between civilian and military structures, while reinforcing the *ideological*, rather than purely military, nature of the struggle. The archetype for this *modus operandi* was found once again in Hadrut, which emerged as a spartan "enclave-within-an-enclave" during this phase:

Hadrut's leaders, from the earliest days of the movement, have been ideological people who remain in the ranks until this very day. These people have led the mass meetings, have put forth the idea of arming ourselves, and have themselves organized fighting units. These men have led the war effort and continue to govern the district. Their model of developing a leadership that is both militarily and civilianly adept is one that should have been adopted by all of Artsakh... From the beginning, they had a clear plan of action, endowed with ideology, working in coordinated fashion and based on dialogue.<sup>29</sup>

While it had many faces, Hadrut's organic leadership was typified by the contrasting cases of Artur Mkrtchyan and Armen Gasparyan ("Armencho"). Mkrtchyan was a soft-spoken history Ph.D. who had studied in Yerevan, only to return to become director of Hadrut's historical museum. A close associate of Igor Muradyan, Mkrtchyan had participated in early underground activities, traveled to Moscow as part of the 1987 delegations, and led early petition drives and civil disobedience efforts. He became an unlikely guerrilla leader beginning in 1990, and an even more unlikely politician the following year, when he was elected president of the fledgling Nagorno Karabagh Republic (NKR), following the USSR's break-up.<sup>30</sup> Mkrtchyan was among the early cadres of organic intellectuals that included numerous "renaissance" men and women—poets, artists, scholars, architects—whose popular appeal derived not from skilled oratory, military prowess, or specialized knowledge, but from unreservedly blending their talents into the service of the movement. These were not "leaders" in a conventional sense—they did not seek governance as an objective—nor did they attempt to separate professional skills from the broadly human attributes that defined one's worth in the eyes of the struggle.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, in these heady times when the "special was found in the ordinary,"<sup>32</sup> Mkrtchyan was among those humble, "unremarkable" people who at once became remarkable.

The juxtaposition was even more striking in the case of Gasparyan: Here was a semi-literate laborer with little formal understanding of Armenian history or politics, who held vocational training but no other higher education. A lifelong villager,<sup>33</sup> Gasparyan emerged as part of a *lumpen* element of "nobody's" who became "somebody's", often at very young ages, through the

opportunities afforded by armed struggle. In a fluid, highly unstable situation where conventional rules no longer applied, Gasparyan was among those who, in improvisatory fashion, forged new rules of conduct and new facts-on-the-ground through acts of terror, hostage-taking, appropriation of facilities, and more, in which learning by *doing*—rather than the legacy of ossified knowledge—became part-and-parcel of the liberation process. Indeed, for Gasparyan social learning was multi-faceted; his immersions brought him into contact with an Armenian political culture he had not known before. National liberation thus became a time not only to *reassert* nationhood, but in a sense to *rejoin* and *redefine* the nation in whose name he fought.

### THE ROLE OF THE ARF

**I**t is no coincidence that Mkrtchyan, Gasparyan, and other early partisans often became associated with the ARF, which decades earlier had been the enclave's preeminent nationalist party, was forced underground and banished in the 1920's, and then returned clandestinely in 1989, after nearly seven decades of exile. Starting from its diasporan headquarters, the ARF was a key element in organizing Artsakh's armed struggle, funneling millions of dollars of assistance in the form of fieldworkers, arms, and logistical and humanitarian supplies. During the next two to three years, the party gained influence not by parachuting in its presence, but by methodically attracting leading native activists to its ranks, thus emerging as a force throughout the enclave. While it was hardly alone in this, the ARF early on carried a special appeal that lay in several factors: 1) At a time when Artsakh was receiving only intermittent backing from Armenia, many saw in the ARF an organization that was more reliable and committed to their needs—particularly regarding arms. This sentiment would become even more pronounced over the next two years, when a newly independent Armenia took initially a soft stance on Artsakh as it sought to normalize relations with neighboring Turkey and Azerbaijan. 2) In the movement's early years, the ARF still carried great prestige for its historic, almost mythical, role in the defense of Artsakh and other Armenian-populated lands. Stories of its heroic acts earlier in the century created an aura around the party, one that was actually bolstered by the ongoing propaganda of Baku and Moscow, which had vilified—and therefore validated—the party's nationalist credentials. 3) The ARF chose to work in a highly pragmatic fashion that resonated with the immediate needs and approaches of many activists. Despite having marked socialist pretensions in the diaspora, the ARF streamlined its message in Artsakh to stand mainly for the defense of the homeland. This non-sense approach appealed to many *Artsakhtsis* who sought immediate results rather than a comprehensive political platform. As one respondent noted, "Many of us joined with a very simple saying: If Njdeh was a Dashnak, then I should be one, too."<sup>35</sup> Moreover, while the ARF did import fieldworkers into Artsakh, it worked largely through recognized activist networks and leaders—including Mkrtchyan himself—who accepted its policies and methods of operation.

The ARF's early pragmatism was not without its problems, however. For one, the party sometimes attracted unwanted adherents due to its (too?) liberal policy of distributing arms. Future adversaries, such as Artsakh's despotic commander Gen. Samvel Babayan, were in fact ARF members for brief periods during the early 1990's, until they were able to establish power bases independent of the party. Second, and perhaps more important, was the party's approach toward cadre development and societal transformation. In choosing to mobilize nearly all cadres toward direct involvement in armed struggle, it would pay a heavy price: Nearly 30 Dashnak commanders—many of whom enjoyed broad prestige and influence, well beyond the military sphere—were killed by the time a cease-fire had been declared in 1994. This left the party in an especially vulnerable position, as it did not have a cadre development or replacement process in place. Meanwhile, the party's adversaries at that time—Robert Kocharian, Serge Sarkisian, Samvel Babayan, and others—quickly took advantage of the vacuum, consolidating their grip on power and leading Artsakh down a rather different path in the post-war era.<sup>36</sup>

In retrospect, the partisan resistance to Operation Ring was one of the remarkable moments in the Artsakh struggle. Led in large part by the ARF, it managed to stay the combined onslaught of Moscow and Baku, holding out just long enough for the playing field to tilt back in the Armenians' favor. That tilt began with the failed August coup in Moscow, which effectively tied up central authorities and signaled the gradual withdrawal of Red Army forces over the next six months. As we shall see, this withdrawal opened new possibilities for the bolstering of Armenian resistance, while at the same time exposing serious weaknesses in Azerbaijan's military capabilities. Over the ensuing 2.5 years, these factors would converge in the form of a decisive Armenian victory, including the total eviction of Azerbaijani military and civilian presence and the establishment of the self-declared Nagorno-Karabagh Republic (NKR), which enjoyed fundamental ties to Armenia.

We shall also see, however, that it was a bumpy, precarious road that led to victory: For one, Artsakh's Armenians often found themselves at odds with newly independent Armenia, whose leadership evinced a markedly different orientation. Indeed, at various points during the war, Artsakh's Armenians became vulnerable in a different way, as Armenia displayed great pliancy at the negotiating table—speaking in Artsakh's name while often dangling it as a bargaining chip as it sought a stabilizing peace settlement.

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[*Artsakhtsi soldier speaking into his walkie-talkie*]  
Aliyev is a #\$(^!%)!  
[*Azeri soldier*] No, Levon is a #\$(^!%)!  
[*Artsakhtsi soldier*] Well, I can't argue with you there.<sup>37</sup>

The above passage aptly depicts the war-time predicament of many *Artsakhtsi* nationalists: Their struggle aspired ultimately to join the Armenian nation-state, and yet they found themselves often impeded, diverted, even undermined at times by the leadership of that very nation-state. For some, this led to confusion; for others, resentment and resistance; for still others, a reinforcement of *Artsakhtsi* indigenism and mistrust of outsiders (including *Armenian*

outsiders). My aim here is 1) to explore the main contours of this difficult relationship, both as it evolved on the ground and as it related to post-Soviet statecraft as pursued by Armenia's new government, headed by Levon Ter-Petrosyan; and 2) to examine this relationship in light of growing friction between Ter-Petrosyan and the ARF.

As we have seen, the initial outbursts of 1988 were followed by a slow-but-steady change in outlook<sup>38</sup> among the new Yerevan elite that had risen in the name of Artsakh. By 1990, this group of ex-dissidents—once called the “Karabagh Committee”—stood poised to seize power, and its new outlook had crystallized as the question of independent statehood came to dominate political discussions, leaving Artsakh occupying a vague, uncomfortable niche in which its importance was simultaneously acknowledged and elided. With the advent of independence one year later, such elisions swiftly gave way to concrete policies and approaches: Now in the driver's seat, Armenia's dissidents-turned-statesmen came forth with a series of pronouncements revealing great pliancy regarding Artsakh. Such “softness” received full and immediate expression on Sept. 24, 1991, when a newly elected Levon Ter-Petrosyan agreed to renounce territorial claims to the enclave,<sup>39</sup> setting a precedent for compromise that he would follow for the remainder of his presidency.

At the time, Ter-Petrosyan's move was widely derided by Armenian nationalists, some of whom equated it with national betrayal. It especially created a stir in Artsakh, where leading elements hardened their position of self-reliance and wariness toward Yerevan. Not surprisingly, the ensuing two years were marked by much friction between authorities in Armenia and those in Artsakh, while Artsakh itself became the scene of growing contention between elements bearing different alignments toward the Ter-Petrosyan regime. Let us take a closer look.

### THE EARLY 1990'S: TER-PETROSYAN, ARTSAKH, AND THE ARF

**I**ndependent Armenia's first years witnessed a sweeping reorientation in Armenia's foreign policy. From 1991–93, the Ter-Petrosyan administration rapidly distanced itself from Moscow, remained aloof from Iranian overtures toward cooperation, and instead emphasized the normalization of relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan as part of an “East-West” integration actively encouraged by the United States. While perhaps unobjectionable in itself, “normalization” soon came to reveal specific priorities, e.g. avoiding antagonisms with Baku and Ankara, and instead promoting “regional stability” along Western lines. Within this framework, issues such as Artsakh's self-determination and Turkey's responsibility for the 1915 Armenian Genocide were quickly transformed from longstanding priorities to costly distractions, even impediments, toward the genuine historical tasks of the day, variously described via neoliberal mantras such as “economic reform,” “global competitiveness,” “attracting foreign investment,” “market integration,” etc.<sup>40</sup>

Yerevan's “flexibility” was soon revealed in a series of policies and pronouncements regarding Artsakh: Ter-Petrosyan officially relinquished Armenia's territorial claims against Azerbaijan, repeatedly signing multilateral documents that affirmed Baku's sovereignty over the enclave. At the same time, he withheld official recognition from the fledgling NKR, calling it “Azerbaijan's internal affair.”<sup>41</sup> Once again, these developments alone were enough to spur widespread discontent. But they became potentially explosive when accompanied by official statements that seemed to go beyond the call of duty:<sup>42</sup> Speaking in the name of value-free “realism” and “pragmatism,” Ter-Petrosyan began to label the Artsakh struggle as “adventuristic,” “unwinnable,” and “disastrous to Armenia.”<sup>43</sup> Most broadly, he posited a collision course between Artsakh and Armenia's independent statehood, adding that in the event of dire necessity, one might have to be sacrificed for the sake of the other. Such statements drew intense criticism—both in Artsakh and in Armenia—which only grew stronger after Ter-Petrosyan associate Ashot Bleyan went to Baku on a peace mission in spring 1993, after which Bleyan and presidential advisor Ktrich Sardarian founded an organization called *Nor Ughi* (New Path), advocating the return of Artsakh to the *status quo ante* as an autonomous region within Azerbaijan.

Needless to say, Ter-Petrosyan's vision of national sovereignty was considerably more limited than it was for most *Artsakhists*, who swallowed their newly marginal status with great difficulty. Such friction was only compounded by the rivalry that emerged between Ter-Petrosyan and the ARF. While detailed analysis here is impractical, suffice it to say that the ARF's influence in Artsakh became a thorn in Ter-Petrosyan's side during the early 1990's: For one, the party possessed high-quality cadres that both commanded great legitimacy within Artsakh and were largely immune to Yerevan's methods and approaches. And, as we have seen, these cadres pursued policies that were frequently at odds with Ter-Petrosyan's “new realism” (indeed, sometimes managing to foil Yerevan's attempts at conciliation). Moreover, these cadres enjoyed the backing of a party leadership that was comparatively well heeled, headquartered in the diaspora, and thus largely able to sidestep the controlling influence of the Armenian government. Such factors sometimes reinforced Yerevan's tendency to leave Artsakh high and dry rather than to tender it active support; indeed, by late 1991 Yerevan had moved beyond neglect toward active attempts to restrict support for Artsakh, including efforts aimed at diverting, intimidating, even eliminating its ARF-led leadership.<sup>44</sup>

### A SHIFT IN POLICY: FOR BETTER AND FOR WORSE

**B**y 1993, Armenia's foreign policy had already shifted away from earlier positions, enabling more active support for the Artsakh war effort. This shift is attributable to two main developments: 1) After a two-year experiment, the Ter-Petrosyan regime began to acknowledge—albeit tacitly—the failure of

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its foray into good-neighborly relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan. Specifically, Yerevan saw that its policies of accommodation were not being sufficiently reciprocated by these countries, which had remained largely belligerent and inflexible. Meanwhile, Armenia's vulnerability was only compounded by its separation from Russia. Indeed, Moscow had issued stern warnings, even occasional shows of force, reminding Yerevan of the price to be paid for abandoning its former patron. Blockaded, economically punished, and with few allies to turn to, Armenia thus moved—quietly and reluctantly—back into the Russian orbit. Given Russia's interests in the region, this move in turn facilitated a stronger stance from Yerevan regarding the war effort. 2) At the same time, Yerevan began to take note of progress made on the ground in Artsakh: With only piecemeal support from Armenia, Artsakh forces had managed to hold off Baku's best efforts and now were scoring significant victories, making the war actually seem winnable for the first time. In response, Yerevan's tone began to change: Artsakh moved from being a risky adventure toward becoming a responsibility that Armenia—however reluctantly—had to shoulder.

As a result, Yerevan worked to create a closer alignment between itself and Artsakh, organizing a better-managed flow of assistance and—after a two-year delay—creating a national army. This army was vigorously supervised by Ter-Petrosyan's one-time colleague, Vazgen Manukyan, who had parted company with his “new realism” but who now returned to the fold as newly appointed Minister of Defense. Under Manukyan, Armenia's armed forces would play a major role in sealing Artsakh's victory: He oversaw the expansion of Armenia's military budget and authorized unsparing support for Artsakh's offensives, even in cases where he clashed with the dovish Ter-Petrosyan.<sup>45</sup>

Alongside increased support, however, came growing penetration, as Ter-Petrosyan sought to control Artsakh through a combination of persuasion, intimidation, and infiltration of military and civilian power structures. Most notable in this regard was the establishment in March 1992 of the NKR State Defense Committee (SDC), which operated in parallel and acted parasitically upon Artsakh's existing governmental bodies. While questioned at first on legal grounds—the NKR Parliament already possessed a Defense Council of its own—the SDC soon gained preeminence following the mysterious killing of Artur Mkrtchyan by gunshot in April. During this period, it became apparent that the SDC had been pushed forward at Yerevan's behest: Headed by former Communists Serge Sarkisian and Robert Kocharian (both opposed to the ARF and closely tied to Yerevan), the SDC received direct backing from Armenia, and steadily revealed a divisive approach as it began to divert badly needed arms, money, and supplies away from regular NKR channels and toward unrecognized elements found directly under its own patronage.

For a time, the SDC's approach served to dampen the war effort as well as *Artsakhtsi* morale, as it created friction and grievances among those who were doing most of the actual fighting. For example, one of the more deplorable incidents took place in

February 1993, when an armed group of 15–20 young men (members of the so-called “SariShen battalion”) sought to occupy the district command headquarters in Hadrut. Although the coup attempt failed, it generated a chain of internecine violence that eventually left five dead and slowed military progress considerably. Upon further investigation,<sup>46</sup> the so-called “SariShen incident” was found to emanate primarily not from local disagreements or youthful immaturities, but from a conscious, designed effort that sought to undermine Hadrut's existing civilian and military authorities (which—not coincidentally—were under ARF control). Moreover, such efforts were found to be carried out with the blessings of officials within the SDC as well as Armenia's Defense Ministry, who allowed the creation of supply lines circumventing Hadrut's own administration while enriching and emboldening the young rebels, who engaged in many weeks of agitation, harassment, and armed theft prior to mounting their takeover attempt. Although Hadrut's conditions subsequently normalized, district commanders reported a temporary draining of momentum—e.g. having to cede certain vantage points to Azerbaijani forces—while they attended to repairing the internal situation.<sup>47</sup>

While the SariShen incident reveals some of the internal dynamics of Yerevan's strengthening grip, a second development reveals some of the broader issues at stake. This development revolved around the taking of Kelbajar by NKR forces in April 1993. Most *Artsakhtsis* understood this maneuver as a way of securing Artsakh's borders, expanding its ties with Armenia, and manufacturing a new bargaining chip for its fledgling independence. Ter-Petrosyan, however, sternly disapproved. Indeed, within weeks he had entered into Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)-brokered negotiations that led to a preliminary agreement to hand back this strategic territory without preconditions. In Artsakh, this led to widespread consternation, which only grew further when—in his first visit to Artsakh as Armenia's president—Ter-Petrosyan sought to pressure NKR officials into co-signing an agreement recognizing Azerbaijan's sovereignty over the entire enclave. Coercive tactics reached their peak when Artsakh's new president, Georgi Petrosyan (also an ARF member), refused to give in to Ter-Petrosyan, was eventually forced into hiding, and ended up resigning rather than signing. On the diplomatic front, the end result was a stalemate: In the face of public disapproval, Ter-Petrosyan retreated from the Kelbajar agreement and managed to save face only when a July coup in Azerbaijan removed international pressure for a speedy settlement. On the domestic front, meanwhile, the resignation of Georgi Petrosyan contributed to a further weakening of ARF influence and heralded the ascendancy of Robert Kocharian, Serge Sarkisian, and others loosely allied with Ter-Petrosyan.

With this new team came other changes: By war's end, political power had shifted away from representative bodies, which increasingly would serve as rubber-stamps for the clique forming around Kocharian, Sarkisian, and their newly appointed military commander, Gen. Samvel Babayan. This shift was expressed also in

socio-spatial terms: Earlier modes of organization—decentralized, movement-based, cross-fertilizing between different segments of society—had given way to a less supple, command model of administration relying on a reconstituted bureaucracy and professionalized army.<sup>48</sup> Not coincidentally, this shift was accompanied by a host of anti-democratic turns, including economic penetration by Yerevan-based mafias and the curtailment—at times active repression—of oppositional currents such as the ARF. Indeed, by 1995 the party that had propelled the movement through its darkest, most tenuous days had been largely straitjacketed and marginalized: Outmaneuvered by Kocharian and Ter-Petrosyan, reeling from heavy losses among its leadership, and subject to a military that removed or harassed its remaining operatives, the Dashnaks had never been so weak, so vulnerable; they had been reduced, in effect, to a *moral* presence within the enclave.<sup>49</sup>

## IN RETROSPECT

Today, with the dust largely settled, we can better reflect on these “messy” years, and better evaluate the ARF’s role within the Artsakh struggle. In a nutshell, I would offer the following:

1. First, I must re-emphasize what I am **not** arguing:

The ARF was **not** the only force involved in Artsakh’s liberation. Certainly, many other groups and individuals contributed significantly—often heroically—to the liberation struggle between 1988 and 1994.

The ARF was **not** an initiating force inside Artsakh, except in the most indirect sense. Rather, the party was able to attract the hearts and minds of existing activists—especially organic intellectuals and the peasantry—who grew in influence and ultimately took charge of the movement.

Developments inside Artsakh, while crucial, did **not** work in a vacuum. To understand the struggle more fully, we must take a stereoscopic view that jumps between scales of activity—including Armenia and Azerbaijan, neighboring states, as well as Moscow and later the U.S. and multilateral agencies.

2. As for what I **am** arguing, let me summarize as follows:

The ARF’s most decisive role came in the early self-defense phase—roughly from 1989/90 until 1992/93—when conditions were at their most precarious. When the population needed arms to defend itself, the ARF was there. When the population needed physical protection, the ARF was there. But above and beyond self-defense, the ARF instilled confidence among a population that was dangerously close to capitulating to the enormous pressures Baku and Moscow applied. It did so by remaining close to the people, even as it waged armed struggle. Indeed, its model of activism—blending military and civilian functions, relying on broad, popular participation featuring the special-amidst-the-ordinary—was unusual for its time, contributing not only to the larger victory but to the party’s popular ascendancy.<sup>50</sup>

True, the ARF’s preeminence did not last. But even as the party’s strength began to ebb in 1993, it could take solace in the fact that Artsakh, by then, had crossed a point-of-no-return: Village-based, partisan fighting had given way to a national army; Armenia (not to mention Moscow) had swung firmly in favor of the struggle; meanwhile, nearly all strata of Artsakh’s society had lined up behind a single goal: independence. That goal was achieved in short order: By spring 1994, NKR defense forces had driven all Azerbaijani civilian and military presence from the enclave, thus rendering worthwhile the ARF’s difficult years of struggle.

There are many lessons to be learned from this page of our history. Among them is the glimmer of hope it provides to present-day activists in Artsakh and Armenia. For in looking back on these days, we can see that a different political culture, one based on broad popular representation, is indeed possible. But realizing this requires great effort, including organizational preparedness, ideological soundness, and a willingness to undertake great risks and sacrifices. I hope and trust that our new generation is up to the challenge. □

## ENDNOTES

To read the endnotes and works cited, visit: <http://armenian-weekly.com/2016/01/11/artsakh-struggle-and-arf/>

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# Anniversaries

are moments to celebrate and rejoice, but also, and more importantly, times to reflect. And so with the 125th anniversary of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), while there have been celebrations across our communities in this region and around the world, they have all been fundamentally moments of evaluation and accounting to our people. Here, as in most every corner of the Diaspora, the history of the ARF is the history of our people, and commemorating the anniversary of the ARF is both a celebration and assessment of our nation's strength and survival.

In this part of the world, the ARF is over 120 years old. It came ashore with the earliest immigrants, and helped maintain a small part of our nation on faraway shores. Our Lowell, Mass. chapter, the oldest, was established in 1894, and our Armenian-language newspaper, *Hairenik Weekly*, is the longest-running Armenian newspaper. The ARF today is a presence in most every city in the U.S. with an Armenian population, and its work and struggle have been the struggle of the Armenian nation, the struggle everywhere to liberate our people and ensure their future.

The challenges of the ARF have been different throughout the years. Today, the work of the ARF is equally based in Armenia and the Diaspora. The challenges in Armenia are severe. We have worked hard to improve the economy through encouraging Diasporan and foreign investment, and have been a force against corruption; we have been a loud voice for a developing civil society and for a strong parliamentary democracy; and we have been steadfast in our focus on national security for our country surrounded by hostile nations.

In the Eastern U.S., as in most of the Diaspora, the ARF's responsibilities have been different. Here, our efforts have focused on advancing the *Hai Tahd* agenda, and more broadly, for a people dispersed across the world, safeguarding our nation's survival.

The work that the ARF pursues in the political arena has always been the assertion of our national rights. Beyond working to ensure the survival of our people, we have laid claim to justice as citizens of this world. This effort has defined entire generations, has created a political identity in all of us, and has helped invigorate our communities. We have risen to this challenge not alone, but with the support of our entire community. It has been possible to lead, because this nation trusts the ARF to pursue these goals. It is this trust that brings members of Congress to work with us for the real grassroots and shared ideals that we represent.

In *Hai Tahd*, we have worked hard in Congress towards a Genocide Resolution and a host of successful legislation that has helped Armenia and Artsakh economically and in matters of national security. Political awareness in our communities is sustained by the numerous local and national conferences and events that we host, like

“Responsibility 2015” and “Armenians and Progressive Politics.” Engagement and activism is fostered in our youth through countless local activities, as well as formal internship programs at Armenia's Mission to the UN in N.Y., and the Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA) in D.C. Ongoing state-wide campaigns and teacher-training programs aim to include the Armenian Genocide in high school curricula across the region. We have embarked on an important, long-term effort to bring the issue of reparations for the crime of genocide to the political forefront. All the petitions, protests, commemorations and marches have kept our communities strong, active, and engaged in the pursuit of social justice.

As important as *Hai Tahd* has been, our essential struggle in the Diaspora has been and remains one of survival, not just as individuals, but as Armenians. The greater part of the ARF's work, therefore, has always been to maintain the Armenian nation, establishing vibrant, viable communities that create the conditions for genera-

tions of Armenians to retain their identity, to realize their dreams, and to come to the aid of our nation.

We understand that 20,000 or 100,000 Armenians in an area do not become a community just by being there. A community needs centers, churches, schools, cultural activities, newspapers; it needs to gather together, to learn of each other, to share lives with one another. This is what a Diasporan community is. From the very start, an ARF presence in a city has led to

the formation and organization of that place. It has meant that eventually there would be a church, a school, a center, youth clubs, cultural associations, newspapers, picnics, dances, and a space for a fragment of our nation to breathe and prosper.

And so we have the *Hairenik* building, the *Hairenik* newspaper, the *Armenian Weekly*, the ANCA, the local ANCs, the Armenian Youth Federation, the Armenian Relief Society, the Hamazkayin Cultural Association, the Homenetmen, the Armenian Prelacy and the parish churches, the schools and the community centers, the *agoumps* and all the activities in our communities across this region that have allowed us the freedom to stay Armenian.

For 125 years, the ARF has taken upon its shoulders the responsibility for a nation. The challenges in Armenia and the Diaspora have been vastly different, but the goal has been the same: to ensure our nation's survival and growth. This effort has required tremendous organizational planning, material resources, and countless volunteers, as well as a powerful spirit of hope and collaboration. Whether it is *Hai Tahd*, community-building, or securing and helping Armenia, the ARF has never been alone in its efforts. It has been our common dedication and sacrifice to our nation that has kept us strong, and our unwavering, united commitment that has allowed us to prevail and grow stronger across 125 years. This is an anniversary for all of us, and a celebration for every Armenian for their service to our nation, in Armenia and in the Diaspora. □

## A Celebration of Years of Service

By Hayg Oshagan

# The Dashnaktsakan...



Forty-third ARF Regional Convention held in Boston in 1936

## By Tatul Sonentz-Papazian

**V**ahan Navasardian—undoubtedly one of the more prominent Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) leaders of the 20th century—starts one of his many published works on the ARF’s political credo with the following sentence: “*There were Dashnaktsakans before there was Dashnaktsutiun.*”

Indeed, there were “ARF-ers” long before there was an ARF, because who can pinpoint the date when the urge for justice first flashed in the heart and mind of humankind? When the need for freedom began tormenting the body and soul of both individual and tribe? When empathy wormed its way into the human conscience?

The answer? Most probably when the early human stopped expressing feelings with grunts, screams, gestures, and blows, and eventually became articulate with actual words, whereby feelings could be expressed without bruises—leading to sentences, ideas, and thoughts that expressed those urges and needs, leading to collective action in pursuit of values that could grace life with both physical and spiritual fulfillment.

However, not all empathic human beings endowed with a strong sense of Justice and a boundless desire for Freedom can survive long in the ranks of the *Dashnaktsutiun*. Those ideals that constitute the bedrock of the *Dashnaktsakan* credo are to be voluntarily given up by those in the ranks, if they are to remain on active duty. The *Dashnaktsakan* pays annual dues for the privilege



Vahan Navasardian

of giving up a good portion of personal freedom and not being too fussy as to how just certain disciplinary measures are, where personal feelings must take a back seat to collective endeavor. The sworn *Dashnaktsakan* grins and bears it, for the privilege to fight to the end for the freedom of others, and their right to justice, when in mortal conflict with corruption and oppression of all kinds.

One may ask, where does Empathy fit in all this? A good portion of the one-and-a-quarter of a century-long existence of the ARF—in essence, a national liberation movement—was devoted to actively assisting other nations in their struggle to shed the shackles of tyranny, sharing their pain in defeat and joy in victory. The empathy that prompted the ARF-er to fight and die for the liberation of neighboring nations from oppressive regimes was based on the conviction that no nation is an island; that one’s own freedom was in constant danger, if surrounded by enslaved neighbors (the endless Israeli-Arab conflict is a good example of this).

Therefore, the true *Dashnaktsakan* is an empath with a revolutionary soul, sworn to a life of service, ready to challenge all forms of injustice and oppression emanating from systems based on privilege and discrimination. In this epic struggle, the ARF-er is not alone, and never will be, for as there were *Dashnaktsakans* before there was a *Dashnaktsutiun*, there will always be *Dashnaktsakans*, long after the *Dashnaktsutiun* is only a memory. □

# Our Shortcomings and the Work Ahead



'Aram Manougian,' oil on canvas by Meruzhan Khachatryan

ARF Parliamentary Faction Secretary Aghvan Vardanyan delivered the following speech at the ARF's 125th anniversary celebration in Yerevan, Armenia, on Dec. 11, 2015.

By Aghvan Vardanyan

## DEAR FRIENDS AND COMRADES,

There is one explanation for the epic existence of the ARF that has spanned three centuries: It is the genuine reflection of our identity, our people, and our Armenianness, both as an ideology and as an organization. There is no other secret.

The ARF will cease to exist when both this identity—a result of our culture, our spiritual life, and the decency of our fighters and our villagers—and our Armenianness are abandoned. Our Armenianness is our Bible in this earthly life.

Sadly, the ARF is often viewed through a narrow lens. It is seen through its strength, with its battle-readiness overshadowing its spiritual and cultural depth. Aram Manougian, Drasdamad Ganayan, and Soghomon Tehlirian have played as much of a role in the ARF, in shaping its essence, and our appreciation of it, as have Daniel Varoujan, Siamanto, and Hovannes Toumanian. The song “*Ambi Dagits Chour E Kalis*”<sup>\*</sup> reflects the ARF as much as “*Menk Angehdz Zinvor Enk*”<sup>\*\*</sup>

And it is precisely for being this genuine reflection of our people and their Armenianness that the ARF has always

<sup>\*</sup> A popular Armenian song in Anoush Opera, the lyrics of which were written by Hovannes Toumanian

<sup>\*\*</sup> An Armenian revolutionary song

“ The laurels of the ARF do not belong to our generation. And we will be the last of the unworthy ones if we squander their legacy; if we are unable to carry our share of the burden with dignity; if we cannot walk in unison; if we cannot modernize while maintaining the essence and depth of the ARF; if we cannot pass on the commitment to the vision of a free, strong, and prosperous Armenia to the next generation.”

been targeted both by foreign powers that have tried to prevent Armenians from organizing and becoming a force within themselves, and by domestic opportunists.

Criticism does not kill; it strengthens—if you are sure of your path and are loyal to your essence and principles.

The work of the ARF has always been difficult. It was difficult yesterday, it is difficult today, and it will be difficult tomorrow.

The work of our predecessors was difficult, unspeakably difficult, as they—wedged between two massive empires—conceived of establishing an autonomous and organized power, and through the horrors built an independent state. Their work was difficult, unspeakably difficult, when in forced exile they organized the diaspora, kept their ground, and placed the Armenian Cause on the political agenda of the world.

That is what they did because they believed *and* worked towards it. They believed in Armenia. They worked dutifully.

That is what they—our predecessors—did.

The laurels of the ARF do not belong to our generation. And we will be the last of the unworthy ones if we squander their legacy; if we are unable to carry our share of the burden with dignity; if we cannot walk in unison; if we cannot modernize while maintaining the essence and depth of the ARF; if we cannot pass on the commitment to the vision of a free, strong, and prosperous Armenia to the next generation.

It has been 25 years since the ARF has become a fully active political party in its own homeland, in its own independent state.

Yes, we have been consistent; we have not engaged in demagoguery; we have not changed positions between one day and the next. We have continued to stay loyal to our national and universal values. In our efforts to build a free, democratic, and just state, we have been determined.

Yes, in the political sphere—it seems—we have not made major mistakes. Whether as part of the ruling coalition or the opposition, we have not compromised the independence and autonomy of our party.

But how little we have accomplished.

Within this independent state, we have been unable to organize the people into an informed citizenry that defends its rights, to create a harmonious public, and to shape an environment of trust.

We have been unable to reduce the enmity, hate, and wickedness that consume us internally.

We have been unable to create a system that is somewhat just; to eliminate the rift between our own government and our own people; and to foster a more or less healthy, and spiritually, morally, and culturally rich environment.

We have been unable to create a political, economic, military, spiritual, and cultural elite that is driven by the same national values.

We have been unable to transform the diaspora into a unified force that supports

not only itself but also Armenia, Artsakh, and our army.

Within the ARF, we have been unable to shape a culture of free thought, debate, and self-criticism that leads to renewal.

And finally, we have been unable to present the essence of the ARF—its democratic nature, goals, operational style—in a simple and accessible way to a large segment of our people, including the independence generation, and to draw strength from them as an organization.

That is how much we have not accomplished.

That is the colossal work we have yet to do.

Dear compatriots and comrades,

On this day of celebration, I could not have structured my message differently. Our realization of what remains unaccomplished, and the honor of an ARF-er compel us to look ahead, and persevere.

The ARF stands resolutely for dignified life. We have a lot to do. And we will do it together.

We will do it, believing in Armenia, and working dutifully. We will do it for the sake of our highest principles...

For the sake of the Armenian people and the citizens of the Republic of Armenia,

For the sake of Armenia's independent statehood,

For the sake of Artsakh,

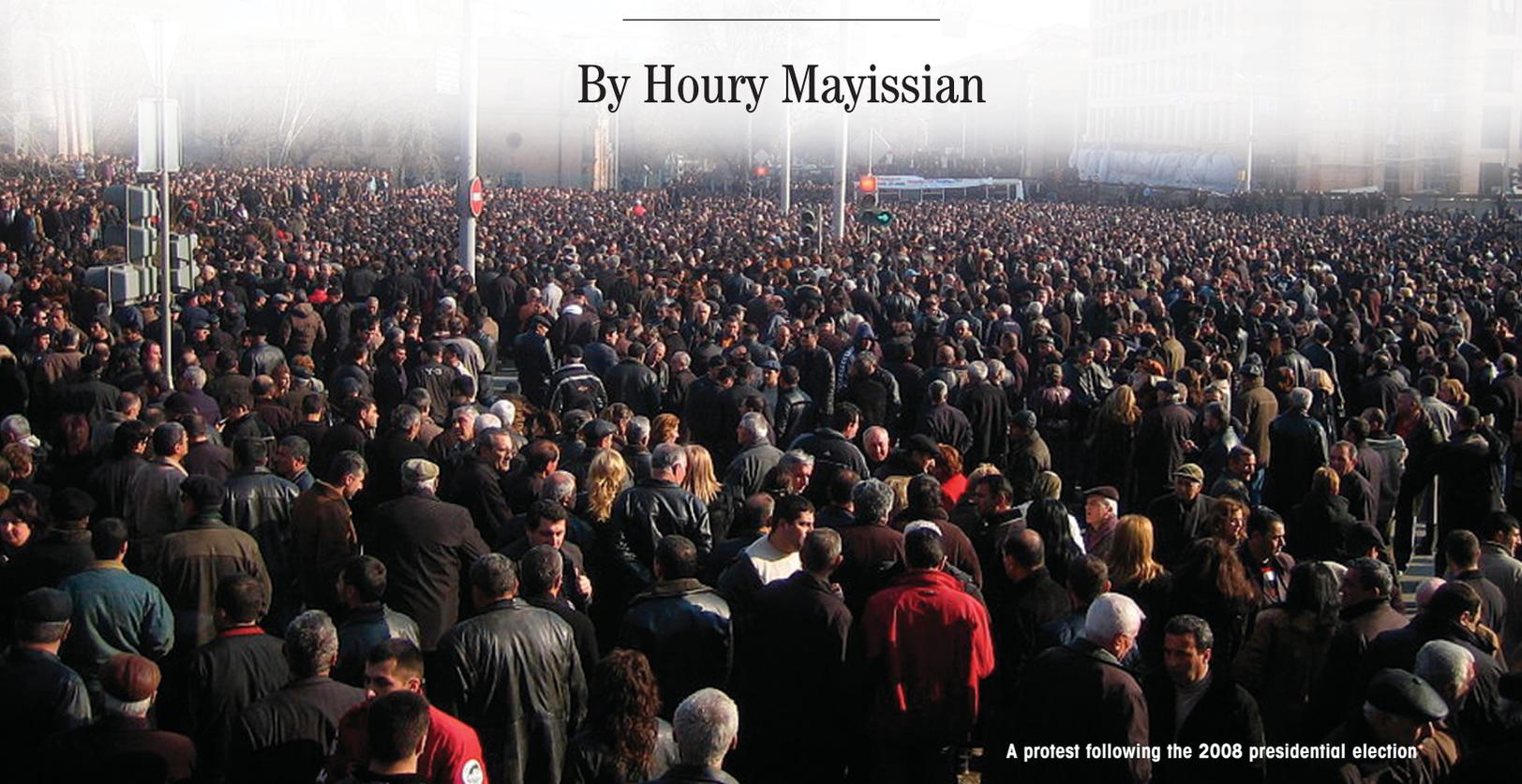
For the sake of Armenianness. □

*Translated by Nanore Barsoumian*

# Embracing Social Justice

## THE ARF IN ARMENIA

By Houry Mayissian



A protest following the 2008 presidential election

**A**fter decades of being banned from Soviet Armenia, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) re-established its presence in the homeland with the emergence of the Karabagh movement in the late 1980's. However, the party has since struggled to establish itself as a viable political force that can affect change.

A detailed analysis of the ARF's activities in post-independence Armenia is not within the scope of this article and is a task

best undertaken by students of contemporary history. However, a brief discussion of some key factors that have impacted the party's trajectory in Armenia will help to understand the current situation, identify shortcomings, and outline a potential role for the future.

The iron curtain that separated the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic from the international community of nations also drove a wedge between the homeland and a large segment of the Armenian Diaspora, including the ARF and its supporters.

The very existence of Armenia as a Soviet entity ran counter to the ARF's ideology and objectives of a Free, Independent, and United Armenia. At the same time, there was no room for these nationalist ideals in a collective dominated by a Communist ideology where national, ethnic, religious, and other identities had, at least in theory, no place. This irreconcilable clash of ideologies resulted in significant animosity and lack of trust between the ARF on the one hand, and Soviet, including Armenian Soviet, authorities on the other.



of the renaissance in late-18th century Armenian political thought that eventually led to the birth of the ARF. The party tirelessly advocated for social reforms and security guarantees for the Armenian-populated *vilayets* by both seeking the intervention of foreign powers and working with reformist elements within the empire.

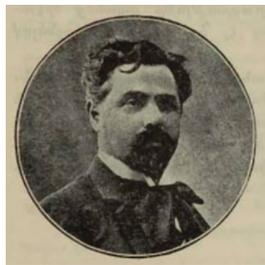
Later on, in the years following the Armenian Genocide and the Sovietization of Armenia, when the ARF became a primarily diasporan party, it took upon itself the preservation of Armenian cultural identity and the governing of communal life. Externally and in countries that had relatively free environments, the party was a leading force in organizing Armenian political representation and advocating for the community's interests. Internally, the party was instrumental in establishing cultural and educational institutions as well as addressing the basic needs of some of the most vulnerable segments of the community. The ARF's sister organization, the Armenian Relief Society (ARS), which was founded by prominent ARF intellectual Edgar Agnoui in 1910, was at the forefront of relief programs for the poor and the elderly and of educational and health initiatives that ensured access to those who could not afford it. These initiatives, while fundamentally charitable in nature, reflected a deep commitment to equality and social justice.

The absence of an independent Armenian statehood during much of the party's lifespan, however, limited the further development of the principle of social justice in the ARF's agenda and the opportunity to practice it through social-economic policies on a wider scale. In the early years of the party's formation, the concept in essence meant demanding equal rights for the oppressed



**‘A Free, Independent, and United Armenia inherently also means a Strong, Sustainable, and Democratic Armenia—a country where Armenians can live and Prosper, free from external dangers but also from internal threats such as poverty, corruption, the lack of rule of law, and social injustice.’**

nation vis-à-vis its *foreign* rulers. The independent Armenian Republic of 1918–20 was too short-lived and too fraught with major crises to offer much practical experience in this regard. In the years of diasporan existence, social justice as a concept was only ever meaningful as caring either for the needs of vulnerable segments of an Armenian community, or the needs and rights of the



Edgar Agnoui

Armenian community as a whole within the context of the society in which it existed. At the same time, the lack of an independent Armenia also led to a further emphasis on the party's nationalist agenda of advocating for the Armenian Cause.

The above analysis is not to say that the ARF has overlooked social justice and equality in Armenia.

These principles, along with the ideals of democracy and the rule of law, are firmly engrained in the party's Program, as mentioned above, and have been part of the ARF's discourse in Armenia since 1990. However, the discourse hasn't translated into much tangible action in the form of socio-economic policies that can deliver change, even though at various times the party has held a number of key ministerial portfolios including social affairs, education, and agriculture.

A Free, Independent, and United Armenia inherently also means a Strong, Sustainable, and Democratic Armenia—a country where Armenians can live and *prosper*, free from external dangers but also from internal threats such as poverty, corruption, the lack of rule of law, and social injustice. Without internal guarantees, Armenia is not secure, stable, or sustainable. This is the broad interpretation of *Hai Tahd* that we as Armenians and the ARF as a party need to embrace today.

The ARF remains the only pan-Armenian political organization with widespread support and following, particularly in large and prosperous diasporan communities. Its power is not vested in the individuals that govern it at any point in time, but rather in its supporters. It has the ideology to uphold social justice, the resources to develop policies, and the legacy to stand-up for the rights of the most vulnerable. Despite the challenging political environment, in Armenia the ARF can and should be a party of the people, for the people, like it has been for so many years in the diaspora. □

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TIME FOR A NEW

# Awakening



The Importance of Translating  
Our Foundational Texts

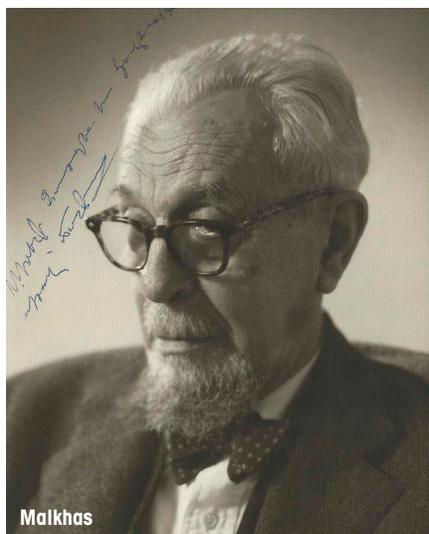
## By Rupen Janbazian

**M**y conversations with senior members of the ARF—no matter which community I may be in—often turn into impassioned monologues about how great certain books on the Armenian Cause are. “This book changed my life,” or “You have to read this book to be a *real* ARF member,” are words I have heard time and time again. Most of the books they mention were published between the late-19th and first half of the 20th century, usually by members of the party or those sympathetic to it; all of them were written in Armenian.

Roupen Der Minassian’s *Memoirs of an Armenian Revolutionary* is a monumental piece of literature that is often referred to as a textbook for many members of the party. Another work frequently mentioned is Malkhas’s *Zartonk*, the epic story of young Armenians who come of age during a period in Armenian history known as “*Zartonk*” (or Awakening, Renaissance).



Roupen Der Minassian



Malkhas

Opposite page: Poster for Malkhas’s ‘Awakening’ designed by Sako Shahinian

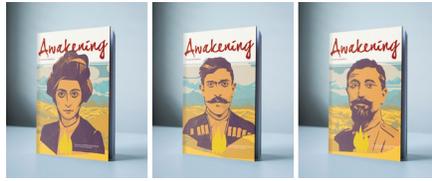
Born Ardashes Hovsepian in Trabzon in 1877, Malkhas came to the United States as a sojourner—something that many Armenians of his generation felt forced to do, to be able to provide for their families back home. He worked as a contributor at the newly founded Armenian-language “Hairenik” newspaper, where he wrote several patriotic articles, thousands of miles away from his ancestral home. Returning to Western Armenia in 1907, Malkhas dedicated his life to the Armenian Cause, contributing in both armed and intellectual capacities in Van, Sasun, and his ancestral Trabzon.<sup>1</sup>

He participated in the battles that would eventually secure the founding of the First Republic of Armenia in 1918 and was elected a member of its parliament. It was not until his permanent relocation to the United States after the Sovietization of Armenia that he wrote *Zartonk*—a piece of literature that is largely considered his *chef-d’oeuvre*. Through its initial publication in Boston by the Hairenik Press in 1933, the novel became a staple in the homes of expatriates who longed for a return to the homeland, and a way to make Armenia palpable for the new generation of Armenians being born in the diaspora.

*Zartonk* is a heroic story of love and camaraderie set in an era of oppression, and provides readers a look into the Armenian revolutionary movement, the Armenian Genocide, and the establishment of the First Republic of Armenia.

Through *Zartonk*, Malkhas admittedly does not try to portray the actions of a single revolutionary or a single revolutionary faction, but rather attempts to make the novel about revolution itself: “I wanted to present to the world a literary work that would describe the anatomy and physiology of a revolution,” he wrote in the preface of his novel.<sup>2</sup>

Malkhas decided to limit *Zartonk*’s scope to the Causasus-Persia-Vasporakan area,



since he had spent years in those places and had extensive experience with the environment and its people. “Novelists have the obligation of immersing their readers in a world they can describe vividly and faithfully. Since I felt a sincere love for the natural beauty of the above-mentioned areas, I knew I could describe them with the most sincerity, and when writing, could feel physically transported back to these lands that I love so much,” he wrote.<sup>3</sup>

Though he limited the story’s geographic setting, Malkhas made an effort to ensure that *Zartonk* was a novel about the entire revolution, and thus made liberal use of the events and characters from other places. Malkhas was dedicated to the Armenian Cause; he lived in many different places and so his perspective was unique. He wrote not only as an intellectual thinker, but also as someone who had been a revolutionary fighter and a statesman.

Argentine-Armenian writer Bedros Hajian, who was born the same year *Zartonk* was first published, belonged to the first generation of Armenians born outside of Western Armenia. The absence of a homeland prompted him and others to search for Armenia on maps and in books. Hajian wrote that for him, *Zartonk* had become a constant source of inspiration and a fountain from which he could access and understand the true Armenian spirit.<sup>4</sup>

The book remained a source of inspiration for later generations of Armenians spread around the world. Nazaret Berberian, the editor of Greece’s “Azad Or” who belonged to the generation that immediately followed Hajian’s, compared *Zartonk* to a freshly baked loaf of bread that he and others could not wait to devour. “Not only did Malkhas’s heroes captivate our imagination...but they became our role models. They gave meaning and direction to our lives, and planted the ideological seeds that became permanently rooted in our collective consciousness,” Berberian once wrote.<sup>5</sup>

Levon Sharoyan, another intellectual from the second generation of diaspora-born Armenians, also confessed his early obsession with the text. “I was barely 15 years old when I was consuming that 1,600-page book—day and night, before bed, I would devour dozens of pages at a time. It moved, pained, and stirred me. That novel was an entire world for me,” he wrote in the pages of “Aztag.”<sup>6</sup>

*Zartonk* was republished in various communities throughout the Armenian Diaspora—including Lebanon and Iran—up until the early 1990’s, and as a result became a source of inspira-

Making these foundational texts that are central to the ideology of the ARF available in English will only create opportunities for them to be read—not only by Armenians, but also by non-Armenians; to inspire; and to become for the English-speaking readership what they were for Berberian and Sharoyan.

tion for thousands. Yet, in his article professing his admiration for *Zartonk*, Sharoyan questioned whether those who came after him still read and understood the novel as he and his friends did. He argued that they do not—that there was a disconnect between generations.

Another fundamental text for generations of Armenians—especially members of the ARF—is Roupen Der Minassian’s seven-part *Memoirs of an Armenian Revolutionary*. Through personal stories and historical accounts totaling more than 2,700 pages, Der Minassian’s memoirs are exceptionally valuable to the historiography of the Armenian struggle for liberation and to Armenian revolutionary literature, for they provide a detailed description of the figures and events of the time, and a collection of Armenian revolutionary thought.<sup>7</sup>

The memoirs were first published as a monthly column in the “Hairenik” monthly journal, starting in 1922. Through these pages, Armenians in

the diaspora were given a first-hand, in-depth look into the experiences of revolutionary fighters during the *fedayee* movement. Similar to Malkhas’s *Zartonk*, Der Minassian’s memoirs charted an ideological path forward for so many in the ARF.

Why, then, if these books were so cherished for decades, do they appear to have become irrelevant, unimportant? Some may point to the subject matter and argue that the old stories of a lost homeland are no longer appealing to the newer generations. If this were the case, then why is Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, for example, written in 1869, still read, relished, and beloved by many around the world? Its setting is older and more removed than *Zartonk*, yet it is considered a masterpiece of world literature, whereas most Armenians have forgotten about something written less than a century ago?

Perhaps the answer lies more so in language than in context. Though it may pain some to admit, today’s generation of Diasporan Armenians, especially those living in North America, are not nearly well-versed enough in the Armenian language to read and grasp pieces of literature like *Zartonk*. When Malkhas penned his novel, Armenian was the common language that linked the intelligentsia and artists of the Armenian Diaspora to each other and to the homeland, and Western Armenian—as a language—was not yet endangered.<sup>8</sup> Today, the reality is far different.

According to Bert Vaux, fellow and director of studies in linguistics at King’s College in Cambridge, Armenians today are facing a threat encountered by all minority groups in the United States and

*This page is sponsored by Marian Mesrobian MacCurdy*

other diaspora communities, namely, imminent assimilation to the dominant language and culture within three generations.<sup>9</sup>

Why is the Armenian language disappearing so quickly in the United States? Vaux identifies a number of contributing factors, of which perhaps the most basic and telling is that many Armenian children are not immersed in an Armenian-speaking environment.<sup>10</sup> If there is one reality Armenians must accept in the diaspora, it is that strictly based on population figures, we are but a drop in an ocean. Often times, Armenians do not constitute even half a percent of a given city's or country's population. How can we expect the new generation of Armenian Americans to maintain their mother tongue in an environment dominated by another language (in this case, English)?

Writer Vatche Proodian rightly points out that while it is critical that these texts be translated, we must also recognize the factors that have led to the decline of the Western Armenian language—from the number of students in Armenian schools, to the subpar level of Armenian-language education and the lack of qualified Armenian teachers.<sup>11</sup>

This past year, 2015, saw the first publication of the English translation of *Zartok*. Translated by Simon Beugekian, published by Sardarabad Bookstore in Glendale, Calif., and crowd-funded by more than 200 people around the world through an initiative of

the Sosé and Allen Foundation, today's generation of Armenian youth now has access to the novel.

The time has come to translate all of our treasures—from Roupen's memoirs to Avo's Albums dedicated to the history of the party, to the revolutionary writings of Vahan Navasartian, Sarkis Zeitlian, Yervant Khatanassian, and many others.

Making these foundational texts that are central to the ideology of the ARF available in English will only create opportunities for them to be read—not only by Armenians, but also by non-Armenians; to inspire; and to become for the English-speaking readership what they were for Berberian and Sharoyan. These translations might even prompt Armenian youth to engage with and learn Armenian, the language of the original texts.

Though the preservation of the Armenian language is central to maintaining our cultural identity, what is important is that these texts are read—whether in Armenian or English—so that new generations are colored with that revolutionary spirit, perhaps sparking a new “*Zartok*”—an Awakening—within our ranks. □

## ENDNOTES

To read the endnotes and works cited, visit: <http://armenianweekly.com/2016/01/18/time-for-new-awakening/>

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# In Search of the ARF 1908 Istanbul Headquarters



Sakız Ağacı today is sealed off for redevelopment. On the other side of the fence stand what used to be the Anarad Hughoutioun School for Girls, the Surp Anna Catholic Orphanage, and the Mkhitarian Catholic School for Boys. (Photo: Varak Ketsemanian)

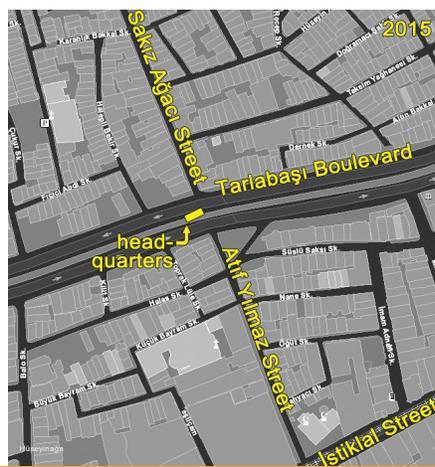
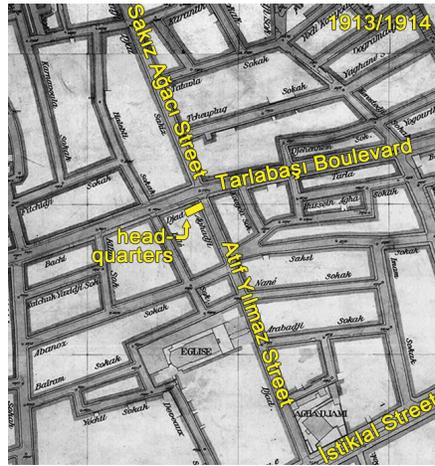
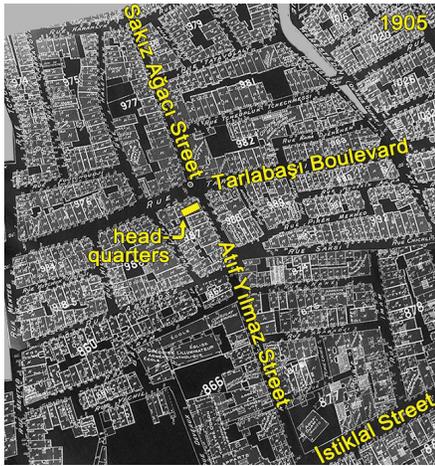
By Varak Ketsemanian & Daniel Ohanian

Of the plethora of contexts from which the history of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) is inextricable, that of the late 19th-/early 20th-century Ottoman Empire is among the most important. As a prominent political party, the ARF came to the forefront of Ottoman politics particularly after the July 1908 Constitutional—or Young Turk—Revolution, in which it played an important role. While it had had underground cells, secret meeting places, and an organizational network in Istanbul (Constantinople) since its founding in 1890, it was the political liberty brought about by this revolution that allowed the ARF to operate openly in the imperial capital.<sup>1</sup>

The following article recreates the attempt of two graduate students to locate the ARF’s first public headquarters in Istanbul,

which was likely opened in July or August 1908. It shows how we connected information in historical and contemporary sources with the empirical reality of the streets, and it finishes with some leads for others to follow.

Our story begins with one of us having come across an address—“*Sakız Agac, 51, à Péra*” (51 Sakız Agac in Pera)—for these headquarters in Raymond Kévorkian’s magnum opus, *Le génocide des Arméniens*.<sup>2</sup> (Kévorkian, in turn, had come across the reference in Vahan Papazian’s [*nom de guerre* Goms] 1950’s memoir.<sup>3</sup>) With the other’s arrival in Istanbul, we decided to launch an investigation aimed at finding out whether the building still existed.



This area had not changed much from 1905–82 (Images: Daniel Ohanian)

We already knew that what used to be the district of Pera overlapped more or less with the touristic parts of today’s municipality of Beyoğlu. Running a search through Google Maps, we discovered that Sakız Ağacı Street lay just north of İstiklal Street, the city’s main promenade. “An easy find!” we thought—but the reality on the ground proved to be quite different. It turned out that Sakız Ağacı today is not what it had been in 1908; also, it was completely closed off for construction. We therefore turned to a different kind of map: that great tool of urban archaeology, Jacques Pervititch’s cadastral drawings of 1922–45 Istanbul.<sup>5</sup>

Pervititch’s maps showed us that Sakız Ağacı is now a truncation of what it once was. In 1945—and this was later confirmed by earlier (1905 and 1913/1914) maps—it had extended all the way to İstiklal and had included today’s Atif Yılmaz Street.<sup>6</sup>

Once on Atif Yılmaz, however, we came face-to-face with a new problem: the absence of a unit 51. The street was cut off by Tarlabası Boulevard after number 33. We turned again to our historical map, and after struggling to overlay what we had on paper with what we had under our feet—street names had changed and so little seemed to match up!—we came to the realization that our building must no longer exist.

Our presumption that a series of buildings along Tarlabası had been torn down to widen the boulevard was later confirmed: During the late 1980’s, the area’s topography had undergone drastic changes in order to attract foreign capital to the city.<sup>7</sup>

Having completed our on-the-ground research, we found that there was still much we did not know. How certain could we be that this street had not changed between 1908 and 1945 (when Pervititch had drawn his map)? What was an ARF headquarters really used for? Was it just one office or an entire building? Did the party have other offices in the city? And was it the same as the “Azadamard building” we had heard mentioned?

In order to answer the first question, we turned to older and less thorough cadastral maps created in 1905 and 1913–14.<sup>8</sup> Thankfully, these were just detailed enough to confirm that the unit numbers in this area had remained the same over the first half of the 20th century. We were now certain that we had traced the building correctly.

For the second question, we referred to Papazian’s memoir. There, we found the site labeled “our home” and described as an exciting place reflecting the celebratory atmosphere so widespread following the proclamation of the constitution:



Tarlabaşı Boulevard around 1986 (Photo: Kadir Can)

*“That ‘home’ was our center. Old and new comrades gathered there all throughout the day. It was a political-organizational hotbed [hunots], and it was there that our leadership was centered; it was from there that orders would go out and from whence the outcomes of our comrades’ efforts would be coordinated.... Old and new comrades [including former exiles] would come there from the provinces, Europe, and the Caucasus in troves, looking to be put to work in the constitutionally free Turkey and to breathe the ‘free air,’ as some were calling it.... Among the comrades already in Istanbul I remember H. Shahrighian, Hrachia Tiriakian, H. Kalfayan, the poets Siamanto, Varoujan, R. Zartarian, Dr. G. Pashayan... [and] junior comrades and writers such as Sh. Misakian, Kegham Parseghian, Cheogourian, Sevag, Sirouni, H. Hampartsoumian, and many others.”<sup>10</sup>*

While we were not able to determine whether the entire building was used by the ARF or if the party was just a tenant, we did find out that these headquarters were different from the “Azadamard building.” Azadamard was the name most commonly used for the Western Bureau’s organ. It operated from 32 Yeniçarşı Road from its July 23, 1909 advent until June 29, 1910; from 76 then 74 Hamalbaşu Road from June 20, 1910 to Oct. 23, 1914; and from 37 Kabristan Street—all in Pera—from Nov. 21, 1918 to

Aug. 21, 1919.<sup>11</sup> Around November 1922, the party was operating out of the district of Hasköy.<sup>12</sup> It is these bits of information that tell us that these headquarters were not in the “Azadamard building”; that epithet belonged to one or more other places. It is certainly not surprising that the ARF in Istanbul operated out of multiple places given that, at a certain point, the city was the seat of the Western Bureau, the region’s Central Committee, and an ARF student union.<sup>13</sup>

The story of the ARF headquarters we have just described is one of the many episodes of the vibrant Armenian life in late-Ottoman era Istanbul. Although this article was only a modest attempt at locating one out of the hundreds of buildings relevant, in one way or another, to the Armenian communities of pre-genocide Istanbul, our hope is that it will encourage others to undertake similar endeavors. Knowing that our work remains inconclusive—and far from believing that we have discovered some forgotten truth—we believe to have made a humble contribution to what many others have done before us: exploring and documenting the Armenian landmarks of a city that has been a focal point of so much history. We look to others to help us fill in the gaps. □

## ENDNOTES

To read the endnotes and works cited, visit: <http://armenianweekly.com/2016/01/18/arf-1908-istanbul-headquarters/>

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## ENDNOTES

1. The literature on the ARF's pre-1908 structure and operations in Istanbul is immense. For glimpses, see Hratch Dasnabedian, *History of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation Dashnaksutiun, 1890–1924*, trans. Bryan Fleming and Vahe Habeshian (Milan: OEMME Edizioni, 1990), 32, 35–6, 45–8, 57–9, 61–3, 70–2, 76–7, 91. Also available as Hratch Dasnabedian, *Ho. He. Dashnaksutyune ir kazmutenen minchev Je. Enth. Joghov* (Athens, 1988). For a historiographical overview, see Ara Sanjian, "The ARF's First 120 Years: A Brief Review of Available Sources and Historiography," *Armenian Review* 52, no. 3–4 (2011): 1–16, 2–7. A new publication not included in Sanjian's piece is Hratch Dasnabedian, *Badmutyun hai heghapokhakan sharjman yev Hai Heghapokhakan Dashnaksutyun* [History of the Armenian revolutionary movement and of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation], ed. Yervant Pamboukian (Bourj Hammoud, Lebanon: Hamazkayin Vahe Setian Publishing House, [2009]). On the years between the Constitutional Revolution and the First World War, see especially Dikran Mesrob Kaligian, *Armenian Organization and Ideology under Ottoman Rule, 1908–1914* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2009).
2. Raymond Kévorkian, *Le génocide des Arméniens* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2006), 93n30. Also available as *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History* (New York: IB Tauris, 2011).
3. Vahan Papazian, *Im Hushere*, vol. 1 (Boston: Hairenik, 1950), vol. 2 (Beirut: Hamazkayin, 1952), vol. 3 (Cairo: Housaper, 1957). Papazian, vol. 2, 48. While Papazian does not give a clear date for when he visited the office, it seems to have been during July or August 1908. Papazian, [My memoirs], vol. 2, 42.
4. Mehmet Polatel et al., *2012 Declaration: The Seized Properties of Armenian Foundations in Istanbul*, trans. Elif Kalaycıoğlu and Nazım Hikmet Richard Dikbaş (Istanbul: Hrant Dink Vakfı Yayınları, 2012), 123, 228.
5. Jacques Pervititch, *Istanbul in the Insurance Maps of Jacques Pervititch*, ed. Seden Ersoy and Çağatay Anadol (Istanbul: History Foundation of Turkey, [2001]).
6. Pervititch, *Istanbul*, 112.
7. Charles Edouard Goad, *Charles Edouard Goad'ın İstanbul Sigorta Haritaları* [Charles Edouard Goad's insurance maps of Istanbul], ed. İrfan Dağdelen (Istanbul: İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi Kütüphane ve Müzeler Müdürlüğü, 2007), maps 39, 40, 42, 45; İrfan Dağdelen, ed., *Alman Mavileri, 1913–1914: I. Dünya Savaşı Öncesi İstanbul Haritaları* [The German blues, 1913–1914: The pre-First World War maps of Istanbul], vol. 2 (Istanbul: İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi Kütüphane ve Müzeler Müdürlüğü, 2006), sheets G11, G12; Pervititch, *Istanbul*, maps 57, 57A, 60, 60A, 60B; 1982 aerial photograph, Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, last accessed Aug. 5, 2015, <http://sehirharitasi.ibb.gov.tr/>; map, Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, last accessed Aug. 5, 2015, <http://sehirharitasi.ibb.gov.tr/>. For a first-person, interactive view of the area, visit: <http://sehirharitasi.ibb.gov.tr/?lat=41.0363763322264&lon=28.9800458753748&zoom=18&angle=255>
8. Çağlar Keyder, "A Brief History of Modern Istanbul," in *The Cambridge History of Turkey*, vol. 4, *Turkey in the Modern World*, ed. Reşat Kasaba (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 504–23, 515–6. As we had seen with the closing off of the "new" Sakız Ağacı, the Tarlabası area continues to undergo change today. Nil Uzun, "Urban Space and Gentrification in Istanbul in the Twentieth Century," in *The Economies of Urban Diversity: Ruhr Area and Istanbul*, ed. Darja Reuschke, Monika Salzbrunn, and Korinna Schönhärl (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 236–54, 249–51.
9. Goad, *Charles Edouard Goad'ın*, map 42; Dağdelen, *Alman Mavileri*, sheet G11/1.
10. Papazian, vol. 2, 49–50, 52.
11. *Azadamard Oratert* [Azadamard daily], June 23, 1909, 1; [Azadamard daily], June 29, 1910, 1; [Azadamard daily], June 30, 1910, 1; [Azadamard daily], Oct. 23, 1914, 1; *Artaramard Oratert* [Artaramard daily], Nov. 21, 1918, 1; *Djagadamard Oratert* [Djagadamard daily], Aug. 21, 1919, 1. This organ changed names frequently after 1912 in order to evade the censors. The second-most-used title was *Djagadamard*. Garegin Levonyan, *Hayots barperakan mamule. Liyakadar tsoutsak hai lragrutyan, esgezpits minchev mer orere, 1794–1934* [The Armenian periodical press: A complete catalogue of Armenian reporting from its beginning until our times, 1794–1934] (Yerevan: Melkonian Fund, 1934), 57. See also M. V. Hovsepyan, "Ho. He. Ta. K. Bolsi barperakan mamule, 1909–1920." [The periodical press of the Constantinople ARE, 1909–1920], *Lraper Hasarakakan Gidutyunneri* 3 (2006): 177–81.  
There are still some blanks in our list, for although the organ began publication on July 23, 1909, it was not suspended until after April 24, 1915. Also, we are not certain when exactly it started up again in 1918 or when it finally shut down or converted to a politically unaffiliated newspaper. Hovsepyan, [Ho. He. Ta. K. Bolsi barperakan mamule, 1909–1920], 177, 179.
12. Elizabeth Dodge Huntington, "Community Organization," in *Constantinople To-day; or, The Pathfinder Survey of Constantinople: A Study in Oriental Social Life*, ed. Clarence Richard Johnson (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 121–164, 134. Recall here that World War I ran from July 1914 until November 1918. The post-war Allied occupation of Istanbul allowed many Armenian organizations to reopen their doors. This lasted until the Turkish National Movement's entry into and the Allies' exit from the city during September/October 1923.
13. Kaligian, *Armenian Organization*, x; Dasnabedian, *History*, 104, 106.



# The Ghosts of Bank Ottoman Past

By Eric Nazarian

**T**he story never ends when it comes to Armenians and Turks, the genocide, and the blowback of the aftermath. It's in our genes, the air we breathe, the memories we never lived that we recall from ancestors still in the infernal limbo of the sands of Der Zor, now bulldozed by the new era of terror branded by the black flags of the self-proclaimed Islamic State.

Flying into Istanbul, my mind gyrates like a shotgun blast of seemingly irrelevant realizations, reflections, voices, names, poems, and deceptions that end up patching together with braided patterns like my late beloved grandmother Tavoos's magnificent carpets. Then, when I try to put pen to paper and shoot down these thoughts, poof! They defy verbs, nouns, and adjectives and I am left with a stunning frustration as the tidal waves of images and feelings eclipse and belittle the pen in my hand as the plane docks into the city of Constantine, then the Byzantines, and finally the Ottomans. The cycle of history is built on chaos, power, empire, lust, greed, more power, and the road of bones built on the skulls of the indigenous in Istanbul and far east into the roads of the interior deep in the root of Western Armenia.





**(Top row, third from right) Papken Suni (born Bedros Parian) in his graduating class photo in 1893. Note: Second from the left on the same row is renowned Armenian linguist Hrachya Ajarian. (Photo is displayed at the Getronagan Lycee in Istanbul.)**



**Bank Ottoman today (Photo: Nanore Barsoumian)**

I was back in *Bolis* for the Hrant Dink Memorial Workshop on “The Genocide of the Ottoman Armenians in Art, Theater, Cinema, and Literature” that took place on Nov. 5 and 6 at Sabanci University. Sabanci was built by the billionaire Sabanci family, which had raked in endless millions of dollars—some after capitalizing on the properties they had confiscated from the Armenians in the wake of the genocide. Several books that are required reading for any pilgrim interested in the plunder of the properties, include Ümit Üngör’s *Confiscation and Destruction: The Young Turk Seizure of Armenian Property* and *The Spirit of the Laws: The Plunder of Wealth in the Armenian Genocide* by Taner Akçam and Ümit Kurt. This massive theft of Armenian properties is a separate subject to return to eventually in a much longer piece, if not a court case, or several, which I hope someday happens under the international spotlight, bringing to light the magnitude of wealth stolen from the Armenians by some of the wealthiest families in Turkey, including Sabanci and Koc.

However, I digress. It’s natural in Istanbul. You can’t walk a block without getting your conversation redirected in at least three directions as we native foreigners and diasporans try to understand the still-flying shrapnel and mayhem of 1915 a century later.

Nov. 5 is Guy Fawkes Day around the world. The mascot for this day for anti-establishment activists, left-leaning folk, graphic novel geeks, and pop culture vultures is the mask of Guy Fawkes designed for the Warner Brothers film, “V for Vendetta,” which was based on the Marvel Comic by Alan Moore and David Lloyd, inspired by Guy Fawkes, an English Catholic who tried to blow up the House of Lords in 1605. Fawkes and his conspirators were caught, castrated, and hanged. In the four centuries since, the failed assassin and extremist has morphed into a mascot of rebellion in the current age, symbolized by the mask made famous in the graphic novel and film.

I was over 2,000 kilometers away from the House of Lords by the Golden Horn and the Galata Bridge that day. The Sabanci campus is right around the corner from Bank Ottoman where, on Aug. 26, 1896, 28 Armenian revolutionaries led by Papken Siuni and Armen Karo raided the bank to bring international attention to the Hamidian Massacres of Armenians by Sultan Abdulhamid, the “Bloody Sultan” as he was known to the West.

The revolutionaries never touched the gold or one bank note. Their attack was a symbolic act hoping to reach the world’s deaf ears about the sultan’s atrocities against the Armenian population in the provinces of Anatolia. Siuni was killed. Karo took charge and the world became alerted to the “Armenian Question,” which was followed up with the slaughter of Constantinople’s Armenian community. Some 6,000–7,000 civilians were butchered by the sultan in retribution for the Bank Ottoman attack; this was followed up with additional mas-

sacres in the Armenian villages in Western Armenia/Anatolia, particularly Akn, where Siuni’s roots were from.

The Bank Ottoman attack kick started Elia Kazan’s masterful “America America,” dramatizing the *collective* punishment the sultan executed on Armenian civilians and the elderly in retribution for the attack on the bank, which ultimately triggered more newspaper headlines worldwide but little, if any, action to aid the Armenians.

And now, on this same street in *Bolis* on Guy Fawkes Day 119 years later, we gathered in peace to give voice again to the genocide and its aftereffects through the arts, with hope for the possibility of grassroots healing through storytelling and unity with brave souls who care deeply about advancing education and knowledge about the genocide in Turkey. Inside the conference hall, I tried to visualize the moments leading up to the day they took Bank Ottoman. I looked out at the waters under Galata Bridge across the boulevard. They were the same waters then as they are now, the tide continuing indifferently to the trials and plagues that men unleash upon each other, generation after generation, empire after empire.

My presentation was on “The Armenian Genocide and Diaspora on Film,” supplemented by visuals, poster art, and period photographs, a few of which were made by William Sachtleben, a famous American cyclist who returned to Erzerum in the time of the Bank Ottoman era to investigate the disappearance of Frank Lenz, another cyclist biking around the world who had been killed in the vicinity of Erzerum in Anatolia. Sachtleben came looking for his friend but instead witnessed the Erzerum massacres, and photographed its aftereffects. Thanks to this wayfaring cyclist, we have some of the first photographic proofs of the massacres from the last decade of the 19th century.

As the laptop flashed images of lifeless bodies splayed on horizontal, desert sands, of Aurora Mardigian and the once-charismatic



A scene from the film 'V for Vendetta' shows V in a Guy Fawkes mask.

eyes of Armin T. Wegner etched with a darkness in his grayer years, my mind drifted back to the irony of Guy Fawkes Day and the ghosts of revolutionaries.

I walked down Bankalar Caddesi again after dark. I didn't hear the footsteps or tinny pops of the first *fin de siècle* bullets that were triggered on that hot August day in 1896, but I could feel the tension in my throat of being an Armenian still in 2015 Istanbul and the rage that races with every step I took, trying to visualize the moments before Papken and Armen Karo and the 26 revolutionaries took the Ottoman. Did their cry serve its purpose? Did anyone care outside of the immediate days and hostage negotiations that led to the exile of the surviving revolutionaries and the butchering of Istanbul's Armenian community? The "Bloody Sultan" Abdulhamid once again lived up to his name that year, laying to waste scores of civilians as payback for the uprising of a few.

Every time I attempt to visualize the magnitude and the immensity of the horrors of the massacres, I wonder yet again if my efforts are naive and futile in the end as a storyteller. Is there a purpose to telling the history of our people to a hall full of Turks, Armenians, Kurds, and international scholars? I believe in efficacy and tangible change for the betterment of people. I'm not sure that telling stories creates efficacy and a tangible source of good that saves a person's life, but I have never stopped believing that it can help heal the soul, both for the storyteller and the listener.

The lectures and presentations at the conference moved me deeply. They were painful, personal, brave, and insightful. In the end, no amount of storytelling, dialogue, handholding, and empathy can ever heal the horrors of the magnitude of the Armenian Genocide and the hideous denialism that continues to white out any trace of the Pontic Greek and Assyrian Genocides. The anonymous dead remain anonymous and the cruel Draconian forces of history apathetically continue to ignore the indigenous of this land and their traces wiped clean from public memory. That is exactly why we must keep telling our stories here in Turkey and Western Armenia. In storytelling, there is truth and healing. There is also rebellion and true pacifism. The act of storytelling is an act of defiance against violence, against erasure and oblivion of history distorted, warped, and manipulated by the winners. This is why I return. To correct that history through the storytelling act, however small or insignificant that may be.

To be an Armenian is to live with the ghosts of the Ottoman past. To be an Armenian is to be keeper of these ghosts and this ravaged civilization that still refuses to perish. Destruction and desecration is a part of Armenian destiny but perishing is not. The very last fragments and shreds that are left of this stalwart, defiant, and silent past in Western Armenia refuse to go. But they will. Time destroys everything in the end, but not the memory if we are stubborn enough to etch and carve it, to breathe and tell it in the stories that will no doubt endure because the tongues and the heart cannot be silenced. Not time, not mortality... NOTHING can silence the story.

The eyes of the descendants will tell this story even if the storytellers perish. This was the last pang of loss and hope I felt colliding as I stood outside those 19th-century stones of Bank Ottoman staring at me in the twilight, sphinxlike as I departed, wanting to grip my Uni-ball pen and put ink to paper again, instead of bashing my fist into the stones for all that we have lost, never to recover in a world that continues to remain a hostage to complicity through that ugly, beastly, eternal coward of silence. I roamed past the Galata Bridge and the fishermen reeling in the night's catch, calmly courteous and clueless of the ghosts and spirits inside me. □

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